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A Memorial Day Memory

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A Memorial Day Memory

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Office of University Communications

May 27, 2011

He was trapped. His B-24 bomber was hit, plummeting toward the German soil below, and Cecil “Cotton” Bolick was pinned to the side of the plane by the sheer force of the spin.

When the blow occurred, he had pulled the cable beneath his seat, freeing him from the plane’s top turret where he was stationed as a gunner. But the plane’s hydraulics systems had been hit, and the doors on his side of the fuselage wouldn’t open. Unable to pull himself to the catwalk and out the other side’s doors, Bolick must have known he was doomed.

It wasn’t supposed to end like this. A native of Cramerton, N.C., and a four-sport star in high school, Bolick had enlisted as a 19-year-old in the Army Air Corps and had been trained as a top turret gunner. He had escaped numerous close calls, including his very first mission, “Operation Tidal Wave” over Ploesti, Romania, on August 1, 1943—the day that, because of the staggering casualties suffered by the United States Army Air Forces, had come to be called “Black Sunday.”

He went on to fly 24 more missions over the next 9 months, completing his required tour of duty. But his pilot, who’d been wounded and temporarily grounded, still had six missions to fly, and Bolick’s desire to finish with his crew outweighed his longing for home. “We were just like a family,” Bolick remembers, “so of course we volunteered to fly the six more together.” And now, during the second of those six extra missions in March 1944, Bolick’s plane was burning over Friedrichshafen, and he was trapped. So close to having completed his service, Bolick was now resigned to dying rather than returning with his crew.

But then, the unthinkable happened, the first of a string of events straight out of a Spielberg script. The plane reversed its spin, hurling him across the fuselage and out the open doors, only seconds before exploding in the skies above him. Bolick and three others had managed to escape the plane; six of his friends were killed in the blast.

As he floated to the ground, unsure of what awaited him below, Bolick realized his right foot was badly wounded, dangling by only a few tendons. He was found first by a German farmer and his daughters who insisted they were not Nazis. They stuffed his leg with straw to stop the bleeding, and held off another German civilian who wanted to attack Bolick with a pitchfork.

Bolick was then shuffled from prison to prison, nearly escaping several angry mobs of German civilians and always refusing to answer interrogators’ questions. “We had been trained, so we knew exactly what they were going to ask in those prisons,” Bolick says. “They told me my crew had already been there and given them everything, so I might as well just tell them what I knew. So I said, ‘If you already got it from them, you don’t need it from

me.” To coerce him to speak, the Germans began threatening to amputate his mangled foot, but he maintained his resolve until they finally sent him to a regular prison hospital in Obermansfeld.

There, Bolick met a Polish surgeon who was also a prisoner of war. Bolick remembers him as “a big strong man, a really compassionate person. He truly cared for everybody, and it worried him to death because he couldn’t get any anesthetics to work with.” Without anesthesia—and with four people holding Bolick—the doctor conducted a series of skin and muscle grafting operations to repair Bolick’s leg, and miraculously, the operations worked. Bolick regained the use of his foot, and after finally being shipped to Stalag Luft I, a prison camp in Barth, he was liberated by the Soviets on April 30, 1945. Bolick was free.

He began that life of freedom in 1946 at Gardner-Webb College, where, only months after having had his foot nearly amputated, he starred in football, basketball, and tennis. In fact, he single-handedly revived the tennis program, pushing the student body to build new tennis courts and coaching the team himself. He also edited the school newspaper and served as Vice President of the International Relations Club. “Those two years were the best two of my single life,” Bolick remembers. “It was wonderful.”

Bolick went on to earn his bachelor’s degree from Catawba College, and he would teach, coach, and serve as Athletic Director at West Mecklenburg High School and Charlotte Country Day School for the next 33 years. He has been inducted into Charlotte halls of fame for both high school baseball coaches and athletic directors, and he has coached numerous future major leaguers, including the Cincinnati Reds’ shortstop Tommy Helms. As Bolick says, his life has been one string of awesome adventures.

The word “miraculous” sometimes gets thrown around too freely, and Bolick is hesitant to say “miracle” about that day over Friedrichshafen, when so many of his “family” were lost. But given all that he has accomplished, all that he has meant to so many people throughout his 87 years, it seems more than just luck that Bolick’s burning B-24 shifted its spin that day. “I tell you,” says Bolick, “I’ve been very fortunate. The Lord’s been good to me, and I just feel like everything happened like it’s happened for a reason.”