



By Carolyn Lee

The Imperial Republican

Chase County Schools secondary school students had the honor of hearing a World War II veteran describe his experiences as a bomber gunner during a Veterans Day 2009 program at the school last Wednesday, Nov. 11.

Dwight Hoff of Imperial served in the U.S. Air Force as a 19-year old stationed out of England. He was a flight engineer and top turret gunner on a B-24 bomber, serving on 28 combat missions over Germany in 1944.

Hoff had enlisted on his 18th birthday in April, 1943, but had to wait to begin training until after he graduated from high school. His bomber crew's oldest member was a 21-year old copilot, plus a 20-year old pilot and career gunners ages 18.

Hoff told the CCS seniors that they may not know what they'll be doing next year. In 1944, "If you were 18, you had a pretty good idea what you were going to do," he pointed out. "You were going into the military."

He first attended basic training at Keesler Air Base in Mississippi, then went on to flight engineer and gunnery school in Florida.

As a country boy and a hunter, he enjoyed shooting practice, where soldiers would fire 250 shotgun rounds per day for six weeks. He then progressed to machine gun operation.

Hoff was stationed at an air base on the east coast of England. The mortality rate for English and American air crews was high—135,000 air casualties were racked up in WWII, he said.

It was sobering to be shown to his new barracks, to realize that "two or three days before, another crew was using the beds and blankets," and that crew was dead.

The bomber crews flew 12 to 15 planes in a "V" formation, pattern bombing railroad yards, air strips and submarine bases in Germany.

On Hoff's first mission over Germany, an officer told him it was a "milk run," or easy.

"Well, we got almost to the target and it was like the Fourth of July in the sky, with steel and flak flying," he said.

"When we got back, I asked him 'What about this milk run,' and he said 'I just didn't want you to worry.'"

Hoff said his crew was "just resigned to what we needed to do."

That's not to say that there weren't many close calls. Once the landing gear was disabled.

"On one mission we were pretty badly shot up. We got back to Belgium, and the pilot opted to slide into the strip at Ath, Belgium. We finally came to a stop with no injuries, then were hauled to a Brussels air base, then back to England and assigned another plane."

Another time his plane was again unable to land normally.

"We'd been shot up so badly before our bombing run that the hydraulic system was knocked

out. Since we didn't have flaps or brakes, we had to find a place in England with a strip long enough so we could come to a gradual stop," he said.

That was in the middle of the night. The crew successfully landed the plane, then settled in for the night.

During the night, an English bomber with incendiary bombs on board landed, and "slammed into our plane." Miraculously, there was no explosion.

Hoff told those present to "Be proud to be an American."

The program also included the VFW Color Guard, an a cappella rendition of the National Anthem, the CCS Junior High Choir with "God Bless America," the Senior High Band with "Marches of America," a video, speeches and recognition of those veterans present.

The program was produced by the Future Business Leaders of America.

