Foreword

It was September 1942. I was a sophomore at Wesleyan University in Middletown, Connecticut, and a war was going on. Hitler and Mussolini were running amok in Europe and Africa while the Japanese were doing their atrocities in the Pacific area.

I was a healthy 19 year old, so it was obvious to me that I might play an active part in the war effort before long -- yet it wasn't the foremost thing on my mind. What was on my mind in order of priority were a) my girl friend in Hartford, b) the war, and c) a college education. "B" and C" weren't even close to "A". So even though the war and its casualties were making daily headlines, the thought never occurred to me that relatively soon I'd be flying a bomber on my first mission over Germany, I'd be shot down, taken prisoner, and told I'd be shot as a spy. Why the latter did *not* happen (as well as prior adventures and some that followed) are the subject of the following short "war stories".

Why "Coffin Corner"?

No matter how you define it, "Coffin Corner" is probably a poor place to be. When I was a kid playing football, "Coffin Corner" was a place you kicked a football out of bounds to put your opponent deep in his territory -- a poor place to be.

When I was 22 (1945) I found "Coffin Corner" a good name for a poor place to be in a bomber formation. It was the slot in a formation that was apt to be vacant when the bombers returned to their home base. It happened to be the spot we were in on our first mission over Germany on which we were shot down. Actually I never thought any place in a bomber formation was better or worse than another. To me, they were all poor and as I reviewed things at our base in England prior to going on my first mission, I wondered how in hell I got to the point where I'd be at 22,000 feet over Germany getting shot at by both fighters and flak -- all the while flying straight and level and not being able to do anything about it! I knew if I ever flew another tour, itou would be in fighters.

But to get back to "Coffin Corner"...According to an article written by Charles Corte in Acme News in early WWII: "There's a place in a flight formation, the lower left hand corner, which is usually the most dangers spot of all. The plane here does a vital job of protecting other planes and is itself the most exposed position in the formation. Only crews with a fine record are placed here. It is an honor that every crew wants -- and dreads to get. For the crew that is put in that exposed corner usually comes home to base, if it comes, with adventures that gets its men cited for a Purple Heart. That's why this position is called 'Purple Heart Corner' ".

He called it that; I called it "Coffin Corner". Whatever it was called, it was a bummer of a spot for us, a green crew, on a first mission. We were not only in this slot with our own bomb group of 30 planes, but our group was the last of nine other groups strung out along the bomb route.

Since the preceding article states that "only crews with a fine record are placed here," you might wonder how we got the spot on our first mission. I think as the war progressed, it was probably felt that you'd start out in the poorest spot and earn your way into a more protected one. Also, it was usually true that a green crew was less dangerous to other crews if it were on the "outside" of the formation. Formation flying within the box of a squadron was something you gained by experience. Midair collisions were an ever-present hazard, especially with green crews with throttle-jockey pilots. Except for the lead plane, pilots were continually fighting the controls just to stay in formation. It wasn't just with green crews, however, that formation flying was a challenge. Veteran pilots will say the most difficult part, by far, of piloting a bomber is formation flying. When you see a stream of bombers from afar, it looks like a tidy situation where once the pilots have the same speed and altitude, they can sit back and relax. Nothing is farther from the truth. The prop wash sent back from the squadrons ahead form a devastating whirlwind and corkscrew effect on the following planes which keep them in constant turmoil. This, plus the fact that Americans bombed in daytime, meant mid-day convection currents produced vertical pockets of turbulence to make matters worse. This type of turbulence is felt in commercial flights when the plane hits "air pockets" and passengers are told to keep their seat belts on. It is not too bad when you're one plane in the sky, but when you're in a formation of bombers, it raises hell. Really what you have is a combination of both vertical turbulence plus the horizontal prop wash combining to make life miserable for a bomber pilot. He uses muscles he never thought he had. And at -30°, it's very easy to work up a sweat in your flying suit. Sweat can seep through your gloves and cause them to freeze on the control column. It's really the pits; and when flak bursts start more air concussions, you just fight to keep from colliding with your wingman. Remember also - in those days we had four propellers ready to chew into a rudder or wing of the buddy you're flying off of.

It was particularly difficult keeping a B-24 in formation due mainly to the two large rudders which reacted sluggishly to controls.

So you can see there were good arguments for letting a green crew fly "Coffin Corner" "Tail-End Charlie" was another name for this spot. The reasons for this being such a poor spot are mainly twofold. It was an easier mark for German fighters and an easier mark for German anti-aircraft fire. Let's review this:

Fighters: Picture yourself in a Messerschmidt 109 single-seat fighter. You're looking down on 300 bombers heading for a target in Germany. Probably the easiest target would be the last plane, and quite often it was. However, early on the Luftwaffe plan was to hit the lead planes head on hoping to kill the pilots, especially the group leaders. Later they came head on from a more elevated angle of attack (twelve o'clock high) and were supposed to continue the attack down through the formation. Usually, however, after the initial attack, they would turn and dive down away from the defensive fire (called a "split s"). Prior to the bombers having fighter protection, however, the German fighters (primarily FW-190s and ME-109s) had a field day attacking from all angles in large numbers. In 1945 when we flew our mission we didn't have the same problem of fighter attacks, for our fighter escort now not only had the range to follow us to the target and back but had obtained complete mastery of the air. It was a far cry from earlier bombing missions when a mission could lose 60 planes out of 376 with another 27 too damaged to repair (Schweinfurt Mission of 10-14-43).

However, early 1945 also meant the Luftwaffe's prized new fighters -- the rocket-propelled Messerschmitt 163 (ME 163) and the jet-propelled Messerschmitt 262 (ME 262) were operational. The ME 163 was a remarkable piece of engineering. It was a rocket-powered egg-shaped interceptor that was designed to take off, reach a bomber formation at 25,000 at speeds of 600 m.p.h., make the attack, and return to base. The problems with this aircraft were threefold. First, the rocket fuel was exhausted in 4-5 minutes so the ME163 (called Komet) could only make one expertly-timed attack, then glide back to its base. Second, to save weight, the landing gear was jettisoned after take off and the Komet had to land on skids. Third, the rocket fuel used (called T-Stoff and C-Stoff) was such a volatile mixture that often the Komet would explode on ignition prior to

take-off, killing the pilot and destroying the aircraft. First used in August 1944 against the 8th Air Force bombers and escorts over Magdeburg, Germany (synthetic oil plants), the Luftwaffe launched three Komets, each of which scored a kill and returned safely to base. Although these rocket planes scared the hell out of the Allies, the few initial kills made by them were more than offset by their own pilots killed in accidents, mostly blowing up on take-off.

So, although the ME 163 was having its difficulties, the ME 262 -- a twin jet which could stay in the air an hour -- was coming on the scene in late 1944. This was designed as a fighter/interceptor. It flew 100 m.p.h. faster than the P-51 (our best), carried 24 rockets (a single hit could bring down a bomber), and four cannons (all of which could be fired outside the range of the defensive fire of bombers, which used 50 cal-machine guns). It had good range and was extremely popular with Luftwaffe pilots despite the radical change to jet power. Germany's Commander of Fighter Forces, General Adolph Galland, said he'd rather have one ME 262 jet than five ME 109's -- the proven backbone of the fighter arm up to that time.

Fortunately for Allied bomber crews, Hitler demanded the ME 262 jet be configured into a bomber, which he called Blitz Bomber, so he could increase the bombing of England. Even though 1400 of this aircraft were built, only a few were allotted to Fighters. If six as fighters could get in the air at any one time, it was quite a feat; and even though Galland's JV44 Fighter Squadron ended with 70 near war's end, the shortage of pilots, fuel, and air fields made the use of these jets fall short of their potential.

If all 1400 had been used as originally designed, the losses to allied bombers would have been devastating. Hitler's decision was extremely lucky for allied bombing crews in 1944-45...and made "Coffin Corner" bearable.

The second reason for "Coffin "Corner" to be a tough spot was anti-aircraft fire (flak). Flak was always a threat to bombers. Intelligence reports would be given us at briefing

as to where to expect flak - flak alleys, etc. - but besides being always heavy around targets, it could also hit you most anywhere on the way to targets (and returning). The Germans had flak towers and flak batteries spread out. Flak batteries on railroad flat cars using two 88's could be moved around.

So, although flak was always a threat, to be in "Coffin Corner" was the pits. The German flak units had radar, so by the time the last bombers flew over, they pretty much knew the bombers' altitude and the speed. We could screw up their radar some by tossing out "chaff" which were strips of metal foil which, when dropped from the bombers, would give false readings on German radar. But this was marginal protection, at best.

An example of this "Coffin Corner" vulnerability occurred when I was a prisoner in Germany. We were walking through Augsberg watching B-24's coming from a target, possibly Munich. Flak had hit the rear bomber, it caught fire, and after we saw four 'chutes, it exploded in a ball of fire. At the same time, we saw flak bursts following another B-24 which was now a "Tail-End Charlie". And although the flak bursts seemed to be gaining on the bomber, a direct hit never materialized...as we all cheered down below!

In any event there we were over Germany on our first mission flying "Coffin Corner" and heading for the synthetic oil refineries at Magdeburg when we were hit with flak, forced to bail out, and were taken prisoners. What happened after that and how one could have reached this point in the first place, are the subjects of the following short stories.

Aircraft #4250387

"Birdie Schmidt"

To the average civilian, and even to the guys and gals in the service in World War II, one B-24 was like all the rest: it was a four-engined, two-tailed bomber called a Liberator, and that was that.

But to the pilots who flew them, such was not the case. Every time we were assigned an airplane, we went to the flight line hoping that we'd get either the latest model or, at least, one which had good maintenance. For instance, we trained in B-24D's, but in England we had B-24H's. Outwardly, they looked similar; the main difference was that the "H" had a nose turret added and was newer.

So when were assigned Aircraft #4250387 on the day of our first mission (February 15, 1945), we were anxious to see what we had drawn. Since we were a replacement crew, we didn't have our own plane. Our crew was made up of Gene Hubbartt, pilot; me as co-pilot; Cal Carter, Navigator; Loren Smith, engineer; Roy Zaskowski, radioman, Paul Glassman, nose gunner, Paul Matusky and Dick Shad, waist gunners, and Howard Neumann, tail gunner.

The vehicle that brought us to the plane pulled up to the right of it. As we piled out, the first thing we noticed was a big red cross painted on the starboard nose. If we wondered what that was all about, we soon discovered what was on the other side: a gal's face about four feet high with the name "Birdie Schmidt" under it. None of us had the slightest idea who in hell Birdie Schmidt was but figured that we'd find out when we returned that afternoon. Meanwhile, we had other things to concern us.

What we didn't know was that 1) we would not come back from our mission that day, 2) I wouldn't learn who Birdie Schmidt was until a year later, and 3) Birdie Schmidt wouldn't find out what happened to "her" bomber until 45 years later.

To begin with, when we failed to return from our mission, the following was reported at debriefing back at our base: "One B-24 and crew, however, apparently suffered flak damage and was lost. This ship, #387 (T for Tango) flown by Lieutenant G. O. Hubbartts' crew and nicknamed "Birdie Schmidt" was seen to be losing altitude and dropping behind near the IP. The crew dropped their bombs about halfway down the bomb run at 1137 hours and continued to follow the group formation until 1255 hours. At this time and position 5238 N - 0743 E, the bomber was seen to be falling considerably behind and again losing altitude. It was last seen at 1333 hours crossing the enemy coastline. Nothing more was know about this crew and aircraft.[1]

So, from this report, the people back at our base (including Birdie Schmidt) assumed we had been lost while ditching in the English Channel.

Actually, at the time they thought we were seen (1333 hours), we had been prisoners in Germany for well over an hour. Probably a disabled B-24 from another group had tried to connect with ours but never made it.

It wasn't until a year later that I learned who Birdie Schmidt was. I was reading a history of the 2nd Division, 8th Air Force, and there was a picture of "our" plane being christened by one Birdie Schmidt of the Red Cross and head of the Aero Club at Wendling...a job she did so well, she had a plane named after her. Everyone knew her back at the base -- except a green crew like us.

Then, it wasn't until 45 years later that I learned Birdie's address (she was teaching in China

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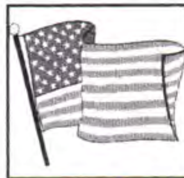
[1] The Liberators from Wendling by Col. Robert Evickers, Jr.
Sunflower Univ. Press, Manhattan, Kansas 1987

for a while and her name was Birdie Schmidt Larrick). I wrote to her detailing the final mission of "her" plane. She telephoned me as soon as she received the letter and was flabbergasted at what had actually happened and that the whole crew bailed out successfully deep in Germany (Mulhausen).

The story hasn't ended, however, as I just recently learned that the Duxford Air Museum in England will be offering commemorative plates featuring World War II 8th Air Force aircraft, and one of them will depict the B-24 "Birdie Schmidt"! They are expected to go on sale in 1994 and will be produced by the famous English porcelain firm of Wedgewood, working with the artist John Batchelor. Birdie Schmidt was present in England at the kickoff of this project, which included a reception at St. James' Palace.

So perhaps the "Birdie Schmidt" saga is coming to a close...but I wouldn't bet on it. Maybe someone in Mulhausen, Germany (where the plane crashed) has a piece of the "Birdie Schmidt" that will turn up someday.



The First and The Last Mission

Look up *mission* in the dictionary and you'll find ten definitions. The one I'm writing about states "a single combat flight by an airplane or a group of airplanes." So with the 8th Air Force in England during World War II a bombing mission meant a group of bombers out to destroy a target, usually in Germany. A bomber combat crew had to fly 25 of these missions to complete its tour of duty.

Our first mission got under way when we were awakened at 3:30 a.m. February 15, 1945 by a banging on the door of our Quonset hut. It was expected as we noted on the bulletin board that we were scheduled to fly this day when we came back to our area around 11:00 p.m. after seeing a movie at the base theatre. Since ice was still hanging down inside our Quonset (from roof leaks), I decided to get into my sleeping bag for a four-hour snooze wearing most of my clothes. I wasn't too concerned about the schedule for we heard that a green crew gets to practice on one mission before actually crossing the English Channel. The idea was you'd get to practice taking off with the group, practice forming over England, and then when you reached the Channel you'd turn back. Getting the formation together was a challenge -- having hundreds of bombers getting together to fly formations to Germany was perhaps easy enough in good weather but doing so on instruments in an overcast was something else. Mid-air collisions were happening. And we still hadn't had this practice mission.

Imagine our surprise at briefing when we learned we were actually going to the target -- the synthetic oil refineries at Magdeburg, Germany -- a tough target about 70 miles southwest of Berlin. This would be the fifth time in two weeks our group had been assigned this target. Obviously we hadn't knocked it out.

So from briefing at 5:30 a.m. we were transported out to the B-24 assigned us, only to find the crew chief (head of the ground crew assigned that aircraft) on a platform

working over #2 engine. The problem was a prop governor which controls the pitch (angle of propeller blade). We had half an hour until take-off at 7:50 a.m. so we sat around and waited, hoping the plane would be scratched. Fog was coming in fast and we didn't look forward to an instrument takeoff with a full load of bombs. Plus, it was a bad omen of sorts seeing repairs done at the last moment. Enough goes wrong with a B-24 when everything seems okay at the start. We also noted we were carrying RDX explosives which were more powerful than TNT. Actually, it made little difference if you blew up with either; it would be bits and pieces remaining.

A half hour later when the rest of our group had completed takeoffs and were forming over East Anglia, our crew chief gave us the OK on the plane. By this time the field was fogged in; and as we taxied to the runway, we expected the tower to call us back . . . even if they couldn't see us! Reaching our takeoff point we were able to line up in the center of runway and were cleared for takeoff by the tower. There was little cross wind so we figured we could make it okay on instruments. The airplane commander, Gene Hubbartt, was at the controls flying left seat and I was flying co-pilot in right seat. After going through our check list we headed down the runway completely enveloped in fog. Gene had the actual takeoff to handle while I followed through and shouted out instrument readings as we rolled -- I also sneaked a look out of the side cockpit after a few hundred feet to see if the edge of the runway was still visible. It was, and a few seconds later we lifted off, and at about 100' altitude broke through the fog into a beautiful sunny morning.

No sooner had we done this and commenced a climbing turn to reach our group when the electrical instruments started going haywire. This didn't effect the flying characteristics but put us on edge a bit until our engineer figured out that the generators had been off on takeoff instead of on. Things settled down after they were toggled on.

We were beginning to feel better about the mission and thought our chances to catch up with our group pretty good when the propeller on #2 engine (left inboard) began to run

away (rotate too fast) indicating the prop governor had not really been fixed by our crew chief at all. We could control this by throttling back on #2 engine but this left us with awkward throttle settings and less power. Three throttles would be in one position but #2 would be way back. Since all four throttles were held in one hand and we used them continuously in formation, we realized we had a problem. So our big decision was whether to go on trying to catch up with our group or to unload the bombs in the North Sea and abort the mission. Initially to abort seemed prudent. Even though we couldn't get back to our own field due to fog, we figured we could find another base that was available. As we pondered this, we continued over the North Sea without incident and decided to go on.

Since we took off alone after our group had left, we didn't have to take the time to form with other groups, so we were able to take a course which, hopefully, would allow us to head off the others and join them over the Continent. This we were able to do thanks to our navigator, Cal Carter. Then before we knew it, we were dropping in our slot at the rear of the bomber stream.

As we flew over Holland we spotted our first anti-aircraft fire (flak). It was not accurate as we noted the purplish bursts here and there. At this point Gene Hubbartt was not feeling well, and I took over completely. We had these flak vests and flak helmets on, and I made sure the distance between the two on mine was small. The vest squeezed up on my oxygen mask, and the helmet squeezed down on my goggles -- only a space big enough to see the bomber I was flying off of was used! Then something suddenly hit the windshield with a clunk that startled us -- for a second we thought flak had hit us but nothing happened. We weren't sure what it was but believe it was a chunk of "chaff" tossed out from a bomber ahead in a high squadron. "Chaff" was metal foil tossed out of bombers to fool the German anti-aircraft radar. It would reflect on the radar as it trailed a bomber stream, confusing the flak gunners below.

As we flew on, the flak didn't seem too intense when all of a sudden our left wing caught

a burst underneath and shot up in the air, forcing the plane to start a rollover and drop off the right at a steep angle. Quick action by both Gene and me brought the plane under control, albeit with tremendous pressure on our twin rudders. We had lost power in both #1 and #2 engines, but the wing was intact and we could not see fire. We were able to feather #1 prop to reduce drag but could do nothing with #2 which would just windmill. The crew checked in and no one was hurt on the bounce around nor by flak.

Although under control we could see our group distancing itself from us as we steadily fell behind and lost altitude. After trying to get some power from either (or both) engines, we decided to jettison our bombs to reduce weight. That didn't help much so there we were alone over Germany. We tried to contact fighter escort by radio but had no luck. They were probably getting at the Luftwaffe before they could get off the ground. We hoped so as our main concern now was the Luftwaffe fighters who would find us a sitting duck. We debated what we would do if the Luftwaffe did show up. We heard that dropping our landing gear would be a signal that we were giving up, and supposedly they would guide us to a landing strip nearby. This was not much of a choice as we weren't about to give them a B-24. So then we thought we'd go along with them, but then bail out the last minute and let the plane crash. This was turned down as we figured we'd be easy targets in our parachutes. Whether or not we'd be shot while parachuting was a topic brought up now and then by all combat pilots. There were stories of both sides doing this and although we were sure it had been done in the heat of battle, we weren't sure there were any instructions by either side. My own opinion was that if you were parachuting into your own territory, you might be shot since you could fight again; where bailing out over enemy territory pretty much meant you were no longer a threat. Then again, we'd heard a story of a bomber crew surrendering by lowering its gear but when the Luftwaffe pilots came in close, they were shot down. We weren't about to try that and finally decided to further lighten the aircraft by tossing out all the guns and ammunition we could. Nothing, however, really helped us maintain altitude. Our only relief seemed to be to head for a cloud bank south of us which we did. So far no fighters, friendly or enemy, had been seen -- and we'd been alone about

15 minutes. We knew we weren't going to make it to friendly skies, so we had to decide whether we'd try to find a place to force-land or bail out. It's a funny thing about bailing out. If there's any chance at all of surviving a crash landing, the majority of air crews seem to opt for that instead of jumping out. The idea we had would be to crash-land, destroy the airplane, and survive that way. But with two engines out and both on the port side, it would have to be a perfect setup for us to survive such. We'd have to see an airstrip dead ahead and reachable on one pass. Fortunately (as it turned out) we had reached the clouds, couldn't see anything anyhow and decided to bail out. We were now down to 8,000 feet (from 22,500 feet) and had no idea of the terrain below us. For all we knew, there were 6000 foot mountains rising up below! The crew started bailing out the bomb bay which I could see from the flight deck. It was eery seeing them one by one drop away in the clouds. I saw one 'chute open with such a jerk that one of the guy's boots flew off. Six went out this way which left the airplane commander, Gene Hubbartt; our engineer, Loren Smith; and me, the co-pilot. I told Loren to get out at which time Gene asked me if I wanted to go last or next-to-last. Loren (whom we called Dad - as he was 28 and a dad) interceded and advised Gene that the airplane commander should be the last to go. To make sure, he advised me to get out while he adjusted his parachute harness one more time. I then bailed out, the 'chute opened with hardly a jolt, and before I knew it I was looking through the clouds at what appeared to be a lake below. The lake turned out to be a small pond, and I realized the tallest trees in Germany were rapidly coming up at me. I could see a dirt road to the right and tried to slip my 'chute toward it but all I did was to create a pendulum effect. I therefore entered the trees at an angle (crossing my legs) and quickly hung up on the high branches only to break free and plummet toward the ground -- only to once again have my chute catch on branches and leave me dangling a few feet off the ground -- a perfect landing!

My first thoughts were that hopefully the rest of the crew were as lucky. Then I wondered if I had landed in a friendly or hostile area. When we decided to bail out we decided not to carry our .45 revolvers with us. We figured we were too deep in Germany to escape, plus we heard stories of air crew members being shot with their own weapons.

When I landed I knew I had been seen. The woods were full of civilians getting wood to use as fuel. As I looked toward the dirt road I'd tried to reach while parachuting, I could see someone running away from my area shouting something in German.

I walked to the road which led to a clearing where four people had come together and were pointing and shouting in my direction. As I approached them it seemed apparent that only one, a middle aged male, was hostile and set upon me shouting and pummeling away. Although I sustained a small nose bleed, I felt nothing; perhaps due to the adrenaline flowing but more probably due to the flight suit I had on which was electrically heated and thus lined with wires. The others pulled him off as I tried to communicate with them by saying "American". We'd heard that Americans might be better received than other allies. It was to my surprise that during this attempt at communicating I realized they thought I'd flown all the way from America. During this brief encounter the hostile one kept beckoning me to come with him to a building nearby. Although I didn't know why, I wanted no part of it. As a gesture of good will, I took off my Mae West (yellow life jacket) and gave it to him. Uninflated it didn't look like much but it seemed to cool him off.

A few minutes later I was elated to see two gunners from our crew come up the road accompanied by other civilians, while at the same time a truck came to pick us up, driven by someone we figured to be the local police. He obviously was in charge, was not hostile, and we breathed a little easier. We were brought to a building in Mulhausen and were confined to a small room adjacent to a large courtyard. We were searched and whatever we had was confiscated. In my pants I still had a pocketful of change which I had won the previous night. Since I had no reason to think I'd actually fly to Germany this day, I kept the money with me. I wasn't about to leave it loose in the barracks -- I'd already had a bike stolen -- so here I was with a wallet, a ring, some cigarettes, and a bunch of English coins which I willingly gave up. Not only were the guards amazed at this cash but so were my own crewmates! As this was going on, another official came in and started shouting at us, stirring up the guards, until all three

were berating us in German -- none of which we understood. I thought perhaps our plane had killed some civilians when crashing or maybe they were just mad at us, the enemy. We were able to discover shortly, however, that we were accused of being spies and were to be shot as such. Melodramatic as this sounds today, it shook us up considerably then . . . first in disbelief, and secondly wondering how soon. (Although we didn't know it at the time, we had parachuted into an area near Nordhausen where the super secret V-2 rockets were being made underground with slave labor.) As we were waiting to be lead away, I can remember sharing some chewing gum that I hadn't turned over when searched. I was the last to be taken and as I was being led through the courtyard I wondered where my crewmates had gone and was listening for any shots from a firing squad. I continued through the courtyard up a flight of stairs and down a long corridor. Near the end of this sat a Luftwaffe officer at a table on which were my personal belongings confiscated earlier. "Sit down, Flying Officer Kenyon", he said in English. "Welcome to Germany. For you the war is over." I was stunned and speechless as he took out a photo of himself beside a fighter plane and showed them to me. I immediately said "Oh, a Messerschmidt 109", and he corrected me: "No, a Focke-Wulff 190". I remarked that a FW190 had a radial engine and since this had an in-line one I assumed it was the Me109. No, he explained, the FW190 had a new model using a liquid-cooled in-line engine and was called an FW190D. The "D" model called a "long nose" distinguished it from the tried and true FW190 so often seen by allied airmen. Since we had never been briefed on such a plane I thought he was giving me a snow job - for what purpose I couldn't fathom. Needless to say I didn't argue and professed admiration for the new model. (Years later I learned it was true - they put the in-line engine in the FW190 to have it perform better at high altitude.)

I might add that besides being relieved at my seemingly safe situation at this time, I was quite impressed sitting apposite a Luftwaffe pilot (on leave due to injury). These guys had been flying for years and any survivors had to be good -- apart from the new recruits hurriedly brought into the fray.

Then he asked me if I would mind trading one of my Camels (cigarettes) for one of his German ones. Once again I couldn't believe what I was hearing. A few minutes earlier I was to be shot as a spy; now I'm being asked to swap cigarettes. Actually not only could he have taken them all, but I wouldn't have cared. I rarely smoked and did so only for the taste. I never did inhale (I could believe Bill Clinton), so it was no big deal to give up smoking. I insisted he keep what was left. He then wondered why I had all that cash on me and although all I had to tell him was my name, rank, and serial number, I did advise that I hadn't realized I'd be flying this day and had won this last evening in a poker game. I asked about our plane and he advised it had crashed, exploded, and burned in a field with no civilian casualties. He also advised other crew members had been picked up along our route, but he didn't know how many. That was about it. My ring, wallet, and cash were returned to me, I was reunited with my two crew members, and the three of us were put in the back of a truck and taken to Luftwaffe quarters at Nordhausen. That evening the whole crew was together at a cell in a prison there. The nose gunner, Paul Glassman, had been shot; the navigator, Cal Carter, had been badly beaten; the engineer, Loren Smith, had a broken leg but we were all alive and reasonably well. Paul Glassman had been shot in the back, the bullet rose through his back, lodging in his cheek. It was removed that night. Paul, Jewish, wore a Star of David medal with his dog tags and evidently was picked on for this. Although we knew the Nazis gave Jews a hard time, we had no idea what was going on relative to the Holocaust. I doubt if our Commanding Officer knew either else why send Jewish crewmen on bomber raids over Germany. There were other theatres of operation, such as Pacific, where assignments would have made more sense. Perhaps it was just because he was a flyer that he got beaten. As we were to learn as we travelled in Germany, the populace had developed an open hostility toward allied airmen who were bombing them incessantly. It was understandable! Although we didn't know it at the time, early in 1944 Reichsleiter Martin Bormann, Secretary to Hitler, notified party leaders that a number of allied fliers had been lynched with nobody being prosecuted. Encouragement was given civilians to lynch before fliers could be "rescued" by the military. No prosecution would result. Later in early 1945 Hitler ordered SS General Gottlob Berger, head of POWs, to collect all RAF

and USAF officers and place them in downtown target areas of Berlin and other cities. Later (February 1945) Paul Goebbels, Hitler Minister of Propaganda, issued an edict to take all POW airmen and shoot them -- said it would stop the bombing.

Our navigator, Cal Carter, was badly beaten by civilians. Particularly noticeable with his beating was a large lump on his head the size of a baseball. His civilian captors had tied him to a horse, but the horse would not move fast enough, so they beat Cal - breaking the wooden part of a rifle on his head. The broken leg suffered by our engineer, Loren Smith, was due to his landing in a tree -- ironically the only one in a large field. Unfortunately, it did not smoothly break his fall, and he landed hard.

Despite all this we were grateful that we all got down and were in the hands of the Luftwaffe. For the most part mutual respect for "fellow airmen" seemed to prevail and we felt a lot more secure in their hands. One of our guards at Nordhausen was a repatriated prisoner who had been at Camp Blanding in Florida and attested to the good treatment he received as a POW in America. We were treated well that first night and were given some soup and black bread.

End of first -- and last -- mission.

P. O. W. Transportation

When you were taken prisoner as an aircrew member in Germany during World War II, the usual procedure was to get you to an interrogation center, then to a transient camp where you were briefed and outfitted, and then brought to a permanent camp -- all of which could be done in a matter of days. In my case it took five weeks to get to a permanent camp due to a variety of reasons, but due mainly to the fact that I was taken prisoner near the end of the war and got caught up in the German retreat from the Rhine, eastward through Bavaria. During most of this time I was marching from town to town but did occasionally get a sampling of the various kinds of transportation available such as pick-up truck, personnel carrier, passenger train, trolley, bus, flatbed truck, boxcar, and gondola car.

1. Pick-up Truck -- This is what came and got me on the outskirts of Mulhausen where I had parachuted. It was a welcome sight as more and more civilians were attracted to the area and whereas most were friendly, there was one in particular that was not. In any event, riding in the back of the pick-up got me to a jail in Mulhausen. The trip was uneventful except driving through the town I was surprised by the town itself and the people I saw. It seemed to me it could have been a town in England. Also, the truck itself gave me a look at how they fueled most vehicles in Germany at this point in the war. Gasoline was unavailable to most, so the Germans had a huge contraption at the front end of the vehicle which burned wood as a fuel for running the thing. It looked like something out of a Rube Goldberg comic scene.

2. Personnel carrier -- Three of us captured at Mulhausen left that night in the back of one of these trucks for the trip to Nordhausen where we joined the rest of

the crew. The trip was uneventful.

3. Passenger train -- From Nordhausen we got on a civilian passenger train to Frankfort. It was a modern train with compartments, but there was really no room for us. We finally wedged into one of the compartments. It was so tight that I opted to climb into an overhead luggage rack, lying on my side with a rack divider under my knees. While there I heard the conversation below turn to the strafing of trains by the Allies. As I was to learn later, you stayed away from all trains in daylight as Allies had complete control of the skies and the 'targets of opportunity' were trains. It didn't take me long to figure that being high in the luggage rack would mean I could get hit first in a strafing attack. Actually with the armament our dive bombers and fighters had (such as rockets, cannons, as well as 50 calibre machine guns), it wouldn't make much difference where you were . . . but even so, I got down as fast as I could and joined my crew below. We weren't strafed.

We had a delay when we reached Kassel and spent some time in a subway entrance during an air raid alert. Nothing happened and we set out once again on the train to Frankfort. Due to bombed-out areas, the pace was slow. As we reached a city called Giessen, we couldn't believe our eyes. Nothing was standing as far as we could see. Way off in the distance was a church steeple. It was my first look at a bombed-out city; and although I was to see more (most notably Nurnberg Augsberg, and Munich), never was I to see such complete devastation. There was one railroad track that brought us crawling through this mess.

4. Trolley -- At Frankfort we left the train and took a trolley north to Oberursel where we were to be interrogated. Here again there was little room aboard and we were being pushed around a bit by civilians riding the same trolley. In one instance I pushed back but was reminded by the crew to cool it. This was good

advice since by now the Germans were in tough shape on all fronts (including the home one) and were in no mood to tolerate us. It's a wonder all bomber crews weren't killed by civilians -- although, a lot of them were.

5. Bus -- From interrogation we were taken by train to Dulag-Luft camp at Wexlar where we were to be outfitted and assigned a permanent prison camp. It was here I got real sick and started to hiccup about every other breath. I was put in sick bay there where I kept everyone awake with the hiccupping. These were extraordinary hiccups that were continuous and shook the bed. I had no appetite since being shot down and had not had a bowel movement since I left England. I was not in any great pain but was wearing myself out with the hiccups. It was also embarrassing to be keeping everyone awake. After two days of this, it was decided to send me to the Hohemark Hospital (for prisoners) at Oberursel, GA, north of Frankfort. So I set out at night in a bus about the size of a school bus with me as the only passenger. I tried to lay down across the rear seat. It was a moonlit night -- fortunate as we drove with lights out due to air attacks. Keeping in mind how precious fuel was, I realized it was quite a decision by both the Allied CO at Dulag-Luft as well as the Germans to allow this to take place. I figured I was probably pretty sick to begin with, but the main thing I remember about the trip was the eeriness of it all. Bouncing around in the back of a bus driving without lights, a moonlit night, wondering where we were and if we'd make it to the hospital -- it seemed like a weird dream. So much had happened in the last few days -- little did I realize I hadn't seen anything yet! We got to Hohemark late that evening. I was given a bed in a room with two other patients -- both air crew gunners who had fractured hips and legs. I continued my hiccupping and by now my stomach had distended so that I looked pregnant. I also could see I was driving my roommates bananas with the hiccups and once again, could only show remorse for being such a drag on anyone's ability to sleep. I must have been in bad shape mentally as I remember at one point wishing I could sleep and never

wake up. As dramatic as this sounds, it was one of those crazy episodes that I never forgot. I wasn't really in a lot of pain, but I kept throwing up liquid purple stuff. And most of my thoughts were of my childhood for some reason or other.

Finally after a couple of days of this, two doctors came in resplendent in the Nazi uniforms. After looking me over and poking me a bit, I received some shots and an enema which led me on the road to recovery. I hadn't eaten or had a movement in eight days.

6. Flatbed Truck -- After being flat on my back for ten days at Hohenmark Hospital, I was ordered back to Dulag Luft at Wexlar to begin my journey once again to a permanent camp. I was with nine others who had been "discharged" and we set out to walk to a railroad station outside of Frankfort with two guards. We hadn't gone a mile down the road when we heard this God-awful racket as two P-51's strafed the road ahead of us as well as some buildings aside the road. It happened so fast as they came in on the deck with no warning whatsoever. We dove in a ditch alongside the road and waited until we were pretty sure it was a one-shot deal. We had no idea what the target was. We knew the interrogation center was nearby and perhaps that had been turned into a military area worth shooting at. Maybe it was to scare us or hit us. Scare us, it did. We continued to the railroad station only to find when we got there that we'd have to walk to another station east of the city. We walked all night and learned there was no train for us anywhere. As daylight came I began getting lame, having not walked in over two weeks. The pain got worse until, about noon, I could no longer raise my legs to take a step. If I moved either leg, it would feel like a knife was cutting me -- behind both knees and at the top of both legs. The nine other P. O. W.'s took turns trying to carry me, but it was obvious after a while that not only couldn't I walk, I couldn't even move my legs without experiencing much pain. So we just stopped while one of our guards set off to see what help we could get. He finally

was able to flag down a flatbed truck headed for Wexlar. We were told to climb on the back, but at this point I couldn't even life a leg up to get on and had to be pulled aboard. Although we reached Wexlar the driver would not or could not get to the prison camp about half a mile away. So I was carried part way until a crew came out of the camp and carried me on a stretcher the last few hundred yards. Two days later I was up and around again, ready to try once more to reach a permanent camp.

7. Boxcar -- On my second exit from Wexlar I was part of a group of 150 which was destined to go to a permanent Stalag at Nurnberg. Transportation was a problem as always but we were to catch a train outside of Wexlar that would take us south. Nothing showed up so we walked a half day to another station and were herded into what were called "40 & 8's" (old boxcars). We were packed in so tight that we had to stand for the all-night ride. It got worse as we travelled - for someone either had to throw up or had diarrhea. We designated one corner of the boxcar for this which, of course, made less space for the rest of us -- some who were sick and had to crouch down as best they could. In the morning we had to leave the train and were amazed to learn we had travelled north rather than south and were, of course, worse off for a walk to Nurnberg. At least our train had not been strafed and we were just as happy to be out in the open again.

8. Gondola car -- Having walked most of the way from Wexlar to Nurnberg (approximately 180 miles) only to find the Stalag there had just been evacuated, we set out "on the road again" and saw vast areas of destruction in Nurnberg as we exited the city southward. All this time we were retreating, we attempted to have our guards just slow down so we could be overtaken by the Allies. No deal -- they had orders to get us to a camp outside Munich and that was that. Also, it was obvious they were scared stiff of the SS as occasionally we'd meet up with them. One day two drove up to us and argued with our guards for 10-15

minutes. We had heard through the grapevine that Hitler had ordered all allied airmen shot (Minister of Propaganda Joseph Goebbels' edict of February 1945 [after the bombing of Dresden]) which was not carried out. Whatever they were arguing about we didn't know, but we did know the guards were adamant in keeping us on a fast track. They were well-motivated. If they were thought to be deliberately slowing down, they would be shot. The SS had the authority.

After walking two days, we were able to catch a freight train heading to Augsberg. At this period in the war riding a train in daylight was suicidal so we headed out at night. We were still 150 in number and were assigned three gondola cars. Gondola cars are open freight cars with sides about 4 feet high. We were cold but otherwise comfortable.

As dawn approached, however, we found ourselves on a steep incline without enough power to complete the climb. Ahead of us were two gondola cars filled with political prisoners (male civilians whom we presumed to be forced laborers). What was in the freight cars to the rear we had no idea. Sitting in the open as daylight broke was of great concern as trains were prime targets of opportunity for Allied fighters. We were also concerned with being on such an incline in case braking would not hold. We had no faith in the mechanical condition of any train at this point in the war and could only hope we wouldn't start rolling backward. Finally another engine was brought in at the end of the train and between the two engines (one pulling, the other pushing), we made it up the incline. By now it was approaching mid-morning and as we approached a small switching area, we were shunted off on a siding with the other four gondolas while the rest of the train headed for a tunnel nearby (according to our guards). Right next to us on parallel tracks was a German anti-aircraft unit on a flatbed train with two 88 mm anti-aircraft guns. Pushed together like this made for some uneasiness on our part, although the attitude of the German crew was less antagonistic than the tank crews we had met during our march. It was obvious to the Germans that we were

aircrews and we assumed their shouts to us were taunts. We kept quiet, having learned long ago (weeks) that even though the Allies were winning the war, we still were in no position to point this out.

It was a sunny day and were content to just sit in the gondola cars and rest. After about 10 minutes of this rest, we noted nine P-47's (American fighters) cruising about 20,000' which was fine except the anti-aircraft crew next to us started firing at them. We could hardly believe they'd do this as the chance of hitting a P-47 at this altitude is practically nil, whereas the chances of the P-47's knocking out the anti-aircraft crew was about 100%! Sitting next to these 88's was deafening -- although we didn't know it, we hadn't heard anything yet.

In our P. O. W. group was a P-47 pilot (who had been shot down attacking a flak tower), and we told him to let us know whenever the P-47's entered attack formation. We had an agreement with the guards that, if attacked, we could run from the train but, of course, would have to return when the strafing was over. Our guards made it clear they would not take us prisoner again if they had to take time to search for us. It was a deal that sounded good to me and as far as I know, no one tried to escape during an attack. I had made up my mind I wouldn't get far as I had a severe blister on my left heel which left me always struggling to keep up with the group. I had been issued new shoes at Dulag Luft and they were doing a number on my heel; I had a hole to the bone. I kept raising the level of my heel with two handkerchiefs I had to change the angle of chafing - to little avail. The right heel was fine.

In any event we noted the P-47's had started to change formation and our own P-47 pilot said that was it -- they had spotted the 88's and were going to come down. I had already decided (for two reasons) I would run in the direction of attack which happened to be up a steep slope. The first reason was that the slope might prove to be a slight shield, and secondly, if you don't have time to run

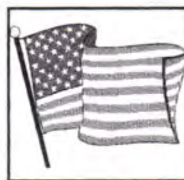
laterally from dive-bombing, run away from the target towards the attackers as this decreases the chances you would be hit. The fighters (or dive-bombers) would have to increase their angle of attack to get you -- whereas if you ran away from the attackers, they could simply fantail while pulling out of the dive and pick you off. While running up the hill less than a 100 feet from the train, I could hear the 40 calibre machine guns and rockets from the P-47's and dove into a slight incline in the slope. I was sure if I so much as raised my arm, it would be shot off. The next 10-15 minutes was without a doubt the most terrifying moments I ever spent. To begin with, I felt I couldn't really hide and as I tried to burrow into the slope, I knew my fanny was above ground but figured that would hurt the least if shot. The noise was deafening; the combination of shells being fired and the attacking fire power of the P-47's was awesome. The machine guns drowned out the roar of the engines of the P-47's, and that, combined with whatever bombs or rockets were used, made the phrase "all hell broke loose" seem inadequate to describe those minutes. One of my fears was that some of the P-47's would attack from the opposite direction which would make our hillside vulnerable as they pulled out of their dives. Fortunately, this did not happen; as it appeared both 88's were knocked out by the initial onslaught of the nine P-47's.

Just before the final plane attacked, one of the German anti-aircraft men ran up to my spot to try to get some protection. I was still with my face buried in the ground. When it was all over I was surprised to find him friendly; he was one of two survivors and he was interested in showing me a photo of his family. Although I could not understand his German, I realized just from looking down at the carnage immediately below that both gun crews were wiped out -- save the two survivors. I was pleasantly surprised to see the two gondola cars still filled with political prisoners (I assumed) untouched. They were only one car away from the carnage yet were untouched -- a remarkable tribute to our P-47 pilots who took pains to avoid scattering their fire. As I walked back to my car, I noted our blanket rolls and overcoats which we left behind were smoldering with hot shell

fragments burning holes in most of them. As far as we knew, we had no casualties and were all marched off once again to seek a P. O. W. camp somewhere that wasn't being evacuated.

I'd like to add that although I had some close calls in flight training and certainly had many anxious moments being shot down, etc., nothing came close to this experience at the railroad siding. Fifty years later it's as vivid as the day it happened. Certainly there was plenty of excitement and it was scary to be shot at in the air, but at least you're busy and the plane is moving. It was different lying face down on the ground with 88 mm shells going over your head one way and 55 calibre machine guns and rockets going the other. Although I was trained for the air war, I rapidly learned the hazards of events on the ground and hated it. I learned to appreciate what the infantry put up with.

As we pulled out of this area, I also thought what it took for these P-47 pilots to literally fly right down the barrels of the 88 mm anti-aircraft guns -- surely, the right stuff. No less did I feel for the German gunners who attacked the enemy knowing full well there chances of survival were slim under the circumstances.



Bomber Hype

A funny thing happened on my way to becoming a WWII hot pilot. I ran smack into an overwhelming need by the military for bomber pilots, not twin-engine bomber pilots, which would have been okay, but four-engine ones. This meant flying 30 tons around, hardly a cause for rejoicing. It was at Freeman Field, Seymour, Indiana, when I first got word of my assignment. We had earned our pilot's wings and thought maybe any job flying would be bearable, but my orders to Tyndall field, Panama City, Florida, indicated it was to be B-24 Liberators, and we were to take a fast course there in order to join an aircrew as co-pilots. Well, the last time I recalled seeing a B-24 was at Maxwell Field, Alabama, where we'd see them land and take off while we were in Pre-Flight School. Right then and there I'd wonder what poor suckers had to fly these lumbering giants and how could it be anything but a chore. I soon found out. Arriving at Tyndall, my first flight in a B-24 was with four other "trainees" as we went aloft with an instructor pilot. We took turns at the controls, sitting in the right seat (co-pilot's position). My first impression on its handling was how sluggish it was responding to controls. However, our biggest problem on this first flight was that the instructor was scared stiff of the airplane. Coming in for a landing he was sweating profusely and although we had a bit of a crosswind, he seemed to be fighting the controls on the approach. We ballooned a little on touchdown but recovery was good. However, we didn't feel too happy with the introductory ride and when a bunch of us got together that night, we discussed what we had gotten into -- what appeared to be not a very choice assignment. But having decided that, we took the view that we had taken throughout our training and that was that we didn't enlist to have fun but to do a job and help win the war. Hurrah! We also didn't have too much time to get mad at the B-24 since soon we were assigned to a crew and started training further at Davis Monthan Field, Tucson, Arizona. Before I left Tyndall, however, I had a chance to fly another 4-engine bomber, the B-17 Flying Fortress -- a few of which were stationed there. What happened was that Flight Test

Operations on the base would occasionally need a co-pilot when they took a plane up for a test flight (usually to slow-time a new engine). I volunteered to co-pilot on one of these flights and had my one (and only) chance to see what a B-17 felt like. The test pilot let me fly once we were airborne, and I was amazed at the ease of flying it compared to the B-24. The Fortress flew like our Advanced Trainer. Later when pilots would get together and stick up for whatever plane they flew, I couldn't help but think whenever B-24's were compared to B-17's that if the pilots could get the chance to fly both, it would be no contest as to which was easier to fly.

At Tucson I had much more time to get acquainted with the B-24, flying with our crew regularly. Something would always go wrong. The models we flew were earlier B-24's (actually B-24 D's) which had plenty of hours on them. Naturally, the newer models, B-24 H's and J's, got to the combat crews around the world. Most of our experiences at Tucson involved minor problems while in air, but not ALL were so minor.

One day we were assigned a cross country formation flight to Bakersfield, California, and return non-stop. While nearing a Marine Flight base at El Centro, we were asked if we'd mind if the Marine pilots could make a practice attack on us. We said okay and as we neared the rendezvous we noted a squadron of FHU's (Corsairs) above us and before we knew it, they were peeling off coming directly vertical at us, fantailing through our formation. Since we were practicing formation and were fairly close together, these Corsairs caught our attention! All I thought was 'Here I am stuck flying straight and level, wallowing in the lead plane's prop wash, while these Marine guys are having all the fun. But on we flew. As we approached Bakersfield we noted a drastic drop in oil pressure on #2 engine forcing us to ultimately shut it down and feather the prop. We decided to set down at the nearest available airfield which happened to be Los Angeles Municipal and radioed in for an emergency approach. We noted fog around the field and as we made our approach on three engines, we saw the runway just disappear in fog, forcing us to abort the landing and try to pull up and go around. The B-24 will fly on three engines but asking it to gain altitude on three engines takes some coaxing. It seemed as though

we were halfway across the Pacific Ocean before we got to 1000' and started to contemplate another air field. Los Angeles was completely fogged in. We headed for Long Beach Airport which was used as an Air Transport Command Base and were able to get clearance there. We landed without incident as ambulances and fire trucks stood by. After landing we radioed our base at Tucson and told them we were fine but please notify our wives we wouldn't be home that night. Actually, it was two nights we were gone as we finally had to have a plane from our group at Tucson come and pick us up. The day after I got back I was walking to the Officers Club at noon to meet my wife when I heard the weirdest roar coming from the flight line. As I turned in the direction of the sound, I saw a B-24 going down the runway with the right wing vertical to the ground and the left wing with its tip striking the ground. It was a position from which it was impossible to recover and all I could do was wait for the final crash and explosion which came seconds later. Evidently engine failure, perhaps two on the same side, occurred on takeoff. Miraculously, one of the eleven on board lived -- the instructor pilot!

Later that week I was heading for a ground school class when I heard a tremendous boom south of the field followed by another a few seconds later. The ground shook for an instant like a small quake might feel. Later I learned two B-24's had collided shortly after takeoff while getting into formation leaving twenty dead. So much for these bombers!

When we finished training here we were ordered to Kansas City to get our overseas assignment. There we would learn not only what war theatre we'd be sent to but whether or not we'd pick up our own plane to get there. Most crews wanted to pick up a new plane and fly it to their overseas base. I really didn't care nor did the rest of the crew. We all figured we'd be going to the Pacific area and were surprised to learn we were headed for England and the 8th Air Force. We got there by boat, sailing from Boston on the Ile de France! My best friend in the service (and the best man at my wedding), Dave Koch, got a new B-24 to fly over to England. He and his crew were lost somewhere between Iceland and England and were never heard from. Although I doubt if any of us

looked forward to flying out of England plus, of course, getting shot at, we nevertheless were glad to get out of our training schedules and all the accidents involved with that. It was recorded after the war that more than 15,130 men died in WWII flight training accidents across the country. Referring to crews lost on training flights out of Westover Field, Massachusetts, an article in the local Eagle Tribune (May 23, 1994) states, "Most died on flights of giant B-24 bombers, which allowed escape only through their underside in a crash. The plane was nicknamed the 'Liberator', but many called it the 'Flying Coffin' ". (Actually, there was an escape hatch behind the flight deck on top of the fuselage.)

But to get back to England . . . although we were part of a B-24 Liberator Group with the 8th Air Force, we sometimes wondered why our B-17 Flying Fortress friends, also part of the 8th Air Force, seemed to get all the publicity. We both flew identical type long-range daylight bombing missions deep into Germany (8-10 hours) and in many instances were on the same mission. It was on such missions we'd really get envious since even though we were the newer bomber on the scene, we couldn't get close to their altitude. We'd go over a target pushing it at 23,000 feet while they'd be 3,000 feet above us. Guess who got the anti-aircraft fire?

Probably the reason the Flying Fortress got all the publicity was because it was the first American heavy bomber to bomb from England (8-17-42 Roven, France, marshaling yards). The B-24's set out 10-9-42. Not only was the B-17 the first but they were also stationed in England which happened to be the heart of Allied news broadcasts. The B-17's also outnumbered the B-24's about 2 to 1 in this particular w ar theatre. Elsewhere around the world in Italy, Africa, the Pacific, Alaska, and India, the B-24's abounded. In fact, the B-24 Liberator was the most produced allied plane of the war with 18,479 being built. The B-17 was almost 6,000 fewer. Yet even after the war, all you heard about with the bombing of Germany was the Fortress. Go to a movie: "Twelve O'Clock High" or "War Lover" and all you'd see were 17's. The B-17 Flying Fortress four-engine and the B-25 Mitchell twin-engine were about all you saw after the war. I figured

there'd be at least one place where I'd see a B-24, however, and decided to take my wife to the Smithsonian National Air and Space Museum in Washington to show her what the "ole man" flew in the big one. Imagine my surprise when, after searching high and low in the museum, I could find nothing but a small plaque in the corner of one room describing briefly the role of this plane. Of course, there was one whole wall with a mural depicting B-17's on a bombing mission!

When I wrote to the Smithsonian about their "oversight", they replied they couldn't find a B-24 and even if they did, it would not fit. Of course, what they did have right in the middle of the museum was a Dassault Falcon, a small transport jet made in France for Federal Express, whose name was all over the plane. Who cared? -- except Federal Express?

Later (1987) when I bought the Smithsonian Book of Flight, there was the usual hoopla about the B-17 Flying Fortress, including a 3-page pull-out of the Museum's mural -- which was fine, but so as to prove, I suppose, that the B-24 "got no respect" there was a piece on how entertainers did their part in the war. They pointed out how Jimmy Stewart, the movie actor, flew combat missions in a B-17! Since Jimmy was one of the few well-known spokesmen for the B-24, having flown a tour of combat in them (later becoming Operations Officer at his Group), it was ironic that even with him, the 17's got credit undeserved.

When I wrote to the Smithsonian about this, I received a reply stating I was one of three people to point this out...the first being Jimmy Stewart himself. They wrote that perhaps I and other enthusiasts should get together to write the B-24 story. Others have done so.

My main point was that you'd think by 1987 that an historical aviation museum would know something about the most produced plane ever in America. Not only that, but since the normal crew of a B-24 was 10, it's undoubtedly the one flown in by most airmen in World War II. By far.

So, for whatever reason, we simply saw the disappearance of B-24's as time went by. Then in the late 60's it was discovered that the India Air Force, where some late model B-24's had remained after the war were still in reasonable condition. Two of these were brought to the United States. One went to Pima Air Museum in Tucson and another was bought by a David Tallichet who kept his flying and actually was the only B-24 J in combat configuration. It was used in the movie showing Joe Kennedy (the president's brother) taking off on his tragic mission out of England. Joe flew a Navy version (PB48-1) of the B-24 J. This plane was a true delight by all who could see it or even just get a giant print of it.

But perhaps the best story of all comes out of Stow, Massachusetts, where a guy by the name of Bob Collings bought another of the India Air Force's B-24 J's from a fellow in England who had purchased it in India. It was in a deplorable state and the Smithsonian had turned it down as it was too big a restoration project. Mr. Collings brought it to his hangar at Stow and solicited volunteers to help restoration. I recall travelling from Chatham to see what the work was all about and found Collings himself at work polishing the fuselage, which at that point was a hollow hull devoid of wings, engines, tail -- in fact, it didn't even have any wiring or controls on the inside. It was completely stripped. The flight deck was minus everything. No instruments, controls -- even the pilots' seats were missing. How anyone converted this mass of metal into the final product (named "The All American") which first flew in 1989 and has toured throughout the United States since then, was truly a remarkable feat. Mr. Collings eventually got corporate help, but his foresight and perseverance to see this through was what made it all happen. When the plane visited Hyannis two summers ago, I was there to greet it -- my third 'viewing'. The next day I was on the beach at Chatham with my wife, daughter, and son-in-law when I heard a familiar sound in the distance and my daughter said "Hey, Dad, isn't that a Liberator?" It sure was, and it was a sight to believe as it flew down the coast, making a slow turn over the beach and heading back toward Hyannis. I wasn't crazy about flying them, but I sure gave them a lot of respect!

And wasn't it great that even though I couldn't show my wife a B-24 at the Smithsonian in 1985, I could show her one on Cape Cod in 1993!

Bailing Out - 1945

Bailing out means different things to different people. Here on Cape Cod it invariarbly means getting water out of a boat -- either after a rainfall or due to a leak in the hull someplace . . . or bailing out of a marriage! The bailing out I'm referring to, however, means getting out of a disabled aircraft in flight in order to save one's life through the use of a parachute. Strangely enough, none of the come-ons and hype I read about when enlisting had mentioned bailing out. It's not that I was unaware of the procedure, but most of us 20-year-olds who were brought up reading "Flying Aces" found that it usually happened to the Germans -- pilots with names like Von Zenden. The BAD guys usually got shot down!

Even in flight training we didn't think much about bailing out. The parachutes we wore were seat packs which banged against the back of our legs as we walked to our planes but once in the cockpit were used like a seat cushion. Bailing out on a training flight was infrequent. Most of the accidents occured while landing or taking off where we were too near the ground to jump. Ejection seats were unheard of in World War II and bailing out below 500' was suicidal. There were no practice jumps either. . . although we did jump off a 30' tower into the water which was supposed to similate something or other. All it taught me was I didn't want to bail out over water.

As we progressed through training there was more and more talk about how to survive by bailing out. One thing that impressed us were stories concerning an occasional 'chute that wouldn't open, plus the fact you might not even clear the aircraft after exiting. It seemed to depend on the various types of aircraft as to whether or not you could clear the plane easily. Planes with twin rudders seemed to be 'bummers'. For instance, in a P-38 the pilot sat between twin fusilage which gave him an easy exit only to hit the rear

horizontal stabilizer behind him. Evidently, the trick was for a P-38 to fly inverted when bailing out so that you'd just drop free of everything. That's fine provided you're able to have any control after being shot.

Then there was the problem of getting out of a B-24 bomber which had two huge rudders extending outwardly at the rear. Rumor was you'd jump out the bomb bay and immediately hit a rudder. In a B-24 we were instructed to jump out, count to ten, and then pull the ripcord. The closer we got to combat, the more we listened to the proper method to egress the aircraft which, in my case, was the B-24 Liberator.

The flight deck of a B-24 had two pilots shoe-horned into their seats. The side cockpit windows were too small to escape through and only led to the propellers anyhow. To bail out in flight the pilots had to step down two levels to the bomb bay catwalk, then jump from there. There was also a top hatch behind the flight deck but the feeling was that should one be able to exit there, he'd be sure to hit the large twin rudder tail section.

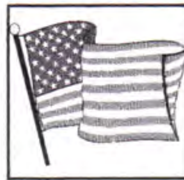
Another factor came to light as we joined combat crews in England. Guys were bailing out all the time over Germany and there were stories of 'chutes not opening. They were called 'streamers'. Occasionally, when the rip cord (the handle on your harness which you pulled to open the 'chute) did not open the 'chute, you could rip it open yourself providing you had a chest pack parachute. A chest pack was one you hooked onto the front of your parachute harness when ready to jump. (The harness itself was always on). Most of the aircrew had these chest packs. The pilots, however, wore back packs which were flat packs in a harness and went from shoulders to waist on your back. The advantages were thatt they were comfortable, out of the way, and were always on. If you got blown out of the aircraft, your 'chute would already be with you. The big disadvantage was that if the rip cord did not open the 'chute, there was no way you could get at the pack to pull it open yourself since it was on your back. Whenever the subject of bailing out came up, bomber pilots thought about this. Nothing, however, was further from our minds when we enlisted -- eager to fly.

After a mission when debriefing would occur and when planes would be missing, returning crews would report on the number of 'chutes seen as planes went down. Often they'd report sighting 3 or 4 out of a usual crew of 10. Chances were they weren't the pilots! The airplane commander (also called 1st pilot) was like a ship's captain. He gave the order to bail out and was responsible to see the crew did so first unless, of course, an explosion rendered communication or control unmanageable so that everyone who could get out did so instinctively or were blown out. The ones nearest the hatches and bomb bay would have the best chances whereas those in turrets or flight deck might be in trouble. The worst position was the ball turret spot. This turret hung below the belly of the bomber. For the gunner to bail out, he first had to extract himself from the turret into the aircraft and then jump -- a time-consuming effort. Later in the war the Air Corps Bomber Command did away with this turret on B-24's as it was felt it was no longer needed defensively, and its elimination saved weight.

Another factor to consider when electing to bail out was to weigh the alternatives, if any. Often when a plane was damaged and going down, the pilot would look for a field to try an emergency landing, not necessarily an airfield as none may have been around. More often than not, this was a poor choice as most any type of crash landing produces a spark resulting in an explosion. Also, the planes were full of high-octane gasoline. The reluctance to jump, however, produced such a scenario too often.

Still another poor alternative to bailing out was ditching (emergency landing on water). Some aircraft with a good pilot could settle in the water, not break up, and stay afloat a minute or so giving the crew time to escape. A B-24, however, tended to break in two at the wing bulkhead and rapidly sink.

So, if possible, it was more prudent to bail out than crash-land or ditch in the water given a choice. It was a choice we made when shot down. . . with all aboard parachuting safely.



A Role of Toilet Paper

One of the best-kept secrets of World War II was the role that the toilet paper shortage played in bringing about the defeat of Nazi Germany. It might have played a role elsewhere in the global conflict, but I was only privy to the German front -- wherein I had hands-on knowledge.

Since I had been shot down near the end of the War, the transportation situation regarding POW's was a mess, resulting in long marches through the cities and countryside of western Germany. If the populace there didn't have enough to worry about -- bombing, etc. -- they also suffered from a lack of toilet paper, a deprivation that led to such a demoralization that would help cave-in the home front...or so it might seem.

My first inkling of this shortage and its effects came during my confinement as a prisoner at Hohemark Hospital, Oberursel, Germany. A German doctor, while poking my stomach (which had distended so much that I looked nine months pregnant) remarked about our large toilet paper supply. What happened was that, in my room at the hospital there were two bedridden POW's who needed bed pans. What we'd do is line the bed pans with toilet paper so that everything would slide neatly off the pan when emptying it. This may have been rather elementary, but it was new to me and since it was my duty to be bed pan orderly as I got ambulatory, I learned to use plenty of paper. The Germans there, however, seemed to think it was wasting paper. That was my first clue as to the effect a shortage of this kind had on morale.

My second clue came to light as we were preparing to move from Dulag Luft camp in Wexlar to another camp, Stalag Luft, in Nurenburg. The Dulag Luft was a transient

camp where airmen prisoners were sent after interrogation. It was where we'd get POW gear and get an assignment to a permanent camp. One hundred fifty of us were slated to move out to Nurenburg. Word had gotten through that there was a shortage of soap and toilet paper there, so we were told to take as much as could in our blanket rolls. I had never packed a blanket roll before and was amazed at the number of bars and rolls we could fit in the blanket.

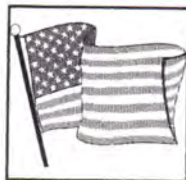
So off we went, each with a blanket roll over our shoulder, to catch a train to Nurenburg. The train never showed, so we started to "hoof it" to another station. Since this was February, 1945, and near the end of the War, the average life of a train was probably 24 hours unless it could hide in a tunnel. The Allies had complete mastery of the skies and the favorite targets of fighter planes were trains and the retreating columns of fighting forces . . . with which P. O. W.'s were sometimes mixed.

As we marched toward Nurenburg in snow and rain, it was apparent that we were not to get much help transportation-wise. We had mixed emotions on this since trains could be death traps. So on we continued with our loads of soap and paper. When it came time to rest in or near towns along the way, we'd have time to open our blankets to get whatever we had left to eat. As we did this, the soap and toilet papers rolls would be exposed. Since we attracted civilians along our route when we stopped, it was with utter amazement that they noted what we were carrying. By now we were a motley group -- unshaven, real sad-sacks -- but with scads of soap, etc., which (according to our guards) hadn't been available to the general populace for some time. I could sense right then and there that the role we were playing in winning the War through the demoralization of the "home front" was one we hadn't thought of.

The more days we marched, the heavier our load seemed to get, so we began to unload the soap to civilians here and there in exchange for something to eat. In my case, I got two apples for one bar of soap, and in another trade I got a small water bottle with a cap for one bar of soap.

When we got to Nurenburg a week later we had only half our soap but most of the toilet paper. We were extremely disappointed to find that the camp had been evacuated the day before, and we would have to continue our trek . . . this time to a camp outside of Munich in the town of Moosburg. The reason the camp in Nurenburg had been evacuated was due to the fact that the Allies advance would have liberated it probably within the week. It was the German High Command's philosophy to prohibit the overrun of prison camps by the Allied so all prisoners on the Western Front were continually marched eastward while those on the Eastern Front were marched westward. So a lot of us met midway at Camp VIIA, Moosburg. Since we were a liability to whomever controlled us, we couldn't understand why this fight to keep us -- the war was certainly lost by then.

So we continued our trek toward Munich, keeping intact the rolls of toilet paper. When we finally got to our ultimate destination, Stalag VIIA at Moosburg, we still had a good supply, albeit some was scorched, some soggy, but usable and welcomed there.



Letting It All Hang Out

When you're on the road marching day and night, there are occasions, no matter who you are, when you're looking for a rest room. As a POW, however, on the road in Germany in 1945 in the midst of the German Army's retreat, there were none to be found. No where! Bavaria was full of beautiful woods, picturesque villages, bombed-out areas, columns of refugees, retreating Panzer Divisions, but NO REST ROOMS!

How we, as POW's, managed to deal with such hasn't been a topic of conversation much since that time, but nevertheless, it might be of sufficient interest to someone, who, finding themselves in a similar situation in the future, could benefit. Techniques in how to handle the absence of any plumbing were not taught in flight school -- or ground school for that matter! Guys in the infantry probably developed skills at such and would probably be amused at an air corps pilot marching hundreds of miles using his ingenuity to handle these matters. And I'll have to admit, I've got to hand it to the infantry for probably perfecting an 'art of sorts' here.

On our longest march there were 150 starting out -- all air crew guys who had been shot down. If we all thought that relieving ourselves in a bomber at 25,000 feet and -30° was challenging, we hadn't experienced anything yet. As we marched from Frankfurt (Wexlar-Dulag Luft) to Munich (Moosburg-Stalag VIIA), we'd stop every few hours for piss call. No problem -- we could get a handle on that. It was when the 'good old #2' urge came that we had to learn by trial and error. Since we were usually on the road, there were plenty of trees to hide behind or maybe lean against to accomplish our purpose. As it turned out, we found squatting was best, although one had to be very careful; this was wintertime and you had to make sure your coat wasn't in the way as you squatted with your ass hanging out -- and hope you wouldn't pee on your pants which were wrapped around your lower legs. Guys with the G.I.'s (diarrhea) were particularly stressed. We

were always thankful that we weren't strafed when in this position (being in the midst of the German retreat, we were continually harassed by our own planes.)

It was fortunate that I became adept at all this because one morning we had reached a small farming village in the center of which was a large manure pile. Our Luftwaffe guard said if we had to go, contribute to the pile! I had an emergency. As I took my position faultlessly, I looked up and saw a heavy-set fraulein gazing down at me from a second-floor window about 100 feet away. I was told by a fellow POW that my performance was exemplary --- a credit to the Air Corps.

It wasn't until we got to urban areas, however, that we saw sewage treated efficiently. Since the cities through which we walked were significantly bombed out (Kassel, Giessen, Frankfort, Nurnberg, Augsburg, Munich), we never saw any intact plumbing. One of the best relief stations we saw (and used) was in Augsburg. There, at the rim of a bomb crater, were wooden 2 x 4's set up benchlike -- over the rim, one to sit on (or hang ass over) and one higher in front to hang onto. Although we looked on this as kind of a godsend and a tribute to German engineering, it was still tricky with all the clothes we had on. At a temperature around freezing, accomplishing your goals without getting wet or falling in was trying.

As with any new procedures, what we'd try to do is learn from someone ahead of us. We figured our guards (goons) would be familiar with these outdoor practices, but we never did see them confronted with "going" outside. We figured they simply "gassed" their way along the march. They certainly seemed to be gas propelled. Normally, having company like this, day and night, would be disgusting. Fortunately, we were in the open air most of the time with a kind wind helping out. Since their diet was black bread, margarine, and sausage, perhaps they were constipated. Occasionally, as we walked along at night, we'd get them to sing. The goon nearest us was quite adept at farting every time his left foot went down.

In due time we reached prison camp and, in addition to being out of the line of fire all the time, we were also relieved to be in the "land of plumbing". Prison camps had what were called "aborts" which were separate buildings about 50 feet from the barracks. These had rows of seats placed over a large cesspool which was regularly pumped out and used as fertilizer. The cesspool was also used to toss in any POW caught stealing.

Although this was a good setup in the daytime, we were forbidden to use it at night. Anyone leaving the barracks for any reason was to be shot. At night, therefore, each barracks had a five-gallon slop bucket which we had to squat over, etc. Since many POW's had the G.I.'s, it was not a fun area to be near. One night I found the pail full and was in a real dilemma with the G.I.'s. I had a choice of going outside to the abort and risk getting shot or go all over the floor. It was a moonlit night and it was obvious that our area was visible from the guard tower. The urge was too great; caution had to be thrown to the wind--downwind-- and I slowly walked outside to the abort, entered, and did my business. No shots, no dogs, nothin'! Then the question was whether to wait until daylight or walk slowly back. It was chilly, so I walked back -- again, nothing happened.

The next day I was a hero of sorts for an hour. . . especially to the guy whose turn it was to empty the slop bucket and clean up that morning.

Close Encounters of the Unusual Kind

It's hard to say whether some of the encounters written about below were unusual or not as they occurred during World War II where there was a fine line between things usual or unusual. Nevertheless, certain events stand out which were, to me, not what was expected in the sometimes weird atmosphere of the times.

I'll number these encounters to make it easy to skip from one to another if things get dull.

1. Mid-air collisions are not everyday happenings while in flight training but as you can imagine, they happen when you get a lot of trainees flying about at the same time -- especially at night.

   While in Basic Training at Courtland, Alabama, I was assigned to practice solo night landings at an auxiliary field at Muscle Shoals, Alabama. While awaiting my turn to land and take off, I was assigned a certain spot in the sky called a quadrant where I was to remain at an assigned altitude until called in. I'd just circle in that quadrant. It was after I had completed a set of takeoffs and landings and returned to my assigned spot when I noted an aircraft at the same altitude straight ahead . . . and to my amazement his starboard navigation wing light (green) showed he was coming straight at me! I pulled back on the stick with full left rudder as he shot past. After checking my position I concluded some lunkhead almost bought me the farm -- a close encounter I could have done without!

2 Close encounters with Corsairs were for the birds, but it must have been fun for

the Corsair pilots. We were on a cross-country training flight out of Tucson, Arizona, in a B-24 heading for Bakersfield, California, and return non-stop when over Bakersfield, our #2 (inboard) engine quit. We were able to feather the prop but decided we should put down at nearby Los Angeles Airport. As we approached Los Angeles, the tower there gave us emergency clearance to land, but advised fog was rolling in fast. We were given a _________ for a straight-in approach and shortly lined up with the runway just as fog completely enveloped it. We kept coming anyhow hoping we'd see the runway the closer we got. At 200' we saw nothing and aborted the landing trying to gain some altitude on our three good engines. Keep in mind the B-24 does well on three engines flying straight and level but you won't see one take off on three (almost what we were asking of it). What we did was stay level at 100' until we were able to get enough speed to inch up higher. By that time we were well over the Pacific and had some close encounters with masts of fishing boats. For a while we were lower than 100' as we probably scared the daylights out of the fishermen.

We were able to make it to the Air Transport Command Field at Long Beach and landed there with ambulances and fire equipment waiting just in case. After this encounter with fishermen, we were at Long Beach for two days and in a lighter mood. We were able to get to Universal Studios in Hollywood where we had another close encounter -- this time with Yvonne DeCarlo who was posing scantily clad for still shots on the set of "Salome". This particular encounter was not close enough -- although we did get within six feet!

3. During the first week of January 1945 our bomber crew joined a dozen other replacement aircrews plus thousands of Infantrymen and set sail for England from Boston on the Ile de France, one of the superliners of the day refurbished as a troop carrier. We learned we were to sail alone (not part of a convoy) and would rely on the ship's speed to thwart off U-boats (German subs) plying the Atlantic. We weren't crazy about the idea of going overseas this way, but the choice wasn't

ours -- we figured a U-boat commander might be smart enough to head us off, etc. As we left the New England coast we realized the tactic was to zig-zag across the ocean continuously showing a false course. As we zigged and zagged things were uneventful until the fourth day when we sighted a ship burning on the horizon. We were off Gibraltar at the time which will give you some idea of the round-about course we sailed. The ship's crew seemed on edge and we assumed (and heard rumors, as always) that a U-boat had been detected in the vicinity. We never did learn how close an encounter this was, but we figured even a lucky guess by a U-boat commander would place us in jeopardy somewhere along the course from Boston to England. We lucked out, however, as a day or so later found us steaming up the Firth of Clyde to Greenock, Scotland, where we disembarked and took a train (and truck) to Wendling, England, home of the 8th Air Force's 392d Bomb Group.

4. A week after I arrived at our base in England I heard a strange drone one afternoon which turned out to be a group of B-17 Flying Fortresses which had been diverted to our field from their home base (closed due to fog). This was not unusual as bombers returning from missions over Germany would frequently find the weather poor on their return and would have to seek out alternative fields which were spread across Britain. I jumped on my bicycle and sped over to the runway to see them land. Besides a natural curiosity to see the condition of bombers returning from a mission, I was interested in seeing a bunch of four-engined taildraggers making three point (sort of) landings. I wasn't there long when I noted one coming in with the #2 prop feathered, which meant only three of his four engines were operating. Inexplicably, he aborted his landing and elected to go around and try again. Why he decided to go around on three engines was puzzling but it was probably because the B-17 landing ahead of him was not clear of the runway. Whatever the reason, to try to pull up and go around on three engines is to be avoided if at all possible. Furthermore, as the pilot gave full throttle I noted smoke coming from his one good engine on the left side. And

as he slowly gained some altitude his left wing began to drop. Now, when you're close to the ground and you lose power on one side, the last thing you want to happen is to have your wing drop on the side your turning into. The wing just won't recover. In fact, at any altitude you don't want to turn into dead power; you always turn into the direction where the good engines are. But anyhow, this B-17 was in a slow agonizing turn to the left and although over a mile from where I was, I could figure he was caught in a slow descending spiral to the left and which, to my concern, would end up probably 500' short of the runway -- right about where I was! I started pedaling as fast as I could away from where I figured he'd hit. Although at times I swore I was a target, I realized the pilot had little control and could only crash land with as little loss of life to his crew as possible. And crash he did -- 200' from me! Just before he hit he cut power on his good engines, was able to level off as he hit, wheels up, ____________ across the road and into the side of a brick maintenance building. As I waited for the inevitable explosion, none occurred, and I happily noted the crew exiting the rear of the aircraft and out a top hatch. I never thought I'd have a close encounter with a B-17 Flying Fortress . . . and on the ground at that!

I learned that day that the veterans at the base didn't rush out to the landing area when bombers returned from missions as the bombers could be in all sorts of damaged condition affecting their ability to land safely and in one piece.

5. While a P. O. W. walking across Bavaria near the end of World War II there were encounters with our own Air Corps fighters which I've written about in other chapters. Being bombed by heavy bombers, however, got me close to the British and American heavy bombing forays! One night while a patient at Hohemark Hospital, Oberursel, just north of Frankfurt, the British (who bombed at night) were bombing something nearby (probably Frankfurt) when out of the blue came a tremendous blast that blew in a couple of black-out shutters we had on the windows. Our fellow Royal Air Force P. O. W.'s at the hospital figured it was a

six-ton blockbuster called Tallboy -- a 21' long bomb which could penetrate 12' of concrete and then explode with a delayed action fuse. Whatever it was (the British also had 2-ton bombs), it was closer than I'd want to get again. It was close enough to get me to take a small bite out of my one treasure: a one-inch square of a D-bar (a chocolate bar found in Red Cross parcels). I would have hated to leave it behind if something happened to me!

Later when we were on our march from Dulag-Luft camp at Wexlar to Stalag-Luft 3 at Nurnberg, we arrived at the camp only to find it had been evacuated. It was noon and as we prepared to move on, an air raid siren sounded and shortly thereafter we could hear the bombs exploding and the earth shake as Nurnberg was being hit. Having just walked through part of the city we couldn't see anything left to bomb. It was in ruins -- rubble everywhere with parts of bombers here and there. It was during this raid by our own bombers that I decided the safest place inside our shaking building was in an interior doorway, figuring there was more support there and some protection from flying glass. As it turned out we had no hits but I was getting sick of these close encounters with our own bombers.

6. If bombing and strafing by our own planes were not enough to give us P. O. W.'s fits, we had another experience at Angsburg that gave us a fright! We were on the outskirts of the city waiting for some black bread that was supposed to be available to us. There were 50 of us P. O. W.'s just hanging around a yard next to a makeshift bakery when two P-47's (American Thunderbolts) began circling overhead. Then, to our amazement they dropped their belly tanks (auxiliary long-range fuel tanks) while directly overhead. These large tear-drop shaped tanks came hurtling down on us, dropping and bouncing about 100 feet away. It was weird. To begin with, we thought P-47's only dropped their tanks when combatting German fighters. The tanks (slung beneath) were a drag on the aircraft when in a dogfight so were jettisoned. We also thought the pilots might

get rid of them prior to landing, etc. But to do this just to scare us we thought was for the birds. Also, although we excused our own planes when, on occasion, they hit on us when we were not easily identified, we thought they could have figured we were P. O. W.'s out in the open as we were in this case. Close encounter with a gas tank! My other close encounter with P-47's is described in the chapter "P. O. W. Transportation".

7. It was probably inevitable that while a P. O. W. being forced to march eastward (Frankfurt to Munich) in Germany as the Allies advanced, that we'd be involved closely with the German retreat. It was March 1945 and at any one time we were probably only a day or so when we could have been overrun and liberated by our Allies had we just stalled for a day. Our guards would have none of that, however, so on we went eastward along with Panzer Divisions, the SS, as well as refugees clogging the roads. The most startling encounter occurred one morning when we were skirting a small town when right around one building as we turned were two huge Panzer division tanks. Someone in our group said they were Tiger tanks (40-ton jobs which were the pride of the Wehrmacht). I had never been near any tank this close and as we walked within a few feet and endured the taunts of the tank men, I was impressed. Never in my short life as a pilot did I dream of meeting up with a Tiger Tank in the middle of a war zone! As usual, when we encountered enemy forces there was always this shouting at us. The German language itself was harsh to the ear, but in the case of these tankers, it was also magnified by anger or contempt -- we didn't know which -- and only wanted to get by them as soon as possible. They were a tough bunch and we weren't sure they'd heed our Luftwaffe guards to leave us alone. During our march our guards seemed to be able to pacify different people -- civilian and military. Apprehensive as I was in this instance, I was in awe of not only the tanks but also of the guys who fought in them. At this time in the war (March 1945) when the Allies had complete control of the air, the future of German armor was short.

8. The last encounter that I'll write about is what I'll refer to as a close encounter with the Grim Reaper. And here I'm not referring to being shot at or sudden death in combat, but rather to the effect that sickness and malnutrition had on me as a P. O. W.

A few days after I was shot down I was taken ill at the transient camp at Dulag Luft in Wexlar, GA. seriously enough to be transferred to a prison hospital at Hokermark, Oberusal (near Frankfurt). It was there I progressed into a blue funk, not caring whether I lived or died and on at least one occasion hoped for the latter. I remember the circumstances vividly. After being bedridden a few days I was allowed to go to the john by myself. It was down the hall from my room and I can recall standing in front of the toilet throwing up this purple fluid while at the same time noting out a small window that a P-38 (American fighters) were dive-bombing some place below our camp in Wexlar. I remember thinking at the time I hadn't realized P-38's were used for dive-bombing. I guessed the reason was that they weren't as good fighters as the P-47's and P-51's but had evidently found a new role. In any event I had every reason to be optimistic. I'd survived a scary few days, I knew the war was almost over and although I was real sick, I was not in a lot of pain. In short, there seemed to be no reason to "give up" when, in retrospect, I was a pretty lucky guy. Nevertheless, the feeling persisted and in the years since I've often thought of how I could have gotten into much a bizarre mental state when on the surface it made no sense at all.

Another close encounter with the Grim Reaper that did not involve combat was when malnutrition took over as we went without food the last few weeks of the war. Red Cross parcels which kept most P. O. W.'s alive during the war were no longer being rationed out. While on the road we didn't get them and even at established camps they were in short supply. The International Red Cross (supplied by American and British Red Cross) were supplying them but the Germans were hoarding them for their own use. This lack of food brought about

conditions among P. O. W.'s that not only precipitated bad cases of malnutrition but also brought about situations wherein P. O. W.'s would talk about nothing but food. Whether on the road or when we finally got to camp (Stalag VIIA - Mousberg), every conversation related to food -- recipes we'd try when we got back, crazy desserts we'd dream up, etc. Normally when you had a bunch of guys around, you'd think the talk would be of liberation, home, girls (especially the latter), but not here. Talk was of food. Period. When Patton's 3rd Army liberated us, all we wanted to know was where some rations were. G.I.'s in his quartermaster corps baked us some white bread which was like giving us a Thanksgiving dinner! This obsession with food at the time made a lasting impression on me. Although I could understand the craving for food when near starving, I was surprised at how all other needs were so secondary. Later when in college I studied Psychology and was fascinated by the writings of Abraham Maslow, a humanistic psychologist best known for his work "Hierarchy of Human Needs". At the top of his list of needs were the need for food, water, sex, and rest. What Abe didn't know (maybe from not being a P. O. W.) was that without food and water, the rest was irrelevant!

After being liberated April 29, 1945, I subsequently was flown to Reims, France, where still sick but thinking of nothing but food, was transferred by hospital train (as a litter(?) case - although I wasn't <u>that</u> sick) to the 241st U. S. General Hospital OISE at Sissonne, France. There, after a few days, I came around to being more myself again, realizing there was more to life than food and water! Thoughts of

returning home to my wife took on a new meaning, and I was a 22-year-old again. I was released from the hospital May 15, 1945. Since then an appreciation of all things edible has been ever present in my ramblings through life. So I have no problem doing the grocery shopping!

Walter Beach Sherwood,

B-24 Pilot

1916 - 1944

In the late 1920's/early 1930's when I was growing up, families didn't move around much. My folks were born in Hartford, Connecticut, and lived there all their lives. Their closest friends were the Sherwoods who lived about a block away. . . all their lives. They had two children, Walter and Dot. I had three sisters and one brother. All six of these people were just a few years apart but were all older than I. Our families were so close we even rented vacation cottages side by side at a lake in Marlboro, Connecticut. These were rented by the year so we saw a lot of each other. Our dads would commute to their jobs in Hartford taking turns on the driving during the summer months.

Growing up I was lucky to have these 'older kids' around -- especially in the summer. My brother, Art, was eight years my senior and Walt Sherwood was six years my senior. Although this age differential precluded us being pals, just to be near these guys gave me a lot of 'growing up' help. I'll concentrate on Walter , whom we called "Beechie" (after his middle name), since he's the subject of this piece. What impressed me most about Beechie depended mostly on what season it was. During the winter I didn't see that much of him except maybe when the families got together during the holidays. Beechie would always be asked to play the piano which he was really good at. His standard was "Nola" which always left me wondering how anyone could play so fast and sound so good.

However, it was during the summer season when Beechie really displayed his talents. To begin with, he was the best swimmer I had ever seen. In those days freestyle swimming

was called the 'crawl' and was exemplified by Olympian, Johnny Weissmuller, then starring in the Tarzan movies. Besides excelling in the crawl, Beechie was an expert diver. His dad built a raft with a five foot diving tower -- made to order for his jack-knife, swan and back dives. Try as I could, I could not come close to matching his swimming or diving, nor could anyone else on the lake! He was a pleasure to watch.

Then along came World War II and Beechie qualified for pilot training, graduated from Multi-Engine School (eventually becoming a B-24 Liberator pilot), and was sent overseas to England with the 8th Air Force in late 1943. By this time I had entered pilot training myself and was in training when I got word from my folks that Beechie was "Missing in Action" after a bombing raid over Germany. This was in April 1944 when bomber losses were particularly heavy. "Missing in Action" could mean he'd be eventually reported as a "Prisoner of War". It depended on what actually happened on the mission. If a bomber is hit by enemy fighters or anti-aircraft fire from the ground it could a) blow up, b) be shot down with crew members parachuting if possible, or c) be damaged but get back or to friendly territory. If a) the plane blows up, there are just pieces remaining and usually all are killed. The trouble is that in the heat of an air battle it's not possible for other air crews to see everything going on so that even if an aircraft blows up, there's always the chance that someone got blown out or escaped with a parachute. (I saw a plane get hit, catch fire, and not blow up until after four crewmen bailed out (out of nine). As a result, since it's usually not definite who escaped, all are listed as missing. For the parents, wives, or other relatives of these "missing", it was a long and agonizing wait. If they were fortunate, a telegram would come stating the missing one was a prisoner of war. For others where "Killed in Action" was verifiable, the news was tragic. But almost as bad were the ones who heard nothing and could only wait for the end of the war to be sure all hope was gone. In the air war over Europe alone there are still over 17,000 listed as missing or unaccounted for. Although this does not minimize the current (1994) concern for 2400 missing in Vietnam and Laos, it does lend a perspective on the relative losses.

If, in the case of b) above, some chutes were observed, it's difficult to know who escaped

and whether or not they survived when captured on the ground. Crew members who bailed out, especially over a target area, were not warmly received by civilians on the ground. "Missing in Action" could well mean "Killed by Civilians". Imagine, if you can, you're a German civilian. Your city has just been bombed. Perhaps your friends have been killed or are entombed in a bomb shelter. Then all of a sudden out of the sky comes the air crew members who have caused this grief -- parachuting almost right into your arms. In addition to being outraged at this enemy, you're also aware that both Hitler and Goebbels have made it clear that no civilian would be prosecuted for killing allied air crews. We never knew how many crew members were killed this way, but no doubt, it was numerous. When I was marched through many of these areas, the devastation was so complete, you'd wonder how anyone survived, and I could only surmise how long I'd survive if my Luftwaffe guards decided to quit. You could understand the anger of civilians.

In addition to the civilian hazard, prisoners (while trying to get to prison camp) could also be killed by allied planes. This could happen if they were travelling through a city being bombed or on a train or in a column being strafed.

So, in Beechie's case nothing was heard and as the months passed, hope gradually faded. When I visited his dad after the war in 1945, there was little doubt that he'd been killed in action. I did learn something on this visit that was absolutely amazing. I learned that Beechie had been with the same bomb group in England as I -- the 392nd out of Wendling. The odds against this were very high. To begin with, the B-24 was used in all theatres of operation all over the world, but even assuming just the 8th Air Force in England had them, it would still be an extremely long shot that I'd be sent to the same group. Perhaps I'd have found out had I time to research while there, but my stay at the 392nd Bomb Group was a short one since I was shot down on my first mission.

So although I found all this out in 1945 upon my return home, it wasn't until 1981 that I obtained a history of the group which included a chronology of bombing missions. This

list of missions showed the date of mission, the target, and the results, as well as information on casualties. This is what I found out -- after 37 years, copied from The Liberators from Wendling[2]

Mission #64 11 April 1944

Target: Bernberg

"The target assigned was an airfield outside the city. Briefings were held between 0300 - 0400 hours for 29 air crews. Lead Bombardiers were Lieutenants Joachim of the 478th and Tierney of the 577th squadrons. Take-offs began at 0700 hours with four aircraft being forced to return early due to mechanical problems. In all, a total of 100 fragmentation bombs were dropped on three target areas with poor target weather being the chief contributing factor. Fourteen ships dropped on the Primary with most of the bombs impacting over the MPI. Nine struck a target of opportunity at Haberstadt while two others released on a railroad yard at Konnern. Bombing results were judged as fair on all targets with enemy fighter attacks numbering 15-20 FW-190 and ME-109 aircraft pressing their passes from the IP to target. AA fire on the bomb run was intense and accurate. Group gunners managed to claim six enemy fighter kills, but three B-24's were lost on this mission which claimed 31 air crew casualties. In the 579th 2nd Lieutenant W. B. Sherwood's crew in #654 suffered a tragic fate when frag bombs dropped from a group aircraft above caused the ship to catch fire, turn over, and enter a spin . . ."

Although four 'chutes were observed, six others on the crew perished, including Beechie. Once on fire, an explosion is just about certain and even if not, a bomber in a spin is virtually impossible to escape from as the centrifugal force caused by the spin pins you to the sides of the aircraft.

The report did not state why the accident happened. We can only surmise the following.

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[2] "Liberators from Wendling" by Col. Robert E. Vickers, Jr. 1987 Sunflower Universal Press, Box 1009, Manhattan, KS 66502-4228