

# **A VIEW FROM THE TAIL, THE LAST MISSION**

**Written by Carl Hoffman**

It all began on the farm in Southern Indiana, July 8, 1943. As for America, WWII was underway since Pearl Harbor, December 7, 1941. America had entered the war with Germany. On July 8, 1943, I became of age (a celebrated milestone in life) in celebrating my 21st birthday. I had made my proposition to my father as to staying on the farm and stay in farming; he declined, because the cards were in his favor.

My sweetheart Bernita Lucille Shelton and I were engaged when I went into the service. Due to the past farm experience, I signed up for the U. S. Army Engineer Corps. When arriving at Ft. Benjamin Harrison, Indianapolis, Indiana, two Army Air Corps Sergeants granted an interview and said we have a program, we can get you into, a Volunteer Flight Training Program. Somehow they could change the service choice for me to go into this program, which maybe was my best decision.

In the period of tests and examinations I washed out it was determined they did not need any more bombardiers or navigators it was my decision to be an Aerial Gunner. On completion of basic training, gunnery and combat training school we flew a new B-17G from Kearney, Nebraska overseas and assigned to the 91st Bomb Group, 323rd Sqdn. In the period of first mission July 31, 1944, until, we were shot down, we documented targets like Munich, Mulhouse, Peenemunde, Elsenborn, Metz, Halle, Berlin, Kiel, Ludwigshaven, Lutzkendorf, Frankfurt, Madgeburg, Neubrandenburg, Freiburg, Cologne, Hamm, Merseburg-Leuna, Aachen, Altenbeken, Merzhausen, KirchGons, Kassel and Cologne Deutz Bridge. There were no milk runs on either of these. Over enemy territory it was battle with fighters and flak into and battle out this was to be expected this was war.

Our 23 mission on December 24, 1944, our 8th Air Force mission was to wish Hitler a Merry Christmas. There were many maximum efforts called, but this is to be the greatest, a special one, the big one. That morning on briefing we were told we would not return to our base, because of a weather front moving in that evening. This day the Mighty Eighth Air Force put up a little over 600 fighters and 2045, B-17 and B-24 aircraft, a bomber stream at least 100 miles long.

In our minds the tension, the uncertainty, the agony, the anxiety grew, with our crew completing our 23rd mission. Will we be able to continue this pace and complete the required 30 missions? We flew our 24th mission on New Years Day 1945 and from our 14th mission on, we Lead or Deputy Lead in the formation of our 36 plane formation. It was a position in formation, considered to be safe. We were flying Deputy Lead on January 6, 1945 railroad marshalling yards was our primary, Duetz Bridge our secondary target. Downtown Cologne, Germany was our target it should have been a milk run. Unfortunately, it did not turn out that way, going off the target right after bombs away, we got a direct hit in Number 3 engine. Flying Tail position, my observation there were four barrages of four burst each, and not being superstitious, I always said it was the thirteenth burst of last (16) four burst barrage that got us. Of course that was not important, more and greater, and do mean greater problems ensued from this incident.

With the combination, 100 octane gas, oxygen bottles along the side of aircraft and hydraulic fluid which was inflammable at that time created one of the worst fires an aircraft could sustain. Surprising a wing did not melt away from the intense heat.

Remembering, when leaving our country America back in July 1944 there was a discussion among us on intercom about who might not return again alive to the country we love. Unfortunately and I say it with great emotion yet after 55 years, there were four of our crew killed this mission, this day, in early 1945. You see a Bomber Crew was a "Band Of Brothers" a "closer knit than brother" relationship existed, even in and English (Pub) or bar fight. What one guy would do for each other to protect him from injury or death was human nature, even in war.

Causalities that day, (he had said he was all right not to worry about him) the Engineer Gunner, Fred Turner of West Virginia died he went down with the plane. The Co-pilot Warren T. Smith of South Dakota was hit by shrapnel and died a day later in a German hospital. The Bombardier Alan Hillman of Maine and Navigator Donald Williams of Illinois landed on the ground safely by parachute, but were shot through the forehead by German civilians and buried in a common grave together. Of the four men (Alan Hillman is the only one who has not come home to America he is buried in the Luxemburg American Cemetery). Four men, four buddies, our hero's we must always remember them and others who gave the Supreme Sacrifice.

After being taken captive, under the point of a gun, one loses his FREEDOM one does not get to practice that which existed as a free man. It was not until the second day of captivity that we learned of Turner and Smith's demise. What is even more shocking even yet today, why we did not learn of and about the death of Hillman and Williams, until December 12, 1983, when the (MACR's) Missing Air Crew Reports were finally declassified. Maybe, the U. S. Government was taking time to fully investigate this incident, deserving War Crimes Trail investigation. We don't really know.

The journey began where we landed when shot down, across from the Battle of The Bulge, ten miles inside Germany, Preum and Gerolstein. At Gerolstein we were incarcerated in an old barn for ten days, we were the only Airmen with about 75 American Infantrymen captured during the Bulge. While there due to not understanding one another a German guard shot two infantrymen American soldiers. The German's laid their bodies out on display in the barn lot as an example, leaving us know who was in charge. After the ten days from there we were forced march 90 miles East from the old barn to Limburg Stalag XII-A, there only overnight.

Remember this unfortunate incident happened on January 6, 1945. In comparison to others who were POW's much longer, for the next unknown at that time four months our four non-com enlisted men who were together, we endured, mans inhumanity to mankind, hunger, sleeping in fence rows and forests like hogs. Except, back on our farm, our hogs had better bedding of straw to sleep on. We would sleep six men together, on brambles or brush to insulate from the frozen cold wet ground with the outside man moving to inside of group every two hours to keep from freezing to death. Each of us had been issued a 4X4 foot blanket by the German's, but not much for cover. Besides that, of the 120 days we were POW's we were 85 of those days forced march 345 miles across Germany. Average calorie intake was under 600 calories per day average.

It was at Limburg, we were taken by the Luftwaffe (German Airforce) to Auswertestelle West and forced march to Oberursel there we spent seven days being interrogated. Later to Dulag Luft transit camp near Wetzlar, Germany.

From there, with 50 other Airmen, forced march down to Frankfurt, where we nearly got killed from English bombing raid one evening in railroad marshalling yard while setting in a railroad car waiting for transportation South.

Due to the bombing our train transport turned into a walk, we were force march South about 185 miles to Nuremburg, Stalag XIII-D. Most of this was happening always on the road, between January 6, 1945, until March 20, 1945 we ended up at Nuremburg. Due to the stress, uncertainty, starvation, exposure to the elements, there was I and several others almost died upon reaching Nuremburg.

On April 4, we one of ten 1000 men compounds, 10,000 of us were forced march out of Nuremburg Stalag XIII-D the last 85 miles Southeast to Moosburg Stalag VII-A (7A). We arrived there about April 17th put under tents on straw. Then on Sunday April 29, 1945, at 1100 hours General Patton's 3rd Army liberated 133,000 of us military, all allies, all ethnic groups, all nationalities. When our Prisoner Of War Allies saw the German Swastika come down from the flag pole and the American Flag go up in its place. There was the loudest crescendo of shouting in each native language and culture, coming from all the compounds in Stalag VII-A.

After liberation, we finally got out of Landshut, Germany AirField, back to Rheims, France, then to La Harve, France (Camp Lucky Strike). Our return to America was by ship, by sea. When we arrived at Boston, Massachusetts, one night at Camp Miles Standish then by train to Camp Atterbury, Indiana, bus to Indianapolis, (full cycle where it all began), a bus ride home to Jasper, Indiana for a happy reunion with family.

On June 14, 1945, my attention turned to my fiancé, my sweetheart Bernita Shelton (God Bless her she waited for me) I ask her if we could carry on where we left off, she agreed. Then on July 6, 1945 we were married. At this writing, on January 6, 2001 we have celebrated our 55th wedding anniversary it will be 56th anniversary in July 2001.

"This Was Not A Dream" these happenings were not possible, this was not our dream. This happening was war the possible changes peoples minds. We were Airmen, there were many ways we and others were taken captive by the enemy, the suffering, hunger, beatings, no shelter, many ways of force march and incarceration.

Around us, mans inhumanity to mankind was ever evident. We were of no use to our government at this stage in the war but we know Prisoner's of War were sacrificed like those who gave the Supreme Sacrifice.

By a sacred tie, we were bound like a "Band Of Brothers," a tie more sacred than any other in the world, because we were American's, we know and enjoy our FREEDOM.

With that said let every day be Thanksgiving and Memorial Day, to give thanks, to commemorate, to perpetuate the memory of those who gave the Supreme Sacrifice for the FREEDOM we live today. What to all of us was not our choosing, it was not a dream, it was reality. It was we, only with the help of God survived, to be liberated, to commemorate and celebrate life. WE WERE FORMER PRISONER'S OF WAR. GOD BLESS US ALL, GOD BLESS AMERICA.

With great emotion each year on this date I reread what I have laid my hand in writing. I do this in memory of our four crewmember buddies and all those who gave the Supreme Sacrifice. I always admired this writing and if they could only speak this I know they would say:

THE YOUNG DEAD SOLDIERS

BY: ARCHIBALD MACLEISH

We were young. We have died. Remember us.

We have done what we could but until it is finished no one could know what our lives gave.

We have given our lives but until it is finished no one can know what our lives gave.

Our deaths are not ours; they are yours, they will mean what you make them.  
Whether our lives and our deaths were for peace, a New Hope or for nothing, we cannot say; it is you who must say this.  
We leave you our deaths. Give them their meaning.  
We were young...We have died...Remember us.

We hold they will always be young and alive in our memories.  
We will never, ever forget them.

LIBERTY, PATRIOTISM, INDEPENDENCE AND ABOVE ALL, OUR FREEDOM, OURS TO CHOOSE WAS FREEDOM, WITHOUT FREEDOM THE OTHER THREE WOULD NOT BE EASILY OBTAINED AND PRACTICED.

GOD BLESS AMERICA.

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