

## HONOR &amp; REMEMBRANCE

# A LIVING HISTORY BOOK

BY AUDREY T. HINGLEY

Hands go up as questions come lightning-fast from a curious class of fifth-graders hanging on Johnny Foster's every word. During World War II, Foster was an Army Air Force B-17 bombardier who flew 30 missions over Germany.

"Were you scared when you flew those missions?"

"Were you confident you'd make it back?"

"Where did you go to the bathroom on a B-17?"

Foster, 94, patiently answers each one. Yes, he was scared every time. No, he wasn't sure he'd make it back, but prayers helped, and people were praying for him. As for the bathroom query, he quips, "We managed," explaining that the plane's escape hatch could be cranked open to allow debris to be thrown out.

With his friend Jayson Brown, 36, Foster has participated in World War II presentations for schools and groups in the Richmond, Va., area for more than five years.

Dressed in a vintage Class A dress uniform, Brown tells students that his attire is what Foster would have worn as his best dress uniform. As for Foster, he sports a replica of the leather bomber jacket he wore during the war. Brown raised money for the jacket online and presented it to his friend at a veterans ceremony.

The pair begin their school presentations with some background. "We're going to be talking about the Air Force before there was an Air Force, sometimes called the Army Air Corps," Brown says. During a slideshow about the U.S. entry into the war, he points at military recruiting posters, telling the children, "We didn't have (social media) to get the word out, so they used motivational posters like these."

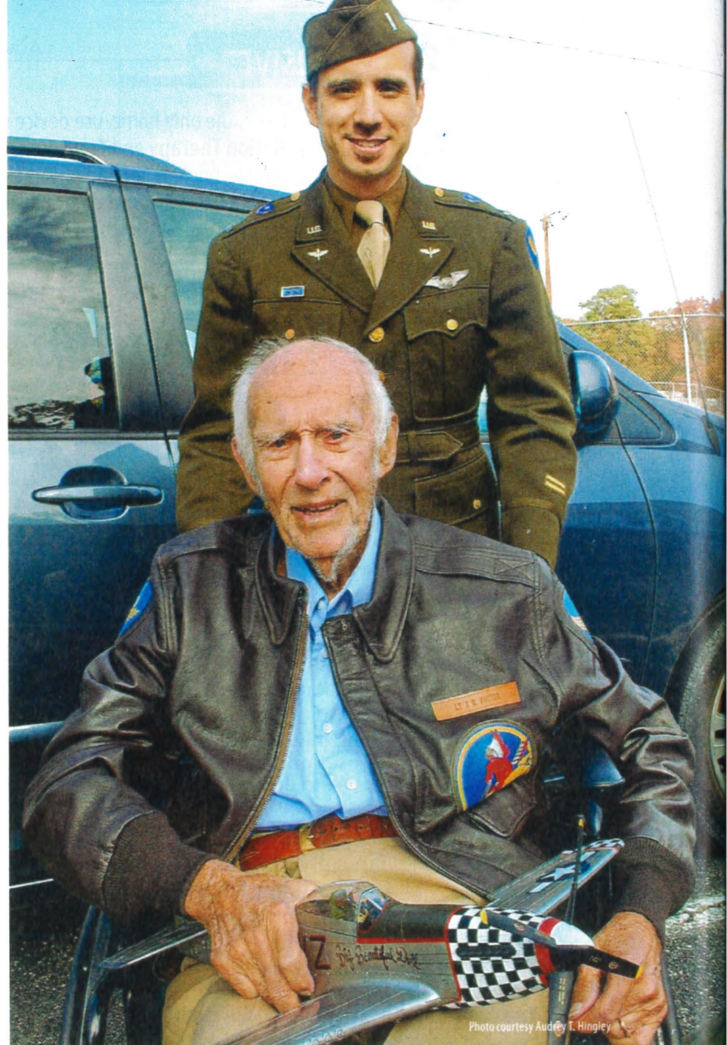
Brown then talks about the B-17 and its crew while several students model vintage gear he digs out of an old kit bag, including a "Mae West" life jacket. By program's end, the kids are cheering and thanking Foster for his service.

What surprised Foster most when he started visiting schools was "how very little the kids know about World War II ... but once they start asking questions, it's contagious."

A mutual friend introduced Foster and Brown, whose connection was immediate. "He's an exemplary, godly man who's humble and generous," Brown says. "To this day, he loves to serve. When I asked him to join these presentations he said it would be neat to meet some young people."

A widower whose only son died in his 20s, Foster says, "Jayson means a lot to me. He's a smart, gentle man. I don't know why he cares for me but I am thankful (he does)."

After the war, Foster earned a college degree and worked for an electrical company for 30 years before starting his own business. After his wife's death in 2002, he found a home in a 55-plus community. He lives independently, as does his 101-year-old sister.



Johnny Foster, a member of American Legion Post 141 in Richmond, Va., visits local schools with friend Jayson Brown to speak about his World War II service. Photo by Audrey T. Hingley

The son of a Navy veteran, Brown says his love of history and "military brat experience" fuel his interest in the World War II era. He's a member of the Capital Wing of the Airmen's Preservation Society and participates in Army Air Corps living history at military events and air shows.

When Brown learned Foster was recommended for the Distinguished Flying Cross but never received it, he says, "The avenger in me wanted to right that wrong." However, "you have to have a narrative of the action signed by eyewitnesses ... how do you get an eyewitness when he doesn't have any surviving crewmates?"

Assigned to the 8th Air Force, 34th Bombardment Group, 18th Bomb Squadron, Foster served in Mendlesham, England, where locals made candy for airmen embarking on dangerous missions.

Shot at but never shot down, Foster loves sharing his close-call stories with audiences.

"I always sat on an ammunition box," he recalls. "One time the man who repaired (flak damage) when we came back showed it to me and said, 'That's where you were sitting.' It stopped a piece of shrapnel from coming all the way through me."

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