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### King High Remembers: James “Jim” Eshelman

James Eshelman, also called Jim, was a Sergeant in the United States Air Force during World War II. Born in 1926, Eshelman grew up in Chicago, Illinois. In 1940, Eshelman went to High School. After the Pearl Harbor attack in December of 1941, many Americans went to war to fight against the Japanese. Although Pearl Harbor was a big reason that Eshelman wanted to go to war, it wasn't the main reason. Eshelman's father had fought in World War I, so Eshelman felt like it was his responsibility to fight in World War II. In addition, the majority of his friends were joining the military, so he wished to join as well. Another reason why Eshelman chose to enlist in the military was because he just didn't want to be drafted. He knew that he wanted to join the Air Force, and the problem with waiting to be drafted was that those drafted were not allowed to choose what branch of the military they were entering. So Eshelman had a choice, wait to be drafted and maybe get into the Air Force or take initiative and enlist, ensuring that he would be in the Air Force. All of these factors led Eshelman to enlist in the United States Air Force in December of 1943, when he was just a few months from graduating high school.

After enlisting, Eshelman was sent to training; he wished to become a pilot, so he joined the cadets. The classes consisted of 400 men and were made to test the physical and mental limitations of the men. In the 90 days that he spent in training he was broken down physically, which was the objective of the training, because it was meant to prepare the men for what war

actually was going to do to them. Because of the difficulty of the classes around  $\frac{3}{4}$  of the men dropped out, or “washed out”, of the pilot school, and had to join a different position. Eshelman decided to join the gunnery school and came to Kingman, Arizona, and went to training for that for about four months. After training Eshelman was placed into a crew of men. The men went to Sioux Falls, South Dakota, for what was called “Transition Flying.” Due to the relatively new technology of the planes, the pilots and crew would have to spend time getting used to using the planes and each other. So during these Transition Flying exercises the men would fly the planes around and practice dropping fake bombs and practice shooting targets. As a remedy for the boring flying exercises the men would try shooting animals on the ground from the planes. On one flight the lookout saw a coyote running around on the ground so all of the men aimed and started to fire at the coyote. When the dust settled however, the coyote was still running.

The pilot who was supposed to be a part of Eshelman’s crew needed to go on 2 missions with a seasoned crew before the rest of the crew could join him. On the pilot’s second mission, on the way to bomb submarine factories, when the planes were about 3 miles up a plane underneath the pilot’s was prop washed. Prop washing is when a plane gets too close underneath another and is sucked into the air stream created by the propellers, making the pilot lose control. In this case, the plane underneath floated up and sliced the pilot’s plane in two. The pilot along with everybody else in the front portion of the plane fell to their death. However, the tail gunner in that plane, a soldier named Joe Jones, miraculously escaped. He was stuck in his seat by the extreme weight of the belt for his machine gun, so he couldn’t bail out and lit a cigarette in preparation for the end. However, the stabilizer wings in the back were still intact and provided enough updraft that the rear portion floated down, eventually hitting two trees and a farmhouse.

Two Belgian farmers pulled Jones out of the wreckage, cared for him during his six unconscious days, and eventually he flew again. Due to the death of their pilot, the bombardier in Eshelman's crew refused to fly again and became a dentist in the service. Before his death, the pilot's wife had sent him a letter that included knitted sacks that were meant to keep his penis and testicles warm. However, the pilot died the day after receiving the gift.

Eshelman's position of tail gunner was a difficult place. To reach his seat, he had to crawl through a small tunnel for a while, and upon reaching his seat he was unable to stand up because the ceiling was too small and his seat was like a bicycle seat and very uncomfortable. It was one of the coldest years on record in Europe at around -45° F. Due to this extreme cold that existed in the high altitudes, whenever a crew member would have diarrhea or urinate, it would freeze in the suit in the air and then unfreeze once the plane reached the ground. They did have a relief tube in the plane, but it was always frozen so they ended up spending ten hours without using the bathroom unless they wanted to go in their pants. The cabins weren't pressurized so at 10,000 feet, the crew would go on oxygen, and everybody had to wear long underwear, a heated suit that was plugged in, regular GI clothes, full leather, a flak suit, a parachute harness, and a Mae West. Eshelman was a part of the Mighty 8th, which consisted of B-24s and B-17s, and he was a tail gunner on B-17s. They would wake up at 3 in the morning and take off at 6. Before missions, the guys would build up a lot of anxiety then have to go puke or have diarrhea in the outhouse before missions. 2,000 planes would take off every day to go on ten hour bombing missions. They would assemble over the English Channel into groups of 36 to 40 bombers then go off on their missions. After missions, but before the debriefing, the men would take double shots of whiskey on an empty stomach to calm them down. For fun, the men would enjoy wine, women,

and song, and go to London sometimes on leave. For protection, Eshelman carried a .45 with him until the Air Force forced them to stop carrying them so that they would be taken as POWs instead of being shot on sight.

The Purple Heart is awarded to many people in the army because most injuries that military people receive warrant a Purple Heart. Some Purple Hearts are awarded to people who are not actually deserving of it, however, such as those who receive minor injuries from non combat situations. That was not the case with James Eschelman. General Doolittle had decreed that the bombers would drop flying altitude to 15,000 feet, putting the bombers in more danger. Eshelman was flying over Germany on a mission at the same time that the Battle of the Bulge was occurring when a piece of flak came flying and pierced his side, leading to bad bleeding. For the pain, he received a jab of morphine and the plane dropped out of formation because of damage to the plane, became sitting ducks and had to be escorted back by a B-51. The Battle of the Bulge had caused all of the hospitals on the continent to be filled up with wounded, so they had to make it back to England. The plane was shaking terribly, and they flew for four hours until they were back over enemy lines and landed at the first RAF base they could. There were about 20 guys in the ward, and the guy next to him had had most of his chest blown off in battle. Eshelman watched as nurses held the guy down and the doctor inserted a huge needle in each of the guy's lungs to extract a large amount of pus and blood. Eshelman was paralyzed from the waist down for two weeks and spent the time trying to work his nurse for a date. She gave him sodium pentothal and promised him a date if he could count to ten after being injected, but he didn't even make it to five. After recovering, he was discharged from the hospital. For his

service, he received a Purple Heart, an Air Medal which is the equivalent of a bronze star, the Presidential Unit Citation from President Roosevelt, as well as many other medals.

Following the war, Eshelman returned home and received his high school diploma. He then met his future wife at a Catholic high school dance in Chicago and they were married in April 1948. The radio operator from Eshelman's crew enticed them to move to California to go to college, and Eshelman attended San Bernardino City College in 1948. They lived in Hemet for an extended period of time before moving to Irvine recently. He attended a 25 year reunion with his crewmates and has stayed in touch with two others. They got together three or four years ago at Jim's house, and the other two had come from Huntington Beach and Boston. He has lived a long and fulfilling life and hopefully he has many more years to come.