

## **Downed WWII pilot shares adventures from Germany**

NORTH JACKSON — When Dan King answered the call to duty during World War II, he had no idea he would end up in a German prison camp.

He made it out and can now tell his story at the age of 99 1/2.

King grew up in North Jackson and graduated from Jackson High School in March 1941. As a young man, he started working for U.S. Steel but knew he wanted to contribute to protecting freedom. That year, he went to the Youngstown recruiting station to sign up for the service. At Youngstown, he was sent to Columbus to enlist.

“In Columbus, I was able to request where I wanted to go,” King said. “I said I wanted to join the Air Corps. The recruiter told me he only had openings for the infantry and the tank corps. I told him I wasn’t interested in those, and he told me to go home then.”

King persisted and was finally given the chance to take a test in Cleveland for what he called the Aviation Cadet Program. He passed the test and went to Eagle Pass, Texas, where he graduated in October 1942, and was commissioned as a second lieutenant.

On the day of his graduation, he attended the ceremony in the morning, and at 3 p.m., he married Shirley Davis.

After that memorable day, King was shipped off to Tallahassee, Fla., where he trained on a P-40 fighter airplane. Upon completion of the training, he was to be shipped overseas but had developed a case of pink eye.

“Because of the pink eye, I was held back,” he said. “When I finally got over it, I was reassigned to Thomasville, Ga., and went through the same P-40 training.”

In December of 1944, King shipped out on a passenger ship bound for New Amsterdam and he arrived at Honington. He was assigned to the 384th Fighter Squadron with the 364th Fighter Group, which served as B-17 and B-25 bomber escorts.

On Jan. 3, 1945, King went on his first mission flying in a P-51D while escorting B-17s on a bombing run over Germany. King was able to get in 29 missions, including some in a special capacity.

“There was another group at Honington called the Weather Sports,” King said. “They flew ahead of the bombers and reported any changes that would affect the mission. Ten of my missions were with the Weather Sports.”

When King is asked how many missions he flew in World War II, he likes to reply “29 1/2.”

That is because of what happened on mission number 30.

“As a fighter pilot, we wore G-suits that had inflatable legs and arms that prevented us from blacking out when pulling Gs (gravitational force),” he said. “Wearing one that day, I was flying lead and my wingman reported a lot of fluid coming from my plane. It was engine oil and by the time I figured that out, the propeller stopped and froze.”

As his plane started going down, King said he rushed to jump out. The G suit was still plugged into the aircraft and when he jumped out, it yanked out and took King’s parachute ripcord over his back.

“I managed to get the rip cord back, and deploy the parachute,” he said. “When it opened, I heard kids talking and I thought I was in heaven. Then I saw the ground come up to hit me.”

He landed near a barn in the German countryside near Berlin and when he got to his feet, he said an angry German farmer was heading toward him with a pitchfork.

“At the time, my back was hurting and I couldn’t move too fast,” King said. “My wingman was still flying overhead, saw what was happening, and buzzed the country road. That scared off the farmer, who dropped the pitchfork and ran.

“I got up and saw two little kids waiting on a school bus. I went over to try to talk to them and a constable came by on a motorcycle and placed me under arrest. I spent the first night sleeping in a barn.”

He said the next day began a march through several small towns, spending each night in jail.

“At one stop, a German officer stopped by and asked if there was anything I needed,” King said. “I asked for a toothbrush and he brought me one.”

He said at another stopover, a German pilot, who couldn’t speak English, sat down and offered King rock candy. When the pilot left, he buzzed the road that King was walking on as a way to say goodbye.

He ended up in Berlin, where he was taken to an interrogation center.

“I tried my best to keep my mouth shut,” he said.

Following the interrogation, King was given back his dog tags. The Germans had taken one tag, then replaced it with a larger stamped metal prisoner tag. A lucky charm, a monkey face carved from a peach seed, was left on the chain.

King was assigned a guard to transport him to a prisoner-of-war camp. He was taken to Stalag Luft 1 near Barth, Germany. It was a prison camp where captured airmen were taken.

King said the men who were prisoners there never really accepted him because of the chance he may be a spy. He eventually did make a few friends, but most kept their distance.

King said he lost track of time, but knew he was at the camp for months in 1945. The camp was finally invaded by the Russians. King said he remembers a big Russian tank mowing down the prison camp gate.

“The Russians came and drove their tank through the front gate and freed us,” King said. “The Russians asked us if there was anything we needed, and we all said food. They went and brought in 12 cows and a horse. We had to find a grinder and ended up making a lot of hamburger. We ate and ate, and everyone got sick from overeating.”

The Russians freed the camp in April and right after May 8, 1945, known as VE Day (Victory in Europe), the now-freed prisoners were flown out. King flew out on May 13, 1945.

Col. Hubert Zemke (WWII fighter pilot and ace) was the highest rank in the camp and therefore was in charge. King said he knew many of the men could not make a long march, so he had B-17s land and take 10 men in each to help the men get back to safety.

“I spent those months in camp imagining what it would be like when I got out,” he said. The hardest part was never knowing when or what you were going to eat.”

In December of 1945, King was given an honorable discharge and returned to the states and his job in maintenance at U.S. Steel in Youngstown. He served 4-1/2 years with the reserves of the 910th Carrier Squadron and went on to attend Youngstown College to earn a mechanical engineer’s degree. He stayed with U.S. Steel until retiring in 1978.

King’s service didn’t stop after the war. He went on to help form and serve as chief of the North Jackson Fire Department. He also served as a Boy Scout leader and was instrumental in starting the North Jackson Credit Union.

He tried to locate one of his fellow POWs named “Google” who was from New Hampshire.

“I tried to look him up, but never found him,” King said.

In 2016, Dan and Shirley entered the Antonine Sisters Assisted Living facility in North Jackson. The couple celebrated their 75th wedding anniversary there. The following year, Shirley passed away.

King is also an “honored member” of VFW Post 9571 in Ellsworth.

“It is people like Dan King who served, sacrificed, and got involved with his community, that have made this country great,” said VFW Post 9671 Commander Dominic DiLoreto. “We are very proud to have him in our organization.”

At 99-1/2 and with 29-1/2 missions under his belt, Dan King still enjoys life and sharing his story of flying the P-51D.

“I still love to eat hamburgers, too,” he said.