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St. Johns High School

Home of the Redwings!

Mitch Das

Interviewed by Justin Hubbard

Mitch Das was a Navigator on a B-17 bomber. He was in the 8th air force and was stationed in England. Having 35 successful missions over Germany he was never shot down, but their 9-man plane was hit in the bomb bay. The flack holes took out the catwalk running from the front of the plane to the back. On one mission they also had an engine shot off. They encountered a jet once towards the end of the war. In the morning they were briefed separately: navigators, engineers, pilots, and gunners. They were informed of their flight path, flock areas, and then were sealed in their planes (much like with tanks) and took off at 7-8:00 a.m. They took off in 1-minute intervals and flew in formation for 12 hours all the way to their target and all the way back. They usually had around 60 planes in the air in one mission. When their planes were above 10,000 feet they had to stay on oxygen; the majority of the time they flew at 30-32,000 feet. They also had to wear gloves. Mitch wore 2 pairs of gloves, a vinyl glove on top, and a heated glove on the bottom, with coils in it. The glove plugged into the sleeve, the sleeve plugged into the shirt, the shirt into the pants, the pants into the feet, and the feet plugged into the wall. Temperatures at those heights were usually 68 ° below zero, and if you did not have on gloves you would freeze. Mitch also wore a scarf, which had a big frozen ball of perspiration on it, from the cold, after each mission. They were unable to eat or drink on the plane, though they did take a sandwich up in their gloves occasionally but it did not keep well. He signed up as a Cadet in the air force at age 22 but the draft board mistakenly put him in the regular army on anti-aircraft artillery training in Mississippi. He finally fixed the problem and went to Milwaukee State Teacher College. He went there 7 days a week for 4 months and received a year's credit, flying occasionally at night. He then went to Santa Ana, California for pre-flight training. From there he went to Hando, Texas to learn how to fly by the stars. It only took him a year minus 1 day to gain his wings. When he graduated school he was a second lieutenant, and at the end of his 35 missions he was a first lieutenant. Every time they went out they would have just airports, or just rail yards, or just bridges. He arrived in England just after the Battle of the Bulge. Normally you had to wait 2 weeks before being put into action, but Mitch, due to the lack of navigators, went into action in 2 days. He never even got a chance to fly with his crew he trained with. On his free time in England he would play volleyball, go to the movies, play cards, and hung out with the guy. After a crews first mission, they were all made sergeants. They had a lot of Coke and orange drink on the base, but they didn't have ice at the bars, they did not believe in anything cold. Occasionally there would be extremely heavy fog. One time when Mitch went into town on the bus a man had to walk in front of the bus it was so foggy. Because of the fog they always took off at the same angle as to not hit anything. He left the service in 1946. He was on his 30-day leave when the war ended in Japan, and instead of going back to England he had to go to Texas to get his discharge. They would occasionally drop leaflets, warning signals to the civilians, to let them know they were bombing the city in a couple of days so they would not kill civilians just destroy buildings. They were required to see their target visually before they bombed it, if not visible they were to pick out a target of opportunity. If they did not destroy a target they didn't get credit for a mission. Before joining the war he worked in a defense plant making plane parts. When he was discharged he went back to Cleveland, Ohio and began working at the same shop he worked at when he left. The biggest change while he was in the war was the prices of products. He move back to Michigan in 1949 and has lived in the same house ever since. He never gets back together with the people he was with in the war; he was constantly shifted around. Mitch's advice to the youth of today is to get into a business you like, no matter what the pay. He says to get an education, then go use it to do something you enjoy

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doing, and to treat people you would like to be treated not holding any grudges.

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