



WORLD WAR II POW SHARES HIS STORY AT PVM

MEDIA, Pa.—Norman Bussel grew up in the south, and still has a bit of a twang to his speech. He has lived just north of New York City for decades. To all appearances, he would have no real ties to Pennsylvania or certainly Delaware County. But a visit to the Pennsylvania Veterans Museum in June 2009 for a chat and book-signing proved what a small world it is indeed.

“Some might wonder what I’m doing here in Media,” he said on a rainy Saturday afternoon. “I have a very strong connection to this area because one of the best buddies I ever had lived most of his life just down the road in Brookhaven,” said Bussel, spry in his mid-80s.

Bussel spoke of George Hamby who passed away a few years ago. They were both in the U. S. Army Air Corps flying B-17 Bombers and were shot down on the same day, April 29, 1944. Being in the same German POW camp, Stalag Luft III, forged the kind of memories which do not fade. For Bussel, those memories continued to haunt him through an illness now called Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). After more than 60 years, Bussel wrote about his PTSD and how it exacted a toll on his personal and professional lives. “My Private War—Liberated Body, Captive Mind, a World War II POW’s Journey” was published in November 2008, finally coming to light in its current form.

“Twelve years ago I couldn’t have done this. I’ve been seen a psychologist for 20 years,” Bussel said candidly, “but I didn’t want to share this experience even though I’d been a journalist and knew I could write it. This reprise was so important, it had to be perfect. But my granddaughter came to me and said, ‘This is a part of your life I know nothing about. You have a book here. Do it for me.’ Eight months later I finished it. It’s about my PTSD. I felt I’d been fortunate in my life, and that helping others would be cathartic.”

Bussel’s book is unflinching in its honesty, not leaving out among the most painful memories and struggles through alcoholism and depression. There are parts he cannot read aloud as he makes book-signing appearances. Often segments are read by Melanie, his wife of 40 years, who makes the trips and participates fully in other services through POW organizations.

“The speaking appearances have different meanings to different audiences,” said Bussel. “I spoke at a university to a group of social workers who were interested in treatment, but in book-signings I’m seeing many young veterans from Iraq and Afghanistan who are going through the same thing.”

Among the three-dozen or so who visited in the PVM were two World War II veterans who shared POW experiences. Melvin R. Jones, of the adjacent town of Wallingford, was astonished to learn Bussel had been in the same camp at the same time.

“I was in the 459th Bomber Group and shot down over Italy in 1944. I was in Stalag Luft III until we were liberated by Gen. Patton’s forces April 29, 1945,” said Jones, revealing those critical dates became seared in his mind. “This is the first time since 1945 that I have met someone in the same camp.”

Unlike Bussel, however, Melvin Jones said he hasn’t experienced the same traumas. He has thought about the “randomness” of surviving his plane going down which killed three of the crew and badly injured four others. But he said he has been able to “put it in the past,” going onto a full professional and personal life.

Bob Williams grew up only blocks from the Media Armory which houses the PVM. He now resides in neighboring Upper Providence and was glad to meet Bussel as well as other fellow WW II veterans.

“I was in the 8th Air Force, a radio operator in an A-24, and shot down Feb. 24, 1944 over what was then East Prussia, near Lithuania. I was free for a day,” said Williams.

His harrowing 13 months in captivity included a three-month, 800-mile trek to Hamburg, Germany prior to liberation by the British.

“Thank God I was young. You don’t realize how terrible things are. All you know is your were with other fellows and you were surviving,” said Williams.

Like Melvin Jones, Williams said he returned home and went to work to support a family. At 86, the memories can provoke an emotional reaction. In general, however, Williams said they are part of his distant past.

This PVM event is only one of a continuing effort to educate and create awareness of service and sacrifice through first-hand accounts. Exhibits, interactive media, films, resource material, speakers and most recently a partnership with Widener Law School for legal consultations comprise an organization with growing outreach to serve a variety of constituents.

The PVM thanks Norman and Melanie Bussel for their appearance and the opportunity for further understanding.

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