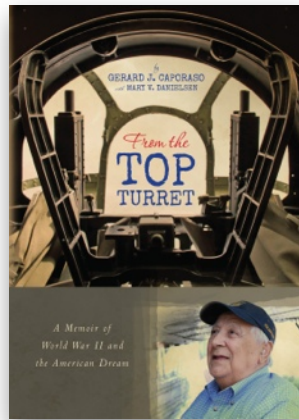


Quotes from the Book

From the Top Turret: A Memoir of World War II and the American dream

By Gerard J. Caporaso and Mary V. Danielsen

(Available in paperback and Kindle on Amazon.com)



On growing up in Chatham, New Jersey the sixth of 11 children

Big families of five or more children were still the norm back when I was a kid. We didn't think anything of it, because most families around us were big. America was growing. So was Chatham, New Jersey. I was born the sixth of 11 children and arrived in time to witness the Great Depression, when food and jobs were scarce. Our nation was struggling to overcome deep hardships. The suffering was evident in every town in America. In our home, we appreciated every little thing we had and we took nothing for granted.

My parents worked very hard to provide for us. It was a time of great ingenuity and thrift. My father worked as a gardener for the Lum family in Chatham and Mom was chief executive of our home. Together, they managed a well-organized backyard garden that kept us all fed and some of the neighbors, too. Yet, every one in my family contributed to the household. No exceptions.

We went to school and did our work on time. If we were told to study, we studied. If we were told to write, we wrote. After school, we went straight home and did our homework, followed by our chores. If there was a way to earn extra money for the family, we did. Our elders were respected. On Sunday, we went to church. When the community rallied for a cause, we showed up. These were the tenets on which I grew up.



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On Training

I never talked about my military service until recent years. Most men of my generation didn't talk about it. We found it better to move on.

We were young kids in our early 20's, except the navigator, who was 27. We thought he was an old man. We were in our glory doing what we wanted to do. We didn't worry about anything. We had no fear of flying or going into the compound or attacking enemy targets. For me it was great. I enjoyed flying very much. I'd like to be that young again and to be flying again. We had a good crew.

On going to war

There wasn't much discussion. No elaborate goodbyes. No emotional separations. We were going war. Before we arrived we had already seen the world. We left the arid dry dustbowl of the northern Texas Panhandle, flew north to Lambert Field in St. Louis, enjoyed the view of amber waves of grain in the Midwest and the lush marbled green mountains that blanketed the Northeast, especially over Pennsylvania and New Jersey in mid summer, and kissed the coast of Staten Island. We landed on bases in Bangor, Maine; Goose Bay, Labrador; Reykjavik, Iceland; and Prestwick, Scotland, before being shuttled to England and put on a train. It was a long squiggly s-curve of a trip that took us nearly half way around the world: more than 5,300 air miles. We went from the heat of summer to ice and snow. The further away we traveled from home the closer to war we came.

On missions

Official records of the United States Air Force credit our crew as having flown eight missions. By my count we flew ten, including two missions aborted while we were en route to the target. Our official missions included an airfield in France; Rheims, France; Emden, Germany; Saarbrucken, Germany; Bremen, Germany; Gdynia, Poland; Munster, Germany; and the war's single most important raid on a ball bearing factory in Schweinfurt, Germany. My incomplete, but definitely flown missions include a submarine pen in France and an attempt to target the famed German battle ship, the Scharnhorst, in Norway. I always counted those other two missions, because we were on duty all day from the moment our feet hit the floor next to our bunks for a pre-dawn briefing.

Once we were stationed on base we didn't have time to dwell on our life, combat missions or our mortality. We just didn't think too much of it back then. When we had a mission we went to the briefing, got into the plane, got into our positions and took off. Our crew had a bit role in the



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strategic cog to overwhelm the German war machine. I'm satisfied that we did our job professionally by hitting our targets and downing a few planes, even on the last mission.

The first time we entered into Germany it was a big deal. That's when we targeted the shipyards in Emden in late September. We knew it was something different. We were trying to destroy their industry. That's what we were after: the ports, trains, factories, and marshaling yards. We knew it was going to be tough and it was. The Germans had plenty of anti-aircraft all around their targets. We were lucky we didn't get shot down before Schweinfurt. We knew what we were over there for and we were doing it. As such, we were always excited going into Germany. Hitler was our enemy and so was Germany.

On Black Thursday, October 14, 1943, the Second Invasion on Schweinfurt, Germany

We had no way of knowing what lay ahead for us. In the previous week, we had flown three consecutive air raids: the ports and warehouses in Bremen, Germany on October 8, 1943, a 12-hour bomb run against the shipyards in Gdynia, Poland on October 9, and an attack on a military base in Munster, Germany on the 10th that targeted a munitions factory producing sulphur mustard gas and the new nerve agent, GA. It was a deadly week of beautifully crisp, clear fall afternoons. What became known as Black Week was about to see its final mission.

At 4 a.m. on Thursday we were awakened from the deepest sleep in our hut and ordered to get ready to mount a maximum effort. It was a freezing cold point in the morning. Before sunlight could warm us, the inevitable mists so common in England had rolled inland from the North Sea, dripping heavy off buildings and trees and dampening our uniforms the moment we walked outside. We layered ourselves in tiers of clothing to ensure our survival in the sub-zero temperatures that existed four miles above the Earth's surface. Knowing that I couldn't work in the top turret and stay plugged into the bunny suit (an electric flight suit that plugged in to keep gunners warm), I grabbed any available clothing I could wear.

Some crews in the Third couldn't set up and follow the PDI (pilot direction instrument). Having no other options the lead bombardier set his crosshairs on a bridge to the southwest of the factories. On his mark the entire division of Forts dropped their bombs, primarily on the southern half of the factory complexes and the marshaling yards that led from the city to Wurzburg. There were isolated patches of clearance, however, that allowed some planes to break through and drop ten bombs at the MPI (maximum point of impact). We didn't have any problems getting in there.

Suddenly out of nowhere, the Luftwaffe began ferociously attacking us. We were met with single engine Focke-Wulf 190s and Messerschmitt 109s that came directly at our formations, firing 20-millimeter cannons and machine guns. From behind twin-engine Messerschmitt 110s and 210s tailed beyond our range and shot crude rockets into our formations. I could hear the



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For further information contact: Mary V. Danielsen mary@documentedlegacy.com 609-468-2367 Page 3

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bullets entering through one side of the plane and rattling the rig's interior as they exited the other side.

It was about 4 o'clock in the afternoon. We were flying just outside of Thiaucourt, France. The autumn sun was making its graceful orange bow into the night and we still had cannons being fired at us from every direction. The right wing of our plane was on fire. The control cables were shot out. The oxygen and interphone weren't working. All the engines were gone. One was hit by antiaircraft.

Lt. Bye informed us we were going to land and he told everyone to get into a safe position on the floor in the radio room. I raced down the post, crouching on the floor behind Lt. Bye's seat, my feet braced against the base of the turret and my head in my gloves. All I could feel was the frightful way my heart thundered. There was no safety equipment to prevent us from being tossed around or thrown from the aircraft. It only took a few minutes. We passed a farm house and crossed over the top of freshly plowed fields where a small group of people were just finishing up their day's work. We belly flopped that plane into a long burning wedge across one of those fields. Our landing gear was still up. The plane was decimated. The only portion that remained was the tail section and a bit of the belly. We all survived, because Lt. Bye did a darn good job landing that plane.

On looking back

They said the life of a gunner is 20 or 30 seconds long. I was just a wide-eyed kid when I heard that statement in 1942. How quickly I learned the truth that in war every second of life is precious.

More than 70 years later I am still hanging on to my 30 seconds, enjoying each day, living for those who couldn't and making sure our enemy didn't win. I would not let the tragic events of my youth define my entire life.

I'll tell you one thing, however. Having survived World War II made me realize that the United States of America is my country. I traveled to a number of countries abroad during the war and there is no comparison. We do a lot for other countries around the world and they don't necessarily appreciate it. Having served in the military helped me to understand the United States. It made me proud to be home. We have a good country here. If we ever had another war where I had to defend our country I would be there again if I could. Home is worth fighting for.

Once I came home from the war, I returned to civilian life, started a career, married my dear wife Virginia and raised three sons. I have survived bad knees, heart trouble, dietary issues and cancer. I've been blessed with two daughter in-laws, Maureen and Mary, who gave me four beautiful granddaughters, Felica, Monica, Elizabeth and Kathleen, I adore. I am surrounded by nieces, nephews and friends.

This life I've cherished. I am still buzzing Chatham.

