



Phillip W. Chaperon's
WW II
B-17 Experience

Phillip was 21 years old when he was drafted into the Army. He spent three weeks at Fort Lewis, Washington waiting to be sorted out for an assignment. He volunteered for the paratroopers, but joined the Army Air Corps when they needed recruits. His training started with basic training in Sheppard Field, Texas, then on to aerial gunnery school in Las Vegas. He went to armament school in Denver. While there he married Ann Patricia Westfall on a snowy January 28, 1943. Ann's Mother, Zena Ewing and brother, Buzz traveled by train to Denver for the wedding. Phillip had arranged for the wedding at a local Congregational Church followed by lunch at the Brown Derby. That same day Ann's family was back on the train to return to Portland, Oregon. Ann and Phillip had a three-day honeymoon in Denver.

Phillip was in training to be a member of a B-17 bomber crew. The bombers had 10 men crews consisting of the pilot, co-pilot, navigator, bombardier, flight engineer, radio operator, ball turret gunner, two waist gunners and the tail gunner. The first phase of Phillip's training with his B-17 crew was in Boise, Idaho. His crew accidentally dropped sand bags on Mountain Home, Idaho during practice bombing at night. Phase two of the training was in Walla Walla, Washington. The third phase of crew training was in Madras, Oregon. The range at Bordman, Oregon was used for target practice. The B-17s also did submarine patrol over the Pacific coast to increase "stick time" in the bombers. More "stick time" was gained in Carney, Nebraska. In Grand Island, Nebraska the crew was assigned a new B-17 and new equipment. A Sperry bomb site was installed in his B-17 by the Navy and tested in Rome, New York. By this time Phillip had been trained as a waist gunner, radio operator and ball turret gunner. The Army Air Corps wanted crew members to be able to serve in multiple positions. Phillip served as a left waist gunner in combat. In Manchester, New Hampshire, Phillip and his crew waited two weeks to be deployed. Ann visited him for eight days before he left the U.S.

Staff Sergeant, Phillip Chaperon and his crew had been trained and were as prepared as possible to join the effort of the Eighth Air Force in England.

The journey to England began as 12 B-17s flew to Bangor, Maine, then Newfoundland, then Prestwick, Scotland. From there his crew took the train to Grafton-Underwood, U.K. They arrived in September 1943 to join the 545th Bomb Squadron of the 384th Bombardment Group. Phillip trained as a toggler at the airfield in Grafton-Underwood and received his Tech Sergeant rating.

Grafton-Underwood is a centuries-old village and part of the Duke of Buccleuch's estate. The 12th century church has a stained glass window honoring the 384th. It is called "Coming Home" and shows a B-17 in flight.

The goal of the American bombing was to destroy German fuel supplies, transportation and war manufacturing. As many as 500 B-17s would fly on a single mission. They flew at 25,000 to 30,000 feet. With no heat in the plane, the temperature was easily forty to fifty degrees below zero. The bomber crews wore electrically heated suits and gloves. They also wore oxygen masks as there was no circulating oxygen inside the plane. Phillip remembers that at the end of a mission (typically lasting ten hours) he would have a yellow residue on his face around the outline of the oxygen mask. He was told that it was "green oxygen." As left waist gunner Phillip stood at an open window behind the radio room and the ball turret where a 50 caliber machine gun was mounted. He received severe frostbite on his forehead, chin and neck on his first mission and had to be hospitalized. When asked how he kept from getting frostbite on his 20 subsequent missions, he said, "I learned not to hang my head out the window." His original crew was shot down on their next mission while he was in the hospital. Elmer Smith and Darwin Nelson, original crew members, became prisoners of war in Luft 3.

The missions could be long. It was five hours one way to Berlin. If the bombs were not dropped on the primary or secondary targets, they were

released over the North Sea on the flight back to England. That prevented planes from landing with a full load of bombs. Such a flight did not count as a "mission" though they were likely to be shot at by German fighters and fly through clouds of shrapnel released by rounds from German 88 mm anti-aircraft guns.

Phillip's longest mission was to Marionberg, Poland. One side of the bomb bay was filled with an extra fuel tank and the other side was filled with leaflets. Another long mission was to bomb Norway where Germans were processing heavy water.

Breakfast before a mission included real eggs, pancakes and no coffee. Bathroom needs were crudely met on the B-17. Crew members were given an orange, a pack of gum and a candy bar before a mission. The oranges froze in the cold planes, but the gum and candy could be used.

The bombers took off from different air fields in England, circled in the air firing flares for identification until all the planes were in the air. If clouds appeared, the planes could not see each other, and mid-air collisions were a problem.

His plane was accidentally hit by "friendly" machine gun fire from a nearby B-17 over Germany. The plane kept flying and was able to complete the mission. He also experienced a water landing on the English Channel when his plane ran out of fuel on the return trip to England. His crew all got out of the B-17 and were picked up by the English Air/Sea Rescue boat before the plane could sink. He experienced a messy landing when the landing gear would not go down. His plane landed in a flooded, muddy field in England. The radio room became filled with mud. Such fields were kept flooded for such wheels-up landings.

On April 13, 1944, 23 B-17s took off from Grafton-Underwood at 0941 to 0955 to form the high group of the 41st combat wing. This group became part of the 1st Bomb Division's 172 aircraft. The mission was to bomb the heavily fortified ball bearing manufacturing plant in Schweinfurt, Germany. The factory had been bombed the previous fall with heavy losses. Nine of the 23 B-17s from Grafton-Underwood were shot down. The 384th Bombardment Group suffered its biggest losses on this 89th Mission.

Phillip's plane, the Damn Yankee II, was part of this mission and was shot down over Heppenheim, Germany, near Heidelberg. This was Phillip's 21st mission. If he had completed 25 missions, he would have returned to the U.S. His plane was blown up in a frontal attack by 20 mm cannon fire from a German ME-109 fighter plane. He fell into the air. He does not remember pulling his rip cord and was in and out of consciousness as he parachuted down. He landed on a barn with his parachute on one side of the barn roof and his body on the other side. In the jarring trip to the ground, his jaw was fractured and his right arm and head were wounded by shrapnel. German soldiers on leave lowered him to the ground from the roof using his parachute lines as a rope. He was fortunate that neither a farmer nor other German civilians found him, as many U.S. airmen were killed if found by citizens in cities or rural areas. The tail-gunner and navigator also landed nearby. Phillip was taken to a hospital in Heppenheim and treated by an Italian doctor.

Four out of the 10 crew members from the Damn Yankee II were killed on this mission. They were the co-pilot, ball turret gunner, flight engineer and radio operator.

Phillip was taken to Dulagluft in Frankfurt and interrogated for seven days by the German military. He told only name, rank and serial number to his interrogators, but the Germans were able to demoralize him by producing a file that contained detailed information about Phillip's life, military training and facts

about his missions. He said that the Germans "knew who shaved the morning before the mission." After the interrogation, he was put in a 40x8 box car packed with other airmen and shipped to Krems, Austria. The trip was slow as other German trains were given priority on the tracks.

Phillip was a P.O.W. (prisoner of war) in Stalag 17B for thirteen months. He was often sick and got treatment in a nearby German military hospital. A U.S. Army dental surgeon, who had been captured in Africa, treated his fractured jaw. The Italian doctor in Heppenheim had drilled a hole in one of his teeth, but could not find the right size wire. The U.S. Army doctor wired his jaw shut with piano wire. In his trips back and forth from the hospital to the camp, he carried supplies and information. His weight in prison camp went from 155 to 120 pounds. Camp food was bad. At midday the prisoners were served black bread and soup made mostly of rutabaga. He developed a life-long distaste for parsnips. While at Stalag 17B he received six Red Cross parcels. A package from his wife, Ann, had been badly damaged, but he used the sweater in the package.

During his imprisonment, a fellow crew member, Joe Recunas, tail gunner, avoided Phillip and did not speak to him. Joe and Phillip had been on leave together in South Whales in a Red cross "R&R" hotel prior to their last mission. The hotel was full and needed more rooms for more servicemen on leave. Phillip suggested that they go to London for an overnight and Joe agreed. They had been to London before, so Phillip suggested that they return to Grafton-Underwood a day early. At the air field, they were quickly assigned to a crew which resulted in their plane having a fateful meeting with a German fighter plane.

Stalag 17B was a military labor camp with prisoners from England, America, Italy, France, Russia and Czechoslovakia. The airmen were not

required to work, but others were used as farm workers. They had a chance of eating better if they worked in the fields.

The German guards used dogs for patrol duty. Phillip tells of the guards sending dogs into each barrack to awaken the prisoners. When the dogs were sent into a Russian barrack, they did not come out.

The prisoners were perpetually digging tunnels under the camp perimeter to attempt to escape. The German guards had informants, so they knew about the tunnels and always stopped the digging and made the prisoners fill in the tunnel. About 30 feet inside of the perimeter fence was a warning wire. If a prisoner crossed into that area, he would be shot.

The prisoners made radios out of wires and could follow the news of the war. They could also see Allied aircraft flying overhead. In late April, 1945, the prisoners and the German guards could hear Russian guns coming from Vienna in the south. The guards cleared out the camp and marched the prisoners (about 4,500 American men and the balance of the labor camp) for days northward into Germany. The prisoners slept in the open and had little to eat. The Germans wanted to surrender to the Allied Forces, not to the Russians. The POWs passed concentration camp prisoners on the road and got a look at their suffering. These very weak prisoners were shot if they could not keep up the pace.

Phillip was liberated on May 3, 1945. He spent about two weeks at Camp Lucky Strike in La Havre, France. At first he could not keep down the food and milk shakes that were liberally offered. He became able to tolerate the food and regain some weight. The troop ship, USS Grant, carried him across the Atlantic to America. He was processed out of the Army Air Corps at Camp Kilmer, New Jersey. He traveled to Portland by train arriving around July 1st. There he would begin his life as a husband, father, carpenter, and a solid citizen.

Additional Notes:

Dad told me more details about his experience with friendly fire. On one of his missions, a waist gunner on another B 17 in the formation fired on his aircraft. The bullet grazed the back of his leg. This caused bleeding, but it was a superficial wound. He could have easily lost his leg had the bullet hit the center part of his leg.

On returning to England after a mission Dad's B 17 could not lower its landing gear. One bomb bay door was open and the ball turret was in place below the fuselage. The four gunners from the rear of the plane went to the radio room for the landing in the flooded field. Mud from the flooded field broke open the door from the bomb bay and mud was everywhere. His plane landed safely and was probably used for replacement parts. While waiting for a truck to take his crew back to Grafton-Underwood, Dad was very interested in a Haviland Mosquito fighter/bomber. He spoke to the Canadian pilot and got a ride on a practice flight.

Dad shared an amazing experience from his time in prison camp. There was a factory south of the camp that was making German ME 262 jet fighter/bomber planes. These planes, previously, attacked his bomb runs over Berlin. They were faster than other German fighters.

During the day B 24s from the 15th Air Force in Italy flew over the camp to bomb the factory. At night the RAF dropped bright phosphorus explosive devices which lit up the sky like daylight to reveal the camp before the bombers targeted the factory. He does not remember how many such bomb runs there were, but they were memorable.

In 1945 after the airmen in were marched into Germany, the POWs met up with the 7th Army. Their resources were depleted, and they could not help the POWs. The 3rd Army under the command of General George Patton arranged for the ex-POWs to be flown to Camp Lucky Strike in La Havre, France.