



## Web site tells of war in vets' voices

By [Russell Grantham](#)

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Burt Vardeman's plane had lost two engines over the Adriatic Sea when a third engine started to fail and the pilot ordered everyone to get ready to bail out.

"The tail gunner bailed out," said Vardeman, then a 20-year-old radio operator flying bomber missions over Europe. But "just about the time he bailed out, the pilot said, 'Hold it, we're going to make it.' "

Vardeman radioed their position to a military search-and-rescue team as he watched his crewmate's parachute recede into the distance, but they never found him.

Sixty-five years later, the incident still haunts Vardeman, now an 84-year-old Atlantan.

"I have thought so many times about what he thought as he was going down and seeing that plane flying away with no parachutes coming out of it."

### Veterans disappearing

War stories are endlessly fascinating to Tom Beaty.

In those tales, war's random tragedies and extraordinary acts are laid out in infinite variety, explains the 41-year-old Norcross entrepreneur. And they are disappearing fast as World War II's veterans, most in their 80s or 90s, pass away.

"Every time I see an obituary for a World War II veteran who has died, it just hits me," said Beaty. "All those stories gone."

In 2001, Beaty decided to capture some of those tales on videotape. That grew into a collection of 200 interviews that he assembled into an online archive, Witness to War ([www.witnesstowar.org](http://www.witnesstowar.org)), that he launched in 2006.

His plan is eventually to interview 1,000 veterans and civilians who were caught in the conflict and donate the collection of oral histories, photos and other materials to the Library of Congress.

But after putting eight years and perhaps \$120,000 of his own money into the project, Beaty has realized it's become too big and expensive for him to do on his own while running his business. To speed up the process before too many veterans get much older, he's trying to raise \$650,000 to hire interviewers and editors for his nonprofit organization.

"I feel like I can take it further, but I'm at the limits of my time," he said.

### First mission was over Alps

Vardeman, who appears in three video vignettes on Beaty's Web site, can't recall what target they hit on the day his B-24 Liberator bomber was almost shot down and the tail gunner disappeared.

But he remembers the goal of his first mission, in October 1944, very well.

It was to hit a Nazi ball-bearing factory in Brux, Czechoslovakia.

"I remember staying up all night thinking about going, and throwing up. I wasn't the only one. The latrine was full," Vardeman said in an interview with the Atlanta Journal-Constitution.

It was less than a week after he had stepped off an old freight train and trudged through the black mud and the black night to a floorless tent at his bomber base in Foggia, Italy.

For more than a year before that night, the Covington native had been training to serve as a radio operator and gunner on a B-24 bomber. Basic training in Gulfport, Miss. Radio instruction in Sioux Falls, S.D. More training stops in Nebraska, Idaho and Arizona.

But after a few days in Italy seeing films and hearing briefings on what combat was like and what to do if shot down, he recalled, "I was thinking, I don't know if I can last through the first mission or not."

On that first flight, the bombers departed from their base about midway down Italy's boot and headed north over the Adriatic toward the Alps.

"I just thought how beautiful and peaceful they looked ... and I thought I wasn't going to get back," he said. "We began to encounter flak pretty soon after that."

### **What was being there like?**

Beaty's "Witness to War" makes such tales accessible to the Google generation through a searchable archive of present-day video interviews, photo collections and written accounts, often by the former soldiers. The professionally designed site allows the user to search for material several ways, including by the soldiers' names, geography, branches of the military, and types of experience — such as what it was like to fight against a tank or to come under a kamikaze attack.

"My whole sense of the project is to learn what it was like to be there," said Beaty. "What was it like to be under artillery fire?" The usual answer, he said, is "terrifying."

Why has he spent so much time and money on the project?

"It's difficult to explain," said Beaty. Part of it's a lifelong fascination with military history, said the Charlotte native. He majored in military history in college, even though his family owned an industrial construction business and has produced few soldiers since the Civil War.

Such tales also help him keep things in perspective, he added.

"It's amazing how cathartic it is," said Beaty, who started a small consulting business in 2002, Norcross-based Insight Sourcing Group, that advises companies on ways to cut costs of transportation, supplies and telecommunications.

"You start hearing the stories and hear what real stress is," said Beaty.

After hundreds of interviews, he hopes the earlier generation also has passed along some wisdom.

"I've learned a lot about how to be a man. How to be a leader. What a successful life looks like," said Beaty. "A lot of them feel like they got a second lease on life."

### **Flak was terrifying**

Vardeman's unit, the 824th Bomb Squadron, lost about 30 percent of its planes during the war, mostly to enemy fighters. By the time Vardeman entered the war, most of the enemy fighters had been shot down or grounded by lack of fuel or pilots.

But flak from ground guns was still a "very dreaded thing," destroying several planes on each mission, said Vardeman.

The anti-aircraft gunners set their shells to explode at the altitude of the planes, but the bombers countered by flying formations at two or three levels to make sure some planes got through.

Crews didn't know which level the gunners had zeroed in "until they started shooting ... [and] the plane next to you blew up," said Vardeman.

As protection from shrapnel, the crew were supplied with helmets and flak jackets. They often sat atop the armored vests to protect their privates, he said.

On that first mission, Vardeman remembers, he saw a plane above him explode, and another crew member said another below them was destroyed.

The bomb runs over the target lasted only three or four minutes, but “it seems like 20 or 30 minutes because you’re getting shot at and the plane can’t maneuver because you’re flying a straight line for the bomb run,” said Vardeman.

He often heard the shrapnel striking the plane, but none ever hit him or other crew members.

He said it wasn’t until about his 25th mission that their luck began to run out.

They had dropped their bombs over the target, but couldn’t keep up with the formation on the flight back to their base because two engines had been hit.

“We began to lose another engine. ... We were over the Adriatic,” he said. The propeller was spinning out of control and violently shaking the plane.

They threw the machine guns, ammunition and other heavy things overboard to lighten the crippled plane.

They were about 50 miles offshore from Italy, and losing altitude.

That’s when the captain ordered the crew to clip on their parachutes and get ready to bail out, and the tail gunner jumped through the hatch near his position.

But off in the distance, the captain spotted the landing strip used by the Tuskegee Airmen, the famed fighter squadron that escorted his unit.

#### **‘I thought it was the end’**

“Our pilot glided our airplane in [to] the landing field,” he said. They crash-landed but no one was hurt. “It was the scariest time for sure. I just thought it was the end.”

But it wasn’t. Vardeman flew several more missions before the war in Europe ended.

After the war, he sent the tail gunner’s personal effects to his family in Minneapolis and told them what happened. “They were most appreciative,” he said.

Vardeman went on to study architecture at Auburn University, where he met his wife of 61 years, Martha, raised four children and had a long career in architecture, construction and commercial real estate.

It was a long time before he talked about the war. “We wanted to get on with our life,” he said.

Beaty is happy Vardeman and other veterans later decided — often long after they retired — that it was time to tell their stories.

For many of them, “that’s the one defining thing in [their] life,” he said.

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#### **About Witness to War**

Entrepreneur Tom Beaty hopes to raise \$650,000 to allow his nonprofit organization to interview 1,000 World War II veterans within two years. He hopes to get support from a few individual donors but plans to approach corporations, foundations and prominent actors and executives linked to veterans’ causes, such as Tom Hanks and FedEx CEO Fred Smith.

To learn more about the project, contact Beaty at 770-481-3010 or [tom@witness-to-war.org](mailto:tom@witness-to-war.org).

Find this article at:

<http://www.ajc.com/news/atlanta/web-site-tells-of-263970.html>



Jason Getz, [jgetz@ajc.com](mailto:jgetz@ajc.com) Burt Vardeman of Atlanta displays a case full of the military honors he received for 31 combat missions he flew as a radio operator on a B-24 over Europe. Vardeman is one of several WWII veterans whose stories are on the Web site [Witness-to-War.org](http://Witness-to-War.org).



Jason Getz, [jgetz@ajc.com](mailto:jgetz@ajc.com) Tom Beaty sits in the room where he conducts interviews with World War II veterans for his Web site, "Witness to War." Beaty collects oral and photographic histories of America's WWII veterans, a group rapidly disappearing. Beaty, founder of Insight Sourcing Group in Norcross, estimates he's put \$120,000 into the project, and hopes to raise money to hire others to help with it.