

SHOT DOWN IN WWII, BOMBER PILOT TELLS HIS STORY

by Amy Davis

Col. Elmo Dooley shows a framed painting that was presented to him recently in honor of his service during World War II. It depicts the B-24 heavy bomber plane he flew. Herald-Citizen Photo/Amy Davis

COOKEVILLE - Shot down. Twice.

But a young B-24 bomber pilot named Elmo Dooley, who served during World War II, lived to tell the tale.



Both were crash-landings brought on by German fire, the first taking him down in Hungary when he was 19 years old and the second, over the Aviano Air Base in Northern Italy at age 20.

He described the enemy skies of Europe as a scary place during the early 1940s.

"I was frightened the whole time," Dooley said. "By the grace of God and lots of luck, I lived through it."

Today, the 87-year-old Air Force veteran makes his home in Cookeville -- but memories of the war are never far from his mind.

His story begins in 1942, when a 17-year-old Dooley was a sophomore biology student at Tennessee Tech University. A Crossville native and the first of his family to attend college, he commuted mostly by train.



"I remember that the Tennessee Central was still running passenger trains, and I rode it many times," he said.

Following the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor on Dec. 7, 1941, America had joined the war in Europe, and it wasn't long for recruiters made their way to TTU.

(Pictured: Elmo S. Dooley in August 1967).

"The recruiters came looking for aviation cadet candidates, and I took the examination and passed it and went into the service on the 13th of July, 1942," Dooley said.

Although he was glad to serve, he said he didn't have much of a choice in the matter.

"I was going to get drafted," he said. "But if I volunteered I could select the service I wanted to go into."

So he chose the Air Force - and he was excited about it.

"Oh, yes," said Dooley, who had read everything he could about the Royal Air Force and German Air Force. "I was always interested in flying. I built and flew model airplanes and couldn't wait to get in there."

The first obstacle, though, was getting his parents to allow him to go.

"I had to get my parents' permission to enlist," recalled Dooley, who was still a minor at age 17.

"They didn't like it. My mother said, 'We're signing your death warrant.' She didn't like it at all."

But after a couple of weeks, the papers were signed, and Dooley took off for flight training at the Southeastern Training Command, graduating in late '42 as second lieutenant from the accelerated program.

Then the young man was sent overseas to Northern Africa.

"We defeated the Germans with the British across the northern part of Africa," he said. "Then we got to Tanzania, where the heavy bombers -- B-24s and B-17s -- were. When they secured bases in the southern part of Italy, the heavy bombers moved across the Mediterranean into Italy, and we spent the rest of the war there, bombing targets in Southern Europe and in the Balkans."

After the war ended in September 1945, Dooley was able to return home and marry Sparta native Betty Jenkins, having served more than three years.

"We were all relieved that we made it through," he said.

But many of his peers didn't -- the stories of their lives ending tragically on foreign soil.

"I'm not a hero. I'm a survivor," Dooley said. "The heroes of the air war in Europe are over there buried in Europe with white crosses over their graves. Fifty thousand Americans between the ages of 18 and 35 were killed during the air war or went missing in action and never came back."

Over the years, Dooley continued his military career, serving 36 years before retiring as a colonel.

While most of his combat service was during World War II, he also served during the Korean War in supply and transport roles. Through the years, he was involved in a variety of other areas as well, including the Army Medical Research Laboratory in Fort Knox, Ky., the Air Force Medical Research Laboratory in Wright-Patterson Air Force Base in Ohio, and even NASA. Along the way, he earned his master's and doctorate degrees in microbiology from the University of Tennessee.

When the time came for his sons to go to college, all three wanted to be engineers -- which brought Dooley and family back to Tennessee Tech, where he taught biology for more than 20 before retiring around 1983, being in active reserve part of the time.

He enjoyed 64 years of marriage with wife Betty before she died two years ago. "She was a wonderful lady," he said.

Looking back on World War II and its effect on the United States, Dooley said, "I don't think this country will ever be as unified as it was during World War II."

How did the war change Dooley?

"It made me appreciate this country," he said. "And I appreciate what we did for the people in Europe who were under the bondage of Hitler. He needed to be stopped, and I'm glad I helped stop him."

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