

## **Stovall AMERICA 250 Transcript**

**Biographical Sketch:** LTC (Ret) Thomas B. Stovall (1918-2019) served in the US Army Air Force during WW2, 553rd Squadron, 386th Bomber Group, 9th Air Force, as a bombardier/navigator in a B-26 Marauder. His plane was shot down over the English Channel on his 72nd mission, and he was captured. He was interned in Stalag Luft IIIB in Sagan, Poland (which is the camp where the "Great Escape" occurred). Released after 11 months, he entered the AF Reserves and was reactivated for the Korean War, stationed in Japan. He remained in the reserves until 1978. As a civilian, he married Dorothy Jolly in 1946 and fathered four children. He also worked for various Sears stores for 33 years, then at TG&Y. LTC Stovall's military awards include the Distinguished Flying Cross, the Air Medal, the Purple Heart, the POW medal, and two Soldier's medals.

### **00:00:00 Marty Olliff**

Shot down on his 73rd bombing mission in Europe, Lieutenant Thomas Stovall was captured and sent to POW Camp Stalag Luft III for 11 months. Stalag Luft III is famous for the escape of 55 English officers memorialized in the film, *The Great Escape*.

Interviewed by Marty Olliff in 2003, retired Lieutenant Colonel Stovall discusses his recruitment immediately after Pearl Harbor and initial assignment as a cavalryman. He also discusses his aviation training and work as a navigator bombardier in the B-26. He discusses being captured and interrogated, his internment in Stalag Luft III, his liberation in 1945, and his return home.

He earned the Distinguished Flying Cross, nine air medals, the Purple Heart, and the POW medal, among other decorations.

Lieutenant Stovall remained in the reserves until 1978.

In this first clip, Mr. Stovall speaks of his December 7th, 1941 experience, his being recruited, then being assigned by a classification officer to the cavalry.

### **00:01:17 Thomas Stovall**

Along with almost everyone else, my interest really got centered when Pearl Harbor happened on December 7, 1941. It just so happened I had a date and we were out driving in my car when we heard it over the radio. We saw a number of soldiers walking along the side of the road. We stopped and told them what had happened, that maybe they'd like to get back to the base, and they just laughed at us. They didn't believe us.

My draft number came up and I said, I'll just go on in the service and maybe something will happen for me later. So in January, I reported to Fort McPherson, got put on KP immediately. Then I went before classification officer and he asked me what I'd been doing. My father had owned some trucks and I'd been driving them even though I was working for Sears. I told him I was a truck driver.

He said, "You look like a horseman to me."

I lived only a few minutes from Five Points in Atlanta, Georgia, and although I'd seen horses, there wasn't many of them around where I lived. I ended up at Fort Riley, Kansas, training as a cavalryman.

#### **00:02:17 Marty Olliff**

While training on horseback, Stovall's application for flight training was approved. He washed out as a pilot, but became the navigator bombardier on a B-26 Marauder crew in the 386th Bomber Group of the Ninth Air Force.

#### **00:02:34 Thomas Stovall**

I had just about finished basic training when orders came that I had been accepted as a cadet. I went to Kelly Field in San Antonio. I think we were there only six weeks, and then we went to basic flying school. Those that completed the course there, there was quite a washout.

I went to Colvin, Texas, primary flying. I flew 31 hours, and I made some basic mistakes, and I got washed out.

Because I was in the top 10% of the class in ground school, they sent me into navigation school at Ellington Field near Houston, Texas. I was about two-thirds through that when the top 10% of the class was sent to be bombardiers at Midland, Texas. They had this plane, the Martin Marauder, the B-26, that required someone to be both a bombardier and a navigator, and they needed to train them in a hurry. So we didn't finish navigation school, but we had all the basics, and so they sent us to be bombardiers.

#### **00:03:30 Marty Olliff**

Mr. Stovall describes flying 72 mid-altitude bombing missions from England into German-occupied Europe and his unit's accuracy.

#### **00:03:41 Thomas Stovall**

Before we started the flying missions, one of the units that preceded us over there with 12 planes at this low level. They came back and all the planes were full of holes. They flew one more mission and nobody came back, so we were grounded.

Somebody came up with the idea that we should fly at mid altitude, which would be from 12 to 14,000 feet, which does not require oxygen for flights of three or four hours. The B-24s and the B-17s were flying at 20 to 24,000 feet puts the requires oxygen and it is sitting high altitude.

Apparently, the Germans' guns were ready to shoot you if you're at low level, they were ready to shoot you at the high level, but apparently, they couldn't get the knack of hitting something was in three. That, I think, is the secret that we were able to fly into heavily fortified areas and sustain very few casualties.

Our squadron lost one plane on its first mission to Amsterdam Schipohl. It received a direct hit, losing one wing. Some of the automatic cameras in our ship caught a picture of the plane as it was upside down, going down.

I flew on 72 missions and I led 42 missions.

Further training for invasion, we went down south of England. We didn't know at the time, but we were going to be picked to do the bombing right ahead of the troops landing on the beach because of our accuracy. They changed our missions from hitting marching yards and airports to hitting the sites that were sending the buzz bombs over. They were camouflaged, they were very small, very difficult to hit, and because of our accuracy, that's one of the reasons they chose us to do that.

#### **00:05:23 Marty Olliff**

Mr. Stovall's bomber was shot down on his 73rd mission. He describes that event, his capture, and his 28-day interrogation before being sent to Stalag Luft III.

#### **00:05:36 Thomas Stovall**

On the day that I was shot down, I led a mission to Paris, France, just 10 days before invasion. We were going to bomb a bridge near Eiffel Tower. Fifty-six airplanes dropped on that bridge. I did not see a bomb hit a road, all of them on the bridge or near the bridge.

I gave immediate turn to the right, and where we would have been another 20 seconds, the sky turned black with any aircraft. They had every gun in Paris on a square, and they were going to wipe us all out. We got home without a hole in the aircraft at all. Like an old war movie, I saw planes going down and chutes in the air and everything else all over Paris. So there must have been an all-out effort that day, not just us, but they must have been here there. And of course, they were trying to knock out the means of transportation of Germans getting anywhere.

So I was not scheduled to fly again that day. This officer came up to me and said, "Stovall, my bombardier's got a bad tooth and he just can't fly. We're going on a milk run just across the channel. Wouldn't you like to go?"

I said, "Yeah, I'll go."

I went into the briefing and it was in the Pas-de-Calais area. So the most heavily fortified place on the coast. The thing that happened was that instead of bombing as we did as a formation, they were going to let six airplanes bomb and then another six bomb and another six bomb. But I said "it'll take 30 minutes to go over the target." When I walked out of there, I felt like somebody going to the electric chair.

We were the last flight over the target. Just as the bombs were away, and I had mentioned there was so much black in the air that shrapnel was falling like hail on a tin roof. And there was an explosion, I heard somebody say, "Are we on fire?"

I came out of the nose, and there was another explosion in the cockpit. It temporarily blinded me, and I got burnt. I remembered I had just closed the bomb bay doors and that was the only way out of the airplane.

I reached up and pulled the kitty bottle that opened the bomb bay doors from the pilot's compartment and I did not have a chute on but I had the harness. So I reached down and the first thing I picked up was square and the chutes didn't come in a square package. It was a dingy. So I threw it down and found a chute hooked on and I was still blind. I could not see it all. I felt my way back towards the bomb bay and the copilot came up behind me and said, "Good God, let's get out of here."

So I bailed out and he came right behind me. I was going to make a delayed jump because we were 12,000 feet. I must have had one leg high on the other because I started to spinning like a top and I could see me opening the chute and the cords just racking themselves together and me just falling like a rock. So I released the chute and there I was hanging up in the air just short of 12,000 feet.

And after I hit the slipstream, I could see some. And so I looked over and the cliffs looked like they were just a few feet away almost, but I was over on the other side. As I came down, I heard these bullets whizzing by and all, but I thought they were shooting at the airplanes. I did not know many years later that only two of us survived because they shot the rest of them in the shoots.

I landed about 150 yards off the coast. I got ready to release the chute just before I hit the water. I didn't feel much like swimming. They fired out in the water with rifles next to me and then someone swam out there and helped me ashore.

The beach had hundreds if not thousands of German soldiers in swim trunks after they all leave or something. Just having a lot of fun and they would in very limited English say, "How-oh are you?" little things like that.

I was taken to a command post. I waited and waited and waited and finally I was taken in to be interviewed by this German colonel. He spoke better English than I did. At first, they accused me of being English. I reckon I spent too much time in London. After the colonel finished interviewing me, I was taken to a jail, and from there, they took me somewhere in Belgium, and the next day they put me on a train, along with some other prisoners, into Germany.

We got to the interrogation center, and I was put into a room that was very small, it was painted white, it had no windows, one light bulb in the ceiling, and a cot. They brought me a piece of bread and some tea with a little jelly on it, and after about three days, I was taken to this lieutenant to be interrogated. He spoke excellent English. He told me that before the war started, he had been living in Brazil.

He wanted me to tell him all this kind of stuff, and of course, I gave my name and serial number a little bit, knowing that's about it. About every third, fourth day, they'd bring me in for interrogation again. This went on for 28 days, and for all practical purposes, I was in solitary confinement on bread and water. I did get a little gruel or something, that was about it. So I don't know how much weight I lost while I was there. Under the Geneva Convention, 28 days is all they could interrogate you.

They could read the identification on the planes with binoculars and they would know what units what. When I was being interrogated, they knew the names of pilots and what high school they went to and everything else from a lot of the units. They knew the wing commander and one of the squadron commanders and all the information they had on the 36th bomb group.

#### **00:10:44 Marty Olliff**

Stalag Luft III, where Stovall was confined for almost 11 months, was the camp from which dozens of British officers escaped, memorialized in the 1960s movie *The Great Escape*. Stovall describes life in the camp until the Soviet Red Army forced its evacuation in early 1945.

#### **00:11:06 Thomas Stovall**

I went on into prison camp for me after Stalag Luft III. That was a strange experience. We got in there and saw a little briefing on what we were supposed to do and not to do and all that kind of thing.

And these long barracks type buildings were in two sections. There was the people in one end couldn't go to the other end. And they had a old coal / wood range which was only heat in the building as well as what you cook on. There were 13 rooms. The kitchen took up one so it didn't count as a room. And there were about 16 people towards the end in each room that

was 15 by 20 and they had old wooden box beds all the way to the ceiling and a table in the middle and that was it.

We took turns to use the cookie stove. We were getting one Red Cross parcel per week. We got bread and potatoes from the Germans.

We had a lot of talented people that were prisoners. Some of them were actually college graduates, so we had classes that we could attend, and the Red Cross and the YMCA and other things that furnished us with certain materials that the Germans let us have. Also, they had a little sporting equipment, softball, stuff like that, a **little bit of some too**.

We also had an activity that we didn't like too much called *Appell*. Sometimes at four o'clock in the morning, they would get everybody out of the building and count, see if everybody was here.

As you know, the camp I was in was the camp in which the Great Escape was made from, where the 55 Englishmen got out. I was in the center compound, which was the compound they escaped from.

#### **00:12:43 Marty Olliff**

Stovall discusses the chaotic evacuation of Stalag Luft III, his transportation to Stalag Luft VIIA in Moosburg, Germany, and his liberation by U.S. forces in late April 1945.

#### **00:12:58 Thomas Stovall**

I was there until past Christmas, and in January, we got word that we were leaving. We were waken up about one o'clock one morning and told them we were leaving, and they said they had opened up the food storage rooms and you could go and get anything you wanted. Everybody got what they could out of these Red Cross parcels, and the next morning we started marching to the west.

It was an unbelievable sight. It was the coldest winter in 50 years of snow on the ground. We didn't quite have adequate clothing, but marching it didn't need quite as much. You would top a hill, you would see the German soldiers four abreast as far as the eye could see in columns marching to the east. And to the west, you saw not only our group and columns of four, but you saw the refugees fleeing from the Russians coming just as far as the eye could see.

We spent our first night in a church. We went out and got snow off the top of monuments and mixed it with some powdered milk to make ice cream.

We marched again to the railroad and we got on these big box cars, what's called a "40 and 8", 8 horses of 40 men. We finally got to a place called Mooseberg near the Swiss border. We were there until April the 28th.

We woke up one morning and there were no guards. We were there for several days after that. We were able to get out of the camp, and the citizens of the little town there invited some of them. I spent the night in one German home, and I was amazed. They had a combination of electric and coal and wood range. For some reason or other, I got the impression from them that they were more American than the English.

Then they [US Army liberation forces] took us to an airbase where we were deloused. Our clothing was thrown away. They ran us through showers and they gave us new clothing. Of course we got to eat some decent food. It was funny almost. We'd eat so much black German bread that we thought the GI loaf of bread was cake.

The members of my squadron apparently were informed that I was there and I had phone calls and got to talk to some of the members of my squad. I thought they were going to come and take me to Paris, but before they showed up, they stuck me on a freighter with 11 other guys. There was just 12 of us on this freighter. They treated us great. They served us steak and all kinds of great food.

**00:15:18 Marty Olliff**

Mr. Stovall notes his return home and immediate post-return assignment as a flight instructor.

**00:15:26 Thomas Stovall**

We ended up in Boston. They sent me to Fort McPherson, where I got an additional physical and all that kind of thing. And of course, I only lived two blocks away. After they got through checking, they gave me leave. And so I had three months of that.

After that, they sent me to instructor school back in Midland, Texas. I'd been out there about half that course, and they had so many people they didn't know what to do with them, so they started discharging them right and left.

Rather than being discharged, I was just relieved from active duty return to reserve status. I went back to San Antone to be discharged, and from there I went home in September of '45.