



Everything in Life Is a Gift

Especially after World War II.

By Bill Jones

Dying of pancreatic cancer, Joe Kenney Sr., World War II veteran, sits in the sunroom of his Lander, Wyo., home and reminisces of his days as a crew member on a heavy bomber in the skies over Europe during the greatest air battle in the history of mankind.

“I kept a journal,” Joe says, “even though that was against the rules. I knew some historical stuff was going on. I knew that if I lived through it, I wanted some sort of record of what really happened. I wanted the world to know what these men really did.”

In 1943, Joe Kenney was a tech sergeant radio operator and gunner on a B-17 assigned to the Fifteenth Air Force’s 99th Bomb Group. “Flying out of North Africa and Italy, the Fifteenth Air Force lost hundreds of men killed in action. Over 2,000 airmen of this one military unit were taken prisoner after bailing out of the battle-damaged aircraft. After completing 50 missions, you were permitted to go home. The odds, however, were not very promising. That is the catch. The Catch 22.”

Joe continues: “I never thought I would get to that magic number. It is the Impossible Dream. Watching those bombers shot down



FROM TOP: A B-17 Bomber “Flying Fortress” over European mountain range. ▶ Joe as a new radioman/gunner in the U.S. Army Air Corps. ▶ Religious services at the 15th Air Force headquarters in Italy.

in a raid is like a kick in the stomach. I know those guys. Sometimes a bomber will simply explode into nothingness. Sickening also, it angers me when I hear stories of the *gentlemen* Luftwaffe fighter pilots. I saw them strafe American crews floating down in parachutes. Absolutely no threat to them at all.”

Joe is quiet and gazes out into his yard. In a few minutes he begins to relate another incident. “The Luftwaffe learned that B-17s were

most vulnerable in a frontal attack. The German fighters would swarm around the bomber formations like angry bees. Especially near the target areas. Our top position gunner was an educated man—a teacher before the war. An enemy fighter is attacking us head-on. Our gunner gets a bead on him and blows the cockpit to pieces. The German pilot is close enough to see his face. When we return to Italy, it is customary for the crews to be given a shot of whiskey. Maybe to calm us down...I don’t know. Our teacher/gunner skips this tradition and quietly walks back to our tent. We could tell this really affected him. But he really had no choice. Then again, I guess none of us really had too many choices.”

The Fifteenth Air Force made 22 bomb runs over Ploesti, Romania, in efforts to destroy the production capabilities that supplied oil and fuel for Hitler’s murderous regime. The Third Reich defended Ploesti with a fanaticism appropriate to its importance. The U.S. Army Air Corps paid a tremendous price in the campaign. A total of 223 bombers were lost over this one target. “Some 50 years later,” Joe confides, “the word

Ploesti fills me with dread.”

Some military historians now claim the raids did little to hinder the production of the Ploesti oil refineries. American military leaders, some historical analysts maintain, have always overestimated the effectiveness of our air power. The United States apparently made the same overly optimistic miscalculations in both Korea and Vietnam. Nevertheless, the bravery and sacrifice of America’s pilots and air crews is the stuff Hollywood makes epic movies about.

My own interest in this period of our history begins with my own father, a gunner on B-17 and B-24 bombers during the Second World War. Although he never went to combat, his role as a gunner/instructor was not without risks. Thousands of pilots and aircrew members were killed in training accidents. Called back during the Korean War, Dad was again put in training capacity.

Some sort of unrealistic “survivor’s guilt” seemed to follow my father the rest of his life. Once, as a child, I met a friend he worked with while we were stationed at an Air Force base in Tripoli, Libya. The guy drank too much and my dad, a teetotaler, did not associate much with drinkers, and never with borderline drunks. It was somewhat out of character, but he explained it by saying, “He was at Ploesti.”

There were some good times, Joe remembers, although not too many. “Once flying fast and low over the Great Pyramids of Egypt, I got some bumpy music on the aircraft’s radio and put it through to the crew’s headsets. This memory stays with me. It was a lot of fun. And once, in Italy, I went out with this local girl. She wasn’t that pretty, but boy, could she dance! We danced our shoes off. Afterwards, she wanted to take me home with her. I didn’t go. My thinking was that if I survived, which wasn’t looking too good, I didn’t want to return home with any regrets.”

Joe flew in five of those 22 missions in the flak-filled skies over Ploesti. “The black flak bursts were thick and everywhere. The close ones sounded like someone throwing a handful of ball bearings against the side of the airplane. One time, in my position on the left side of the plane in my little radio compartment, something told me to get up and move. A few seconds later a piece of shrapnel came through the side of the plane right where I had been sitting. Don’t ask me to explain it.” Later Joe showed me the piece of metal he had recovered and saved. One end is stamped with a Nazi emblem. His son, Joe Junior, owns it now.

“Once,” Joe recalls, “we are returning from a bombing run with a lot of damage to the aircraft. The hydraulics are shot up and not working properly. Our pilot is worried he can’t land us without killing us all. As we approached our home base he gives us a choice. ‘I am going to fly over the runway’ he says, ‘and let you guys bail out before I try to land this thing.’ The crew congregates near the front of the airplane and takes a vote. All agree

“I’m not afraid of dying,” Joe said. “After all, I should have been killed in 1943.”

Let me close with one more recollection that perhaps will more accurately describe the character of the man Joe Kenney, technical sergeant, U.S. Army Air Corps.

“I finally, much to my delight and surprise, reached the 50 missions’ limit,” Joe reflected. “My crew still has several more missions to fly to reach that magic number. The



ABOVE: Joe and fellow crew members at the Great Pyramids of Egypt. ▶ Joe with his father. ▶ Tech/Sgt. Kenney home again with Mom. “War,” Joe said, “changes people.”



to stick with the pilot. He brought us this far,” Joe explains, “and we were not going to let him go it alone.” The plane crash landed with no injuries.

I met Joe because he had read things I had written about my war—the Vietnam War. He found the parallels striking and we became friends in the months before he passed away. “It is amazing,” Joe once said, “how all wars are the same. You were on the ground. I was in the air. Over 25 years apart, but the emotions are identical.”

It was an honor for me to get to know Joe, a member of the Greatest Generation. I will never forget his honesty and his courageous spirit. He died on April 29, 1989, at age 69.

morning they left on their next bombing run, I walked out to the flight line to watch them go. Why? Maybe to gloat, I don’t really know. Anyway, the strangest thing happened.”

“I already know what happened, Joe,” I said. (All wars are the same.)

“You do?” Joe replied, with perhaps a hint of skepticism.

“I don’t have any doubt,” I said. “You wanted to climb aboard and go with them.” ■

Bill Jones lives in New Tazewell, Tenn. After he served in Vietnam he wrote “The Body Burning Detail,” available from RANGE by calling 1-800-726-4348. Proceeds go to Range Conservation Foundation.