

Lt. Robert M. Janson

A Greatest Generation Story

When the war began in December 1941, Robert Janson of Bergenfield, New Jersey, was 25 years old. Since high school he had been helping support his mother and three younger siblings in a variety of jobs, including a stint as a security guard at the 1939 World's Fair, and later for the Wright Aeronautical Corporation. The Nazis now controlled most of the European continent, and England was under assault from Hitler's feared Luftwaffe. But now, millions of Yanks were coming, and Janson was one of them.

He had joined the Army Air Corps, and he departed from Newark later that day, bound for preflight school at Kelly Field in Texas. He was sent to Advanced Navigation School at Hondo Army Air Base, graduating on 28 January 1943 as 2nd Lieutenant in the Army Air Forces Reserve. One week later he flew to Salt Lake City to begin his first phase of training on a B-17 Flying Fortress at Gowen Field in Idaho. In March, Janson became a member of the 545th Squadron of the 384th Bombardment Group, and in April began his final few weeks of intense training at the Army Air Base in Sioux City, Iowa. The Group spent two weeks in Kearney, Nebraska being processed for overseas assignment to the First Air Division of the 8th Air Force.

Janson was assigned to Ralph Hall's Crew, and became close friends with copilot Rodney House, and bombardier Tony Palazzo from the Bronx. On their trip across the Atlantic, he and Palazzo named their plane the Yankee Powerhouse, after their favorite candy bar.

They stopped at Gander Lake, Newfoundland for refueling, before embarking on the "Big Hop" as it was known, the 12-hour flight to Prestwick, Scotland, and finally to their permanent base, USAAF Station 106 near the village of Grafton Underwood, Northamptonshire, England. Their commander was Colonel Budd J. Peaslee, and their primary function would be the strategic bombardment of airfields and industries in France, Germany, and surrounding Nazi-occupied areas.

The group flew their first combat mission on June 22nd, 1943, bombing an automobile parts factory in Belgium. This first mission claimed two of the unit's B-17s. Janson recalled the mission in his logbook:

Well a day to remember in my life. Our first bombing mission. Antwerp, Belgium General Motors Factory. What a sensation when those Focke-Wulf 190s started their first attacks. Head-on frontal attacks. spurts of orange coming right in at us. And accurate flak all around us. No damage to our ship and crew. Thank our lucky stars. Said quite a few prayers. What a memorable day. Golly 24 to go. Chances of making them all are very, very slim. But really hoping against all odds to do so. Quite a day. Dead tired after it all. But safe and healthy. Thank God.

The 384th's second mission was to bomb the submarine construction shipyards at Hamburg, deep inside Germany. Janson had flown with his original crew on his first mission, but was ordered at the last minute to substitute on the Miss Deal, of the 544th Squadron, piloted by Lt.

John Way of Englewood, New Jersey. Their navigator had taken sick. Janson was awakened at 4AM on 25 June and given the news. The bombers left Grafton-Underwood 2 hours later. Janson would recall that day in a radio interview after the war.

By the time we got there (Hamburg), the weather had closed in and we set out for our secondary target, which was Emden. The Luftwaffe's fighters had kept up a running battle with us all the way. Just before we got to Emden, one of our engines went out, and the pilot feathered the prop. We were tail-end Charlie in the formation, and the fighters really pounced on us.

A journalist who later interviewed Janson wrote:

The Miss Deal was flying at an altitude of 27,000 feet, suddenly there was a shudder of the big bomber and seconds later came the report on the intercom phone that the tail was on fire. Soon after that came the piercing call of the bail-out siren. Janson was on the verge of passing out as the trap door in the nose of the plane jammed against his efforts. It had to be forced open. Finally, Janson jumped, pulled the rip cord as soon as possible and floated down immediately into the surrounding void of clouds. He never saw the Miss Deal again, nor any of its crew members. Then, for minute after long minute, he drifted downward into the cottony gloom of the clouds, seeing nothing, feeling nothing. He remembered it was like being suspended in a jar of damp cotton. At about 6,000 feet, he broke out of the clouds. Two German fighters flew around him buzzing the countryside below to warn them that a flyer was parachuting down. The young navigator came down hard on the solid earth. The hard landing broke his back and injured him in other ways. Shortly German soldiers and country folk carried him away.

Janson remembers:

I landed wrong, and broke my back in the pelvis section. My right leg was paralyzed and I couldn't move. I spent seven months in various hospitals around Germany, and finally ended up in Stalag Luft III, the Air Force Officer's Camp.

Also shot down on that mission were two other B-17s. One was Janson's original plane which had taken him across the Atlantic, the Yankee Powerhouse, flown by another crew. The second was an unnamed fortress carrying the Deputy Commander Major Selden McMillin. "Major Mac," who would soon coin the 384th's motto when writing a postcard to Budd Peaslee with the message "*KEEP THE SHOW ON THE ROAD.*"

Janson's family back home received word that his plane had gone down and he was officially Missing In Action - MIA. His mother began attending Mass and receiving Communion every day. Back at Grafton Underwood, his pals, Tony Palazzo, Rodney House and Ralph Hall, took the news hard. Six of the ten crew members had survived the crash of the Miss Deal, but as far as anyone knew then, none had survived. Four were killed in action, including the pilot, John Way.

Meanwhile Janson was being moved from hospital to hospital throughout Germany. Word finally reached family and friends back home, in time for Christmas, that he was alive, a POW.

He had smuggled a letter to a German nun in a hospital, and it arrived at his home even before the War Department telegram was delivered with the happy news.

Stalug Luft III, known as the airmen's prison camp, was located of in Sagan, 100 miles southeast of Berlin. Janson's log book from prison camp was "dedicated to my mother and sisters and brothers, whom I cherish most in Life... To the life we have shared together and to the day I return to my Home."

The log is filled with sketches, poetry, song lyrics and prayers clipped from newspapers, photos of Hollywood pin-up girls, and the names and addresses written down by the many fellow POWs he would get in touch with after the war.

Stalag Luft III would become famous as the site of The Great Escape, which happened on March 24th, 1944. But early in February, Janson, still recovering from his injuries, had learned that he and a number of other wounded officers were to join the war's first repatriation and exchange of prisoners. In his Wartime Log, Janson wrote his last entry from Stalag Luft:

Monday – February 14th Valentine's Day. Stayed in cooler from 11 A.M. Left at 04:00 AM Tuesday Morning.

After ten train changes, Janson finally made it to Saarburg in time for his birthday on February 19th. Back home, his family followed his progress in the New York Times and Journal American. The next stop was across the border in neutral Spain. Janson's logbook continues:

A very happy moment to cross the border with no goons on board.

Diplomats were very friendly... Crossed the high Pyrenees covered with snow. First stop in Spain -- had some delicious Spanish food – with very good – strong wine. It seemed a different day. Sun shining. And first time I realized I was free. We arrived in Lisbon -- a harbor city – quite picturesque. We were warned that photographers & reporters were awaiting the party. And the station was crowded. We were whisked through the crowd by Red Cross workers. In the terminal they had a room for us. One large table decked out in oranges – sandwiches & flowers.

American officials & their wives were simply grand. They expressed their joy at seeing us. Imagine our thanks in seeing them. We were taken in an ambulance to our quarters. A Red Cross building. Nice clean beds, new linens. Flowers. Treated us fine. Outside in the harbor we could see our ship the "Gripsholm." Received new underwear, toothbrush & toothpaste, handkerchiefs.

Saturday enjoyed our first good sleep in a nice comfortable bed. Took a very thankful shower. Also 3 barbers spruced us up. Received Pajamas – Robe. Sunday went to Mass in a very pretty Church. Felt swell.

Janson and his group were scheduled to sail for home in aboard the S.S. Gripsholm, a Swedish ocean liner called The Mercy Ship, as it had been chartered to the US State Department as an exchange and repatriation ship, under the protection of the Red Cross. Janson's uncle, George

Mitchell, who was like a father to him, wrote him upon hearing the news that he was homeward bound.

Dear Bob:

Welcome home, to our conquering hero. The best news we have heard in some time, was learning you were being returned to good old U.S.A., on the S.S. Gripsholm. Your family and relatives have been walking on clouds ever since.

Thank God, every cloud has a silver lining, and the world looks bright and cheery again, for our brave little soldier, is safely back home again.

You have acquitted yourself in the highest tradition of American courage, and can look with pride at your war record, knowing you have given your all, for your country's and loved one's sake. Greater glory than this, no man hath.



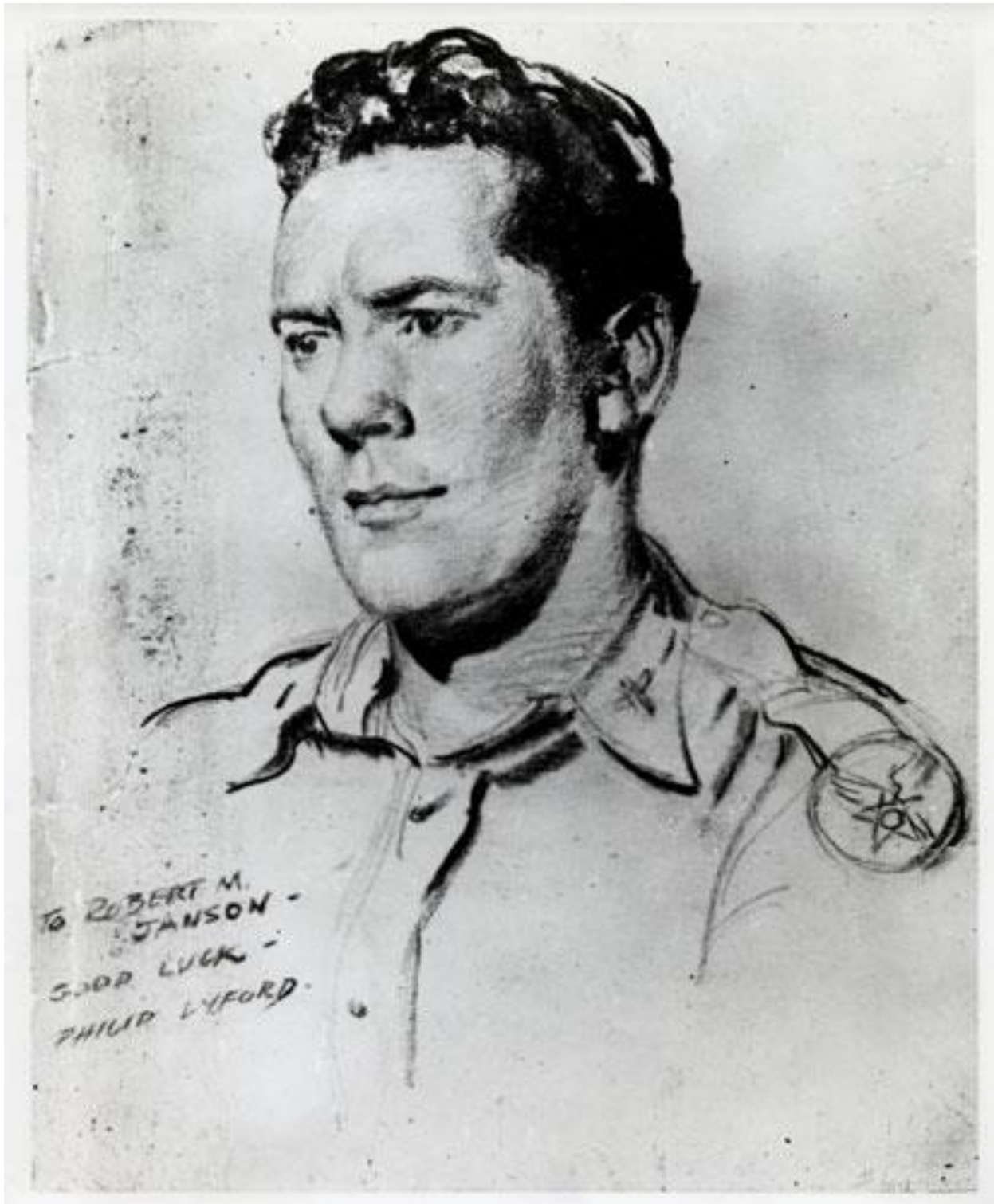
Robert Janson and Barney Baxter, also a navigator, aboard the Gripsholm

On March 6th, 1944 Janson departed Lisbon on the Gripsholm, bound for home. Here he is pictured on deck with one of his best friends, another navigator, Barney Baxter. Janson arrived in New York Harbor ten days later and disembarked at Halloran Hospital on Staten Island. He later told his family that the sight of the Statue of Liberty was one of the most emotional moments of his life. His younger brother Richard, 19 years old at the time, still remembers that day with extraordinary detail nearly 60 years later.

Visiting friends and family were asked to wait in a large hall, while the guys were having a brief physical and perhaps a little de-briefing.

I was with my mother and oldest sister. It was a long wait and a scene I will never ever forget. One by one each guy would enter in a maroon bathrobe. As they each came in you would hear shouts of joy or screams of terror from friends and relatives. Many came in wheelchairs- some missing legs, some arms, some both, and many of them so severely burned I doubt they were recognized – no ears, no nose, etc. – what a horrible sight! After seeing all of the above, we had to wait for Bob. We did not know what to expect because he did not say much about his physical condition when he wrote home. Hey - here comes Bob - walking over to greet us looking super with a sunburn from a good trip back with good weather. He looked like he was away on vacation. While he was talking to my mother and sister, I was checking him out from head to toe to see if he had his arms, legs, etc. I noticed he had on a pair of ankle high boots with a metal spring from the toe of his right foot to the top of the foot. The fall numbed his leg, so the spring, which a German doctor rigged up, was to exercise his foot as he walked. For many months thereafter, he would be sent to a resort for rehab. He would come home on most weekends and have a ball. He took my mother and sisters to just about every show on Broadway. After his experience, I guess every weekend was like Christmas.

Janson received the Purple Heart at a ceremony at Halloran Hospital that day. As one of the first American airmen to be repatriated, after his rehabilitation he was often asked to be a guest speaker by civic organizations eager for news from the prison camps, and his story appeared in a number of newspapers. He was assigned to the Port Air Office of the NY Port of Embarkation in September. In October he met a beautiful young woman who also worked there -- Kathleen Holland. About six months later they were married, on April 14th, three years to the day after he had left home for basic training in the Army Air Corps. The war in Europe ended on May 8th, 1945, and on May 15th Janson was promoted to Captain. He left the service soon after and joined millions of other young men who set out to raise their families and build the America we know today. But to his wife and children he never spoke of the war, and never glorified his role in it. Robert M. Janson passed on in 1986, a hero to his own family for a life of honor and integrity in everything he did. His wartime experience is just one of countless similar stories... from America's greatest generation.



Sketch done by fellow POW Philip Lyford

Webmaster note: this document was edited in April 2016, and migrated from HTML to PDF.