

Eugene Schmidt
B-24, B-17 Ball Turret Gunner
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When did you get into the Army Air Corps?

Eugene Schmidt: We got out to Santa Anna in December the 7th of 1942. I went through primary training, graduated from there, which took about two months. And I got sent to Thunderbird Field for pilot training, where I proceeded to be washed out 'cause I couldn't take the spins. I would get airsick and disoriented.

So they gave me a choice of what I wanted to do; be a gunner or something else on the ground crew and I said, "Oh, I wouldn't mind being a gunner." And they sent me down to Harlingen, Texas and I guess that was about December of '43. And from there we had a furlough, come back and we had our crews formed.

What crew station did you take?

Eugene Schmidt: I was a ball turret gunner. I wasn't as heavy as I am today, and even at that I just about squeezed in and it was quite a thrill. I really only flew about six in the ball turret 'cause the clothes and all that took up so much space it was hard to work. You had foot pedals that directed the wing...swing span of the plane and many other things. So I got on a waist gun and flew that station after most of my crew went home.

I still was still flying 'cause I spent some time in a hospital. And one of the missions I think I'll never forget is where I got this piece of flak. We was on a flight to (INAUDIBLE) Germany and man, it was really a long trip; cold and when we got over the target the flak was tremendous.

And it hit everything on the ship and I think that's where the saying, "I want my mommy" originated, 'cause I was scared like hell. And I got hit with this big hunk of flak and tore my flak suit off, my oxygen mask and everything was laying around. I was gone. I was out. And I don't know how long I laid there, but next thing I can remember I opened my eyes and there was good old Jim Everhart.

He was the radio operator and he looked around and saw me laying there and he come out and got my flak jacket back on, the oxygen mask, of course, first, and that's what brought me to. And he drug me into the radio room, just sat me up against the wall and I had big split in the jaw here and didn't just seem to bleed until we got down to lower altitude and that put me in a hospital for about a week or so.

And for that I got five missions taken off as opposed to 35. I got down to 30.

That got me out of there about in April of '45. Came home. By the time I was home the war in Europe had ended and they was gonna then send me to Wichita for B-29 training. I was at Camp Atterbury for about two weeks when they said that anybody that's got enough points can go home. Well I had enough points, so I went home and that was in May of '45. And from there on I was a civilian. Went into the camera business and done that for up till about 10 years ago and that's about it.

When you were a gunner did you have many fighter attacks?

Eugene Schmidt: Just a few. One of the first ones was I was flying in the nose to gun there. And it came over the radio that there was bandits in the area. Said that it looked like 109s. Well, I looked out in front of me here and boy I could see like, it looked like little fly specks and I had the gun ready to go and by time I got up to my sights there, man, they come zooming by me. There were six Me109s, which I only got about three shots off at. They must have been doing about 350 and we're doing 160. So it was...things were moving fast.

And a couple of times we just got attacked by one 109 and happened to see some of the jet planes towards the end. Didn't know what they were. Didn't have a propeller, but then they attacked our group. I really only had about three attacks.

Did you hear the flak when you got hit?

Eugene Schmidt: I was...I guess I, I really didn't know anything hit me till I woke up. It must have knocked me out because I had just, well, I did have a fractured jaw and the...I guess the oxygen Jim Everhart gave me really saved my life. And then he found this piece of flak here laying on the floor. And it was still warm. And he makes me bring this thing to the meetings here every year. And I just put on this thing here that this is flak, was the flak that hit me on June the 18th, 1945 and about Jim Everhart retrieving it. He said it was amazing how warm it still was.

When you were firing out the waist, were there problems with cartridges on the floor?

Yeah, yeah. It was could get a little slippery.

Did you ever have problems with the guns freezing up?

Eugene Schmidt: No. No. We was real careful not to get too much oil on them, very thin. One thing I did one time though with a...I got the gun a little hot and it knocked off a few rounds. I could have hit another ship or (LAUGHING)...but if you shot too many of them in succession, they would cook off (Editor's note: shoot spontaneously). They didn't like that too much.

How did you feel about the B-17?

Eugene Schmidt: Oh, it...like the other man said, it was when we was in 24s, when I got out of the hospital they had switched over to B-17s and that was terrific. There was no comparison. And they flew a lot more closer. The formations were much tighter with a B-17, at least in our group, 'cause old Colonel Brostum made sure of that. It was, they were so close to each other I though I was gonna bail out again.

So you once had to bail out?

Eugene Schmidt: Yeah, at the beginning yeah, we bailed out.

What happened on that mission?

Eugene Schmidt: Well this was before we was in combat. We had about two more days to go. It was on May the 28th. We was flying about 16,000 feet. Went into a cloud bank and when we came out there we hit some real turbulent air, flipped the B-24 over on its back and we went into a spin. I was flat, placed right up against a wall, parachutes down there. Couldn't move to get it. And I thought we were gone and Riley Kallem, our pilot, actually finally pulled us out. We was over the Channel and this was a practice mission and got us back home. The plane had so much structural damage that I don't think it ever flew again. But that's, that was one day.

The next day we got another plane, 'cause this one was not airworthy anymore, and we're up about 20,000 feet. I looked out the window and number one engine's really smoking. And called the pilot and said, "We got a lot of smoke coming out of the number one engine," and by the time he got back there, it was on fire. He says, "Well, we better see if we can get it out," with low pressure extinguishers they had. And it didn't do any good. And the flames crept over to about the number two engine.

We thought we better get out of here. So he gave the order to bail out and Newman Sanders, he was at the tail and he come flying out to the door there and saw the flames and everything and he said, "Wow," he says, "We better get out." We opened the hatch of this 24 and (LAUGHING) it was four of us standing around there wondering who the hell's going first. And I thought it was...to this day I don't know who did, but I remember I think Hank Sanders gave me a good shove and I went out.

And my when I went out the chute hit the escape hatch and pulled my chute up about, about here and that's strapped on, but instead of the rip cord being down here it's up here. I didn't know that for awhile. I thought, well, I don't have a chute. But I looked up and I saw that thing hanging there and I *pshh*, pulled

that and boy she popped open. Sound like a 45 going off. And when I hit the ground I rolled over and bang my shoulder up. I got a dislocated shoulder. That's what put me in the hospital. Sanders, he came down like a bullet. His chute didn't open till it was about, I'd say maybe 600, 700 feet from the ground. And he got hurt. He got a pretty bad back.

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