



Essay by Tony Dworak, Director of Development

Last winter, NSHS Foundation Trustee Don Dillon and I were talking about his visits to Europe, and the profound historic sites throughout the continent dedicated to American involvement in the two world wars of the 20th Century. Don then shared with me that he is among that rapidly-decreasing number of Americans who are privileged to have a living relative who fought in World War II.

His name is Howard Watson of Alliance. Sergeant Watson (Don's first cousin on his mother's side) was released on September 8th 1944 from a Nazi prison camp in Bulgaria after his B-24 was shot down by enemy planes during a mission to Ploetsi.

Today, Howard is a retired farmer, now living within the beautiful western sandhills railroad town of Alliance, Nebraska with his wife Shirley. The Watsons will be celebrating 67 years of marriage this October.

After his return from the war, Howard took over his father's farm, which is now operated by his sons. Outside of his time in the military, Howard has lived in Alliance (also Don Dillon's childhood hometown) his whole life.

I asked Don if there was any chance I could meet with Howard and maybe even interview him for our newsletter, where we love nothing more than putting out great stories about great Nebraskans from every corner of our state, and all points in between.

Don asked one of his sisters who still reside in Alliance to see if an interview was feasible. The green light was given for me to meet Mr. Watson on my next visit "outstate." "I have known (Howard Watson) all my life and worked for him harvesting one year. He is the kindest, gentlest person I know," was how Don described his cousin. Don also let me know that Howard's wife still plays in a bridge club and that "I hope to heck I can have enough IQ left at that age to play any card game!"

Don further prepped me for my meeting with his cousin Howard by sharing with me the 1944 newspaper story printed in the Alliance Daily Times Herald that was based upon an interview during Howard's hard-earned furlough from the war. As the father of a couple of high school athletes, this article had all the markings of those nice hometown newspaper stories about the local boy stepping up in the big game or other forms of competitions, against a rival school. Needless to say, the level of the heroics, and the stakes involved in these kinds of stories were on an entirely different level in those days. (see article).

I met with Howard shortly before Christmas in his and Shirley's very nice home in one of Alliance's many well-manicured, peaceful neighborhood streets. I missed Shirley, as she was again out attending one of her bridge games. Howard was in great spirits, and he was very generous with his time, and quite patient with my unlearned questions about his military service, and his life in general. His recollection of

his service in World War II was amazing, and he retains the ability to convey these events in a very understandable and enjoyable manner.

In typical Nebraska-style, understatement, Howard began the interview by saying "It's been quite a few years ago, now." He was based out of Italy during his time in the war. "We were in the southern part, right in that heel of Italy. That's where our air base was. This was in 1943 and 44. I was drafted at the age of 18, and by the time I was 19 I was a radio operator, mechanic, and gunner in the Army Air Corps.

"Most of my time overseas I spent as a waist gunner. We had big doors and windows we'd open up. I'd fire a big .50 caliber machine gun and aim it by hand. I just fired it out the door in the open-air. Our main objective at that stage of the war was to run the Germans out of fuel. And we tried to bomb railroad yards to hurt their transportation."

As someone who gets nervous enough from turbulence on a commercial flight, I could not help but ask Howard how he handled the stress of being shot at while flying thousands of feet above the ground. Humble and matter-of-fact as always, he replied "Well, I was only 18 or 19 years old. It was kind of an adventure for me. I guess it didn't bother me that much, really."

The name of Howard's B-24 was the "Guinea-Guinea Boom-Boom," named after a type of bead worn by locals they had run across during a layover stop in Northern Africa. "These beads were supposed to ward off all evil spirits," Howard recalled.

The shooting down of Howard's plane, his capture, and his time spent as a Nazi POW are well-documented in that 1944 story from the Alliance newspaper. I asked him to pick things up from his time of release. "The policy at that time of the war was that if you got released or escaped from being a prisoner of war, they sent you home for furlough." I asked Howard if there was a big celebration in Alliance waiting for him when he got back home. "I don't remember any celebrating. The only thing I wanted was to get out, to be alive and to be back home. That was all the celebrating I wanted, anyway.

"They (Army Air Corp) treated us real well then. They sent me and some other guys to Santa Monica California for thirty days, where we could rest and go swimming in the ocean. They sent me there for thirty days twice. Then they gave me a choice of where I wanted be stationed stateside, and I chose Grand Island, which was the closest I could get to home. I did some work on the radio equipment on some of the B-29's while I was there, but I didn't really do that much."

Howard ended the conversation about his time in the war the same way he began it, with another one of those Nebraska-style understatements, "All in all it was quite an adventure."

Howard then shared with me that he is the grandson of an actual homesteader. Let that sink in a minute. It always amazes me how more recent the past seems to be in western Nebraska as opposed to back here in the east. "The place that was my grandpa Patterson's, where my boy lives now, and where I was raised, was a homestead. If you put up a homestead and some improvements you could get a quarter (section) of land, and if you then put up a few trees, you could get another quarter. That's how I think it worked."

Howard's final words to me were to be passed on to his cousin Don Dillon, whose father, and Howard's uncle, grew up in a sod house near Alliance (again, think about that one for a minute). After a few

recollections of Don's childhood, and letting him know how proud he is of Don's success in life, he closed by saying to Don "Hi, and maybe we'll see you again one of these days."

NOTE: Don Dillon is a great friend and trustee of the NSHS Foundation, and through his Dillon Foundation, has been a key supporter of our mission to preserve and protect Nebraska History. Most recently, the Dillon Foundation has played pivotal roles in a campaign to restore our state's damaged and outdated historical markers, and the renovation and expansion of the Ethel S. and Christopher J. Abbott Visitor Center at Chimney Rock, which is just 30 miles drive south from Alliance.