

**MICHAEL J. LASPROGATO,
STAFF SGT.
B-17 WAIST GUNNER
(WILLIAM “BILLY” CLEAVES CREW)**

Jon: When were you deployed in Europe?

Staff Sgt. Lasprogato: Well, the exact date I can't give you, but I was over there at the end of '43 and the end of 44 – just about a year.

Jon: Tell me your first memories of meeting your crew.

Staff Sgt. Lasprogato: Let me see now. I picked up a plane first. We picked up a ship in Lincoln, Nebraska, had flight training over there, you know, picked up a plane. And I can't remember exactly where we...the crew met, but we flew over...now where did we go? We went through Newfoundland and up that way and the entire crew was there. And I remember from Cleveland we were on automatic pilot.

And Cleveland, I don't know how far in toward Newfoundland and Cleaves (Billy Cleaves, the Pilot) said, “Wanna fly it?” said to me. Boy I was (MUMBLE) and he said, “Just keep that thing level, that's all. That's all you have to do is get...” this guy's the co-pilot, he was sitting there, so if in the case anything happened he'd grab it right way, and it was quite a thrill. And he was trying to get he said, “You just keep the horizontal thing level there,” and I'm going on and shaking. I said, “That's enough here. Take it.” So I must have flown, maybe, I don't know, maybe 50 miles, something like that.

But like you said, (MUMBLE). In the beginning I was with the National Guard, with that one National Guard and I was in the...I got a job in the office at night. I bust up my knee playing football and I was all crippled up for awhile and they put me in what they call the Station Compliment, like the graveyard. You end up there. And luckily I had a job in the office at night, you know, tough enough.

And a directive comes down. They were looking for airmen and boom, I jumped right in. Signed right up. Couldn't wait to go. And luckily they grabbed me. You know, I was ready to go. And I applied for flight for a pilot and I went through the first day...I was built like a rock.
(UNINTELLIGIBLE).

Then when it come to the heavy stuff like the Trig and Algebra and all this stuff I was in the forest of the trees I didn't know for nothing. I didn't know. So, they put me as a gunner because they could use gunners also. So that's

where I sat. I ended up as a gunner with uh...and then they gave me to Cleaves and he trained us and worked us over in our...then we all went over together. I don't remember...it was Ardmore, Oklahoma. I'm not sure of that. I'm not sure where we flew from here to. I know we went through Newfoundland and up, and up the north coast to England.

But we ended up in the wash - misty, damp (in England). We had Nissan huts and, and slime was on the floor. It wasn't...I don't know what the hell it was, but it was terrible, slippery and dirty, you know, cold, awful. And then from there we all got together and went up to Eye (the airbase near the village of Eye, England) and we...that's where we got our ship.

Then from there we were flying Remmen Brist, uh, Brooks. Oh, I don't remember the rest of the...Berlin twice. I flew into the ball turret. I flew in the ball turret once. Now this guy, he wanted to trade with me. This is the kid from Michigan, Army. I forgot his last name. He's the one who was ironing clothes and he got a shocked.

Now we were in a Nissan hut. There was always water on the floor. Place was like a sieve, and he was ironing, you know, and all of a sudden he reaches up to put out the light or do something with the light, and it sucked him right up. Now I'm standing right next to him. I said, "(MUMBLE) and I grabbed him like a jerk. I went up and over too and then I finally pulled him down. My weight pulled him down and we were all right, but I thought he died. I thought he died and got electrocuted up there. And that's one of the incidents.

And uh, let me see, another time we went to London, raising hell, having fun and on the way back, a British guy, he comes up with a bottle of scotch. He said, "Mate, would you like to buy a bottle of scotch?" "How much?" "Five dollars." Five bucks for a bottle of scotch. So I bought it. And this is in the night. Thought, "Where am I going to put..." so I put it under the bed, I was on the bottom bunk, and I later...and I woke up in the morning. I said, "What the hell...it smells like awful, awful." Smelled like vinegar. And sure enough, that's what it was. That guy sold me a bottle of vinegar (MUMBLE). Yankees not so sharp. And that's what he had, is a bottle of vinegar he sold me. That was, that's one incident. There's so many that I can't remember all of them.

I had a dog. Oh Jesus, (MUMBLE) lady pregnant and we were in the Nissan hut and my buddy's on this end of the Nissan hut and I'm on the other end. And that guy hollered right away, so the dog had the puppies right on by his ear right by his head and they were these little old bitty puppies, things like that. I said, "What are we gonna do with all these dogs?" And I forgot what we did with them. He gave them away to somebody or something and then that episode was all gone. But it was quite an experience. It was really...

Jon: How did you feel like the English people treated you?

Staff Sgt. Lasprogato: Oh, they were good. The English are a fine people. I really uh, (MUMBLE). It was pros and cons on them. We were in a bar. The Americans are having a fight and this big, he must have been a 300 pounder. He was big. (MUMBLE). There was a little bit of a guy. He walked up and he cold-cocked him one. He lifted him off the floor and this guy went flat on his back – out – he knocked him right out. And this woman, she...it was like a house and it was uh, uh, right over here was a uh, a fireplace and I was leaning against the mantel. I was watching and this girl was sitting next to him and next to me. She says, “If you Yanks fought like out in the field, like you did here, we’d had this won this war long ago. There wouldn’t be no more war.” And that turned me off on them.

But that’s just one incident. I mean, but overall they were very, very nice. They’re, they’re a good bunch. They had it tough. They had it tough. I would never want to go through what they went through, ‘cause they really had it bad. But, thank God, we helped them out and we come out successful, that’s all.

Jon: What was your first impression when you met your crew in Nebraska?

Staff Sgt. Lasprogato: Well, uh, I had a funny incident on my own. I was disconnecting the...we had 50 caliber guns, and this was on a spring, and I neck-load the spring. Like a jerk I didn’t hold onto both of them and there’s a spring down by itself. I let go of it and it come up and (motions) and it scraped my face just like that. And Cleaves almost had a heart attack because if you lose a man then you can’t go over. You gotta pick up another man before you go over. That...assume that’s the way they worked it. ‘Cause he was so mad and so excited and nervous.

And I go, “I’m all right. I’m okay” you know. “I’m okay. I’m all right.” Oh boy, he was breathless. The point of the story is I ended up okay and we got on the plane and we took off for Europe. But it’s teamwork. That’s all it is teamwork. My job as a waist gunner, there’s a little catwalk, I don’t think it’s a foot wide, and that’s...my job was when the bomb bay doors were open I had to go through on that catwalk and pull the cotter pins on the bombs ‘cause, as I said, there were screws and when that bomb went down there, and that what do you call it... (Editor’s note: pulling the pin enabled the fuse propeller to turn and screw the fuse into the bomb, thus arming it as it fell).

Well, it made the bomb active, I’ll put it that way. When they hit they blew up. And that was my job. And Rip ([Jimmy Collins](#)), he was a radioman and he’s sharp, sharp kid, very sharp. And we got along good together.

Everybody got along fine. The engineer, he was from Norwalk, California and at that time I was from Norwalk, Connecticut and that was ironic how the things happened. And our co-pilot, he was from Texas. Scotty, he was a prince of a guy, prince of a guy. And we had a...in the interim we had a couple of navigators. All I remember was [\(Paul\) Huser](#). ...

And uh, can't remember any of the other guys. Just can't...60 years ago.

Jon: What were your responsibilities as a gunner?

Staff Sgt. Lasprogato: I had to keep my eyes open. I mean, you see any enemy planes coming through or sneaking through or going up above. Just, you know, it's hit 'em, hit 'em, but uh, you go over the mike here, "The plane's at 3:00 or 4:30," or whatever, you know. You used throat mikes.

You gotta keep silent though. You gotta keep silent. You can't get excited. I get excited a couple of times though. Cleaves is, "Get off that mike. Get off that mike." But he was good. Cleaves was all right. What was I saying? Oh, so we got along fine together. We just, just a good...we're here. We're here to talk about it.

Jon: Tell me about, "Skipper, I'm never gonna chatter again on the radio."

Staff Sgt. Lasprogato: No, I don't remember that, but, I remember when I was sick I thought I was gonna...I thought I was gonna die of pneumonia. That's a tough over there. The whole nation doesn't have pneumonia. But I was sick. I was uh...in fact, that was one of the times that they had these 5,000 planes in the air on a mission. That was around Christmas I think, cold weather. And uh, I had a hell of a cold, oh, geez, I thought I was gonna die. But I got out of it.

I...few days you give me, literally, give me, they cured me and then I got back. I went out with another crew because if you miss a flight then, you know, if you can't make it you gotta make it up with another crew. And I think I had two more flights to go, two or three. And I finished them, thank God. Kissed the ground, I got my 30th mission I tell you. And then we went home. I was...it was all finished. And we kept in touch, up until today, kept in touch with all the crew. I visited them and they visited me down in Florida. And I hope we can continue on for years to come, you know.

Jon: Tell what you did as a gunner.

Staff Sgt. Lasprogato: I...you get the gun from Armament and you put them in the rack, the barrel fits right in here. You gotta lock it in and all that and gotta keep it clean. And when you finish the mission you have to take it out and bring it down to Armament and they go over it, touch up what they have

to and fix it here and there. You're ready for the next mission. And that's all I had to do.

And after the mission, well, we'd be down to interrogation, talk to all the officers down there and tell them what you saw, what you didn't see and what you think you saw – anything, anything at all. I remember one time I saw a dirigible, not a dirigible, a air balloon way off on the right. I called on it. May mean nothing, but on the other hand it may mean something. So you tell them everything, everything you see. And I got a kick out of it. They give you whiskey and cookies. I don't know what the combination is, but that's what we had when we finished our mission and uh, ended up about 30 missions and we went home.

I went down to Atlantic City for about, I was there about a month refresher, and we...and from there they transferred me down to Tyndall Field in Florida in Panama City. And you had to do something. I had my flights on and all the hours required and then some. And I was in charge of the beach down there, the lifeguards. And I was a lifeguard and I've got 10 or 15 lifeguards, good...muscle beach they called it. Kinda built like Adonis.

The sergeant from Texas who was in charge of something or other, what authority he had I don't know, but he pulled strings. A cadre was going out to Texas and he's got my name on it. Now I have, I don't remember the exact nomenclature, but I had 21 points or 22 points. More than enough to get discharged from the service. And I say "Sarge, you got my name on this list. I got a lot of points here. I can't...you can't send me. You know, I'm ready to get discharged." "That's where you're going, Yank." Oh, he was a rebel. Oh, he was a rebel.

So I hustled my bustle over to the headquarters, saw the Colonel. "Colonel; Sergeant Lasprogato. I'm on a cadre to go out to Texas. And, and you can see by the records I have bookoos of points." And then he looks up; he looks this over here, and gets the records out. "Okay, we'll take care of it." He was on the next cadre out to Texas. That Sergeant. He give him the shaft. And that's the way it goes. And little things happened back and forth. Now they...and I got discharged and went home. I even got discharged on the (UNINTELLIGIBLE). I went the, uh, before we went there we got a boxing crew. And I said, "Yeah, I'll take up boxing for a month. And (UNINTELLIGIBLE) Field was gonna box a field in Alabama.

Jon: Dothan?

Staff Sgt. Lasprogato: Dothan, it could be, yeah. And we flew up there in boxcars. We had the heavy weights, light heavy, middles, so forth. Rained cats and dogs. Thank God they washed it. No more boxing. So that...right then and there my boxing days were over. But I got good training down at,

you know...black guy, had a black guy. I had a black guy that...on the beach who's built like an Adonis. Oh, what a body on him. They wouldn't let him fight. They wouldn't let him fight. Is that America? And, he was a soldier, yet they wouldn't let him fight because of who he was. They would not let him fight. I said, "Lieutenant...Sergeant, I have nothing to do with it." (MUMBLE). He just can't fight." This guy's a champ (MUMBLE). Nope, sorry, can't fight and that was it. I didn't push it anymore. I told him, I said, "You can't fight and I'm sorry. That's the way it goes."

Jon: Tell me about a typical mission day.

Staff Sgt. Lasprogato: Uh, well, as best as I can remember you hit the sack early because you gotta get up at 4:00. 4:30, quarter of 5:00 you got breakfast. 6:00 you were in your ship. 5:00 or 6:00, pretty close, right around that time. It was dark. And you get all your equipment ready. You get the baskets, put all the shells, that's spent shells, go in there, get everything out, your gun all set. And I had very little to do as a gunner.

My job was I get that 50 (caliber gun) going in case you see an enemy, hope you never see them, but if you do, give them a three degree lead, 4 degree lead and knock 'em off. And, whatever you see in the distance there, in the air, I saw a plane, oh, must have been 100 miles up in the air, way up. And I found out later that it's one of our officers in a civilian situation from down...looking right down on. It's quite a thing.

And then when we...there's a...when we get to come down we take our guns out of the rack, bring it down to the armament and then we go for interrogation and the same old routine over again. I think we flew uh, one day one and two days off.

Jon: What was it like being on oxygen 10 or 11 hours?

Staff Sgt. Lasprogato: You're really dopey. I don't know how people can stay under there so long. It, it was, it's fake, you know. It's not like you're breathing fresh air now. It, it's just a heavy feeling and 11 hours, oh, even on the shorter missions you could...we were up 36,000 feet, gotta have oxygen. And we're over the target, lay the eggs and get out of there quick. You know, that's all you can do. You can't fight anything, and as quick as you're out of the area they drop down to a reasonable height then they take off the masks and breath in normally you know.

Jon: Tell me about the electrically heated flight suit.

Well, it's a boot and goes right up to the neck and it goes right into the helmet. It's...we have a leather helmet and the plugs from an ear wires are all through the body. And from the foot to the oh, head to toe, your wires are

heated, 'course they're all insulated, but the heat goes through. It was just as comfortable. You're...I don't know, must be 20 below zero up there and we're comfortable, you know. If the system ever went out, forget it, forget it. You, just you go on, that's all. But it's hard to describe sucking on that fake oxygen that's, I don't know. But it's not bad, you know. It's a lifesaver. Let me put it that way. It's a lifesaver.

Jon: What was your biggest fear as a gunner?

Staff Sgt. Lasprogato: Getting knocked down. Getting knocked down. I was...when you're in the interrogation room, I'll go back a little bit. We had our breakfast and we'd go to the interrogation room and then we'd get on our planes and take off. Well when you're in the interrogation room, they pull the blind down with a map that's where they target us. And, well, this is it boys, you know, point to say, Berlin or uh, any place. Any place at all is bad, except Bretz...Bretz was a snap.

But they'd point, like say, to Berlin and that was the most heavily protected city in the world. They had guns all over the place, thousands of them. And we got through. We were lucky, you know. Uh, some places had little or no flack, but, you know, if you get one or two bursts, woof, it sounds like a dog barking, woof, and you see a red flare. The baby's born. It's all over after you see all that. The shrapnel's flying all over the place and if that catches a vital spot in the engine or, or anything mechanical into the engine, well, you got trouble. Of course, fortunately we had four big engines there, so I know a lot of them got back on two. We were lucky. We just, knock on wood, we got back on four. We got maybe, maybe a couple of pinholes, you know, shrapnel going through the fuselage, but nothing you know, serious.

Jon: Were you fearful of trying to escape?

Staff Sgt. Lasprogato: You know, it never dawned on me...I say, "How the hell am I gonna get out of this thing?" I got a parachute; you had a belly chute on you. The plane's going down with such terrific force and it's actually, the plane's going down your bodies has to go back and how the hell and I gonna fight that force? You figure, "Well, I'm close to the window," which never happened, "I'll jump right out the window." But you can't do that. You can't...you, you just can't...there's too much force against you to jump right out of that window. And you hope that you're never gonna get knocked down and, we were lucky.

Jon: What was it like seeing other planes go down?

Staff Sgt. Lasprogato: I was operating a K-20 camera. On the K-20 camera had a lens this big. There's no buttons. It's a big handle that you're shooting and boom. And I got a picture of our plane on my right wing. Yeah, we had

the...we were the lead crew and the plane got hit right here and it was going around like that and I caught the picture and as it was going over this wing pops right off and I shot it. I went back to the cameraman. I put the whole camera... 'cause then when we took a good shot it was daytime. So we flew daytime.

I went to the camera room and I said, "Sarge, I got a shot here that's out of this world and I'd like to have it." "No way. Belongs to the government. It's all government property. You're government property." "I'll pay for it." God, it came out beautiful. Best picture I've ever seen. Wouldn't give it to me. And the consequences? I didn't have it. But all I can do is talk about it. And when that wing separated from the fuselage like that, there're two separate pieces in that picture and the plane was going this way at the same time, both of them. So uh, it was my job to take pictures with the K-20 camera. A big, big thing. Took a lot of pictures – on, on the ground of our planes, other planes. Let me see, well, a couple of ME-109s you're seeing way in the distance, way in the distance. But, the camera's good enough, as you know, a K-20. It picked that plane right up and it come out.

Jon: Did you count parachutes? Did you see any friends go down?

Staff Sgt. Lasprogato: Yeah, yeah, I've counted one or two, you know. I just see the planes go down. You can see a white, white cloud come out, a bright chute, it looked like a cloud and, and then you could see the body, then eventually the chute will open. Then you report it to the captain, you know. Tell him, "Skipper..." this and that and the other thing. Okay. And when you get down... the interrogation and so you give all that report.

Jon: Who could get out of a B-17 the easiest?

Staff Sgt. Lasprogato: Oh, geez, I don't think there's uh...how those guys got out of those knocked-down planes I don't know. I do not know how they...which...that's such a force...I don't know how many pounds of...tons the plane weighs, and that's going zooming downhill. And naturally your body's coming back from the force. I don't know how they got out. Thank God they got out, but I don't know how they did it. I would say if they're lucky enough they'd jump out through that window. Unless you kicked the door in, but, I don't know. I've never heard of that being done.

The only logical place would be the window. The pilot and co-pilot, they're stuck. They're boxed right in. Engineer, he's in...right behind the pilot and co-pilot. He stands up under that turret. He's locked right under it. He's just...can't move. Bombardier, forget it. He's riding on those...and, tail gunner, I don't know how, I don't know how (MUMBLE) the entire ship is a coffin. That's the only way you can describe it. You know, you feel sorry for them. I choke up when I think of those poor kids, but uh, that was it. That,

that's the game you're playing and you play to win. We were lucky. We were playing to win. We won.

I would think we'd have a better chance of getting out ditching because that plane's more or less sort of floating for a few minutes anyway. And this way you have a chance of jumping out that window. But I never had the occasion to think about ditching. I never even thought about it. We were flying... I'll tell you...tell you a story about ditching. We were going on a mission. We were going over Belgium and I'm in the waist and I'm looking out the wing and I see like a big gas cap like this and I'm seeing gas coming out. So I just got on the mike and said, "Skipper, there's gas coming out of this right wing." "Oh no (MUMBLE)." That meant an abortion. Well I said, "I'll keep an eye on it." He says, "You keep an eye on it. You tell me when to stop. Maybe it's just a something or other." Okay. We were over Belgium soil and, "Skipper, it's leaking like a sieve out here." So he reported to somebody, his commander or somebody, gotta go back. There was an abortion. So he had to make up that flight. So that flight was all washed out. And that's about the closest I would say we would come to a ditch in case we ran out of gas, but there's hundreds of gallons of gas in those wings, Christ, wings are that thick.

Jon: Tell me about the bird strike. (See [Billy Cleaves'](#) account of the bird strike)

Staff Sgt. Lasprogato: Most of these were flying at 5:00 in the morning, 6:00 in the morning taking off. So you don't see any birds flying around at that time. But when you come in the evening, 3:00 or 4:00, 4:00, something like that, anytime in the afternoon. You always get some stupid birds that are flying around. And you, you can see parts of it hitting the windshield, the props hitting on, cut it right back. But we didn't, I didn't see too much of that. But I did see some of it. There was...you can see plenty of parts of the bird are flying over the wing. I'm looking out the window, oh, there's goes one. He's flying right by. It happens. You can't help it you know. So many birds out there. But there, there's not too much of it.

Jon: There was a lifespan of a B-17 crewmember of 30 days and loss rate of 10%.

Staff Sgt. Lasprogato: By reading I knew it by reading. I read a lot of the Air Force magazines. That we lost too many to begin with in the very beginning. I'm talking '43, '42, '43, too many, way too many. And what I personally would say, and I love those birds. What really, I think, saved us are the P-38's, P-51's (Long range fighter escorts). They were super. They were just...in fact, the P-51's they would take us right into Berlin. Could fly right into Berlin and back. That's how we saved an awful lot of planes – with the P-51.

Jon: Tell me about the B-17.

Staff Sgt. Lasprogato: Best airplane in the air. Best airplane in the air. Solid, like a rock. Solid. You never hear of any engine failure or this...one time we were coming close to the landing area and the skipper he feathered 1, 2, 3, 4, the first engine. Number one engine. He said he didn't like the way it was acting up. So (MUMBLE) he feathered the prop (MUMBLE) didn't stop it. And we came down and everything was fine.

But, that's the only malfunction I've ever seen or heard of in our planes anyway, 30 missions that uh, they had any trouble. Bodies are solid as a rock. It's beautiful. It's a great ship, great ship.

Jon: Did you feel like it was protecting you?

Staff Sgt. Lasprogato: 100, 100 percent. 100 percent.

Jon: Tell me about formation flying.

Staff Sgt. Lasprogato: I often wonder why they didn't bump into each other. I often figured, how the heck...they're so big, they need the whole world to fly along without hitting each other. But we had a close formation. I don't know, you got the triangle there. You've got the lead ship. We had a lead ship after awhile. And you have the two wings (wingmen). I think they had one in the back and it's all level flying and I also wonder how the prop wash didn't shake us, well not, not us because we were way on the front, but these planes in the back. But I never heard of a prop wash bothering a plane in all, the up or down or you hit a little pocket or something the thing would drop right down and you'd bring it right up again. But we've had that a couple of times, but nothing big, nothing serious.

Jon: How did you feel about being in the lead plane?

Staff Sgt. Lasprogato: Like a hero. Follow me men. I felt, I felt good about it. We had that Mickey. That's a great thing. Uh, Mickey was a jammer and it, it really jammed the radar down below and my job was to throw out the chaff. You familiar with chaff? That's that long, thin stuff. That's uh, tin foil. And it had a chute on the side right by my basket of shells and you just keep pouring it out of there and it looked like planes flying. Looked like B-17's flying (on the German's radar screens).

And as you're going along you'd see bursts of flack way in the back of you, which means it was effective. And that was a great thing.

Jon: How much battle damage could a B-17 take?

Staff Sgt. Lasprogato: I didn't see any. I saw one hole.

Jon: In general, what about the other planes that came back to the base?

Staff Sgt. Lasprogato: Oh, yeah. You'd see part of a tail was off or uh, I saw one that the tip of the wing was off about six feet. That's a lot, six feet of the tip. I saw one of those knocked off. Uh, but outside of that not too much. We had it lucky. We were there when it was almost over, you know, '44, '45. Mostly '44. They (the Germans) were beat. Poor guys, they were on their knees. They couldn't do anything anymore. They had no more planes to fight us. One or two stragglers would be...someone would wanna be a hero, you know, he'd be flying around us. But he couldn't get a shot in... 2, 4, 6, 8, probably about twelve 50 calibers. Couldn't get near us, you know.

Jon: Tell me about stragglers.

Staff Sgt. Lasprogato: Uh, I seen them, but I don't know what happened to them. You know, we see a guy get hit and, and I look out my window and I could see a couple of planes whose props were feathered, the props were feathered. And I just, I said, "Poor guys, they gonna hit..." And that...you could see them losing altitude when you see them losing altitude you know they got hit. But what happened to them, I don't know. But, you know, we kept going. The, the rule of thumb is "you gotta keep going." You can't help them. You cannot help them. Have to keep moving. And uh, I don't know what happened to them after that.

Jon: Wouldn't they be picked up by the Luftwaffe?

Staff Sgt. Lasprogato: Well, at that time I don't think they'd be picked up by the Luftwaffe, 'cause there weren't too many of them, you know.

Jon: Talk about bombs on the runway.

Staff Sgt. Lasprogato: Ah, he's beautiful. I love the guy. Well, Rip and I were, we were talking, just getting ready to...he was set up. He was all ready to...with the radio to function. He was all ready to go. And my set, my guns are all set, and I was already set. And we hear a terrific boom, boom, boom, boom, boom. And the bomb bay doors were open. Of course we were ready to fly it. And we, Rip and I, we run for the gate right away. We run for the door. We didn't know what the hell was going on. And, we go back in there, Tony had...he's in a very tight place in there and the toggle switch was right here. And he must have tried to get out, and so I...and as he got out this way...and there's a guard on the, face like this, and then there's a guard over it. And his suit or something must have caught that guard and hit that trigger at the same time. And those bombs went down, I don't know, must have been five or ten of them, all in a row, and with the kind of bomb they had, the

propeller and a nose, you know, a timer, there was a timer on there. So, luckily, you know, they didn't, the pin didn't hit or anything. He's quite a guy though. And then we lost him after that. He went, went to another ship. We liked Tony.

(Editor's note: James "Jimmy" Campbell took [Tony Bezer's](#) place as bombardier when Cleaves' crew made Lead Crew).

Jon: Tell me about the G.I. story.

Staff Sgt. Lasprogato: Well, poor [Tony](#)...you gotta go, you gotta go. It's a hell of a place to go though, way up there and he just couldn't hold it. Poor guy was sick. He had the GI's (diarrhea) and he came...the way I remember the story, being in the waist I saw everything, and I smelled everything. He came in here with his flight helmet, the metal helmet and he had more room to squat on it than up in the, up in the nose. And (sound) he let 'em go. And thank God I'm out the window like this getting a little fresh air. He said, "What the hell I do with this?" "Well, you're not gonna save it. Throw it out the damn window. You're not...you can't, you can't keep it in here, you know. Throw it out the window." I threw it out the window. I did. I said, "Give me the (expletive) thing," and I threw it right out the window and that's all, forget it. "Go back in and toggle your switch over some guy." It was really a funny thing though, really. Poor Tony. (laughs)

Jon: What do you remember about your first combat mission?

Staff Sgt. Lasprogato: Well, as I remember...I kept a little diary of all the flights that went...You know, my first one was in Bremen, Germany and it wasn't too bad. We had flack. There was flack and I was, you know, I'm not hero, you know. I said, "Geez, these guys are gonna shut us down. They're getting rough up here."

And that was the time in the beginning that they started throwing one or two P-51's up there just prior to that, there was nothing, nothing. And I think, "Geez, we need some protection up here," and as luck would have it, we went through the run, came back home and we were safe. But thank God that I did see a couple of 51's flying around – not too many. Was enough that probably scared them off, you know. That's the way they were.

But that was, that was scary. Everyone was scary; I'm not kidding you. I mean, I crapped my drawers. You never know if you're gonna come out of it or not. You never know, you know. Uh, "Gosh, am I next? Who's gonna take care of all my stuff? How I wanna go home." You think of a thousand things and uh, oh, "Christ, here we go." (MUMBLE)...knock down on this one. And when you hear a "woof", it sounds like it's right next to your head, "woof", "woof" and you, and you look out and you see that red flare, whoosh. (MUMBLE)...after, as I've said before, after you see that burst and

everything, those shells are gone. They're going past you and all over the place. But, again, I say, "Thank God I'm here to talk about it."

Jon: Do you think the leadership of your Pilot, Billy Cleaves, contributed to your safety?

Staff Sgt. Lasprogato: Yes, yes, I do. He was a smart guy. He was really an intelligent man. He really was. If he was a goof-off, I'd tell you, but he wasn't. He...strictly business, strictly business. And he was, I don't know, a percentage would say he wasn't bringing us back, but he gave us a lot of self-confidence, you know, "Relax. Don't worry about it. You're gonna be okay. We're gonna come back." And, you know, just before a flight I'd say, "Skip, how's it look?" "Piece of cake. Don't worry about it. You're gonna come back. Don't worry about it." And, "All right, okay. If you say so. All right." 'Cause I'm in the back. I can't see what's going on front there, you know. "I'm watching this gun over here. I don't know what the hell you're doing up there." You know, we'd joke back and forth like that, but he brought us back. He brought us back. Thank God he did.

Jon: Was it real important to maintain radio silence?

Staff Sgt. Lasprogato: Well, the enemy down at the bottom there, they can catch you, well they got equipment next to none. They got the best, they had the best (radar and radio gear). Now we got the best. But if you...like you'd snap your finger that that little bit of a noise like that they can catch you and they know where you are and they got the radar there and bang, they can shoot you down.

Jon: What about the intercom?

Staff Sgt. Lasprogato: Well, there was nothing they could psych us out about 'cause first of all, absolute silence, and we understood this. We knew this. And I would say a couple of things getting excited, you know. I'd say, "Geez, look. Oh, gosh Skip. There's something..." He'd say "Get off the phone. Get off the...get off the Go...get off the phone." Okay. And you know, it dawned on me that skipper was right, you know. They can, they can spot us where the hell we are and all that. But outside of the...he was the, he was the...he was a good...smart man. He was a smart man.

Jon: What do you remember about your last mission?

Staff Sgt. Lasprogato: You know I don't remember a thing about it. I do not remember. I was with another crew to finish up my tour and I didn't even know who the pilot was...I don't know any of the crew at all. I was a waist gunner.

I've got to tell you a little story, if I may. If you've got time. I flew in the ball turret. Now, right now I'm sitting on 226. Uh, then 180, 185 pounds. I went to Berlin twice. Once in the waist and once when, uh, I forgot who the hell was in the ball. But I said, "Hey, let me ride in the ball." I offered, I asked him to let me ride in there. "Go ahead. Help yourself. I don't care." 'Cause once you're locked in there, that's it. You're locked in.

So the way you get in, the guns are pointing down, then the hatch opens here and you get right down through that hatch and you can't take your chute in cause there's not enough room. So you're down like this, but really folded up. I think I weighed about 190 pounds, 180 pounds. How the hell I got in there I'll never know. But I did. I had to go in there and see. And thank God we come back and I could talk about it. It was crazy though when you're a kid. You know, even though you're afraid and nervous and everything. You've got a lot of moxy. It's gotta be crazy or something, I don't know.

Jon: Your thoughts on dropping an atomic bomb on Hiroshima?

Staff Sgt. Lasprogato: My impression was that it had to be done. It had to be done because this war was going on; we got millions of people that are dying. We gotta stop it. And that's the only way to stop it, one big blast and that makes them quit. It brings them to their knees and they say, "I surrender here," and that's it. It's the only way to do it. And I feel sorry for all the poor folks; poor people skins were burned alive. They used to take pictures of it, the movies and...of the doctors were peeling the skin off and, awful.

But it had to be done. It had to be done. Otherwise, the Japs would have been still fighting today, you know, not because they're Japs, but any person, nation would be wanting to fight. Look at down in South America. They're fighting again. They'll be starting...they're trying to start a war down there now.

Jon: What were your overall feelings about the B-17 as an aircraft?

Staff Sgt. Lasprogato: Yeah, I think it was the finest airplane in the air. The finest. It's sturdy. I repeat, it's like a Chevrolet rock. It's solid, really. Can't say enough for it. Can't say enough for it. Take a beating. Uh, from the pictures that I've seen, and we have them in the lobby there and everything, where the tail's shot off, uh, one part of the tail shot off where the gunner was in it. Knocked him right out of the sky. And yet, they brought the plane in. One, half a wing was off. They brought the plane in. So it must be a good ship.

Jon: What do you attribute your survival of the war to?

Staff Sgt. Lasprogato: Luck. Luck. Luck. I was in the fight. I was in

where the shooting was. There was a bunch of lucky guys, like myself, and unfortunately a bunch of unlucky guys. And I was one of the lucky guys, that's all. That's all I can say. Just luck.

Jon: How do you see warfare different today?

Staff Sgt. Lasprogato: Well, as we were talking before, today they're making planes run by buttons, computers. Everything's computerized. This world is computerized today. Everything. Everything. So, they can send a plane up, a bomber, and it can be shot down, but you won't lose any lives. You just lost a piece of metal and stuff, you know. And that's what I think uh...I don't want to be a flag waver, but we guys did a hell of a job with our bodies being there and more so the guys that were knocked down, who were killed. They were the guys that, they're the heroes. They were in my mind, they're the heroes. I don't want no praise; don't want nothing. I'm just...my praise is that I'm here. That's uh, those guys, they deserve everything, their families, they deserve everything. The insurance, you know...

I think it costs about a thousand dollars or something like that. So, if you wanna give me the money give it to some poor guy who was killed in the service, give it to his family, you know. Not like I'm gonna be rich on a thousand dollars today. (MUMBLE) thousand dollars today. So, that's what I think about then and now. There'll never be heroes like us. I shouldn't use the word "heroes". There'll never be uh, fighters like us, people like us as against uh, computers and everything. 'Cause there we lost all our men. Here, you lose a computer or something, you know, and that's about the way I feel about it.