

Former WW II POW Robert Ryan Remains An Alton Treasure At Age 99

by Dan Brannan, Content Director
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ALTON - Robert Ryan of Alton is not an everyday 99-year-old. Ryan, truly a River Bend treasure, recently appeared on C.J. Nasello's Our Daily Show on Riverbender.com. Nasello has guests every day Monday through Friday on [Riverbender.com](https://www.riverbender.com).

During the program, Ryan was asked about his capture as a POW in May 1944 when his B17 4-Engine Bomber was hit head-on by an enemy air attack, damaging engine No. 2 of four engines.

Ryan said he was a navigator on the plane, and he said they discovered they were 200 miles from Switzerland and Sweden, but also 200 miles from France, which was still occupied.

“I knew we were in trouble,” Ryan said. “Because I was the navigator, I parachuted out of the plane first. It took a while to land. I thought to myself, ‘how am I going to get back to Illinois.’”

As soon as Ryan hit the ground, he said: “A guy was aiming a rifle at me. He had been firing at me from about 1,000 feet down. Thank God he did not pull the trigger after I hit the ground.”

Ryan said under the terms of the Geneva Convention, all he provided was his name, rank, and serial number. “They didn’t like that, but I was only 19 years old, so they knew I didn’t have any important information.” I was about 80 miles southeast of Berlin right before Normandy when this happened.” Ryan spent time at multiple German prison camps where he said he endured hunger and a lot of apprehension about his future.

“Some German officer announced the invasion in one of the camps had started and it said it was a perfect English slaughter. I thought, ‘That is terrible, and I thought I would be there 10 years.’”

Ryan said he had not parachuted out of an airplane before that fateful day in May 1944 and has never “parachuted since.”

After being positioned in multiple prisoner-of-war camps, on April 29, 1945, Ryan’s camp was liberated.

“There was a lot of euphoria displayed when the Nazi flag went down and the American flag went up,” he said. “The first thing we did when we were liberated was eat some angel food cake with white bread. When the troops showed up, a guy in a tank crashed against the gate of the camp. He was looking for his brother.”

Robert came back home to Alton after the war, finished his degree, had a successful marriage, and had children and grandchildren. At age 99, he is still practicing law in Alton and has an office in the Riverbender Building.

He truly loves Alton and credits "the good Lord" for his 99 years of living and surviving the cruelty of POW camps in Nazi Germany. He also said he eats in small portions and that is because of his POW experience, which changed his life forever.

Ryan ended the interview with Our Daily Show with one of the most interesting stories ever told about how he was captured.

He said his group was not scheduled to fly on the day he was shot down because they had battled intense fire the day before.

“We got shot at a lot the day before, and we normally would not fly the next day - two days in a row,” he said. “But there were too many guys hung over from a party the night before, and one complained they had engine problems which, after they checked, there were no problems and another bombardier was sick.

"So in essence, we flew that day we were captured because some other people were hung over.”