

B-17 refreshes memories of WWII

Gunner survived crash, capture and German prison

By Leigh Dethman

Deseret Morning News

Published: Friday, June 17, 2005 12:00 a.m. MDT

Staff Sgt. Gael Elmer was trapped, spinning downward from 27,000 feet somewhere above Hungary.

As tail-gunner on a bombing run over Vienna, Austria, Elmer risked his life to accomplish the mission. He sat alone, vulnerable, in the rear of the massive B-17 when the plane came under attack on that February day in 1945.

Heavy fire set one of the wings ablaze. Elmer squatted near the tail's escape hatch, waiting for the signal to bail out.

But the signal never came. Fire soon engulfed the entire front section of the plane, sending it into a downward spiral. Large boxes of ammunition plummeted toward the tail in the ensuing chaos, pinning Elmer to the rear. He was only able to move one arm.

Soon the entire tail section separated from the fiery front, leaving Elmer all alone.

"He said, 'Dear Lord, I'm coming,' " his wife, Doris Elmer said Thursday. "He thought that was it."

Surrounded by his wife, daughter and grandchildren Thursday, Elmer relived the dramatic experience. Sitting quietly in his wheelchair, he stared at the rear of the visiting B-17 on display at Ogden-Hinckley Airport.

The historic warplane is in town through Sunday as part of the Experimental Aircraft Association's "Allied Victory Tour" to celebrate the 60th anniversary of the end of World War II.

Visitors can walk through a B-17, and even take a flight on the "Fuddy Duddy," for a minimum of \$355.

Elmer posed for pictures next to the tail of the B-17 Thursday. His family sat proud as the combat veteran posed for picture after picture with his many military medals, including two Purple Hearts.

"I asked him if he wanted to go up and he said, 'I've had quite enough of that already,' " said Doris Elmer. The couple live in South Ogden.

Living through a plane crash can do that to a man.

Somehow Elmer survived the impact of the tail of the plane crashing down from 27,000 feet. He suffered back, head and foot injuries, many of which still have lingering effects today. Two men on his crew weren't so lucky — they died in the crash.

Soon after impact, the Germans took Elmer prisoner. He was forced to march endless miles and was shuffled to about four different prison camps.

On April 29, 1945, Elmer was at Germany's Moosburg Allied Prisoner of War Camp cooking raisins and prunes over a fire with some other prisoners. It was a typical, quiet day at the prison camp.

The routine of prison life was interrupted when cheers filled the air. Elmer was confused at the elation, until he looked toward the flag pole and saw Old Glory waving in the German sky.

"He said that was the most glorious sight he had ever seen," Doris Elmer said.

Nearly 110,000 Allied prisoners were freed at Moosburg that day, including an estimated 30,000 Americans.

Elmer returned to his southern Utah home shortly after, where he married his sweetheart, Doris, three days after his return. The couple will celebrate their 60th anniversary Sunday.

E-mail: ldethman@desnews.com

© 2011 Deseret News Publishing Company | All rights reserved



Tom Smart, Deseret News

Former tail-gunner Gael Elmer displays his World War II medals beside the tail of the B-17 visiting Ogden-Hinckley Airport. The plane is open to visitors through Sunday.