

Prison Camp

By

Capt. Charlie Jannette

1943

Crazy? A fool? Maybe. Look at it from another point of view. Have you ever wanted anything so badly you'd do most anything to obtain it?

To fly is my greatest desire. Since 1935 I've done everything I know to do to become a pilot. After failing to pass the physical examination at Langley required for pilot training, I took the next best thing in 1941, Adjutant of a heavy bomb squadron of B-24s, at least it was next to the thing I wanted most, airplanes and more airplanes.

There are some men who are pilots and some who are flyers. I'm writing of those who fly for the love of flying and not for the extra money. Our pilot, Larry Kennedy, is the sort who flies because flying is his love, just as it is mine. Over 1800 hours in the air and he has never so much as scratched the paint on a ship through pilot error. That's the kind of pilot I wanted to be, but I was reminded time and time again, by my C.O., that I was not to become a "flying adjutant".

After four months of persuasion, on December 10, 1942, the "Killer", (Col. John R. Kane) finally said "Yes", I could go on this mission to Naples, Italy - - my first official and last mission - - until I get out of this prison camp called P.G. 21, Chieti, Italy.

After much preparation we were off - - to the advance base, L. G. 139, a little southwest of Tobruk, to spend the night and get bombed up. After being with the crew for over 24 hours, I still felt like an outsider, as one who has trespassed on sacred ground. Sure, I could shoot a machine gun. Hadn't I been checked out as a rear turret operator at Ft. Myers, Fla.? Hadn't I fired hundreds of rounds while in training from the guns of heavy bombers? Hadn't I completed more than 25 hours on the bomb trainer at McDill towards becoming a Bombardier? Can't blame the fellows on the crew, though, I really hadn't proved to them that I could "take it", or "dish it out" either - - I figured I would just have to show them, and I think I did, the next day, December 11, 1942.

My station of the plane was the right waist gun. Sgt. Mathew Brazil was posted opposite me at the left waist gun. Sgt. Armando Risso was the engineer and Sgt.

Frankie Spindler occupied the rear turret. The four of us comprised the “infield”, or the “hot spot” while in the air. We also acted as “eyes” for the rear of the ship.

Never will I forget the views of destruction caused by war, nor the scenic beauty untouched by war. From several thousand feet up, even the German defense positions on the desert floor were clean-cut and pretty in their geometric designs. We flew just west of Tobruk and the destruction of the city and the sunken ships in the harbor were almost unbelievable.

As we crossed the blue Mediterranean and the southern tip of Italy, there were a few shots from ack-ack positions fired at us somewhere between the “heel” and the “toe” of the “boot”. I remember thinking that their “flak” was not very accurate. We didn’t even see where the shells burst.

Somebody came on the intercom saying enemy fighters had been spotted just as we were turning on the I.P.”. Westheimer reported to Kennedy that we would probably approach our target at about 4:30 PM.

Then began our constant vigil for attacking fighters. It was bitter cold, 35 degrees below zero, but hot sweat rolled down my cheeks, and anything could happen. Whether it was from nervous tension, or the bitter cold, or both, I couldn’t stay still. Moisture continued to roll down, in and around my oxygen mask. Just as we passed near Vesuvius, approaching the target, my oxygen mask froze!! - - I pulled on Risso’s arm, pointing to the useless mask. Luckily, there was an extra mask aboard and Brazil and Risso immediately jerked off the fouled mask and replaced it with the extra.

On the bomb run now. The beautiful harbor of Naples lay dead ahead. Gardinier, the bombardier, conversed with Kennedy on the “horn” then “bombs away”, and we went into a slight dive.

Our plane began to vibrate as Barnes in the top turret, Brazil and Spindler open fire - - - “Matt” held up three fingers, three Macchis on our tail! Brazil continued to fire, but as yet, no sight of enemy planes on my side. I looked at Brazil to get an idea where they were, “Matt” looked over to my side, indicating the ones he had been shooting at had crossed to my side - - - yes, there it was, making a turn. I gave him a burst of about 20 rounds and stopped firing as he disappeared behind our right rudder. Out now, another long burst - - - I could see my tracers burn out in direct line of the fighter’s flight. He slipped sideways and started down. Our plane then began to shake violently. It sounded as though hail was beating her to

pieces. I looked up and the entire roof looked like a sieve. There were two large holes in the wings and fuselage from “ack-ack” and/or 20 MM shells.

A moment later the floor looked to be on fire as tracers and armor piercing shells tore through. Something hot hit my right leg from the rear, about 2 inches above the ankle - - it felt like a hard kick, but more forceful with follow through. I know I had been hit but didn't know how badly. No time to find out now. No fighter planes in sight on my side. Looking forward, I could see that number four engine was on fire and throwing oil!

“Gunner to pilot”, no answer. “Gunner to pilot”, still no answer. Everything began to swim before my eyes. I felt dizzy and faint. My leg was now numb up to the knee.

Pointed out the bad engine to Brazil who called Kennedy, “Gunner to pilot, number four engine on fire, throwing oil”. Barnes came on the intercom saying he was running out of ammo. Kennedy, with cool Irish humor, answered Barnes, “I'm running out of engines”. I let myself down to overcome the dizziness and to prevent heaving. Stood up and sickness came again. I caught Risso's arm and pointed, asking him to take my gun, then fell again to the floor, with Risso on top of me. He had been hit also.

Just then Gardinier came through the hatch door. Propped Risso up and proceeded to administer first aid. Risso's leg was a bloody mess and blood was running out of my flying boot. Gardinier's head was between Risso's legs when the ship again received another spray of lead and steel. A 20MM shell came through the side, struck Risso's right leg, tearing away flesh and spattering blood, the shell missed our heads by less than 2 inches.

A tourniquet was put on Risso's leg when - - - God, fire in the bottom of the plane!! I yelled for somebody to hand me the extinguisher, but there was too much confusion to be heard. The guns in the bottom turret had been removed and the space filled with emergency oxygen bottles. The fire, fed by pure oxygen, made a blue-white flame I could see through the splintered cover. I raised up on one knee and took the extinguisher from the wall and turned it on the source of the flame. The plane quickly filled with acrid, choking smoke. The extinguisher played out, but my left hand was frozen to the metal nozzle. The fire was out, I pulled my hand away by prying the fingers loose. I looked out the waist gate window in time to see another B-24 leave his formation and slide over to help us, since we were alone, our flight leader, Lt. Bacon, was nowhere in sight. Later, we learned it was

Lt. Kilgore who had stuck his neck out, risking plane and crew to keep us from being blown clean out of the air.

Gardinier started to help Risso to the flight deck where it was warmer. He asked me if I could make it, I nodded my head.

The plane was going down fast now, since the number four engine froze before the props could be feathered, it spun out of its frame into the number three engine, knocking it out of the wing. Brazil, in the meantime, was firing from one waist gun to the other, until his gun jammed. I stood up again and looked out of the window --- both engines on the starboard side were gone!

On one leg, I pulled my way through the bomb bay to the flight deck, it was too crowded and couldn't get in - - felt somebody pulling on my good leg from below. "Westy" began handing me ammo for Barnes in the top turret. Several boxes of 50 Cal. Rounds came up and I hooked them to Barne's toe to be pulled up to his empty guns.

Thank goodness, the remaining Macchi was gone.

Closer to the water now. As I entered the rear again, I saw Brazil and Frankie putting on their 'chutes. I jerked off my flying clothes and put on my 'chute, then an order came from Kennedy, "Don't jump, will set her down in the water". With cold, numb hands, Brazil, Spindler and I took off our 'chutes and prepared for ditching.

Brazil and I unscrewed our guns from the tripods and lashed them to the sides. I looked over the side and saw we were only a few hundred feet above the water, not far from the rocky coast.

We squatted down by our windows, our backs to the front, holding onto the window edge with our hands. Spindler was sitting, or squatting, just in front of Brazil, waiting - - - -.

There was a terrific crunching sound. The tail of the ship struck the water first. Then the wheels, which had shaken loose and in a down position, struck the water. There was a loud crash, and everything went black - - - -.

I don't know how long I was unconscious, but the cold water brought me partially to my senses. I was under water! I remember fumbling for the release cord on my Mae West to release the compressed air, but the cord kept slipping through my hand. Something was wrong, then I tried my left hand and that did it. I felt the

vest inflate and I came to the surface - - - there was about six inches of space between the perforated roof of the ship and the rising water - - -.

What a mess! - - - Flying clothes, empty cartridges bobbing in the water, oxygen bottles and splinters of wood and other debris floated around me and the ship was settling fast. To this day, I don't know how I cleared the wreckage. Obviously, I had been thrown through the bulkhead into the bomb bay section. The next thing I remember, I was a few feet from the wreckage, and somebody had me by the seat of the pants pulling me into a small boat. I still don't remember seeing any of the other members of the crew. Still in a daze, I remember looking back as we pulled toward shore and could only see the twin tails of our ship. Just beyond was an oxygen bottle that jumped clear of the water with every little wave - - - that seemed kinda' funny at the time.

As the boat scraped bottom near the shoreline, the Italian motioned for me to get out and wade ashore. Stupidly, I stepped out with my broken leg and went face first into the water, then I was taken bodily to a little fishing hut with the rest of the crew. We were immediately stripped of our wet, torn and bloody clothes. Things began to clear up and I started counting, to see who was missing. Kent Leader, co-pilot, Frankie Spindler and Norman George, Ass't radio operator, were not among us.

Unfortunately, maybe fortunately, words fail to describe the horrible, deplorable treatment that we received from the time we were pulled from the water to the present time - - - we were given a little first aid.

Medical attention in Italy seems to be a thing of the past. I observed this while lying on a grass mat, naked and shivering. An Italian, I presumed to have been a doctor, came among us and proceeded to wrap our wounds with gauze. No examinations were made to determine the extent of our injuries, merely wrapped them up. My leg was beginning to ache and with every movement of my body, I could feel broken bones grate together, similar to the crushing effect of a handful of gravel.

Risso and Brazil lay at the other end of the hut, also naked and under a blanket. Risso was cheerful, despite shell holes through both legs. Brazil's left leg was mutilated. All of us were beginning to feel the shock and strain of the ordeal. Yet, the real strain was yet to come.

Later, that very cold night, we were placed in old, open trucks, equipped with solid rubber tires and trundled to what seemed to have been an Italian replacement camp. Those of us who were wounded were carried to a small hut where an Italian army doctor looked at our wounds, gave Risso and Brazil hypodermics, redressed my right leg, right hand and my head and gave all of us several drinks of cognac.

Midnight. Again we were placed on a truck, to ride once more through that freezing mountain air, with only a single blanket over our naked bodies - - - Kennedy, Westheimer, Gardinier and Barnes, uninjured, fared no better.

After three hours of bumping and jostling over rough mountain roads at the rate of 10 miles per hour, we finally arrived at a small Italian village, with first degree chills and those of us who were wounded, with fever.

Roughly manhandled from the trucks to a Fascist Building and deposited in a cold bare room for another hour. Sleep and rest were impossible. Then onto an unlighted, unheated train and with nothing but cheap outer garments for warmth. There were many times during this train ride I wished I could quietly “pass out”, in order not to feel the pain. Our uninjured crew members willingly gave up their cotton jackets so that we might not catch pneumonia.

Approximately 18 hours after our crash, we were taken from the train at Salerno. Risso, Brazil and I were carried to an Italian hospital where we were to remain for four months. We didn't see our friends during this time.

Surprising and unbelievable, but nevertheless true, the hospital to which we were taken, was supposed to have been an old established one, Hospitali Ruiniti, but it still could not compare with even third class, first aid station in the U.S. It was sadly in need of all medical supplies, for instance, bandages from wounds were washed out and reused after drying, forceps badly worn, surgical knives very dull (I know), lack of anesthetics, not to mention the fact that bed sheets were changed every three weeks, to a month, and bed bugs! We spent four months in that hospital!! After a month, the beds became so bad, Sgt. Risso and I crawled out of our beds, put blankets on the floor and let the bugs have the beds. The entire hospital was full of them. As one Italian doctor told me, “We don't practice medicine at this hospital, we perform miracles”. And they did, too.

I still say, if a patient lives, after having been taken from the ambulance into this hospital, he will live to come out. The orderlies here were rejectees from military

service because of their lack of intelligence - - minds of six- to ten-year-old! The three of us actually shaved our heads because sanitary conditions were so bad.

For three hours, the first day in bed, before we were given a chance to rest, we were interrogated by six loud, boisterous Italians from Rome. We told them nothing.

The next day, the orderly assigned to us came into our section, grabbed the foot of my bed, and violently shook it saying, “The pilot is dead”. I feel reasonably sure he was talking about the fighter pilot we shot down, but also helped knock us down. Then things became worse. The orderly took us, in turn, in his arms to the third-floor operating room. While “Matt” was up there, I could hear him scream as they worked on his leg. The orderly who took me in his arms, deliberately swung my bad leg against the door - - - I don’t remember getting to the third floor. Nothing was given us for pain and no medication for gangrene setting in. Risso was then told, because of his Italian born parents, that he would be shot as a “traitor to his mother country”!!

Ten days later, my leg was set in a cast. The X-ray showed that 2½ inches of bone had been shot away.

By Christmas Day, we had made friends with three Italians who proved to be really good friends. Despite our uncomfortable conditions, foreign nationality and our rating by the Italian press as “American Flying Gangsters”, our new friends smuggled us cigarettes, sweets, fruits and food, which were against the orders of the Italian authorities. With their help, we managed to survive. Risso and Brazil are now in another camp, and I am with Kennedy, Westheimer, Gardinier and Barnes, waiting and dreaming.

And there’s a girl back in Louisiana who is waiting and dreaming, too - - - - I hope.

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