

Prisoner of War

by

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742nd Squadron

455th Bomb Group

Our crew was put together at Westover Air Base, Springfield, Massachusetts, February 1944. We had three 19-year-olds, three at 20, a 22-year-old, 24 year old, a 28 and a 32 year old. We were a family from the start, kidding, joking, teasing and from all sections of the U.S.

From Westover we went on a troop train to Charleston, South Carolina for B-24 training of 6 to 8 weeks, and then by another train to Mitchell Field, Long Island, New York. We had a day at Mitchell and one night in New York City where we saw a play (Mexican Hayride), did some roller skating and back to the field by 1 am.

At Mitchell we picked up a shiny B-24 and flew the southern route to Morrison Field in Florida, Belize, Brazil, across the Atlantic to Dakar, to Marrakech and finally Tunis. Here we were separated from our shiny plane that we thought was going to take us thru combat. It went one way and we were picked up and flown to San Giovanni - Cerignola to the 742nd Squadron of the 455th Bomb Group. The date was May 20, 1944.

An experienced co-pilot, Jack Montgomery was assigned crew pilot and Lew Sims became the co-pilot. Our co-pilot was assigned to another crew. Jack fit right in with everyone, as we knew we were there to do a job and part of it was to take orders. Being eager, we couldn't wait to get flying. It seemed that there was quite a bit of rain in late May and early June so we didn't fly as much as we would have liked. We started to a port in Northern Italy but had to turn back when we lost an engine. On the way back we suddenly found ourselves being shelled by flak, but quickly got out of the way. We got credit for the mission because of being shot at. Then we went to Munich, an airfield in northern Italy and a marshalling yard in Yugoslavia. We saw flak and fighters at Munich, flak at northern Italy, but nothing in Yugoslavia. In fact, on the first pass, the lead bombardier did not get a good fix on the target, so we turned around and dropped the bombs on the way home. We heard the stories about the tough missions to the Vienna area and of the airfields and fighters that had been encountered on previous missions.

On June 26, 1944, we were part of the planes going to the edge of Vienna to bomb the Moosbierbaum oil refinery. We were assigned to the low flight in the second section and had been made to understand it was the worst place to be. The take off was fine and the planes went out over the Adriatic, heading north towards northern Italy. As we hit land, all eyes were looking for German fighters. One was off to the left but never came in, just following beside us at a distance. As we were getting into the target area, the tail gunner came on the intercom saying, "We're all set fellers, fifteen P-38's just caught up with us and are flying overhead". What a relief!

It seemed just a few minutes later that we were hit by a bunch of ME-100 and JU-88 fighter bombers. They got the plane next to us and the 38's took them off. All we had to do then was go thru the flak at the target. We thought that, anyway. We hit the IP, turned onto the bomb run, opened Bombay doors and went into the flak. The plane was bouncing around and the particles of flak were tinkling off its sides. Suddenly we were being sprayed with bullets going through the front section of the B-24. We seemed to stop going forward and then started to float. I salvo'd the bombs to lighten the weight, knowing we were going down. The intercom was out and I crawled back to the edge of the bomb bay. Looking down, there was an FW-190 coming up at our belly. I heard the bullets flying around me and saw them pierce the lines in the bomb bay, setting them on fire.

When the bullets stopped coming thru, I climbed up between the pilots and looked out. One engine was feathered, one on each side was burning. We had one good engine left. The co-pilot glanced at me and hollered, "get out". I grabbed my chest pack and clipped it on, moved down to the edge of the bomb bay, put my hand on the rip cord, closed my eyes and jumped.

Suddenly, I felt something zip up by my face and a jerk. The eyes opened and there above was the parachute. I looked for the plane and couldn't see it. Then there were zip, zip, zip going by me. Looking up, there was another section of planes going over and the zips were flak shots shooting at them. The sky was full of parachutes. I counted 27 at one time, some had already landed. One poor guy landed at the same spot and same time as bombs salvo'd from another plane going over. He just disappeared.

Things became very quiet. The hour or two we received in training of what to do if you had to bail out came to mind. Pulling on parachute lines to slip in a direction

only caused me to swing violently, back and forth. Get on the ground was the first order of business. I kicked off my boots, unhooked the leg straps so I could get out of the harness quickly when I hit as instructed, and waited. About halfway down a ME-110 came by at the same altitude. They circled me three times and then took off.

They probably wondered if I was one of theirs.

Looking down, it appeared my landing would be in a field with woods at each end. Coming across the field were three German soldiers towards the spot where I would land. They had two or three big dogs, just tugging at their lines, I hit the ground, was quickly out of the chute and they were 300-400 feet away. Back in my mind was the instruction, "you have to try to escape". I was right where a field of grain and potatoes met, and the grain was high. Dropping down to my knees and pulling my fanny down, I headed toward one of the wooded areas. After going, maybe 100 feet, there was a noise behind me, and there were the soldiers. Got up, put my hands up, and they came up to me.

They searched me taking all personal items and the escape kit. They opened the kit and it had a little cloth map, a compass and a few U.S. dollar bills, that had a bright yellow seal. Then they marched me to a set of farm buildings, about half a mile away. In the yard of the buildings were 5 or 6 other American's, which included our tail gunner, Sid Weiss. Sid had one foot split from heel to toe. One of the women from the farm was wrapping it with a tissue bandage.

Absolutely not one word was spoken between the Americans. After a while (time meant nothing) a little pickup truck chugged in, running on a charcoal burner. The driver got out and fueled the burner and we all climbed in the back. There was just room enough for the few of us. We traveled for quite a while and entered a city styled section, turning into a military complex, stopping in the assembly area. One guard got out and went into the buildings. A blond woman came out with a bottle of wine, giving each, Sid and another who had a bad wound, a glass of wine. I heard my first word of German, donka, as Sid said thank you.

Shortly the other guard came back and we left stopping at what was probably a hospital. Everyone went in and stopped at a large room, maybe 30 by 40. The floor was covered by wounded guys lying shoulder to shoulder, with about a foot or so between the rows. The two badly wounded were kept and the rest returned to the

pickup. As we traveled through the town/city, people were coming back on the streets. Some hollered at us, waving their arms and spitting, but the guards waved to them to keep away.

We entered what I think was an airfield. Over the gate was the word "Langlebarn" or something like that and we were put in separate cells about 6x8. We were supposed to be on the bomb run about 9:30 a.m., so I suppose it was midafternoon when we were put in solitary. A short time after being housed, a guard came and took me out to a large wood building that I assumed was headquarters. I remember the trip as if it was yesterday. There was a large set of steps going up 5 or 6 feet. As we entered into a large room, orderlies waving papers were running about, very excited. To the right was a set of stairs going up to a balcony, circling to the left, ending with an orderly sitting at a desk. We traveled up the stairs, around to the orderly, where the guard spoke to him. The orderly went into a large room, opening and closing the door, returned and indicated for us to go in, closing the door after us.

Sitting at a desk at the end of the room was a large German officer, chest full of ribbons, gowering. He looked me over from top to bottom, finally saying "how old are you, married, children?" My answers were 20, yes, no. Again, he scanned me, saying "such a shame, such a shame." Then he said, "do you have anything to say?" I said yes, and told him of my personal things that were taken when picked up, and "I want them back". At this he slammed his fist on the desk and started to holler in German. The orderly came in, was given instructions and waved to leave. He then turned to me and said, "you will have your things by nightfall", and waved for the guard to take me away.

I never got my things back.

Later on that day, back at the guard house, the guard came by apparently giving each prisoner a one inch piece of black bread. I took one bite and it tasted like sawdust. When the guard came back by my door, I gave him back the bread saying, "I'm not going to eat this". He looked at me and said, in perfect English, "you will".

I did.

It was amazing how well the Germans spoke English. It appeared that the guardhouse was built in a circle or semi-circle. Late that night a voice came out saying, "is anybody out there, is there anybody out there?" Immediately another

voice came out saying, "Sensi is that you, Sensi is that you?" No other words were spoken. I stayed in the guardhouse for maybe three or four days, finally being taken out, joining five or six other Americans, a Norwegian and an Englishman. We were put on a train in a separate room with two guards. The Norwegian said he had been a Mosquito pilot shot down over Berlin. The Englishman said he came from New Castle, the good New Castle. They both teased the guards in German, to no end.

The Americans said nothing for the longest time. Then one spoke up and asked if anyone knew a Donald Michaels. I said yes, he was a waist gunner on our crew. He then replied that Don had been picked up where he was and died from loss of blood. There were no other words spoken by the Americans on the train. When we reached Frankfort, the guards took us to the restroom for a break. While we were relieving ourselves, a train apparently docked, and the people unloaded. They all streamed through, men, women and children, without a glance at us or what we were doing. I wondered if this was normal in Germany or if it was the only way to get thru the station. Being used to the U.S. practices, this was quite a surprise.

Off we went on a hike of half a mile or so to Dulag Luft, sitting on a hill outside of Frankfort. Each given their own 6 x 8 room with a straw mat, full of fleas or other biting bugs, on a wooden bench for a bed. Mine was on the second floor and had a small window facing out on a courtyard. Down below you could see small groups apparently leaving for someplace else. There was nothing to do but wait.

The next day, I guess, I was taken out to an interrogation room. The interrogator was friendly; started telling me that he had lived in the U.S., owning a candy store in Brooklyn. That in 1939, he returned to help the Fatherland. He gave me a summary of my life in the air force, the schools, etc., which could have been easily taken from newspaper articles. He, also, listed our crew by name, saying they had taken the flight book from part of the crashed plane. I knew that Sid Weiss had lost his dog tags on the trip over, and we had not been at the 742nd long enough to get a new set. Also, that he was Jewish, and became concerned that he might not be treated as a prisoner of war. I brought this to his attention and said Sid was probably in some hospital. I asked if the Red Cross had been notified of my situation so it would be relayed to the states, and he said it had.

A couple days later, I was taken down to the interrogating room again. He had a big book in the middle of the table and asked me to look at it, and I said no. After a

few minutes he left the room, probably to look at me through from some place. I picked up the book and fanned the pages and put it down. Apparently, it was information on the Norden bombsight. I told him I had nothing to say and was returned to my room. A day or so later I was taken down to the yard and put in a group of 10 or 15 others, both English and American. We were put on a train and apparently traveled about halfway across Germany where we were held in a temporary camp, on top of a hill, encircled with a wire fence. During the travel no one said anything. One of the days we were there happened to be a Sunday, and an English officer looked into our tent, saying he had been a church steward and was going to hold services in his tent, that we would be welcome. I think we all went, probably 6 or 8 of us.

Next, we were put on another train and ended up at Sagan, Germany, Stalag Luft III, prison camp for air force officers. This is now part of Poland. We were separated into groups, and I was headed for the Center Compound of the prison. Lined up outside the enclosed compound, you could look down and see the prisoners inside. I couldn't wait to get inside and enjoy the numerical security they had. Those of us going in were lined up and checked. As our name was called, we took a step forward. When my name was called, I stepped up and one of the guards, an elderly man in his 40's or 50's started to wave his arms and speak German, loudly. I asked the American next to me who spoke fluent German what he was saying, and he replied, "he said his name is Tilley too".

The Center Compound held about 3000 Americans. Our group was divided up and directed to different buildings, with four of us going to Barracks 56, Combine D. Two were from the (Bart & Rod) same B-24 flying from England, while Lenny apparently was from the 455th. Bart was fluent in German, having grown up with his grandparents who had emigrated from Germany to Texas. I believe Lenny was probably from the 742nd and his pilot was Sensenbrenner, who ended up in the Center Compound as well, but in another barracks. It was understood that newcomers had to be verified as Americans before they were accepted. During their first seven days, newcomers were kept at arm's length until someone could vouch for them. When the four of us came in, combine D had 4 residents, all of whom were the crew of a B-17 (pilot, co-pilot, bombardier, navigator) shot down during the initial raid on the ball bearing plants in October 1943. Fortunately for me, one had lived in Maine, and one's parents originated from Maine. We came together quickly and remained friends after the war.

The camp was run just like a base anywhere under U.S. Air Force control. The organization and discipline was terrific. The military could be proud of how it was handled. Food was at a minimum, basically prisoners existed on Red Cross parcels. After the Great Escape, the Germans reduced the weekly parcels from one to half of one. From them we usually got a cup of barley and a small ration of black bread a week, and some farm vegetables when they were being harvested. In our combine we pooled the food with a different person each week to care for it. Usually, we had a thin slice of black bread in the morning and some spam or whatever at night with a cup of Nescafe. The cook was left to decide special desserts which included raisin and butterscotch pie. They didn't come out too good, but it was all devoured. Cookie was given special treatment for his service, such as licking the dishes.

From time to time something special happened that sticks in your memory. For instance, someone managed to get a volume of Canadian chocolate into the camp via the Red Cross. It was enough for everyone to get a piece about an inch square.

The compound had a few badly wounded who were repatriated. When they went out we gathered at the gate and our band (a few instruments came in via the Red Cross) played "Give Our Regards to Broadway". It was really moving and excellent. Everyone more or less established their own daily routine. There was form up for counting about 8:30 each morning followed by calisthenics for half an hour. Then have our slice of black bread, hit the sack, play cards, watch a softball game, exercise on some equipment, walk the perimeter to keep in shape, and whatever, to kill the day. A radio had been put together somewhere in the camp, using it to listen to the BBC each night. A summary of what was happening in the ETO was secretly read in the barracks, keeping the process closely guarded. The Germans had an informational board where they posted German newspapers which were really for the benefit of citizens and did not cover the advancing allied armies as reported by the BBC.

An attempt to escape could only be done with the permission of the commanding officer. During the summer there were a few who made it outside the area with one reaching a rail station about 50 miles away. After being picked up they were put in solitary. It was understood they were roughed up.

We watched the progress towards us from both directions. The Russians were getting much closer in late summer. With winter on the way, we were given some

heavier clothing, provided by the U.S. and delivered by the Red Cross. I got a GI overcoat, a helmet liner for a hat, pair of RAF wool pants and a pair of knit gloves. Going into November and December, as the ground froze, we could feel the ground shaking from the bombing of Berlin. It happened almost every night from midnight to 2 am. There was no heat in the barracks and only shutters for windows, which were opened at night. The winter was cold, similar to that of northern New England. When you hit the sack, you put on every piece of clothing you had and pulled your blanket over your head to take advantage of the heat generated by your breath. It was surprising how much warmth your body delivered this way.

By late December 1944, the Russians were getting so close we could hear the guns. By early January 1945, they were almost to the Elbe River and we were about 50 miles away on the west side. About the middle of January, we were routed out around 2 AM one morning. The Germans were going to move us. Each were given a Red Cross parcel from which we kept the energy items and cigarettes, and left anything else. Everyone was excited. It was snowing, cold, about zero with the wind blowing. We stood waiting until about 7 AM before the march started.

We were all half frozen, but that didn't matter. Something was happening.

The combine had expanded to 16 during the fall of 1944; a fighter pilot, and 7 bomber crew members, mostly from England. When we hit the road, we split into pairs and I got together with a 17 co-pilot. The first day we walked from 7 AM to about 5 PM, covering about 20 miles. It was dark by then and we were in a small town. They filled every available space, including the church. We were on the tail end and there was no more room in the church. About 20 or 30 of us were standing in the cemetery amongst the head stones, waiting. The German officer was asked where they were going to put us for the night and he replied, "no place left, you spend the night here". No one got excited. An hour or so later a German guard came to us waving his arms indicating to follow him. We went to the town parsonage where the minister and family had removed all furnishings out of what must have been their living room. It was about 8 x 10 and this was where we spent the night.

We laid down shoulder to shoulder in two opposite rows. The knees of one row were over/under the other. But it was warm. Someone in the house came in with a little warm water which was sipped but gone before it got to me. The next day we walked about 18 miles and some of us spent the night in a farmers' barn. We went

up into the hay loft, dug a hole in the hay, and all climbed in, pulling the hay in at our backs. Some were in the middle and others on the outside with arms around each other. It is surprising how the body heat kept us warm, those in the middle, front and back and the outside on the front, but freezing on the back.

The following day the trip was a little shorter and we spent the night in another hay loft. The next stop was in a town housing brick factories. This was a real treat because the bricks had been heated and were in the process of drying. We climbed on top of the pallet loads and thawed out, staying there for two days. The small towns that we had passed through were lined with people. It was a good opportunity to try to swap something for food, usually bread. Generally, you would see someone holding something, usually under a coat. We were lucky to spot a trader and negotiated a package of cigarettes for a loaf of bread. There may have been another stop, but we finally ended at a military barracks that was empty.

The Germans had not given us anything to eat or drink up until then. As we were entering, the guards brought out some tubs of barley. Barley was like oatmeal and was quite a treat. Word came down the line that each were getting two cups. Being on the end, by the time we got to the dishing out, it was down to half a cup. But no one cared. We went into the barracks and slept on the floor for two days. There was a railroad track into the barracks area and several box cars had been brought in. We were loaded to the limit in the cars. You could either stand or sit in rows between one and another's legs, which was how our end of the box car settled. We were in the box cars for about 4 days, shuffling from eastern Germany to the west, to a big prison camp, Stalag 7A, outside Moosburg, a few miles from Munich.

During the trip, we stopped once during an air raid. The guards opened the doors so we could get out for a short time. Quite a few of the guys had diarrhea. The minute they hit the ground their pants came down. We were on the edge of a small town, and it was a sight to see. Everyone had a can, and some dashed up to the locomotive to catch the exhaust drippings. The stop was short and then we were back in the box cars. Apparently 7A was where the Germans were housing many groups of prisoners from all countries and from other camps in Germany. Here I met Sid Weiss, our tail gunner, his foot healed, and he filled me in on what happened in the tail as he was getting out. Sid said that one waist gunner, Don Michaels, was badly hit and the other waist gunner was helping to get out. Don later died on the ground from his wounds.

At this point in time, I thought Sid and I were the only survivors from the plane, but he told me he had met Lew Sims, who was the co-pilot, in the same section of the camp. When I found Lew, he told me that Jack Montgomery, the pilot was killed on the first pass of the German fighters; that he was trying to keep the plane afloat until everyone got out. However, he was told by a pilot of another 24 that went down, seconds after we did, that our plane flipped over on its back and exploded and that only three chutes had been seen.

Lew didn't bail out. Apparently, the plane broke apart and he was thrown out, breaking an arm in the process. He was able to open his backpack and float down. The Germans sent him to a hospital and was later sent to a camp in southern Germany. They had walked from that camp to 7A and he arrived shortly before our group. It was probably sometime in mid-February, 1945, when we reached 7A. We were still able to get scant news of the locations of our ground troops and watched it closely.

During March, the Germans came through the barracks looking for volunteers to fight on the eastern front, with the offer of freedom if they won. I don't believe there were any takers. Also, a report that Hitler had ordered that all POW's be killed circulated through the camp, truth or not.

Obviously, it didn't happen.

In early April, we started to hear the noise of gun battles and they got closer every day. Then one morning, the gates were opened, and three Sherman tanks came down the alley between the camp sections. Everyone realized that we were free, a feeling that I don't believe anyone would ever forget. The tanks were smothered with POW's climbing over them. They soon left and went back to work.

Instructions were that no one was to leave the camp because there were still pockets of SS in the area. Many of us couldn't resist and went out through holes in the fences. On one trip, a group of us went into the town of Moosburg and walked up and down the main street. We were the only ones out and you could see the locals looking at us from the windows, just old people and children, with scared looks on their faces. It was easy to imagine that such a display could happen any place in the world. I don't believe there were any incidents of reprisals.

A few days after the liberation the gates opened and in came General Patton (pearl-handle pistols and all), in a Jeep accompanied by his group of guards. He made a

speech and left. Maybe 10 days passed, and we were trucked out to a hayfield where C-47's were shuttling between the camp and Camp Lucky Strike in France. Once there, we got deloused, a shower, physical, good food and new clothes. After a week of fattening up I was up to 115 pounds from 135 the day we went down, but the losses came so gradually, it wasn't noticed.

The stay at Lucky Strike was a week or so and then onto a Liberty ship and back to the U.S.

Submitted by Arthur Tilley, Sr.