

Remembering Dick Bong

RK: Yes, he was - Dick Bong was - I don't think you've ever heard of him, probably not, but anyway, he was the top ace of - American top ace of WWII. And he was in our squadron. And so I had a chance, of course, to fly with him on a number of occasions. And he was the top fighter pilot. He was a remarkable pilot. And he just shot down the enemies like tin pins. And, you would think that it would be easy to do, but it wasn't easy to do, it was very very difficult to do. But he was a master at it. And what Dick was - he just had a knack of knowing what to do. And how to turn and how to get the edge on the enemy aircraft. And he did it time and time again. And he rarely came home with bullets in his airplane. Some of us would come home almost every time with bullets in our airplane - Japanese bullets. But he was remarkable, and was our top ace.

A tidbit about him: He was rather reserved. A bit on the reserved side. But anyway, he never went - since we were an advanced squadron, we got bombed a lot at night. The Japanese would come in and bomb us, at night, you know. And so, everybody - the first thing that we did when we got a new base is to dig what we call a fox hole, which is a hole in the ground to dive into at night when they bomb us. The Japanese bombers would come over, and then they would blow the whistle and we'd all join up and jump in the slip trench. Not Dick Bong. He never got out of his bed. He says, "oh, I'm not gonna do that." He says, "those dumb Japanese bomber pilots, they can't hit anything, anyway." So he wouldn't get up at night.

Well when we got to the Philippines, the first night they bombed us 52 times. And he happened to be - I happened to be in his tent. And we were roommates in the Philippines. And so anyway, it was night and we all crawled in the sack, and in a couple hours they started bombing us. And bomb, bomb, bomb, and as usual, he says, "oh, I'm not gonna get up." And he just was snoring away there, and all of a sudden, a Japanese bomber dropped a phosphorus bomb. I'd never seen one before. And the phosphorus bomb is just brilliant, brilliant burning phosphorus. And it's so bright you can't even look at it, it burns so. And it just was coming down in millions of fingers, the whole sky erupted in this magnificent light. And these fingers of fire come run down, and whatever they touch they burn right through. And let me tell you, that night he came out of the sack! [Laughs].

I'll always remember! When that old bomb blew up, Dick ran across there and dove in the slip trench head first and nearly broke his neck. One time he didn't make it. He didn't stay, he came out that night. He was our greatest fighter pilot. And unfortunately he was killed after he had completed his combat tour. He wasn't shot down in combat. He had an accident afterward. But that's the way it is.