WWII Pilot Gives the Most Fascinating AMA You'll Ever Read

Fighting Germany was just the beginning.

As the granddaughter of a World War II veteran, stumbling on Carl Estersohn's Ask Me Anything on Reddit over the weekend was like finding lost treasure. I never got a chance to ask my grandfather what the war was like, but reading this man's story somehow felt not so different from his. Like

BY JILL KRASNY

(GCC·7·1·486)(13·11·44)LT. ESTERSOHN'S CREW
CREW OF THE WEEK

my grandfather, Estersohn piloted B-17 bombers, wore heated suits, and breathed through oxygen masks. And, as I've imagined, he, too, drank a lot of lukewarm British beer and danced with pretty girls to keep his spirits up. Between June 1944 and May 1945, Estersohn flew with the 833 squadron. Here, in no particular order, are the most fascinating tidbits from the 90-something pilot's AMA, edited for grammar and clarity.

What he felt as he left the runway for his very mission:

"Well, I was interested in flying an airplane with three to four tons of bombs, and full tanks of gasoline, and I had to keep the plane going, keep it in motion, put it up in the air. Emotionally, I don't think I had time for that, really. I was too busy being a pilot. That required just an awful lot of concentration. Anxiety? Fear? I don't think so. No."

On keeping spirits light in dark times:

"We drank a lot of beer! We would go to London every three to four days ... We'd go to the dance halls, dance with the pretty girls, and that's about all we could do because London was at war, and they were being bombed, and it wasn't really that safe a place."

Estersohn's best and worst experiences during the war:

"Well, my worst experience was when I got shot down during one of my raids and landed in Belgium, which, fortunately, was in Allied hands. The Allied armies had pushed their way up through France, and up into Belgium, on their way to Holland, so I was not made a prisoner of war. And me and my crew got back to our base in England and we managed to fly 35 missions altogether.

"My best experience during the war, that's kind of tough. I'd say my last mission was probably my best, because that was knowing that I wasn't going to be subjected to enemy action

anymore, and I took over somebody's job as a planning officer to send missions out and brief the other guys as to where they were going and what they were supposed to do. I didn't have a title, I was just Lieutenant Estersohn."

On knowing whether WWII would change the world:

"Well, I knew that the good guys—the Allied Forces—were triumphant both in the European theater and in the Pacific theater, and I knew that we weren't going to be dominated by some sadistic ruler that killed people without half thinking about it. It was good to know that we could go on living our lives normally. That's about the best I can say for it."

The worst part of manning an aircraft:

"There was no radio contact at all. We were forbidden to do that, because that gave away our position. So we had to decide everything in advance of being up in the air. The defense would start to kick in pretty much when we got there. And how did we find where we were going? We had navigators who told us where we could fly and when you could see the ground, you could tell simply by looking around and by checking the cities that you passed through, the amount of time that you took at the speed you were going. That was the easy part. The tough part was sitting there and watching all the anti-aircraft explosions all around you and being thankful none of them hit you. That's the hard part."

On how war changes a man:

"I would say, overall, it's for the better. It gave me a chance to get my priorities straight. It gave me a chance to look at so-called "crises" with a different outlook, different expectation, and different way of handling it. I don't mean to say that war is a good thing, in *any* respect. But it does affect you. I think that any person who's been at war, or in any kind of skirmish, can say the same thing. It changes your values."