

Editor's note: Lloyd Kraft was an original member of the Gardner crew. He chose to volunteer to fly with other crews when his crew was not scheduled. He was shot down while on a mission with another crew.

## **Lloyd Kraft Interview**

by

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I conducted an interview with Lloyd Kraft who was a WWII POW and spent one year at Stalag 17 as a German prisoner of war. Mr. Kraft currently lives in Battle Creek, MI and also happens to be my father-in-law.

Lloyd enlisted in the Army Air Corps in 1941 and after airplane mechanics school became a flight engineer and T/Sgt. Assigned to Foggia, Italy, in 1943, he was a gunnery sergeant for B-24 bombers and flew 17 missions into German-occupied territories before being shot down over Austria and captured. He was a member of the 745<sup>th</sup> Bomb Squadron of the 456<sup>th</sup> Bomb Group. Targets included Rumania, Yugoslavia, Austria, and Czechoslovakia.

This interview will deal strictly with questions concerning matters up to his internment in Nazi concentration camps. (Hopefully, part II will deal with the experiences he had during confinement in three separate Nazi holding centers.)

Q: Why did you volunteer for duty when you knew you probably would be sent overseas?

A: I wasn't doing anything full-time and did not want to be a potato farmer in Hoople, North Dakota, like my family and ancestors were."

Q: What was your first mission like during the war?

A: We dropped 500 lb. fragmentation bombs and had two engines shot out and didn't know if we would make it back to base or not.

Q: What was your range on these missions?

A: We could fly up to 13 hours at 21,000-to-24,000 feet and still get home.

Q: What was the worst part of this duty?

A: The daily tension of waiting, the 4:00 am calls, waiting for the fog to lift to get the okay to take off, sitting in planes waiting for the weather forecast, and then often being cancelled.

Q: Where did you stay?

A: In cold tents on homemade airstrips wherever they could set up temporary bases.

Q: What act of heroism sticks out in your mind?

A: There were many but a humorous one was the time a guy grabbed a burning 55 gal. drum full of gas and carried it away from our tent so we wouldn't burn up if it exploded. (They heated their tents with straight gasoline from a drum just outside the tent door and often it would get too hot and explode.) This man suffered serious burns to face and chest but carried that drum 50 feet while it was on fire.

Q: When and how were you shot down?

A: We were on a mission to Vienna, Austria, and were hit by German fighter planes at 21,000 feet. I was knocked unconscious. When I woke up everyone had bailed out except the pilot and co-pilot who were waiting for me. I put on my parachute and tried to get up to them so we could jump out the same hole. I noticed I had put my parachute on upside down but didn't have enough time to change so I just jumped out that way. It was my first jump EVER.

Q: What happened next?

A: I lucked out and landed in a tree, and, with the updraft from the Alps, I landed softly and crawled out onto tree branches and slid down the tree. We were in the foothills of the Alps and Nazis were all around.

Q: Was this the most nervous time for you of all your scary moments?

A: No, the most scared is when German ME-110s are following you and you know their 20 mm cannon and rocket shells have you in their sights and your guns are out of range but theirs are not.

Q: What did you do after getting on the ground in enemy territory?

A: The first thing was to tear up all papers and ID. Then I found three other U.S. airmen and we headed for the foothills and cover. We didn't carry guns because if shot down we didn't want to get shot as spies because we were armed.

Q: Did you know the guys with you?

A: No, because I volunteered today and slid down a ¼ mile on this snowy slope and walked to a ski lodge we saw. There was a family (Austrian) who seemed friendly and took us in and gave us food. The only problem was while we were eating the husband had gone off to summon the Nazi soldiers.

Q: Were you scared of being shot right then?

A: Not really. We knew they knew we were airmen and unarmed, so we had heard they were putting air boys in camps and after brief interrogation.

Q: Where did they take you then?

A: They took us by truck to Weiner Neustadt, Austria, for questioning at some German headquarters.

Q: How did they treat you there?

A: Not that bad. We were there three days with soup once a day in a totally dark room by yourself. Twice a day they hauled you down to a room with four Nazis sitting at a table and asked questions. Our response was always the same—that according to the Geneva Convention all we had to provide was name, rank and serial number. The worst part was that they turned on the heat in your room to almost unbearable temperature, then shut it off totally for a while and you would freeze. I did not have my shoes, belt or any blankets or covers. I was wet from sweat and snow and very uncomfortable.

Q: Then what did they do to you next?

A: They shipped us by train to Krems and Stalag 17 concentration camp.

Q: Were you scared?

A: The scary part was when we were sitting in the railroad cars and here we were sitting ducks, eyes closed, praying as our car just jumped from side to side on the tracks. That was scary.

(There was a man sitting next to Lloyd Kraft that day who said, “If I ever get out of this alive, I am going to write a book about this.” That man was Edward Tracinski who years later would write, direct, and star in the movie, *Stalag 17*. He also was a consultant to the TV show “Hogan’s Heroes”.)