

# Covered by Grace

## *Testimonial of a Ball Turret Gunner*

**By Major Ralph C. Davis, U.S. Air Force (Retired)**

as told to Deborah Woodbery



From my ball turret gunner position under the B-24 Liberator bomber, I could see bombs dropping as we hit targets during World War II. (U.S. Air Force photo)

## **Forward**

During a recent conversation, my friend Deborah Woodbery asked why I did not write a book about my experiences as a ball turret gunner in a B-24 Liberator bomber during World War II. She knew that I was now 91 years old and had served 20 years in the Air Force. Both she and my nurse, Valerie Williams of Alacare Home Care and Hospice in Jasper, Alabama, had always listened with interest when I answered their questions about my life and, particularly, my experiences as a ball turret gunner.

Another reason she suggested that I write a book was that my dear wife, Shirley Marie, had recently passed away, which left me grieving and lonely. They both thought it would help my loneliness to write about my life. I did not really know how to start, but thought from the beginning would be best so that others could see God's amazing grace toward me in my long life. I've been covered by grace all my life.

Many thanks to Deborah Woodbery for typing from my handwritten notes and for the guidance and hard work on this testimonial. Thanks especially to my step-son Nick Pendley for taking care of me when I was by myself and for taking care of his mother during her battle with dementia.

We all express our thanks to a loving Heavenly Father who has kept us all alive and in good health. At my age, it has been a long road getting this testimonial written and preserving material used in this story.

## Childhood

I was born Jan. 1, 1923, to Dora Ethel and John Wilburn Davis of Dora, Alabama. I was delivered by a mid-wife who wrote on my birth certificate “Walker County, Alabama” as my birthplace and put only my middle and last names “Clifford Davis” to identify me. Throughout my childhood, I was always known as “Clifford.” I gave myself the first name “Ralph” because I needed a first, middle and last name to go into military service.

My father was a coal miner who walked miles across North Alabama hills and “hollers” each day to work. During that particular time, there was trouble brewing. Local coal miners wanted to be unionized and the coal company owners wanted no part of it. Some fierce confrontations resulted in Walker County, and there was even bloodshed in other states.

Working conditions in the mines were bad because many of the coal seams were very deep, creating extremely hazardous working conditions. On top of the danger of working in unsafe mines, coal miners’ wages were very low. Most of the companies were not interested as much about worker safety as they were in profits. There were many accounts of men getting killed by falling rocks or even through other accidents because safety measures were ignored.

As a foreman at the mines near Dora, my father was a company man. Yet he saw the need for reformation and implementation of safety for the men who worked in the mines daily. By pressing for reform and leaning toward unionization, he eventually lost his job. Without an income, he did not have a way to pay for our family’s new home that he had just finished building. Somehow we barely survived. Those were the circumstances during my childhood and part of what influenced what I wanted to do when I grew up.

As a kid in Dora, Alabama, I was fascinated watching Alabama Air National Guard airplanes flying over our home.

Airplanes remained my interest over the years and I started buying wood model airplanes that would fly by using power made from a wind-up propeller. Later on, I bought small one-cylinder engines that had a wooden propeller much like a real airplane. I remember building model airplanes - one with a six-foot wingspan - with gasoline engines and free flying them over the hills and hollers of Dora. I was proud of my model airplanes.



My mother in her later years.



Father John Wilburn Davis.

In the late 1930s, the Good Brothers came up with a way to control model airplanes in flight by remote control. Their idea seems to be the basis nowadays for drones and auto-pilot flight. This had a lot of advantages, such as pilots relaxing on long tiresome trips by using “auto-pilot,” allowing a pilot to leave the cockpit for small amounts of time.

I graduated from Dora High School in May 1941. Since the war started with Japan bombing Pearl Harbor on Dec. 7, 1941, it seemed everyone wanted to volunteer for military service. I was no exception. Because I was only seventeen and not old enough to join the military, I had to ask my parents to sign approval for me to enter the service. The only thing I wanted since childhood was to be a pilot.

The one drawback in order to be a pilot was the prerequisite of having a college education to be eligible to become a cadet, which I did not have. The country needed pilots, so a young person was given the opportunity to take a test. If you passed the test, which was considered equivalent to a college degree, you would be considered for flight school. I went to Birmingham Army Recruiting Office to take the test. I did pass the test, not with flying colors, but I passed and was sworn in as a reservist since I still needed my parent’s permission, which I could not get. My one and only brother Newman persuaded my parents to sign the approval by saying, “Why don’t you let him go; if he gets killed, at least he would have been doing what he wanted to do.”

They relented and gave me permission to join the Army Air Corps.

## My First Military Days

I signed up for the ready reserve in January 1942 but had to wait to get in the service pending my parents' approval. In February, 1943, I was called to active duty in Birmingham. A large group of us were told to report to Birmingham on a certain day. Nothing was said about where we all would be going. During the war years, no one knew where they were going to serve. No dates, no times were ever given, just to show up at the railroad station. We boarded a train much like a troop train and headed to where no one knew. I found out that there were other young men with the last name of Davis on the train. We were on a train to basic training. After a night and day we arrived at Miami Beach, Florida, early one morning.



Miami was a very strange place to be going for basic training in the Army Air Corps, and we had no idea what to expect. We were taken by large Army trucks to 34<sup>th</sup> and Collins Street to the Rendale Hotel. There were about forty of us - including three of us unrelated Davis boys - that were deposited in a room full of metal bunk beds. One of my fellow cadets was from Tennessee. Not long after we had settled in and were given an opportunity to sleep, it seemed too soon that we heard a gruff call to "Fall Out" into a soldierly formation.

That busy day was just beginning and, thanks to a loving Heavenly Father, we made it through that day and many other tiring days until we finished basic training. During basic training, we were given shots and medical check-ups to prepare us for anywhere in the world we may be sent in the future.

Since I wanted to be a pilot, I was sent to where I would receive more education to better qualify me for subjects such as rules and regulations of civil air requirements. I was sent to Knox College in Galesburg, Illinois. We lived in the YMCA building down town. It was about 3-4 miles from the college, as best I remember. In the winter, it was a cold and icy trip to walk in formation. One good thing, we were served really nice meals in the school cafeteria. No army grub would come anywhere close to such good food. We also got more immunizations.

I have been blessed by my Lord with a healthy body all my life except for some surgery. Still, now at 91 years of age, I am blessed in more ways than I should be probably.

## Primary Flight School

After finishing our courses and other requirements at Galesburg, I was told I would go to Primary Flight Training at Chickasha, Oklahoma. The flight training would be in a PT-19 Primary Trainer with an open cockpit for one cadet and his civilian flight instructor. I had received 10 hours of flight time at Knox College in a cabin monoplane to become familiar with how I would react in flight. I loved flying and kept a pilots log in which my instructor wrote passing grades. I could fly loops, turns, spins and upside down with a belt holding me. I enjoyed getting to about 10,000 feet to do “high work” and then put the PT-19 into a spin to get down to do the “light work” of flying a few thousand feet around a pasture or an open field to practice an emergency landing if my engine ever stopped.



On the wing at flight school.

My instructor was very good and had lots of patience. One day he got out of the plane after we had landed and told me to give him a solo three-point landing. Until I die, I will always remember the day that he told me and two other students, “Do not let anyone ever tell you that you can’t fly this airplane.” From that point on I was told I would be going to Garden City, Kansas, for training in a BT-13 Basic Trainer with an Army officer as my instructor. Things changed quickly. The food there was no comparison to the great food back at Knox College and Chickasha.

At Garden City, the BT-13 instructor asked if anyone in our class wanted to volunteer to take off their oxygen mask in an altitude chamber at 30,000 feet. I held up my hand. I was trying to learn what a cadet might encounter later as a pilot or as a crew member. I took one breath with my oxygen mask off and immediately felt it and would have passed out if the instructor had not placed my mask back on. I had learned a valuable lesson, but did not realize how important until later on.

On another trip to the altitude chamber, I was given a chance to leave my mask off as we were going to altitude. I was asked to write my general orders which we all had to know. As we were going up to altitude according to the gauges, I simply could not think. My memory was failing me. By the time we were over 10,000 feet, I could not think at all. You could possibly pass out from a collection of moisture in the air tube you were breathing connected to the planes oxygen supply. This lesson served me well because, later on a B-24 mission, our right waist gunner did not look right. He was rather sleepy and did not realize he was in trouble. I noticed him from my ball turret and asked the left gunner to check on him. I had learned in the altitude chamber that you could fall over while standing or go to sleep while sitting.

Short people like me had a hard time parking the plane and were required to place a large pillow in the seat to even reach the controls, much less trying to park it. The white lines were hard to see from the cockpit, so parking was a problem for us short people. In the air, an instructor could surprise a cadet by gradually lowering the flaps and cause the plane to stall. That happened to me one day. Because I did not react quickly enough, I was washed out of flight training.

The failure was very hard on me. I had tried hard to be a fighter pilot. Even though I was eliminated, I still wanted to fly, so I was ordered to aerial gunnery school. I was not lucky enough to go to bombardier school or to navigation school.

I was told I would be going to Buckley Field, Colorado, to armament school. That was around 1944. After finishing that training, I was sent to aerial gunnery training at Las Vegas, Nevada. I completed six weeks of aerial gunnery training and earned my gunnery wings. I was qualified to be a gunner on any airplane.

I later told a friend that I felt like God did not let me be a fighter pilot because I would have gotten shot down or have to shoot another pilot down in a “dog fight.”

I was sent to Kansas to become part of a bomber crew. We all got flight equipment and aerial combat gear. The crew then went to Davis-Monthan Air Force Base near Tucson, Arizona, to practice flying high altitude missions in whatever plane we were assigned to. Our plane happened to be a B-24 Liberator. Because I was short, I was assigned to be the ball turret gunner. My workplace was the glass and metal ball turret under the aircraft.



## Our B-24 Crew

Our crew was one of the best. It consisted of pilot Roy Hammond, a 6'1" 19-year-old from New York; a 19-year-old co-pilot named Ed Olson from Indiana; navigator Billy Hill from Florida; bombardier Joe Meighan from Lome, Pennsylvania; flight engineer R.W. "Mac" Mcpherson from Texas; me - ball turret gunner Ralph Davis from Dora, Alabama; tail gunner Ross Becker from Cumberland, Iowa; waist gunners Johnny Griener "Jack" from Indiana and Winslow Adams from Maine; and radio operator Harold Brehmer.



Our crew. I'm in the front row second from the left.

Before going to war, we practiced flying high altitude formations over 20,000 feet or more over the American Southwest.

We were a strong team. There was no arguing, fussing or hurt feelings when we worked together, so our superiors considered us a good crew. We were so well known as a good crew that some of the extra gunners on base without a full crew used to volunteer to fly with us.

We practiced day after day. On the way home from the practice - and later real - targets, you had a hard time speaking to the rest of the crew members over the intercom. The ball turret gunner could see the tail gunner and both waist gunners, but they couldn't see me. I could see everything under the plane. One day, I noticed one of our waist gunners seemed to be falling asleep.

Because of my prior altitude chamber training, I knew what was happening. His sleepiness could have been caused by moisture collecting in his breath connection to the oxygen supply. I notified



the other waist gunner to check him. Moisture from your breathing tank could freeze and cut off your oxygen. That causes the crew member to pass out from oxygen starvation.

After an eternity of high altitude formation air combat training, we went to war.

I relied on my Bible for guidance.

Not knowing what to expect during war, I had taken a new Bible that I had been reading. I had gotten my Bible from a Billy Graham Association organization. For some unknown reason, I had started reading Psalms because I wanted to read something rather short in length anytime I started.

One day I turned to the 90th and 91<sup>st</sup> Psalms. Verse 10 of the 90<sup>th</sup> Psalm was very interesting because it read, "Our lifetime is 70 years, if we are strong we may live to be 80." I do not remember how old I was at the time, except later I thought to myself when I was in my 80s, "I am living on borrowed time.

It was very interesting to learn according to the 91st Psalm, verse 9, "The Lord is your protection, you have God most high, your place of safety." That was very comforting to me to learn because of war, one should be looking to our God and praying for that protection during our missions because we were not or had not thought too much of fighter escorts as we flew over Germany or other targets.



## Missions

In November 1944, we flew our first combat mission from Lecce, Italy, as part of the 343th Squadron of the 98th Bomb Group (Heavy), 15th Air Force. We also flew a mission on Christmas Day.

By the end of the war in May 1945, we had flown 22 combat missions, bombing targets over Germany, Northern Italy, Austria, and Yugoslavia.

One day our target was Vienna, Austria. We were told that we might encounter 94 German fighter planes over our target. Typically, the crew members were told what we could expect in the way of enemy fighter planes over our targets.

Fighter escorts from the 8<sup>th</sup> Air Force flying from England did not have the range to stay with the bombers on the way to their targets. Over most of Europe, our bomber losses were heavy because none of 8th Air Force friendly fighters could fly far enough to help them. We were thankful and blessed that there was not a distance problem as we flew missions from Lecce. We had the Tuskegee Airmen to protect us.

In May, 1945, we felt the war was almost over. However, our crew was scheduled for a mission to Vienna, Austria. The officers met for one briefing before the morning we were scheduled for take-off. The enlisted crew members were in another briefing. The officers doing the briefing told us enlisted men that you might encounter 94 German fighter planes over the target area.

We had taken off from our 343rd squadron base in southern Italy near Lecce, the last southern field in Italy. Everything went well on the way to the target. When we returned from our course coming to Austria to make the bomb run, we did not see enemy planes anywhere. No one made any comments over the intercom, as I recall, because we were not facing any fighters. Later, we found out why we had not seen any enemy aircraft because the Tuskegee “Red Tails” squadron was preventing the German fighter planes from coming after us.



The Tuskegee fighters usually flew about 30,000 feet and the B-24 or B-17 groups usually flew at 25,000 or 25,500 feet. So the Tuskegee group could spot German fighters and drive the fight away from us before the Germans even saw them coming. Naturally, we felt very blessed and pleased because we did not have to fight that many enemy planes. If we had, we'd have been shot down for sure.

I have always praised the Lord because the 91 Psalm, verse 11 says, "God will take care of you. He will put his angels in charge of you. They will watch over you wherever you go."

I will always remember and, even at 91 years of age, I still say the angels were the Tuskegee Airmen that were sent by God to take care of us.

Before the war ended in May, 1945, our crew flew 22 missions and we never had to fire a weapon at any enemy fighters because they never bothered us.

I am not afraid to admit that every time our wheels left the runway, I was asking the Lord to take care of us. Just how many more of the crew were doing the same. We were shot at by the Germany Crown crews with their famous German .88 millimeter ground guns. The gunners had plenty of prior practice and they were good. Our engineer told the crew that we came back with 42 holes from all the flak. You could hear the shots at us even over the roar of the engines. You could also feel the B-24 going up and down as the shells hit us. The pilots and navigator said the sky was black from flak explosions.

Great piloting, the Tuskegee Airmen and the Will of God protected us from harm.

## After the War

As far as I know, I am the last living crew member of our particular group. I never stopped thanking the Lord after every time we came back and our wheels touched the earth. I will always give thanks to God for his caring for us. I will always give God the credit for no one in our crew getting hurt and making it home once again. I know Harold Brehmer, the radio man, got a piece of flak through the upper gun turret causing him to have a small cut over one of his eyes. I heard some say there was not even a drop of blood over his eye. I do not think he got the Purple Heart or ever went on sick call for it.

After the war, many of us kept in touch at Christmas time. The last I heard from Harold Brehmer, the radio man, who also manned the upper turret in combat, he was 94 years old. I saw him in 1997 at a crew reunion. Half (five) of our crew were there at the reunion in Chattanooga, Tennessee. I knew he and I - not sure of who else - never stopped thanking God for all of us getting home safely.

We had a good crew that did what we were sent to do. There are no heroes in our crew and this testimonial was written to bring all praise, glory and honor to our Father God, who deserves all this because He took care of all of us! Our pilot, Roy, used to say, "We, the officers will take you to the target, but we look to each of you to get us home." Actually, it was God who got us home.

I got out of the service for a few years after the war, but returned to military service after finding out how hard it was to get a civilian job. I was fortunate enough to get a reserve commission as an Air Force officer. During the rest of my 20-year Air Force career, I progressed from a 2nd Lieutenant in June 1948 to Major in September 1961. I held many supply officer or supply management jobs in many places until I retired from the Air Force in 1965.

## My Family

I want every person who reads this book to know about a person I met the first time on a blind date. That person would be 79 years old now. But she died at the young age of 56. She was my wife, Julia Ruth Williams.

The blind date was arranged by her friend, who also knew me. That blind date was the beginning of a long, loving relationship. We were together for 38 years before she died in July 1982.

Ruth stood by me through all my war years and was faithful to the end of her life. She was the most dedicated wife a service man could have ever wished for. She was ready to go every time the Air Force sent me overseas. Sometimes I had to go overseas by myself on an unaccompanied tour, leaving her alone with our children. But when the Air Force allowed me to take my family overseas or anywhere in the U.S., she was always eager to go. Air Force travel orders allowing her to join me in Guam were happy ones for her. I had to go to Guam just as the Korean War was beginning and had leave her alone for a year. But she and the kids joined me later. She boarded a ship on the west coast with our daughter, Pat, and first son Steven.



Ruth, Pat, Steven and David's passport.

Before that, we lived a happy life until we moved to Wichita Falls, Texas, where Steven was born. She wasn't a Christian then, but we attended the Baptist church, which she embraced. We were busy in many churches and chapels throughout our military career. She was always active in the church, singing in the choir and teaching Sunday School classes for the young girls. We attended church every time the door opened from the Korean War until I was sent on a classified military mission to Iceland. She, Pat and Steven stayed at home in Birmingham, Alabama until I returned from Iceland. Then we moved to Colorado Springs, Colorado, where we bought a nice home there, but later moved to Boulder, where I got my business degree from the University of Colorado, thanks to the Air Force. My second son, David, was born in Colorado, with a congenial heart problem, a blocked aorta that required surgery when he was five years old.

Despite David's illness and frailty in his early years, we all enjoyed life in the foothills of Boulder, Colorado. Then I was transferred to Laon Air Base, France, in 1958. I had to leave Ruth and the kids for months, but they were able to join me in France later. They boarded the USS Buckner, a military transport ship, in Brooklyn, New York, for a stormy five-day winter voyage across the North Atlantic. They encountered severe weather in the English Channel that caused

David's baby crib to roll all over their state room. Crew members had to tie it down. They also helped Ruth tend to David and the kids' seasickness. One stormy afternoon as an Elvis Presley movie was shown in the ship theater, the ship was broadsided by a huge wave and many theatergoers were thrown out of their chairs. The ship had listed 65 degrees, almost rolling over. They finally docked in Bremerhaven, Germany, where they took a train to France.

By the time I retired from the Air Force in 1965 in California, our military family had lived in 23 states and in two countries, Guam and France. We had visited countless other states and countries.

Ruth died of lymphoma in July 1982.

After Ruth died, I married Shirley Marie Pendley, a wonderful woman whose husband had died several years earlier. Her family embraced me as their own during the 38 years Shirley and I were married. She died in early 2014 of complications from dementia and chronic lung problems. From the day we married, Shirley Marie's family embraced me as one of their own. Throughout her illness and even afterward, Marie's son Nick Pendley joined me for breakfast. He shopped for me, ran errands, and took me to the doctor. I will always be grateful for his support and support from Marie's eldest son Nelson and his wife Valerie Pendley, who cleaned my apartment regularly. Others of the large Pendley family live in or around Jasper. They all looked in on me from time to time. Most recently, Nick's son Chase brought me some delicious syrup and jam from his vacation in Gatlinburg, Tenn.



Me and Shirley Marie.

My daughter Patricia died in August 2003 of cardiac arrest. My son David died in December 2002 of complications from hepatitis C. After Shirley Marie passed away, my son Steven, now retired from a 20-year U.S. Army and a 10-year Civil Service career as a public affairs officer, moved from the West Coast to be closer to me. In October 2014, I moved to Pensacola, Florida to live with him, his wife Yu Sun and Doogie and Oscar, their two cute Shih Tzu dogs.

Yu Sun and Steven's daughter Jamie works for Verizon cellular as a project manager. Their other daughter Cindy, who will be married Nov. 9, 2014, is a social worker for the Orthodox Christian Church.

At 91 years old, I have been blessed with a long life and two loving families.





I continue to offer my testimony every time I have a chance. I was honored recently to be chosen by the Christian Broadcasting Network for their 700 Club Veterans Day tribute.

Christian Broadcasting Network videographer Rob Birch films me Sept. 16, 2014, for the 700 Club Veterans Day tribute.

To this day, I hand out a 3"x5" inch card to anyone who will take one to explain my long life and praise of the Lord.

The Everyday Bible-New Century Version

90th Psalm v:10 "Our lifetime is 70 years, if we are strong we may live to be 80."

91st v:9 "The Lord is your protection, you have made God most high, your place of safety."

vs:10 "Nothing bad will happen to you. No disaster will come to your home."

v:11 "He will put his angels in charge of you, they will watch over you where ever you go."

I wish you a long and blessed life! May you be Covered by Grace as I have been all my life!