1944

WORLD WAR II

Richard Macon:

Let me tell you how I met him. When we became cadets, we ended up at Walterboro Air Base for basic training. We were called dummies. I was called into a room one day, and a little fellow called me Dummy Macon after I had told him my name. He said, "Dummy Macon, here's what I want you to do."

I said, "Yes sir, Mr. Jefferson." That's how I met him. It was the beginning of a very good friendship even though we were hazed. He was agentleman, a very fine guy. He hazed, but with a human spirit. Some hazed like demons.

To give you an idea, one night one of our upper classmen came into the dummy barracks. Some dummy brother saw them and yelled, "Attention." This night we were having a discussion about shotgun shells. He said, "He said there were two hammers that hit the shell, and I said there was only one. We want you dummies to solve this problem for us." He sent us all the way out to the range where they shot guns and skeets. It was about 12 at night, and we had to go out there and find some shotgun shells to prove that he was right. Of course, there was only one stroke on the shells, but we had to look all over trying to find some shells with two. We had to come back and hav no excuse for not being able to find them. We were braced after than. Bracing means he may say, "Dummy, hit the dew point." That means sit with your backup against the wall and nothing up under you. The only thing that is holding you up is the muscles in your legs pushing your back against the wall.

Alexander Jefferson:
It's been a very long and enduring friendship that has lasted about 47 years. I finished in January, 1944 and he finished in February, 1944, and we have been together ever since.

I left Walterboro the first of June 1944. You must have left about the first of July. Consequently I started flying combat the middle of July, and he started the first of August. We both were blown away on the 12th of August. I had 18 missions. He had six.

We were in Ramitelli, Italy. There are 64 airplanes and four squadrons, 16 airplanes to a squadron. Each squadron has approximately 25 pilots plus a hoard of enlisted personnel and other complementary officers. There are four of us in a tent. A tent is approximately 10′ x 10′, a wooden floor or metal grating floor with four cots. You wake up at approximately 5:30 a.m., get washed up, get dressed, put on your flying togs, helmet, goggles, flight suit, big boods, large gloves. First thing you to to go eat. Never drink too much coffee becaue the missions are usually 5-6 hours long. You are sitting in an airplane which is about that wide. Of course, there's a relief tube which runs from here down to there, but try to get to that relief tube with a parachute on with straps across the legs and shoulders. Therefore, never drink

coffee in the morning.

After breakfast, you go to the briefing room where all these 64 pilots are sitting watching a huge screen. Gleed would walk in. He was the captain at that time. Everyone was smoking, a lot of horseplay going on. Waiting. Nervousness. Gleed would walk in; he was our operations officer. He would walk up and say, "Gentlemen, this is the mission." And he would pull the curtain back. You'd see the red line running from Ramitelli going up into Germany, and everybody would say, "Ohhhhh!" Of course, I wasn't nervous. I was never nervous. There would be take-off times for each squadron. Each would take off at a different time in order to take off on this one strip. Two squadrons at each end of the runway. You'd have your headings out to the target--time to take off, time to meet the bombers, on which heading, how long we would stay with the bombers, and turnaround then time to come home.

Richard Macon:
The bombers were usually flying from other fields. The one that was closest was at Foggia, Italy. They had a schedule. They would take off at about 4:30 in the morning. We had a little radar then so they could track us just a little bit. They would not fly straight to the target. They would fly with a heading like this and turn on the heading and turn on the heading again. If the Germans could anticipate where they were going, they would have the full force to meet them there. If they were kept guessing, they would have to keep all of the bases covered.

We knew where to pick them up. All the bombers wouldn't be together. They'd be coming from many different directions. The fighters would take off three or four hours later, and we'd do the same kind of manuevering. My first mission I thought, now how in the hell can they have us twisting all over the world and end up together. He said, "Rendevous time is 10:17."

Alexander Jefferson:
You'd look at your watch, and it would be 10:15:30, and you'd look over at about 3 o'clock about two miles away, and there the bombers would be. We'd meet them right on time. There would be another squadron of P51's from another group who had been with the bombers for an hour and a half or two hours. Then they are low on fuel so those P51's would have to go back. We'd take over and escort those bombers from point B to point C. When our fuel was up, another group of P51 fighters were taking off three hours later and would take over from where we had them and escort them on. The bombers would just keep right on going to the target.

Each squadron took off at the end of the runway. Remember now, you had four machine guns loaded with 50 calibers, 500 rounds per gun, 92 gallons of fuel in each wing, 45 gallons sitting behind you in a tank. Underneath each wing, there is a drop tank of 110 gallons. You're sitting there just like a flying gasoline tank. You're 16 airplanes parked at the end of the runway. Your wing is tucked into another guy's wing. You're all sitting there, and these props

are moving, and you've got your feet on the rudder holding the brakes because this big prop up ahead wants to pull you ahead. Meanwhile, down at the other end of the runway, one squadron starts taking off. They take off. These 16 airplanes take off. Then it's your chance to take off. Then the other 302nd would take off and finally the fourth. It was exhilirating. 64 airplanes with all the noise and the fervor and excitement. You'd take off, rendevous, and fly in formation.

The first time I ever got sick inside of an oxygen mask we were at 32,000 feet so you had to have an oxygen mask. We escorted B17's to Romania over oil fields. The B17's would get to the initial point, and they would turn and fly straight to a huge black cloud right over the oil fields. The black cloud started at approximately 20,000 feet and went to 25,000 feet. It was five or six miles in diameter, just like a huge hockey puck. They would fly straight into the black cloud. It was anti-aircraft. The Germans woud fire the shells up and they would explode. We would take off and go over and sit on the other side of the black cloud and wait for these B17's to come out. As we sat there, we looked back. The B17's go into the black cloud and then after a while, you'd see one come out of the bottom of the cloud with a wing gone and fire coming out. You'd hear someone on the radio, "OK you guys, bang it off! Bang it off! Bang it off! You'd see one parachute come out and a second parachute come out and then the whole damn thing would explode. Then all of a sudden it struck me. There were ten men on the place. Two got out. Eight men died right in fron of your eyes. I got sick inside the parachute at 32,000 feet. So you take it and you shake it out and put it back on real quick. But I had to sit there for two and a half hours back with a stinking mask. It's frightening. They tell you that war is glamorous. We never saw anyone get hurt in an airplane unless it's your own blood because we were in the ship by ourselves. But war is hell. This glamour that we often see is for the birds. Except when I saw Macon. His eyes were red; that's another story.

We escorted B17's and B24's from Italy u to Romania, from Italy to Polant, from Italy to Berlin, from Italy to Munich, from Italy to France. We escorted B17's and prevented the German fights from shooting them down. Our unit has a war record of never losing a bomber that we were escorting. Escording means simply sit there like a mother hen over chicks. You hover around and when the Germans would come in, we would fight the Germans off. A lot of times Germans wouldn't even come in because they saw us there. There were other times when you would go on fighter sweeps, and you could shoot anything. Those were opportunity times when the guys in our group really did get some victories.

Richard Macon:
Different squadrons would be assigned to escort different squadrons of bombers. Your job would be to know where your bombers were. Many times planes would be straggling out of formation or havaing some other kind of difficulty.

The Germans were something like a wolf pack. They stood and looked. Wolves catch the one that falls behind the farthest. They would pounce on that plane and shoot it down. Or they would send seven, eight or 10 aircraft off to the side meancingly, acting as if they might come into the squadron. Many times some of the White fighter pilots would think, "This is the time for me to get a kill. I'll go out there and shoot them down." They would take off going out there to attack instead of defend, not realizing that they were leaving their bombers unprotected. There would be 15-20 other planes up there waiting for that to happen, and they would come in and shoot down some of the bombers. The bombers were well-protected with their own firepower, but it wasn't enough. They couldn't maneuver the way fighter planes could to get into position to shoot. We were move agile. They used to call us the Red Tail Angels because we stayed right there and saw to it that nobody came from up here to attack them and shoot them down. We never lost a bomber because we stayed in one place.

My first flight I was flying up from Ramitelli. The Norden Bomb Sight was a brand new state of the art device at that time. The only shortcoming as we look back was from the initial point of the bomb run until the bombs were dropped, the bombadier was in charge of the airplane. That smoke that he was taling about, they didn't deliberately fly through that smoke. The smoke just happened to be where they sighted most of the planes, and that's where it accumulated, and that's where our planes had to go in order to drop the bombs. The bombadiers were pretty good with the bombs, but they were sitting ducks on that bomb run because they couldn't fly but about 140 miles per hour and straight. The Germans knew this so all they had to do was aim the guns to hit something going 140 miles per hour, and they could shoot them off like that. We couldn't do anything about blocking the flack from coming up. Allwe could do was sit there and hope they got through so we could escort them back home. When we got over the target, we went around to the other end and waited for them to come out. I'm flying along here with my squadron leader and enjoying the trip. This is my first trip. I was looking around. I saw these clouds and thought this is pretty high for clouds--30,000 feet. I didn't think there was too much weather up there. Here is another cloud. That's flack! When I realized that they were shooting at us too, I tucked in under my flight leader, and from then on I flew some very tight formation because Bill Campbell had a reputation for knowing when to move because he could see the guns go off. I didn't know how to do that. He could see the guns go off, and he assumed that they were pretty accurate so he would just turn at about the time the flack would get up that high.

Historically, in the northern part of France, the allied troops were stalemated with the Germans, and they wanted to have some kind of pressure relief or diversionary action in the south so that the Germans would have to start looking that way and hopefully the allied troops could start moving. This was only supposed to be a diversion. The Germans, according to the intelligence that we got at this briefing, did not have it well protected with guns. But

they had radar all up and down the coast so that if they saw something coming, they could call, and the planes could get there soon enough to probably avert it and attack from that side. It was absolutely stupid to attack from that side so the Germans didn't pay it any attention. The Americans had chosen a general who didn't follow orders too well. George Patton did what he wanted to. They had chosen him to open up this diversion in the south. We had to shoot up the radar to keep them from catching him coming in to land the troops.

Alexander Jefferson:
I was tailing Charlie on my target which meant I was on the last plane. We shot up radar stations. As I went across the target at about 50 fet I heard this big BOOM! A hole came up through the floor, and when I looked up, there was a hole atop the canopy. I surmised afterward a gunshell came up and exploded so I uplled up in a half loof and fire came up, and I bailed out at about 800 feet. My buddies, all 15, went ahead of me. They saw the airplane go in, but they didn't see me get out of it. A KIA (Killed in Action) was send home to my mother. I remember seeing the tail go by. I pulled the ripcord. I pulled it out and looked at it, and just at that time she opened and I hit the ground. Intelligence had told us to roll over, dig a hole and hide your chute and get to the free French because this was southern France. I hit the ground and rolled over, and I looked up and a German said, Ya." I landed in the middle of the guys who shot me down. They treated me with all the respect of an officer.

Richard Macon:
Mine was in Montpelier. My target was there. The strategy was to fly over the target at a high altitude, and then after you got far enough inland so that the mountains half-blurred you out, we were supposed to drop down so that the radar couldn't pick you up and then come in and jump over the mountains. It looked good on paper. I was one of the spares that day. They have 16 planes in a squadron and two spares. When you get ready to do some maneuvers, you have to get rid of the external tanks because the plane does not maneuver with those tanks on. You just pull a lever, and that releases the catch and they fall off. Sometimes they don't fall right off, and you have to shake it a little bit to make it fall off. This guy didn't know how to do it so I was trying to help him so we could hurry up and hit the target. We came in over the target a little later than the rest of them did. Usually what they did was have the guns shooting up, not at any target but just shooting out here like a spray of water. If you fly through water you get wet. If you fly through the bullets, some of them will hit you. Nobody is shooting at you particularly. Joe had a direct hit and his plane blew up. It went like this--BOOM! I knew there was nothing left of him.

But at the same time there were holes I saw in my wing. I knew I had been hit. I tried to maneuver away and the plane wouldn't manuever away, and then I knew that my controls had been shot out. The plane flipped over upside down, and I was headed straight for

the ground. I knew I was a dead duck, so having nothing else to do I went through the procedures they taught us to go through in emergencies. Get off the oxygen mask and release your safety belt, and dump yourself out. I knew I couldn't do any of that but you might as well do something and not go down like this. Then everything went red. I redded out.

When you're going down like this, everything is going in the same direction. When the plane goes up like this, your body has a tendency, according to Newton's law, to keep going straight. That means that your body is stuck to the plane, and it keeps going up with the plane, but your blood isn't. Blood keeps going down until it hits rock bottom. That means that all the blood drains out of your head and you can't see anything. That's called blacking out. If it is upside down and you're going down, the same thing happens but in reverse. Then all the blood keeps going down toward your head, and all that blood in your head makes you see red, and you can't stand but just so much of that before your eyes start popping out more or you blood in from the head and it kills you.

I tell people my eyes popped out. They didn't, but I was happy that the weakest vessels in my head were in my eyes because if they had been in my head, I would have been dead. I regained consciousness about 45 minutes later. I tried to get up and get rid of my parachute. I didn't know that my neck was broken and my shoulder was broken. It was then that I saw these legs, three sets of them very close to me. When I looked up, these Germans were saying, "Ya, ya, rousmitten," telling me to get up I guess. I tried to get up, and they saw that I couldn't and they helped me up. I was paralyzed from the waist down. They dragged me to the car and took me to one of the field hospitals. That's where they reset my shoulder.

We had heard all of the things about the tortures that the Germans do, and that included castration. They had shown us instances where they had done that, and I knew this was going to happen to me at the time. As soon as I got there, and they put the pad on my nose I was fighting, saying, "No, no, no!" When I regained consciousness the first thing I did was check to see if I was all still there. I was surprised to find out they hadn't done it yet. But I knew they were going to do it sooner or later.

My plane had crashed into a farm house they had commandeered for a headquarters. It had exploded with the airplane and killed some German soldiers. They were bitter about that. They had come to shoot me to avenge for their death. The next morning they took me to a farmhouse. They took me over the stone wall so they could shoot me. They wanted to do it in style so the men could see it. Now I didn't have to worry about all these torture things they were going to do to me. They were going to kill me. I was going to die anyway so this would speed it up. They finally got me propped up there on the wall so they could do their thing. They put some blindfolds on me, and then I heard soldiers coming out. I could imagine that they were counting cadence, and then they stopped, and

you could her them make a right face. An order was given, and they put one in the chamber. Click. Click. You could hear all this. Another order was given, and I figured that was aim. This this big gate opened. Someone yelled "ACHTUNG." I heard a voice say Lt. Macon, so I figured he was looking for me. Then somebody came and took the blindfolds off.

This officer, who was a Captain Hauttman, took me out and told me that he was taking me to Frankfurt because they wanted to interrogate me to find out what was going on. That saved my life. They took me over to the bottom of the Rhine Valley. it's the last stop coming down the Rhine before you get to the channel. In this barn they have a round manger where they feed the animals. They put some straw in there and put me in there. About 2 o'clock that morning I'm finally getting comfortable. I heard somebody messing with the lock. They got around me and held a light on me like this. I couldn't see anything past the light. Somebody on the other side of the light said, "It's a spook." This is our own private joke. We call each other spooks because the Germans said they couldn't see us at night. Somebody said, "It's a spook," and I knew they were friends. It was this dude here.

Alexander Jefferson:
That's how I found him. I landed right in the middle of the guys who shot me down. They took me immediately to the officer who was in charge of the coast artillery. They took me about two or three miles down the beach to a little house sitting right on the water. Out on the porch was a glass table and sitting at the table was a German officer. I saluted, and he said in perfect English, "Have a seat Lieutenant." I was scared. I sat down. The porch went right down about 100 yards to the ocean. Beautiful white sand. He said, "have a cigarette." My own cigarettes, by the way. The first thing they did was take your cigarettes and take your watch and your Parker fountain pen and your eyeglasses. We had Ray Bans. It turns out the guy was a German who had gone to the United States to the University of Michigan for a doctorate in political science, and had gone back to Germany and they put him in the Army. He asked if I'd been to Washington. I went to Howard University, but quite naturally I said no. He described Washington, the Black area, Howard University, the night clubs, the crystall coverns.

"You ever been to Detroit?" He described the Valley--the Three Sixes nightclub on Adams Street, the little joint across the street where the girls were. He described how to get the Oakman streetcar downtown around the Library, how it would turn and go north on Hastings. He described Sunnie Wilson's bar. He described the hotels on John R, the Gotham. He had been there.

That's the night I met Macon, where we saw him at 2 o'clock in the morning in the straw. From there we were taken up the Rhone Valley to Wexlar, Germany for interrogation.

Richard Macon:
We went by wagon with hay on the top. They didn't know my neck was

broken. They just knew I was blacking out every time I moved my head. When we finally got to Franfurt three or four days later they thought my neck muscles were hurt so they put a mustard plaster on. I didn't get any attention for the broken neck until more than a month later. Somebody was always with me so if my head moved, they would catch me if I blacked out. I had to walk very carefully.

One of the POW's had been in medical school. He said, "Dick, something else is wrong with your neck besides strained muscles. I'm ging to see if I can get them to do something about that." Two or three days later they arranged for me to go to a hospital. When the Germans pulled out of France, they commandeered this hopsital and brought the whole staff as prisoners to staff the hospital for prisoners of war. These were French prisoners, but they were almost a complete staff. They didn't have any x-rays. The Germans finally game them one x-ray film. They said, "That's it. If it doesn't work, that's all we have." There was a little break and four vertebrae were crumbled up in a lot of little pieces. They put me in traction for about 24 hours. They took the straw off the bunk and then the bunk was just wood. I had to lay on the wood with my head over the edge. One of the French boys went and stole two bricks out of the hospital wall, and they made a strap and tied it uper my chin to hold my head back, and I was like that for about 30 hours. By this time I knew I was among friends. We could talk and we kidded each other a little bit. It wasn't too bad.

Alexander Jefferson:
They knew more about us than we knew about ourselves. They had a large book, about two feet long and a foot wide. Across the front it said 332nd Fighter Group, Negroes, Red Tails. When the guy opened it up, he thumbed through all the pages and finally stopped. He said, "Lieutenant, isn't that you?" It was my class picture. They knew your father's social security number, how much money he made, how much he paid in taxes on his house, where he went to high school.

Richard Macon:
I got married just before I went overseas. This guy showed me the picture that was in the newspaper of me and my wife.

Alexander Jefferson:
They were all listed--all the generals, the colonels, the lieutenant colonesl, the majors, the captains, all the enlisted personnel.

I enjoyed sitting there because I hadn't had a cigarette in three, four, five, six days.

Richard Macon:
When they interrogated me, we were at the same place the second time. It was in Frankfurt, and we were separated then. I was in a cell all by myself with only one little window which was to high

for me to escape. The morning of my interrogation the guard had come around serving breakfast. Breakfast was a slice of black bread with some ersatz margarine. It was white. It wasn't yellow like butter at all. Yu spread it on that black bread. That was my breakfast. I didn't want to put it down because in my particular cell I had a stone bed and no bedclothes, just a stone bed and a blanket. The other animals--body lice, fleas--they were all over what was there including me. You learned how to deal with them. But I didn't want them to eat my bread.

Before I could eat another guy opened the door and said, "Come with me!"

I said, "I haven't eaten my breakfast yet." But he didn't understand what I was saying. He took me down for interrogation, and I had a piece of bread in my hand.

The lieutenant who was in charge down there said, "Lieutenant, are you coming down here for an interview and you're going to bring food to eat?" I was embarrassed. I said I didn't want to leave it back in the room. He said, "Let me get a piece of paper so that you can put it down over here." He was condescending, trying to make me feel bad. But I didn't want him to bother my piece of bread because it was 11 I had to eat that day.

There were two German SS men in the room. He sat at the desk, and I sat like I was being interviewed for a job, facing him. He asked me all these questions, but it was just like Jefferson said. I knew absolutely nothing.

He said, "We are not trying to get information from you. We are just trying to make sure that you are not an imposter. We don't want to send somebody else to camp for officers. I'll give you one last chance. YHou had a code name when you were flying that nobody knew. If I give you half of that name and you can supply the other half, then I'll know you are Lieutenant Macon. He looked me right in the eye, and he said, "Sub." My name was Subsoil 16.

I said, "soil."

He said, "That's right. You were Subsoil 16." That ended my interview.

Alexander Jefferson:
We both ended up at Stalag 3, 80 miles east of Berlin.

Richard Macon:
We were on the same train.

Alexander Jefferson:
So all in all we spent nine months in Germany.

Richard Macon:
Stalag 3 is the camp from which the great escape took place.

Alexander Jefferson:
It was a time of near starvation because in Germany everything moved by train. Quite naturally the Americans and the English had bombed out the train systems so therefore there was very little food that was transferable. Our food was mainly potatoes, kohlrabi, 30 year old bread.

Richard Macon:
No kidding. They buried their bread and put straw around it after the first World War. They resurrected it for us prisoners.

Alexander Jefferson:
The bread actually had sawdust. you could slice it an eighth of an inch thick.

Richard Macon:
I weighed 128 when we were liberated. I weighed 160 when I was captured.