

US INTERNEES IN SWITZERLAND DURING WW2

Written by Arthur Glenn Foster

I was Navigator on Bob Slane's B-17-F on the 2nd Schweinfurt raid on 14 Oct 1943. We had lost 3 engines from aircraft attacks after we left the bombing area and were heading home. Seven of our crew bailed out successfully. Bob via intercom sent me back to the waist to determine the condition of our tail gunner who had been reported by the waist gunners as badly wounded. He was dead from very serious wounds.

I was supposed to intercom this info back to Slane who was in good control of the plane but it was losing altitude rapidly while still under heavy fire from Luftwaffe aircraft. Some pieces of either flak or metal chips from 20 mm enemy fire skimmed my forehead and back left shoulder about that time but I didn't know that until later. Apparently I was somewhat dazed by those minor injuries, but probably more because of having no bail-out oxygen bottle and was beginning to pass out as I staggered forward. We were still at about what I guessed as 18 or 19,000 feet.

I never managed to get Slane on the intercom. Somehow I managed to fall out of the plane, unconscious or semi-conscious, leaving Slane with the thought that maybe both the tail-gunner and myself were laying wounded in the rear. So he (I found out much later) decided to take the plane down and crash-land it instead of bailing out himself.

I have no recollection of pulling the ripcord on the British Irwin-type chest-pack chute. But the shock of it opening -- causing me to kick myself in the back of the head -- crushed a couple of lower vertebrae and brought me to full consciousness. Strangely, I looked at my wrist watch (navigator habit) and it was 3:43 pm. I hit the ground 17 minutes later, at 4:00 pm. (The watch stuck at 4:00 because it was damaged by the landing and had to be repaired later). So that also told me that the chute had opened at about 17,000 feet.

A couple of German soldiers with rifles had been operating a tractor in a field right next to a large stand of woods. They waved and then watched as I hit the ground and was stunned. The chute was in the upper part of an oscillation as I hit, so the extra fall caused me to hit really hard, flat on my back. I came to with them jabbering at me. Eventually they helped me remove my chute (which they bundled up and stuffed under some shrubs), and my May west. My fleece boots and electric boots had blown off, apparently when I bailed out -- I was wearing only stockings.

They didn't search me or they would have found my loaded .45 inside my electric suit. They started marching me, one on each side, on a trail through the woods. I won't go into the details, but I managed to "subdue them," leaving them unconscious on the trail. I took off through the woods. I had fired no shots, because I didn't want other locals to hear a shot, as that would have given away my location immediately. These actions of "escape" lasted about 20 minutes. The ensuing "evasion" lasted about 10 months.

I eventually formed a pile of leaves in a very distant wooded location, crawled under, and went to sleep, as it was getting dark. When I awoke much later, I had complete amnesia. I thought I might be back in the UK, outside a pub or something. But I was still in flying duds so that didn't make sense. I wondered where my shoes were.

Slowly I began to remember that I was deep inside Nazi Germany and that I was to head southwest toward Spain, which was about 500 miles away. A full moon had arisen so I could see surprisingly

well. This was the beginning of a long period of walking only at night and hiding in haystacks or other places during the day, while avoiding homes and towns. I had to swim a small river once to avoid crossing over what appeared to be a guarded bridge. From a distance I listened to people speaking. Eventually I was in edge of a small town when I heard some folks speaking French so then I knew I had entered German-occupied French territory.

I passed through a couple of more towns and finally one night found a home situated at least a hundred yards away from the next home, and right next to a French cemetery (I could read the names on the headstones). Fortunately I had taken two quarters of French during my sophomore year of Electrical Engineering. That home turned out to be one occupied by the cemetery caretaker. He managed to arrange for a doctor to come one night to check my wounds. The doc took me away that night with me sitting on the back of his small motorbike. I stayed at his home for several days, sleeping in the hayloft of his barn, and listening to the BBC radio broadcasts in the evenings.

The French Resistance folks moved me around a good deal, not keeping me in any one location for very long. I spent some significant time in the city of Nancy in Northeast France.

Bon jour, Monsieur! Je suis un aviateur qui echapee les Allamande en 14 Octobre, 1943. I entered La Suisse near Porentruy as an escaped POW (20-minute capture duration) after I had spent some valuable time with La Resistance Francaise in the Nancy region. Since I entered Switzerland as an escaped POW, I was NOT an internee, but was permitted to live as a citizen-tourist -- from November 1943 until September 1944. All escapees (Les Eschapees) were under the direction and command of General Legge, who was the Military Attaché to the American Legation in Bern.

So, for a couple of months I lived with other early escapees at the Gurten Kolm Hotel atop the golf course hill near downtown Bern. Vrennie Schuyer (sp?) was one of the Proprietors of that Hotel, who if she is still alive, could share information with you. She might even have retained our names on her register cards. (I am now nearing 80 years of age.) When winter came, most of us traveled up to Klosters, and stayed in the Silvretta Hotel from where we made many skiing expeditions, including to the Davos ski facilities.

The famous Kublis and Klosters ski runs from the Davos mountain peak were quite memorable. Some of us also skated, and others entered bobsled races. About a dozen of us also scaled the Silvretta Glacier in the spring of 1944, where we skied the entire next day to the consternation of certain German armed forces down below us at the border location.

One day a number of Luftwaffe flyers sat near us on the funicular tram taking us all to the top of the Davos peak to begin our ski runs. They were about the same age as ourselves (20-22) and were supposedly there on Rest and Recuperation treatment for tuberculosis. We all laughed at that potential subterfuge and exchanged tales of the various combat missions we had experienced where all of us might have been firing at each other. Such can be the strangeness of war.

In late spring, we escapees relocated to a hotel in Glion-sur-Montreux, from where we enjoyed the cities of Lausanne, Vevey, and Montreux during the summer months. We were free during all of those months to travel to Zurich, Bern and other places, so long as we kept the American and Swiss authorities notified of our whereabouts. Internees in Switzerland, however, were not permitted to leave their internment camps. Of course we studied the local languages and many technical subjects to help occupy our time in useful ways. We also followed the progress of the war by listening to rented radios.

It is my understanding that internees from any wartime nation were those who crash-landed their aircraft, parachuted, or safely landed their aircraft in Swiss territory during the war. There were perhaps

500,000 Polish internees who were also given refuge by the Swiss. There were a great many refugee members in Switzerland from the various royal houses from many countries occupied by the German and Italian forces. Some of us had the opportunity to meet and speak with those people, including their sons and daughters.

We were shown great hospitality by the Swiss citizens, and enjoyed our stay immensely. I departed with others, via Geneva, in September 1944, back into France, mostly down to Annecy. From there we were in touch with General Patch's forces that had invaded Southern France and were advancing rapidly north toward Germany.

From Annecy we were flown to Naples, Casa Blanca, and London to rejoin our various military units. I stayed in London for a month, first undergoing interrogations, and then getting bombed by V-1's. I got back to the USA in October 1944, returned to New York and later my home in the American Rockies, in late October 1944.

I understand that there were about 50 or 60 of us escapees by the time I left La Suisse, and that there were about 1200 interned American military folks who left Switzerland at a later date. I have no information about the internees other than that.

I do know the identities of some of my fellow escapees, but I have not been in contact with them since those days. If I can be of further use to you, please contact me directly via email. I have forgotten much of my vocabulary in the French language for which I am sorry. I just haven't had much opportunity to use it. I did make a visit to Marseille in 1960 on a trip up to Frankfurt, Germany from Tripoli, Libya, and that was an interesting visit. I had a much better memory then than now. I have studied some German, and some Russian, and a little Spanish and Arabic, but I was able to think in French during my stay in La Suisse, which made it much easier to make friends and to enjoy the great hospitality of your wonderful nation.

Bon Chance,

Arthur Glenn Foster

p.s. Dans La Resistance j'ai m'appelais moi Jean Josef Bossaire, et J'ai demeurais dans les Vosges, a' la regionne Merthe et Moselle. Maintenant, pour se moment, au-revoir.

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