



POW TALES

by

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Oakland, California
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Editor's note: Second Lieutenant Wollenweber was a B-17 pilot in WWII, serving as a co-pilot for the Johnny Butler Crew in the 384th Bomb Group (H), 547th Bomb Squadron. He completed 13 combat missions before being shot down on 16 September 1943, becoming a POW for the duration of the war. This memoir was completed in 1998, and first posted on the original 384thBombGroup.com website. Some slight editing of the original text was done to improve readability (commas & hyphens) and to correct some terminology and place-names.

DEDICATION

To My Grandsons

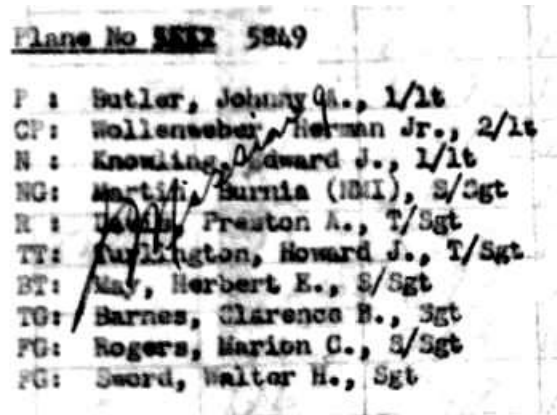
Benjamin, Charles and Jason

"There's a fire in the left wing!" Lt. Johnny Butler and I couldn't mistake Sgt. Howard 'Joe' Turlington's North Carolina drawl. When we looked out the window at the hole between the #1 and #2 engines of our B-17 and saw the raging fuel-fed fire melting the outer surface of the wing, there was no doubt about the truth of his statement, either. This mission on September 16, 1943 to bomb the submarine pens at Nantes, France, was supposed to be as near to a 'milk run' as we got in those early days of the air war for the 384th Bomb Group in Europe. Our crew was one of the luckier, more experienced ones. We'd been on 13 successful missions, including being lead bomber on the hazardous first raid on ball-bearing plants in Schweinfurt, Germany on August 17, 1943. We had incurred our flying buddies' displeasure over that assignment, because we'd been briefed weeks before the raid, were withdrawn

from combat and sworn to secrecy. A mission to Nantes seemed like a fairly easy way to add one more mission toward our goal of 25 that would complete our tour of duty and rotate us back to the States.

After this flight our crew was to be broken up and assigned to other crews. Bombardier Joe Baggs had already been taken off to become a lead bombardier of the 384th. I was to have been checked out that day to become a First Pilot and have my own crew.

The Natural, named for its number 25852, that we'd flown since we brought it overseas around the first of May 1943, was down for repairs because its #2 engine had been shot out while going to Stuttgart. We were assigned to fly Hell's Belles II. The luck of the draw got us the low squadron position in the group, 'coffin corner,' the one most vulnerable to the attacking enemy planes.



1. The Crew of HELL'S BELLES II on 16 September 1943
Note original aircraft assigned was "5852" – THE NATURAL

Butler asked me to do much of the flying that day, to help me gain extra experience for my forthcoming check out as pilot. Flying across the English Channel, we had good flying weather and no German fighter planes in sight. Then out of the blue I hear tail gunner Sgt. Vernon Barnes report, "Fighters at six o'clock!" I still didn't see the enemy, but after Turlington's report and seeing the wing on fire, Butler took over control of the plane and immediately dove out of formation. Thinking that the previously malfunctioning generator might be at fault, he went below to investigate. I clutched in the automatic pilot to keep the plane as level as possible, since it was now apparent we would have to abandon ship. Butler returned and gave the order to bail out. Either he or Sgt. Burnia Martin, nose gunner, salvaged or toggled out our bomb load of five 1000-pounders. I saw Butler reach for the alarm bell to warn the others. As I got out of my seat I saw Turlington still at his station in the top turret; I shook his leg and yelled for him to bail out. Then I crawled into the nose and told Lt. Ed Knowling, our navigator and Sgt. Martin that we had to go. The three of us came back to the escape hatch area, buckling on our chest pack parachutes. Martin and I kicked off the hatch door and stood looking at each other and bailed out.

As I tumbled into the slipstream I had time for a momentary glance to note that the bomb bay doors were open, and the bombs were gone. All four engines were still churning. I believe we were flying at about 18,000 feet and going about 200n mph when we abandoned ship. (Fifty years later Joe and Kay Turlington talked with villagers and found evidence that the left wing burned off and the plane crashed about 15 miles away at La Nouette near Châteaubriant, France.)

I could feel my tumbling speed slow down to terminal velocity, about 140 mph. We'd been taught to make a delayed parachute jump in order to reach the ground as quickly as possible and avoid being shot at or captured. We were told that when the ground seemed to rush up at us, pull the ripcord. I argued with myself that the ground was indeed 'rushing up' so I pulled the ripcord. I discovered I was just above the treetops when the chute opened! I swung forward and back and then hit the ground, bumping the back of my head.

I took off my parachute, Mae West flotation vest, throat mike and flying boots and tried to cover them up in a hedgerow. To get away from my landing site, I followed the recommended procedure of running

away as fast and long as I could, along the hedgerows. After a while I saw a group of French people in a field, evidently watching the planes and the parachutists. Not knowing if they were friendly types, I ran in another direction.

After running and walking a long while, I decided to hide until dark. I found a ditch in a hedgerow, crawled under the branches and covered myself with leaves. Only a few minutes later I heard excited voices, a man and a woman, 30 or 40 feet away from me. They walked by my hiding place without spotting me, which seemed like good news. However, a few minutes after that a German soldier came along the row, methodically parting the hedges, working toward me. He uncovered the branches above me, pulled up his rifle and commanded, "Raus!" I 'raused.'

He called to another soldier nearby; one kept me covered while the other took off my air/sea rescue whistle and blew it. When no one appeared in response, they searched me, took my 45-caliber automatic, my escape kit, my dog tags, my insignia (including my pin-on wings) and my pack of cigarettes. I was standing with my hands raised all this time, as more and more German soldiers arrived on the scene. They paraded me to a crossroads, where I was again searched. Finally, they allowed me to relax my arms. While we waited there a French youth asked me in English, "Are you an American airman?" I nodded, but the Germans chased him away.

A truck came and about ten soldiers and I piled in. We drove to Rennes, where I was ushered into a building to appear before the local German Kommandant. I learned later his rank in the Luftwaffe was a major. He asked in excellent English if I was injured; I said, "No, except for a bump on my head." He requested my name, rank and serial number, which I gave him. Then he rather imperiously waved the guards and me out of the room.

By now it was evening. They loaded me on the truck and took me to a Luftwaffe base where I was put into a jail. In the anteroom I was surprised to see two other crew members, Sgts. Preston Davis and Burnia Martin. I started to ask them if they were okay, but the guards put a stop to any questions. I was relieved that they appeared unhurt.

The guards locked me in a jail cell that had iron bars in front and masonry walls. It had a high ceiling and there was a tiny barred window about seven feet above the floor. A cot with a straw tick and a blanket were the only other things in the room. They brought me watery soup made with carrot tops, a cup of ersatz coffee and a slice of black bread. The bread was the only thing I managed to eat.

All night long at intervals, a guard walked by and looked in on me. I pulled the bed to the far wall, climbed upon it and could just see out of the barred window. There, tantalizingly close by stood a JU-88, a fighter bomber! With all sorts of plans running through my head, I tried the bars, but they were very solid and dashed any hopes I had of escape.

Three days followed, with more terrible-tasting food that I finally forced myself to eat, but I had no cigarettes! The third day three guards took me and two other prisoners I hadn't seen before by truck to the railway station in Rennes. We traveled in a six-person compartment and disembarked at the town of Vitre. While we were standing on the platform with our guards, a number of French people walked by and stared. One man, when the Germans weren't looking, flashed me a quick 'V for Victory' sign and I nodded to him in acknowledgement.

We were herded onto a Paris-bound train; the guards sat by the door and forbade us to open the compartment window. They couldn't speak English and we couldn't speak German, so communication was by sign language. Each of us prisoners escorted to and from the toilet by a guard when necessary.

The guards had drawn extra food which they shared with us. After not having eaten much in the prison, I was really hungry and thought the wurst and dark bread tasted pretty good. The guards were decent men, but they were still soldiers under orders.

At the railway station in Paris we were met by additional guards who had a truck with a cage built on the back. The three of us were locked into it and ordered to sit on the wooden benches. We drove into Paris and at one point I glimpsed the Eiffel Tower. It was late afternoon when the truck stopped along a busy boulevard. Our guards met friends at a sidewalk cafe, where they had something to eat and drink. Civilians passed by and looked curiously into the truck.

We were next transported to Gare du Nord, the northern railway station, where we and our guards boarded a train for Frankfurt, Germany. During an all-night ride we crossed the Rhine River and entered Mainz, Germany. The soldiers talked excitedly together because they were nearing their home.

Upon reaching Frankfurt's main station, our captors took us outside onto a small trolley which took us about ten miles to Oberursel, which seemed to be the main interrogation headquarters. Here I was put into solitary confinement for six days and ignored, for the most part. My cell was 6' by 8' with a small frosted-glass window and was heavily infested with fleas. In order to go to the toilet, I had to signal for a guard by using a device on the door. It consisted of a knocker that fell once, and the guard answered when he felt like it, maybe hours later and only once a day. The food was worse than it had been at Rennes.

After a couple of days, I was taken to be interrogated by an English-speaking intelligence officer. He gave me one of my own cigarettes, noted from my dog tags that I was from Chillicothe, Ohio, and told me that before the war he had worked in a truck plant in Springfield, Ohio. He asked why I was fighting against the land of my forefathers. I replied, "I am an American." When I refused to give him more than my name, rank and serial number (all that is required under the rules of the Geneva Convention) he got indignant and said, "Back to the cooler!"

The fleas were terrible. Often, I removed all my uniform to try to control them; all the tight places of my flying suit, for example, made the bites worse.

I had a second interrogation with the officer, with the same result as before. On about the fifth day an English-speaking enlisted man came into my cell, saying he represented the Red Cross and wanted me to fill out a form. I wrote only my name, rank and serial number on it, but filled in my mother's name since they already knew that from my ID tags. Finally, the man left, acting disgusted.

The sixth day I was called to face the interrogator again. He had the Red Cross form and said, "Lieutenant Wollenweber, you'll be surprised how much we know about you!" He then proceeded to write on the form our group number, our squadron number, where I had graduated from flying school and other accurate information. I was flabbergasted! I still have no idea how he could have acquired this data. The only flaw in his report was listing Colonel Budd Peaslee as group commander, whereas he had been reassigned just a few days before I was shot down.

Back I went to the cooler, but that evening I was taken via the trolley to downtown Frankfurt to be transferred to Dulag Luft prison camp. This compound contained British, Canadian and American flyers. I got to take a shower, shave (with a dull razor) and started to get rid of the fleas. I stayed there about two days. The food was a bit better, and I was given a postcard to send to my family. They had been told on September 17 that I was missing in action, and I think they learned in November that I was a prisoner of war.

A group of us was taken to the railway station where we were loaded into boxcars that had straw on the floor, approximately 50 men to a car. We started the long two-day journey across Germany to Stalag Luft III at Sagan, which is east of the Oder River in a section that is now Poland. Some Canadians told us about a 'Dambusters' raid they had been specially trained for. According to them they flew Lancaster planes holding a ten-thousand-pound mine rotating on an axle partly sticking out of a bomb bay. About thirty feet above the water they planned to drop and skip it over the Jerries' torpedo-catching net in front of the dam. Unfortunately, they flew one plane at a time into the valley ahead of the dam and the German anti-aircraft could shoot down at them from the surrounding hills.

We arrived at Sagan on October 1 and were marched from railroad to POW camp. At the Vorlager, or entrance, we had ID pictures taken, had a shower and got dusted for fleas. They gave me back my cigarettes, insignia and dog tags, but only gave me a receipt for my flying suit; I never saw it again. It was too similar to German uniforms and might be used for escape attempts. I also became Kriegsgefangene # 2582, with a German ID tag.

About a hundred of us were sent through the gate at Center Compound, where I saw several acquaintances of the 384th Group. They vouched for me to the senior American POW officers, affirming I was not a 'stooge.' We were issued a knife, fork, spoon, enameled tin cup and a bowl, and told to find a vacant bed and join a combine. A combine was a group of fellow prisoners who pooled their rations and took turns cooking. It ranged from five to six members at first, then to twelve as the camp filled up. I went into Block 39 at the corner of the camp and joined a combine that had a window facing the fence. Center Compound at that time had British, Canadian and American air officers, with a few enlisted men. Eventually all but the Americans were moved into other camps.

I met Major MacMillan, for whom I'd flown overseas as co-pilot. He had been shot down on our second day of flying, on a raid to Hamburg. He was second in command here to Colonel Delmar Spivey, senior American officer of the camp. The Germans seemed to respect the Geneva Convention requiring humane treatment of prisoners, for although I was subjected to psychological 'wars of nerves' I was never brutalized.

After I had been there two weeks Lt. Ed Knowling, our crew navigator, showed up in an incoming group. He had been in contact with French people who gave him civilian clothing. When he was subsequently captured out of uniform it made things tougher for him as he was accused of being a spy. He had spent several weeks in La Fren prison, Paris, and was pretty used up after this treatment. I persuaded my combine to take him in with us.

About once or twice a week the Germans would drive a horse and wagon into camp with a load of coarse black bread, one loaf per man, and the combines picked up their rations. The bread was so hard we had to cut it with hand-operated slicing machines, standing in line for our turn. They also gave us cooked potatoes with the skins on, blood pudding, sometimes some soup, and three cubes of white

margarine once a week. Every item had to be perishable, like tin cans with holes punched in them, so we couldn't store up food for escape attempts. At that time, we were also receiving Red Cross food parcels, one per man per week, from the USA, Canada, England, New Zealand, South Africa and others. Contents were usually: instant coffee, cube sugar, Klim (powdered milk), D-bars (chocolate), ground coffee or, in British parcels a bundle of tea, and occasionally Spam luncheon meat. Canadian had round wheat flour crackers that we ground up to use as flour in baking because the German millet didn't work as well.

Our kitchen had two little coal briquette stoves. Two combines could cook on them for a few minutes' time before giving way to the next group. As camp filled up there were maybe 15-20 combines using them. Our times were 10 a.m. for breakfast, 1 p.m. for lunch, 4 p.m. for dinner. Since we only had nine briquettes a day for heating, we usually used those in the evening.

At night we Kriegies were locked inside our blocks and Germans patrolled with guard dogs. There were guard towers at the corners and midpoints of the double fence around the camp, with searchlights and machine guns. Between the fences was coiled barbed wire. There was a low warning rail about twenty feet inside the fence; a perimeter path inside that provided us with exercise. When we lost a softball inside the fence someone had to don a special varicolored, ragged coat, get a guard's attention, point to the ball and wait for permission to step over the rail to retrieve it.

We soon learned the camp routine. Each morning and evening we had Appell or roll call. We line up by blocks in rows, five men deep. Our Major Mac called us to attention as German Kommandant Hauptmann faced us. Feldwebel (Sgt.) Schultz, nicknamed 'Popeye' by us because he had only one eye, walked in front of us, counting. Another man walked behind us to check the groups of five. The blocks reported anyone sick, and the 'goons'(guards) checked the bunks to see if it were true. All the totals had to check out or we would have to stand there until they were satisfied. An American general, General Vanaman, arrived in camp rather mysteriously. We never heard where he was shot down and captured and suspected because he spoke German well he was on special assignment. Before, we had sauntered to Appell. After he came he insisted we line up and march in military fashion from our barracks.

Between roll calls our time was devoted to our own pursuits: laundry, housekeeping, cooking, reading, games, writing letters or journals. We spent hours and hours walking-and talking-on the perimeter paths for exercise. We also organized college courses, for example in math or German.

The camp had a library in the senior officers' mess, stocked with books furnished by the International YMCA. We had a variety of titles from mysteries to humor to the classics. There were even some original manuscripts produced by our camp mates. Guys and Dolls by Damon Runyon inspired us to talk like the characters in his stories. Overall, I read about eighty books, one every five days while I was in camp. In summer we'd find a spot outdoors to read; in winter we'd read in our room. There was only a single light bulb suspended from the ceiling, but we had young eyes! "Lichts aus" was the command to turn it out; blackout shutters went over the windows.

Hugh Geiger and I, with two other fellows from our combine, played a lot of bridge, using the greasy, dog-eared cards supplied by the 'Y.' We played Ely Culbertson style and considered ourselves pretty good. We challenged 'Bridge Incorporated,' a group from another barracks who wanted to bet on the games, using chocolate bars and cigarettes. The match was scheduled: three sessions of duplicate-style bridge. At the first session we won by a big margin, about 100 points. The second time they evened up the score. On the third session they beat us by a thousand points and we had to admit defeat and pay

off. We hashed over the results many times afterward and realized their strategy had been to overbid their hands to grab the bid and keep opponents from bidding and making a good hand. This cured us of gambling on card games!

The Germans permitted us to convert and modify part of one barracks as a theater for shows, plays and religious purposes. Plywood cartons, three-foot cubes with wood frames from Canadian food parcels, were admitted 'on parole,' meaning 'to be used as promised,' not for tunnel supports. Four of these would make a sort of seat; we made several rows of these. A stage was set up in front, where we also had a small reed organ that we used for church services. British prisoners organized the first shows: 'We're in the Rackets, Chaps' and 'Belaria.' The German brass attended, wearing their highly polished boots and sitting in the front row.

We held Roman Catholic and Protestant worship services here every second or third Sunday. Hy Bevins directed the Protestant choir of about twenty men, of which Ed Knowling and I were members. Once the choir wanted to perform 'The Whiffenpoof Song.' I'd sung it in Phalanx Glee Club, so I knew it and sang it for Lt. Lucas Finney who then arranged it for the chorus.

The 'Y' also supplied us with band instruments; we had a wonderful 'Big Band Sound' swing band. For entertainment we'd listen to them practicing. We put on a revue called 'Hasty Raisin Brew,' which was named for an illegal alcoholic beverage the groups tried to make, using raisins, sugar, water and yeast substitute. The concoction was very smelly, and the Germans would dump it if they found it.

'Lagergelt' was camp money, although we never saw any. Geneva Convention terms required Germans to pay us at the same rate as their own officers. Theoretically the camp had a great amount of credit on tap, but it was redeemed only by the purchase of scarce commodities which were then made available to us. An example might be a small German diary, some wooden trinkets or 'near beer.' The Germans brought in kegs of this flat beverage at Christmas time in 1943. One fellow tried to get away inside the empty keg but was discovered and thrown into the cooler.

Just one time they brought us a wagonload of fresh spinach. It was like manna from heaven! We ate it raw or cooked, and I remember to this day how good something fresh and green tasted. Potatoes were an important part of our diet. In the fall, the Germans would fill a long trench on the west perimeter outside the fence with potatoes, cover them with manure, then soil to keep them from freezing. As needed, they dug them up, washed them off and cooked them in retorts. A potato famine in the late fall of '43 was a benchmark for prisoners. You were gauged as having come in 'pre-famine' or 'post-famine.' A soup they gave us was so bad-tasting that we spurned it if we had anything else at all to eat.

Having practically no cooking utensils, we learned how to make pans from tin cans. I collected South American corned beef can lids to get the small ring of solder that sealed them. These I heated red-hot in a can over the dying embers of the coal stove until I could knock off the melted solder. When I got a half inch of collected solder I'd pour it in a strip on the concrete kitchen floor and would have a four-inch piece of solder to work with. To solder, I'd melt German margarine in a small butter tin from food parcels, insert a wick of cotton rag, light it and blow across it with a tube to put flame on the solder.

I was our combine's tinsmith/inventor, using solder and tin cans. I made a percolator, cooking pans, cracker grinder, blower oven and an ice cream freezer. For the grinder, I used a Klim can, a bed board and a tin from British biscuits. I knocked a series of 200 holes through the tin with a nail and my

'pranger.' I fastened the Klim can on one side of the board and on the other, the lid with holes. I cut the board the width of the can, then made a shaft and paddle, with a crank to turn the can. Underneath I made a trough to catch the cracker crumbs, which we used for flour.

My biggest job was a percolator coffeepot. South African biscuit tins yielded a 12x18" piece of tin, which I fashioned into a tapered pot shape. I soldered a bottom on it, one bit of solder at a time, and also made a top. I used a broken baseball bat for the handle and a glass jar for the top. I rolled two flat pieces of tin around a 3/8" piece of wood dowel and made a 10" tube. I soldered tin cans to the top and bottom of this (one with holes punched in it.) With this contraption to hold the coffee grounds I could brew twelve cups of coffee for the combine, when we got ground coffee.

Each combine was issued a 'kein trinkwasser' (not for drinking-water.) This was a pitcher made of pot metal about 6x12" with a pouring lip, a handle on one side and label on the other. We used these for heating water, soup, boiling potatoes and tea, in spite of the possibility of lead poisoning. Every so often somebody would forget and let the pot boil dry. The bottom of the pot would melt off and the potatoes or whatever would be lost. I scrounged several of the broken pots, melted them in a mold, added a piece of broken ball bat for a handle and a couple of bolts 'liberated' from a latrine door and made a flatiron. It worked fine until someone got it too hot and melted it all over the stove.

With my ice cream freezer, I made a tolerable concoction using a can of Klim, D-bar, sugar and water. I gathered snow and alternated it with the big grains of rock salt the Jerries gave us for seasoning. It froze the ice cream hard in less than an hour. We'd melt it out of the can and slice it. It tasted delicious, at the time! Another dessert we invented was 'gedong pudding,' named for the way it hit your stomach and went 'Gedong!' We cooked millet flour, bread, chopped prunes or raisins, Klim and sometimes sugar or a melted D-bar for flavor.

One of my most valuable possessions was my leather A-2 jacket. I traded it to a British fellow for badly needed underwear, socks, shirt, sweater and an overcoat. This gave me the luxury of a change of clothing when I did laundry. However, I was sorry I'd gotten rid of the coat. Later on when I received parcels from home I traded chocolate bars and cigarettes for another one, but it wasn't in as good shape as my original. There was always a time lag between requesting items from home and receiving them: we got warm clothing in summer and shorts and tee shirts in wintertime!

After we'd been at Stalag Luft III for several months, the Germans decided to remodel Blocks 39 and 40, making a center aisle and rooms on either side for up to 12 men per room, with triple deck bunks. Each room had a window and a little heating stove, and the block had a urinal and flush toilet, ending the need for nighttime chamber pots. We were lucky that our seniority rights allowed us to move back into these 'plush' accommodations, because the Jerries never got around to remodeling any more blocks.

Our bunks had wooden bed boards to hold a 'palliasse' or woven fiber pallet stuffed with excelsior-like wood chips. We had a sheet, two woolen blankets and a pillowcase also stuffed with chips. At first there would be about eight boards per bed; these were reduced in numbers to four or five when escape tunnelers begged for them to shore up their tunnels.

There was a system of organization to forge identifications, create clothing to be used for escape, engineer tunnels and other sorts of effort to be used in escape attempts. Although I was never included in this select group, I often stood guard duty to give warning when a German came nosing around.

When I first took on this kind of duty the signal was "Goon up" but when the Germans found out the meaning of 'goon' we changed the alarm to "Tally-ho." When an all-out effort was being made to build a tunnel from Block 56, we strung a volleyball net outside a window. When the diggers threw out a box of sand we would kick it around to try to disperse it and darken the color, then scoop it up and sprinkle it around the perimeter path. Just like the others, as soon as the tunnel reached the area of the fence the Germans found it and flooded it to make it collapse.

One time I was out of cigarettes and wrote a twenty-dollar check on my home bank on ordinary paper, payable to a non-smoking Brit. He was repatriated and sent the check to Ohio for payment. When First National Bank received it, they called my mother down to verify my signature. Marie was happy to do so, as it was another proof that I was okay.

In the fall of 1944 we heard an enormous roar in the air over the camp. We all stopped what we were doing and raced outside. An aircraft had buzzed the camp to get our attention. It flew eight to ten miles away while it gained altitude to five or six thousand feet. Then the pilot turned toward camp in a descent, power on, and when he reached us he pulled the plane straight up to about 20,000 feet and disappeared. This was our first astonishing view of a jet plane; no one knew what it was but there was considerable speculation that if the Jerries had many of these they'd be tough on B-17s! We later learned it was a Messerschmitt 262.

Before the British were moved out of camp in the winter of '43 they organized some group efforts. One was 'Foodaco,' trading food for tobacco or vice versa. 'TOCH' was a semi-religious group meaning 'to conquer hate.' They also played rugby without helmets or other protection, which made it a rough sport. Blue shirts versus the white shirts, with spectators yelling, "Come on, you Lily Whites!"

Americans played softball in the summer and volleyball at other times. There was no real excitement, just 1700 guys coping one way or another with boredom, chores and trying to keep clean and fed.

In sixteen months at Stalag Luft II I got to go on shower detail about three times. We were marched through the main gate in a group of fifteen or twenty to the 'Vorlager.' We would strip, go into the shower room to soap and rinse. The guards controlled the water usage. Later at Moosburg, I only got one shower upon arrival. We had to strip and wash under a faucet as best we could. I tried to shave every day. Dad sent twelve-pack cartons of thin Gillette blades which worked in a plastic German razor I had. We heated water in a Klim can and used the small gray bar of soap the Germans gave us; it didn't lather but was better than nothing. Our barber was Joe Patrick, who had somehow obtained a pair of hand clippers.

There were three classes of German guards in camp. One class was the 'ferrets' who crawled under barracks with three-to four-foot poles to poke in the sand for illegal tunnels. Another type roamed the camp with dogs at night after lockup. The third, higher-echelon group spoke some English. They tried to get close to us at times, especially to the few GI's who knew German. The ferrets wore coveralls similar to our flight uniforms, so ours were confiscated to make escape attempts harder. We felt that our captors were more honorable than the Wehrmacht and the Gestapo; we were glad we were not under the latter's jurisdiction.

We were each issued a china bowl, a tin cup and knife, fork and spoon. Several times the guards assembled us to make sure we still had these. One guard would look at me and say, "Ach, Herr

Wollenweber, Lord Mayor of Lubeck!" It wasn't until years later that I found an article in the Encyclopedia Britannica that told of Jurgen Wullenweber who had been a leader in Lübeck, a port city on the Baltic, at the time of the Hanseatic League in the 16th century.

Propaganda publications were given to us. The magazine Der Adler (Eagle) was published in English by the Luftwaffe and contained negative reports on the Allies but with glowing photos and accounts of German troops. The newspaper The O.K.Kid (Overseas Kid) was another piece of flagrant propaganda.

On December 25, 1944, we put on a Christmas service that included an original piece, 'Christmas--a Song of Praise' by Lts. Finney and R.W. Thompson, sung by our twenty-voice choir. Little did we guess that the Polish border was collapsing and that a short month later we'd be marching through snow to another camp.

We saved up for days to have memorable meals on the holiday. Eldon Agler hand-printed menus for us and painted watercolor covers showing a curvy blonde Santa Claus stuck on a barbed wire fence. The menus read:

Breakfast - 10:00

Oatmeal - Cocoa
Toast and Honey

Lunch - 13:00

Deviled Ham Sandwiches
Chocolate Pie
Coffee - Tea

Dinner - 16:00

Bouillon Consommé
Roast Turkey
Snowflake Potatoes and Gravy
Macaroni and Cheese
Creamed Carrots
Plum Pudding and Hard Sauce
Coffee - Cigars

Brew - 21:00

Hot Mince Pie
Coffee

Lest you believe we had a catering service, I'll describe the foods. Cocoa was melted D-bars with powdered milk. Toast was black bread with honey from Canadian parcels. The ham sandwiches were chopped Spam, and chocolate pie had a cracker-crumb crust with D-bars and Klim. Now for the roast 'turkey.' We molded four cans of chopped Spam into the shape of the bird and heated it in the oven. The potatoes were real potatoes, but the gravy was Spam juice. We made the macaroni using a can of cheese from a food parcel. Cigars were provided in a package from George Campbell's wife. The 'hot

mince pie' was made from biscuit flour, raisins, orange juice concentrate and --- guess what? --- chopped Spam! We thought everything tasted pretty good.

In January of '45 we heard that the Russian front was 27 miles east of us. We anticipated they might reach our camp and liberate us. Instead, the Jerries decided to hold onto us, perhaps with an idea of using us as prime hostages. They ordered us to move out of Stalag Luft III on four hours' notice.

We were up all that night equally dividing our few common food supplies and preparing backpacks out of blankets. I decided to carry along my logbook, so I cut the lining of my overcoat and sewed in a pocket underneath my left armpit to hold it. Having just received a package from Mother containing 30 packs of Lucky Strike cigarettes, I added those to my blanket roll.

In Block 39 there was a room set aside for clothing supplies. My GI shoes that had been issued to me at Kelly Field in 1942 were worn out from daily wearing since then. I found a used pair of size 11 British shoes that were too big, but by putting on several pairs of socks they almost fit. I had knitted a wool scarf out of yarn scraps from worn out socks, etc., so I added that to my wardrobe.

Just after dawn we were mustered out for Appell. Then we marched out into the snow and bitter cold, carrying all our belongings and not knowing where we were headed. The guards commanded "Fertig machen" to get us to move, and "Essen machen" when we had a short break. Once we were detoured so that school bus loads of German troops in white camouflage clothing could pass us on their way to the front lines.

Our course took us somewhat southwest of Sagan, in the area of western Poland. In late afternoon, about eight miles from Sagan, we halted in a tiny town and stood in the frigid air, our hands and feet nearly freezing, while the Jerries discussed what to do with us next. While waiting, five of us bargained with the German townfolk; five packs of cigarettes got us a sled. The idea was to use it to carry our blanket packs. This gave others the notion, too, and soon there were a number of sleds among us.

At last the Germans decided to put us up overnight in an old stone church-1700 of us! It was unheated, but dry and out of the weather. We slept wherever we could make room. I slept underneath a pew. Next day we appropriated the church belfry's rope for a towline to pull our sled!

On our line of march, we had to depend for the most part on getting our own food supply. We ate snow for liquid, and whenever we had a chance we'd barter with the local residents to exchange cigarettes for potatoes. Many were hostile to us, but others would trade. When we were finally given some hot food, it was a ration of potatoes or stew in our tin cups.

For a day or so we were corralled inside a stone-walled farm yard, which made it easier for the guards to keep track of us. Fifteen of us pooled our blankets and slept interlaced head to toe, our shoes beneath us to keep them warm.

After we left the farm the weather changed, and it rained instead of snowing. This made it harder to use our sleds. We stopped at Bad Muskau where the Jerries put us up for several nights in a working pottery factory. Compared to most places we'd been this was heaven! It was a three-story building with kilns firing, warm and bone-dry. While there we had a chance to clean ourselves up a bit, and shave and wash.

In a yard behind the factory were thousands of clay pots about beanpot size. We soon contrived to cook potatoes in these by setting them in the doors of the kiln. The pots didn't stand much heat, so we couldn't get them very hot before the bottom fell out. We raced with them up to the third floor to eat.

In the pottery plant were many pipes that had valves on them. These were turned by metal wheel-like handles. Enterprising POWs tried to use these to turn sleds into wagons, but the owner discovered the missing parts, complained loudly to our guards and we had to return them.

After we left Bad Muskau we arrived at a town called Spremberg, where we were placed in a large troop camp facility. We could clean up some more before we were herded into boxcars for a train ride. We went through Dresden, Chemnitz, Plauen and Hof on our way to Nuremberg. There, our guards were unable to find room for our trainload of prisoners, so we traveled on to Munich. Our train stayed in the yard for about a day with nothing happening. When air raid sirens sounded at noon the next day, we were moved out within minutes and stopped near a woods. After a while the train went on to Moosburg, where we were taken off. Alongside the tracks was a discarded carton of leeks, and several of us picked them up and ate them.

At camp we were dusted with delousing powder and then, in groups of about thirty, were taken to the showers. Following this we were shown to the wood and stucco barracks in Stalag 7-A. This was 'home' from mid-February until April first when we were booted out to live in tents outside. This POW camp was enormous, containing thousands of prisoners of many different nationalities. There were barbed wire fences roughly dividing various compounds. I remember that across from us there was a group of Hindus wearing turbans and doing yoga several times a day.

My bed was top bunk in a three-tiered, four bunk set-up for 12 men. Luckily, I still had my two blankets. Our combine was now down to five, but we had no cooking facilities although we had some food issued to us. There was one outside faucet that served as the only water source for cooking, drinking and washing. We discovered that between the joists of the wooden floor of our building there were short 15-inch wood spacers covered by gravel for insulation. We chopped these with a steel table knife for fuel, making pieces about two inches long. I fashioned a blower from a piece of wood about 5x15" and on this I placed a tin can with baffles. I made a turning crank using two hand-carved wooden spools for pulleys and a braided string for a belt. On top of this I put a pan I made, 6x12x1" with a hole for heat and flames to be blown through. I made a cooking pan a little larger to hold stew (about 2 quarts) for the six men who pooled food in our combine. Then I made an oven around the firebox that could toast a slice of bread. With one double handful of wood chips from the floor spacers I could boil our stew. The Germans didn't monitor us very closely at this point; they seemed to know the war was coming to an end.

While I was working on the blower we were moved out of the building to make room for the hundreds of new POWs arriving at intervals. The Jerries set up large tents on the Appell ground to hold about 150 men each. Unfortunately, the area was at a lower level than the surrounding ground and rain water found its way under our palliasses. I picked up pebbles to put underneath for better drainage, if not comfort. Conditions were miserable and crowded, and I felt sick much of the time.

We knew the fighting was getting closer. On April 27 we could hear the artillery guns firing to the north of us. Next day we heard the guns fire on one side and the shells explode on the other. On April 29, we were liberated by Patton's Third Army. General George Patton arrived in camp shortly after this, wearing

high leather boots and his two famous pearl-handled revolvers. As he strode through the camp we saluted and cheered.

After liberation, most of us still remained in the camp for about a week until provision could be made for our transportation. A few adventurous souls went with the Third Army to Munich. During this time I went into the camp offices and 'liberated' my record cards from the files as a souvenir. We were given U.S. Army rations at a field kitchen that was set up. When they gave us soft white bread, we ate it for dessert; it tasted like angel food cake!

On VE Day, May 6, 1945, a large fleet of army trucks picked up the American POWs and took us to a former German airfield at Straubing on the Danube River. Shortly after our arrival a German pilot flying a Focke-Wulf 190 landed his plane on the field. The minute he cut his engine he was overwhelmed by ex-POWs who proceeded to strip his plane and his insignia for souvenirs. He gesticulated, trying to convey a message. Finally, he made known that a woman was concealed in a small compartment on the plane. They were both arrested, and I don't know what became of them.

A JU-52, their major tri-motor transport plane, landed also, with white strips of parachute silk flying from the plane's flaps, indicating they wanted to surrender. Military police took charge of the number of men who surrendered. The airfield had been an important Luftwaffe base, with planes dispersed to the perimeters. Dozens of those planes had been destroyed and burned at their hardstands, whether by Germans or Allies I didn't learn.

We were next transported by C-47 planes to Camp Lucky Strike near Le Havre, France. This camp was an embarkation point, a huge establishment. I was surprised and pleased to see Preston Davis and Burnia Martin there. They had been imprisoned near the Baltic Sea. I also met Major Dolan, who was the intelligence officer for the 384th.

I was given an 'Eisenhower' battle jacket in order to get back into uniform, and also got \$80 in real money, my first since England.

I was there for about ten days undergoing questioning and medical examinations. Finally, I got boarding orders on the USS General William H. Gordon, a 20,000-ton military ship.

The dock was the only structure left standing in this formerly important center for shipping traffic; everything else had been flattened. On board ship we had double decker cots, with eight men to a cabin. I soon discovered the ship's store where I could get Lucky Strike cigarettes at fifty cents a carton and Suchard chocolate bars in 12-packs. Having been deprived of good food and sweets for nearly two years, I 'bashed' on two cartons of candy bars. By the time the Gordon left the English Channel I was deathly seasick. For the next three or four days I lay on my bunk watching the walls seem to sway. I haven't felt the same about chocolate ever since.

We were overjoyed to be on our way home, except that instead of heading straight for New York the ship went to Port-of-Spain, Trinidad. For three days we were confined to the boat while men and supplies were off-loaded. Eventually the ship left port and passed through the 'Dragon's Mouth' into the Caribbean. We saw the island of Grenada, looking like an inviting isle in the distance. By now I was feeling better and spent hours at the bow, watching porpoises and flying fish. After several days we approached New York harbor. Tears came to my eyes when I saw the Statue of Liberty, that symbol of freedom. As the vessel started up the Hudson River, steam tugboats appeared beside us to move us into

the dock, located about midtown Manhattan. We were overawed to see, at neighboring docks, the Queen Mary and the Queen Elizabeth which had also carried troops. They looked enormous in size compared to our ship.

As we disembarked we were met by the USO who had 'Welcome Home!' signs and coffee and doughnuts for us. We were then checked in, put on the Staten Island ferry and taken to Camp Shanks in New Jersey. There I was able to draw \$400, get new ID and an 18-hour pass to go to New York City.

A girl friend of mine was living in town so I got in touch with her; we had dinner at the '400' Club, talked awhile and then my pass was over. Next day I got travel orders. A two-day train ride took me along the Hudson River through upstate New York, Pennsylvania and through Columbus, Ohio. It was especially hard to know I was only fifty miles from Chillicothe and home, but I had to continue to Camp Atterbury in Indiana.

Because I needed extensive dental work from the years of neglect, I spent two days with a military dentist who filled tooth after tooth. Then I was issued a 60-day leave. I went by train, bus and taxi to Chillicothe and arrived on Sunday morning after traveling all night. I had a glad homecoming with Mother, Dad and sister Flo on June 10th, 42 days after being liberated.

These momentous events of my life came to an end about 55 years ago and yet, even today, my memories of them are vivid. There is great contrast between the highs----after completing a mission, and the lows---living with the fleas in solitary confinement.

World War II made a remarkable change in my life. Four and a half years out of high school, I qualified for Aviation Cadet Pilot Training. I had been out of Ohio twice--once into neighboring Kentucky and on a week's trip through the southern states. My first military assignment was to Kelly Field, San Antonio, Texas, a long way from Chillicothe. In the next nine months our government spent \$25,000 for my flight training and ground school. That was a lot of money for a young small-town Ohio man. In one day short of a year I had been to Texas, Oklahoma, Texas again, Colorado, Idaho, Utah, Wyoming, Iowa, California, Nebraska, Maine, Newfoundland and England. Just as the year was up I flew my first combat mission into Belgium.

Even though our B-17 crew was together only six months, we developed trust, interdependence, friendship and respect for each other that I hold dear today. I grieve for the three who died and delight in those rare occasions when seven of us can be together.

These were memorable times in my life. I was proud to become an officer and a pilot in the United States Army Air Corps. I considered it a duty and an honor to serve my country.

BACKGROUND NOTES

On December 7, 1941, after going to Sunday School and church at First Presbyterian in Chillicothe, Ohio, I took Mr. Henry Greenbaum and two of his friends for a drive in his 1940 Studebaker. We returned home about 5:30 p.m. and I walked to my house to find out that the Japanese had attacked Pearl Harbor and we were at war.

Although I had registered for the draft I was not expecting to be called into service because my number was far from coming up. I was single, twenty-one and One-A. Right after Pearl harbor the Army Air Corps announced a program of Aviation Cadet pilot training for single men in my age group. I applied at once and after mental and physical examinations taken in Columbus, Ohio, I was sworn into the service in March 1942. They sent me home to await orders to report for duty. While waiting, I received several pieces of anonymous hate mail for not being in service. On June 23, 1942 I was sent to Kelly Field, San Antonio, Texas for preflight training.

Instead of learning how to fly, we were given a rifle that was loaded with cosmoline (grease) from WWI, uniforms, shots, more tests, more physicals and taught how to clean that rifle and march in the hot dusty parade ground. We were treated to Army discipline, calisthenics, obstacle courses, 15-mile hikes, inspections and read the Articles of War. After six weeks I received orders to report to primary flight training at the Spartan School of Aeronautics, Tulsa, Oklahoma.

Spartan was located on a portion of Tulsa's airport, and the Army Air Corps had a small detachment there. Mr. Phillips, my civilian instructor, took me out for my first ride in a Fairchild PT-19 and I became airsick at once. As a matter of fact, I was airsick every time until I was in danger of being washed out. On the morning I was to go for a check ride, I decided to try drinking coffee since nothing else had helped, and I never became airsick again. What a sense of accomplishment it was for me to solo! After soloing, learning to fly became my whole life.

From Tulsa I was sent to Lance Field in Enid, Oklahoma to fly Vultee BT-13s and BT-13As, then on to a brand-new field at Pampa, Texas for advanced twin engine training. At Pampa we lived in tar paper barracks and started our course learning to fly Curtis AT-9s. The AT-9 was a hot little twin-engine plane, but it was soon replaced by a Beechcraft AT-10, a step down from the Curtis. We ended Advanced with Cessna AT-17s, a far cry from the Curtis. It was a proud day for me on February 16, 1943, in the class of 43-B, to receive my wings and 2nd Lieutenant commission. After graduation I was sent to Boise, Idaho but was only there a few days when I received orders to join the 384th Bomb Group at Wendover, Utah. I became co-pilot on B-17s. On the first flight we were sent to Salt Lake City; when we landed the brakes failed. The plane ran off the runway onto a muddy field and stopped. We spent several hours digging the plane out and towing it to have the brakes fixed. We flew back to Wendover, had lunch and I was assigned to another crew to fly to Pocatello, Idaho to get the plane gassed. We cut a taxiway short and got this one stuck in the mud, too! With some jacks, shovels and a tractor we got this one out, gassed and returned to Wendover. My first day in a B-17 wasn't quite what I hoped, but it ended OK and I was excited about being assigned to these wonderful planes.

I became co-pilot for 2nd Lt. Willie Koch, and we became a working crew with eight other men. After the 384th moved to Sioux City, Iowa, Willie developed an ear infection and was replaced by 2nd Lt. Johnny Butler. The group flew to California for maneuvers and returned to Sioux City.

We were granted a week's leave to go home before going overseas. On returning to Sioux City the 384th went to Kearney, Nebraska where we picked up our new B-17F, which the crew named The Natural because of its number, 25852. The plane had seven hours of flight time on it, and looked and performed beautifully. We swung the compass, tested the systems and prepared it to go to England.

The 384th had four squadrons of nine crews and planes each for a total of thirty-six. An additional three or four planes were assigned to the group and I became co-pilot for Major Selden MacMillan, deputy

commander of the 384th. Captain Maurice Dillingham, the 544th Squadron Commander flew with my plane and crew while Major Mac and I carried some of the ground crews. We all met again at our Grafton Underwood base in England after flying via Bangor, Maine, Gander Lake, Newfoundland, and Prestwick, Scotland.

In England our enlisted men were sent to gunnery school while we engaged in a couple of weeks of very intensive training to prepare for combat. On June 22, 1943 the 384th was assigned to bomb a truck plant in Antwerp, Belgium. Our first taste of combat on a short mission such as this resulted in the loss of two planes and crews and some battle damage to our own plane. It seemed to me that FW-190s and ME-109s were everywhere. Our element leader started to go down and we and the right-wing plane tried to give them protection, only to receive attacks from the German fighters. When our leader went down, we were at least a mile behind the formation and were in danger of being shot down, too. We hit the throttles and gradually caught up to the formation. When Lt. Don Ogilvie caught up, they had a hole in the vertical stabilizer we could see through. At the debriefing we caught you-know-what for not staying with the formation. Ogilvie's crew named their plane Patches after that.

Our crew was one of the luckier ones in those early days of the 384th, flying 13 missions successfully. Due to the large number of losses the group sustained, it was decided to break up experience crews and assign the men to replacement crews. Our bombardier, Joe Baggs, was taken off our crew, and on September 16, 1943, I was to take a final check ride to become a first pilot with my own plane and crew. Instead, we received battle orders to bomb Nazi submarine pens at Nantes, France, and were shot down ourselves.

After I was liberated and had a 60-day leave to spend at home, the time went by swiftly with many visits to friends and relatives. My orders at the end of leave were to report to Miami Beach, Florida for rest, rehabilitation and recovery. I spent two weeks in Florida at the luxurious Hotel Caribbean run by the Army, swimming, sunning and eating at the Army mess. During this time an old friend, Pit Smith, contacted me and arranged for me to get four hours of flying time in a DC-3 out of Boca Raton where he was stationed. The weather was bad; we flew toward Key West but were turned back by a tropical storm. We flew around sightseeing to get in my hours.

After my 'three R's' in Florida ended, I was transferred to Anniston, Alabama, pending reassignment to the Pacific Theater. The atomic bomb had been dropped on Japan which brought them to surrender. U.S. military forces began cutting back. I was sent to Fort McPherson, Georgia and was asked if I wanted to be discharged. I decided I wanted to go home and was separated on November 20, 1945.

I want to acknowledge my deepest thanks to the International Red Cross and the International YMCA for their gifts of food and clothing which helped sustain life, and for the books, athletic equipment and music, which helped sustain morale.

Lt. Herman Wollenweber, Jr.
Oakland, California
1998

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