

Oral Histories – Robert “Kurt” Lavack



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Robert “Kurt” Lavack was a young Canadian lad in the merchant marine when his boat was torpedoed. As one of six survivors, he was taken to Britain where he could choose between training in the Royal Canadian Air Force or its British equivalent. Robert chose to serve with the British. He was trained and flew over 30 bombing missions—a remarkable feat considering the tremendous casualty rate of both British and Canadian airmen. Now as a vibrant senior citizen living in Sweden, he recalls war experiences in a way that history texts cannot provide.

The photo showing me half inside my tent was taken in the Western Desert in 1942 during the first Battle of El Alamein. My squadron was based south of Sidi Barrani when Rommel captured Tobruk in June 1942 and the British forces started their withdrawal to the El Alamein line. We lived rather rough like the army. The dug out tent wasn’t mandatory, but it tended to be safer in bombing and strafing attacks. Water was rationed and the diet was mainly bully beef, tinned potatoes, pickles, hardtack, jam

and tea. A good evening snack was to fry the hardtack in butter and eat it warm with jam. We would occasionally get eggs from Bedouins that passed through the area with their camels and sheep. They wanted dry tea and we had lots of that but limited water. Washing was a luxury but we could occasionally take a trip to the ocean about 20+ miles north and soak in the sea.

Study Questions

1. Look up the locations mentioned in Mr. Lavack’s oral history. Locate El Alamein, Sid Barrani and Tobruk on a map of the area.
Why were allied troops in Africa during World War II?
2. What are bully beef and hard tack?
What nutrients would they supply?
Why would frying the hardtack and eating it with jam make it easier to eat?
3. Who are the Bedouins and why would they be passing through this area of Africa?
Why would dry tea appeal to the Bedouins?
4. What details about WW II does Mr. Lavack’s oral history supply that are missing from textbook accounts of WW II?

Larger images of: Robert Lavack and Plane; Robert Lavack and Tent; Robert Lavack and Squadron available—see images.