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APUSH Period 2

James Eshelman

Air Force

1944-1945

2018

King High Remembers 2018 - James Eshelman

James H. Eshelman is a veteran of the United States Air Force. He was born in Chicago on February 27, 1926 and lived in the city for a total of 23 years. Eshelman's attraction to flying drove him to enlist in the Air Force at the age of 17. He served in the Air Force for 2 two years during World War II and was involved in multiple major battles such as Battle of the Bulge. Eshelman flew as a tail gunner on a B-17 plane known as the Rum Dum. He is highly decorated and has won multiple medals including the Purple Heart.

After he joined the United States Air Force in 1944, Eshelman went through training in Kingman, Arizona. Although he strove to become a pilot, Eshelman was unable to do so and was instead positioned as a tail gunner on a B-17. His duty was to fire at targets from a gun mounted on the tail end of the B-17. The missions which Eshelman flew in were large and they would often fly in packs of up to 1500 planes. As a result of the large war effort during World War II involving thousands of soldiers, Eshelman made many friends in the Air Force, many of whom

died in battle. Mr. Eshelman describes his spot on the B-17 as being cramped and difficult to reach. He had to carry heavy strips of bullets and sit on a bicycle seat. Eshelman and the crew of the Rum Dum flew multiple missions, including the Battle of the Bulge. During this battle, the Rum Dum was hit by enemy fire, and Eshelman was hit by a piece of shrapnel which then lodged itself in his abdomen. Two members of his crew navigated through the complicated structure of the plane and managed to reach him. Because the plane was 5 miles high, Eshelman had to share an oxygen mask with his crew to stay conscious in the thin air. The flak that hit Eshelman also downed an engine, forcing the Rum Dum out of formation and into landing in England. There, Eshelman stayed in a hospital for 6 weeks; he was paralyzed from the waist down. Miraculously, Eshelman regained movement in his legs, but his service in the Air Force was over.

After two years of service, Eshelman returned to Chicago. Once he returned, Eshelman married and came to California on honeymoon with his wife Joan. The Eshelmans loved California so much that they decided to move to the state so that James could gain a college education, paid for by the GI Bill. He attended San Bernardino Junior College and found a job at a machine shop afterwards. However, he lacked the education to move up to a higher level job. This, in tandem with back issues which he had from his time in the Air Force, forced him to move into sales instead. He would go on to work with companies such as Frito-Lay. James Eshelman currently works as a docent at the Lyon Air Museum

After the war, James Eshelman's health issues, such as his crippling back pain caused by his injuries during the war, led him to request support from the Department of Veterans Affairs. He struggled to get the support he needed and spent years fighting the department for better care.

Until recently, the V.A. did not consider Eshelman to be fully handicapped, and withheld aid, only paying for basic medical tests. James Eshelman developed rectal cancer and often had to be rushed to the emergency room and treated for long periods of time. His cancer was most likely a repercussion of his being wounded in the Air Force, as there were many specs of metal found in his abdomen. Eshelman has continued to have a plethora of health problems as he ages, but he has braved through any health scares with the support of his wife Joan, whom he has been married to for 70 years.

James Eshelman strongly believes that his service in the Air Force was of great benefit to him. He urges all young men and women to join the armed forces, stating that this is one of the best times to do so. Eshelman shows appreciation for the benefits and support which the present day Air Force provides to its members. Eshelman also recommended pursuing a higher college education, stating that he regrets not doing so himself. We are all indebted to James Eshelman and everyone else who served or is currently serving in the United States armed forces for fighting to protect our freedom and our rights.

