

Service: Stories of Hunger and War
Episode 1.5 – “FOR THE MECHANICALLY MINDED”
Episode Transcript

(TELETYPE BEEPS, FACTORY SOUNDS)

JACQUELINE RAPOSO: Welcome to a special supporting episode of SERVICE: Stories of Hunger and War, a production of iHeartRadio and me, your host, Jacqueline Raposo....

HAROLD BUD LONG: I lived on K-Rations and C-rations.

PASQUALE D’AMBROSIO: The C-rations, they were like extra-large crackerjack boxes.

FRANK DEVITA: We were on the chow line, waiting for food, probably half a mile long between all the soldiers and sailors.

JACQUELINE RAPOSO: The military has a language all its own. Over the course of this season, we'll progressively hear our World War 2 veterans describe K-Ration boxes, how they loved or hated or simply tolerated their military meals, and what they outsourced to fill in the gaps. Today we're going to detail out a few terms you'll be hearing our veterans voice early on this season.

JOHN BISTRICA: They had a code name Mickey Mouse. If I said, "Mickey", you had to say "Mouse."

HAROLD BUD LONG: They made a C-46. That was a bigger cargo plane than the C-47.

GEORGE HARDY: Most people flew in the Steerman – that's a bi-wing plane.

JACQUELINE RAPOSO: The needs of World War 2 encouraged major advancements in technology in both the United States and abroad, and Allied forces worked together before the United States joined in December of 1941. By that time, the war had been raging in Britain, and Winston Churchill was never shy in praising technological advancement...

WINSTON CHURCHILL, FROM RADIO, JULY 29, 1941: “...But all the adverse factors I have described have somehow or another been canceled out by the superior development of our machinery and organization....”

(COMPUTER SOUNDS OF MORSE CODE)

JACQUELINE RAPOSO: The first digital computers were breaking enemy code. Civilians filled assembly lines stateside, churning out nearly 50,000 M4 Sherman tanks in only four years. And the brand new development of radio navigation systems like radar, allowed pilots to maneuver to and from targets safely, which aided the Allies' triumph against the Germans in the Battle of Britain -- a huge turning point in the war, which inspired Churchill's famous speech...

WINSTON CHURCHILL, FROM RADIO, August 20, 1940: The gratitude of every home in our Island, in our Empire, and indeed throughout the world, except in the abodes of the guilty, goes out to the British airmen who, undaunted by odds, unwearied in their constant challenge and mortal danger, are turning the tide of the world war by their prowess and by their devotion. Never in the field of human conflict was so much owed by so many to so few.

JACQUELINE RAPOSO: Fledgling U.S. Army Air Corp pilots were inspired by such wins. And today, veterans aren't shy in name-dropping the companies that made such things possible. Before he was drafted, Harold Bud Long was one of 180,000 employees of Curtiss-Wright, the largest aircraft manufacturer in the U.S at the time and second only to General Motors when it came to employment. Curtiss produced aircraft engines, electric propellers, and airplanes like the P-40 fighter, a sleek, light, one-man monoplane with an enclosed cockpit that made it possible for pilots to fly in inclement weather.

Here's George Hardy, a Tuskegee Airmen you'll hear from this season who flew fighter planes in Italy - explaining how manufacturers from different companies worked together on advancements that could make or break crucial missions.

GEORGE HARDY: A P-51 type airplane we built for the British. When we got into the war, they came over here for us to build an airplane. They wanted P40s, but Curtiss couldn't build any more than they were building. And they asked North American to put in a P40 production line. And North American said, "We can build a better airplane faster than that," so, they built an airplane - A36, something like that. P40s had an Allison engine in it, built by the Allison Company here. But the Allison engine lost efficiency above, say, 15,000 thousand feet. It didn't have a good supercharger on it, see. The English took the airplane and they put the Rolls-Royce engine in it, and that changed the whole characteristic of the airplane. It was the best airplane at any altitude. We built over 14,000 of them for ourselves after that with the Rolls-Royce engine. The engine was built under license by the Packard Motor Company. So I had my Rolls at 19. Yeah, I remember flying at 40,000 feet, an engine just going beautifully, over the Colosseum in Rome.

(PROPELLER PLANE TAKING OFF, THEN SOUND OF AN ENGINE COASTING FROM INSIDE PLANE)

JACQUELINE RAPOSO: Because they were fast and could so fly high, pilots like George were able to escort and defend bomber planes -- you'll hear details about that in his episodes. But even with such helpful technological advances, soldiers sometimes faced agricultural challenges when they landed in foreign landscapes.

(TIMPANI DRUMS)

JOHN BASTRICA: After I got off on the beach and I was looking for my C-Company guys, I come up into the hedgerows...

(FARM SOUNDS, CHICKENS AND CRICKETS)

JACQUELINE RAPOSO: When off of the Normandy beaches after D-Day, soldiers like Bud and Army Private John Bistrica then had to navigate "hedgerows". I had never heard of them, but veterans remember them clearly. Built as early as the Roman era, picture them as tall man-made earth fences topped with dense shrubbery, trees, and brambles. They closed in areas of pasture around the size of a football field, and as they had spread over time to create meandering lanes with deep curves, they made prime hiding spots. This meant soldiers had to learn new maneuvering strategies if they were to stay ahead of their foe. Here's Bud Long, who landed in Normandy with the Air Corp on D-Day:

(CRICKETS AND BOOTS WALKING THROUGH BRUSH)

BUD LONG: They were tough to get through because there were thick. The farmers there had teams of horses and they'd farm like five acres of land - just a small plot - and hedgerows and all of a sudden a lane went in it. And they said, "Don't go through that lane. Because the machine guns set up on the other side just waiting for you to get through." So I said, "Pick the thickest part of the hedgerow and go through it and you'll catch them up by surprise. We learned that right off the beach.

JACQUELINE RAPOSO: Because tents and barns made easy enemy targets, finding a safe place to rest was a treacherous task. And so as much as the hedgerows hindered movement, they also helped create shelter. Here's John Bastrica, Army Private First class, explaining the difference between slip-trenches and fox holes and how hedgerows could help:

(WALKING SOUNDS FADE OUT, HIGH PITCH OF CICADAS)

JOHN BASTRICA: When we stopped before nightfall, we were told, "Don't dig a slip trench. Dig a foxhole." A trench is just: dig the hole, the length of your body and the thickness of your body. There was dirt on all sides and all you'd be level with the ground. If a shell would hit close the shrapnel would go over your head. But if you dug a foxhole you dug down maybe three feet in the ground, and you made a seat in there, and your head had to be below ground in case you had a tank attack, the tank would go over it and it wouldn't, wouldn't hurt you. The biggest hedgerows were at least five foot high, maybe three-foot-wide so that you didn't have to dig into the ground so much.

(SOUND OF TANKS GRUMBLING OVER HARD GROUND)

JACQUELINE RAPOSO: This season you'll hear our veterans casually refer to such hedgerows and various kinds of ships, trucks, and planes. If you find yourself not entirely sure of the what and why, don't worry too hard on it, soldiers and sailors were once civilians, too.

PRESIDENT ROOSEVELT FROM RADIO, JUNE 6, 1944: "Our sons, pride of our nation, this day have set upon a mighty endeavor, a struggle to preserve our Republic, our religion, and our civilization, and to set free a suffering humanity..."

JACQUELINE RAPOSO: You can see photos from this episode at ServicePodcast.org, where you can leave comments or messages for our veterans. Connect with our community on social media - we're @servicepod on Instagram and Facebook.

Service is a production of iHeartRadio and me, Jacqueline Raposo. Misti Boettiger is the Associate Producer on this episode. Juuni Ramocan engineered the on-site interview with John. Our supervising producer is Gabrielle Collins. Our Executive Producer is Christopher Hassiotis. Our art is by Girl Friday. Thanks for listening. And thank you, those who are serving and those who have served.