

My Father, Robert E. Hughes, was born and raised in Akron, Ohio. He was the middle child of three. His family was poor but there was a lot of love, and he grew up wanting to make something of himself in the world. An early and profound experience was being sent to a Tuberculosis sanatorium for two years with his brother. He learned to be strong and independent and to thrive in challenging environments.

In September 1942, Dad volunteered and joined the US Army and was initially assigned to be trained for artillery. According to him, he quickly realized the life expectancy in this area was pretty low. He signed up for radio school and after that saw a poster advertising the US Army Air Corps. He joined and passed the test to be a pilot of a B-24 Liberator. During his training (now in his second year) the Army decided they had too many pilots and he was assigned to be a Navigator. His crew (#675 under pilot Warren "Shad" Sharrock) was assembled in Walla Walla, Washington and shipped out to England on the Louis Pasteur ocean liner in November 1944. He was assigned to Attlebridge airbase near Norwich in East Anglia. Dad flew 33 missions over occupied Europe and considered it his duty. He flew his second mission on Christmas Eve and was near completing his tour when VE Day occurred on May 8, 1945. He navigated their crew back to the States – the most difficult navigation of his tour over open water to Iceland and then to Gander before landing in Maine. He lost a number of friends, including his best friend who died taking off from neighboring Horsham St. Faith. Dad would cry every time he told the story of Les Gruner, who was handsome and good and deserved a long life.

Dad's experience in England, and fighting fascism, forged his personality and influenced his life. He loved the English people, and twice was transferred to England for work (for Westinghouse Electric Co.). His world expanded through this travel and he spent the rest of his life working and visiting countries from the Americas, through Europe, the Middle East, Africa and Asia. He was dismissive of the sacrifice he had made, but in his final years he came to understand that he and his brother (who fought in the infantry at the Battle of the Bulge) had probably suffered PTSD and that was why they had lived so wildly upon return to the US after the War.

I wanted to share Dad's experiences here, particularly as this is an English project and he had been a part of the English war experience. He lived to be 100 years old, and would mesmerize friends and family with his stories of flying over the European war zone and many personal tales of meeting English people (women mostly) and escaping the air base to run across a field to the pub! His stories were so vibrant tangible, you were standing there beside him looking for a bit of fun in the midst danger. He was the best of fathers, and I am honored to share his memory and legacy with you.

Alexia Hughes