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URGENT

Highland WWII vet recalls escaping German capture in the middle of the night

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HIGHLAND — It's been years since Ken Holcomb has flown a plane.

The 96-year-old World War II veteran spent hours in aircraft during the war, and he went on to earn his private pilot's license in 1965 — 20 years after he returned home from overseas.

Although he had to give up the hobby in 2001 after experiencing vision loss, airplane memorabilia still hangs in his garage.

Holcomb is one of the few WWII veterans left in the Hoosier state. By September 2020, there will be **5,354 WWII veterans in Indiana**, according to the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs. In 2015, there were 16,833.

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The Highland resident grew up on a dairy farm between Monroe and Monticello, Wisconsin. He enlisted in the war in August 1942 at 18.

He served in the Army Air Corp. with the 458th Bombardment Group and the 752nd Squadron.

Holcomb eventually was assigned to RAF Horsham St. Faith, an air base near Norwich, Norfolk, England, in May 1944.

From there, he would begin to fly in combat missions as primarily a radio operator. Holcomb also was an aerial gunner.

However, the technical sergeant almost didn't return home.

A harrowing tale

About 10:15 a.m. on July 20, 1944, the B-24 Liberator bomber Tech. Sgt. Holcomb was in began to go down while over Germany.

Holcomb said the crew was on its 19th mission, attempting to make it back to England.

The aircraft was on fire, two of its engines were out, and it could no longer keep up with its squadron, Holcomb recalled recently.

Around 9,000 feet, unsure if the aircraft was over land, the crew jumped. Holcomb was the second to jump out — it was his first parachute jump.

"I went right out, and when I hit the slipstream, which was about over 100 miles an hour, I started tumbling backwards," Holcomb said. "I could see the airplane, and I could watch the airplane. (It) looked like the airplane was going away from me, and I was just suspended up there."

His parachute opened, and he landed in a wheat field in eastern Belgium. There, a farmer disposed of his parachute and harness, **according to his escape and evasion report.**

 76 hours of battle: Dyer WWII veteran recalls invading Tarawa

 99-year-old WWII vet, a Purple Heart recipient, gives glimpse of time overseas

From there, members of the Belgium Underground tried to help Holcomb and fellow crew member, Sgt. Cecil Spence, evade being captured by German troops and make it to Switzerland.

After many treks in the countryside and 30 days later, Holcomb and Spence reached Brussels, where they met a man and woman who betrayed Allied forces by handing fliers over to German troops.

Holcomb was in German prison for a few weeks with two Belgian civilians, an 18-year-old Belgian in the German army and bed bugs as companions.

In early September, the prison was being evacuated as England's 8th Army was approaching Brussels, Holcomb recalled.

"One day we got on the train about 8 o'clock in the morning, and it tried to get into Germany until late afternoon. The bridges were gone or the railroads were blowing up or something so that they couldn't get back into Germany," Holcomb said.

Around 9:30 p.m., the train was backed up into the switching yards in Brussels, and the bells in the city were ringing, signaling the liberation of Brussels.

The 8th Army was close enough to hear their gunfire, Holcomb said, and three train cars had derailed.

"In all the commotion, the Germans uncoupled these three cars, and we happened to be in one of the cars," he said. "We were able to escape from the Germans."

Holcomb was awarded a Purple Heart after his left hand was lacerated when pulling the rip cord of his parachute. He also has an Air Medal with two Oak Leaf Clusters and an European Theatre of Operations ribbon with battle stars.

After a brief furlough, Holcomb was reassigned to serve with an aircrew in Paris.

Settling in the Region

After returning home in October 1945, he pursued a bachelor's degree in electrical engineering at the University of Wisconsin.

He, along with his late wife, Alice, and two children, moved to the Region after he secured a job with NIPSCO in Hammond. He retired from NIPSCO in 1984 after 34 years.

After his retirement, he traveled with Alice, visiting almost every U.S. state.

He also spent his time at local airports, renting airplanes and flying around Indiana, Michigan, Illinois and Ohio.

"I still love to fly," he said. "I don't fly anymore, of course."

Gallery: B-24 Liberator