

## CHOW-HOUND

Written by Frank Bolen (Submitted by Chris Johnson, AM)

Twenty two-year-old 2nd Lt. Frank Bolen, a bombardier on the replacement crew of pilot 2nd Lt. Jack "Tex" Thompson, came to the 322 Bomb Squadron of the 91st Bomb Group on 02 June 1944. The crew had been together since forming up in February of 1944. Lt. Bolen had enlisted in the Cadet Aviation Program in the spring of 1943, but washed out of pilot training in San Antonio, TX., and subsequently went to his second choice of Bombardier training in Midland, TX.

The Thompson crew spent the next few weeks flying practice missions in a well known 91st Fort, LG R, the "Chow-hound." Lt. Thompson got his introductory mission with another crew, and then his crew, including Lt. Bolen, was assigned their first mission. That first mission would be on 20 June 1944, the target was Hamburg, and the crew was assigned a new airplane, LG Q, 44-6117.

Except for one mission on # 996, Frank would fly nine out of the next ten missions on # 367, the "Chow-hound" with the Thompson crew. On the 19 July 44 mission, a flak shell exploded directly in front of the "Chow-hound," ventilating the nose and causing a minor wound to Lt. Bolen in the right arm, for which he quickly mended. Frank's pilot, Lt. Thompson, was a proficient flyer, and during this time period was checked out as a Lead Pilot.

On 7 August 1944 the crew of Lt. Jack Thompson was alerted to fly the next day. Frank was informed that he would not go, as Lt. Thompson would fly the Deputy Lead position and Frank was not yet checked out as a lead Bombardier. This would save Lt. Bolen's life. The next day, on 8 August 1944, Frank's crew took off in the "Chow-hound" and formed up in the Deputy Lead position, flying off the right wing of Lt. Dave Hanst in "Hikin' for Home." The "Chow-hound" would not return from this mission, and all hands were lost. Frank describes what he felt while standing on the flight line upon hearing about the loss that afternoon upon the Groups return, "...It was the most empty dejected feeling that I have ever had."

Frank was then assigned to the crew of a fellow Alabaman, Lt. David McCarty. They then flew two missions in #634, "My Baby." For the third mission with the McCarty crew, and Lt. Bolen's 16th mission, "My Baby" was down for repairs. The crew loaded up in a relatively new airplane, # 348, named the "Roxy's Special." The date was 08 September 1944 and the target was the I.G. Farben Industrie plant at Ludwigshafen, one month to the day after the loss of the "Chow-hound." Frank would fly this day as the Deputy Lead Bombardier for the 322nd in the Low Group lead by Lt. Malone in # 562.

At the IP the Germans extended their usual greeting in the form of intense and accurate Flak. Approaching the target Frank was leaned over his bombsite, setting it up and waiting for the target to come into view, and at the same time keeping an eye on the Lead Ship. Suddenly there was a large jolt, as "Roxy's Special" took a direct Flak hit in the number three nacelle, setting the wing on fire. Mere seconds went by and the right wing blew off, sending the aircraft into a flat spin. Frank was pinned to the floor, along with Lt. Don Brazdzones, the Navigator. Suddenly Frank found himself on his back in the blue sky, as the aircraft had exploded, and he gathered his senses and pulled his ripcord. Looking below he saw another chute and figured it was Lt. Brazdzones. The rest of the crew did not survive.

Frank landed on a small island in the Rhine towards the Mannheim side, and he had several new problems to face. He had the sudden realization that he was in enemy territory alone. He had landed only a quarter mile from the target, and American bombs were raining down all around. He had sprained his ankle in the landing, so that moving quickly was not possible. And he had ended up on the wrong side of the Rhine if he hoped to get to the border of France some 75 miles away. Fortunately, most all of the civilian and military population were in bomb shelters during the raid, so that Frank had a chance to scout and locate a small boat, and then find a hiding spot in a thicket to wait for the cover of darkness, to steal the boat and get across the river. It was only noon and the wait for darkness was long, and it also started raining about mid afternoon.

That night he got away in his rowboat, but to the East side of the Rhine, so he knew he would have to find a way across the river to the West side. The next day he walked the 10 miles to the city of Worms, found a loosely guarded bridge, and waited for darkness. At eleven that evening Frank started across the bridge in a casual manner, hoping not to look unusual. Half way across he met a German guard who looked him right in the eye, and Frank, heart pounding, prayed, and looked right back at the guard. Amazingly, the guard was satisfied without a word and moved on, and Frank crossed the bridge to his great relief. Frank walked on his painful ankle for five days by the cover of night. He came upon the outskirts of the small town of Lambsheim by the morning of the sixth day, and had not had any water for three days, so he proceeded into town to find some. He walked through town and ran into a group of old men and nodded, and they nodded back. He found a hydrant, drank his fill, and filled his cellophane bottle. He lit a cigarette and strolled out of town. Frank could not believe what he had just done, and the experience gave him confidence.

The confidence boost Lt. Bolen got from strolling through a German town in broad daylight would prove to be his undoing, as he decided to travel by day, and after all, he was wearing his flight uniform. On the seventh day afoot in Germany, he came upon the well-populated town of Speyerdorf. He attempted to walk into this town, but his luck would not hold. As he was walking he spotted two Luftwaffe officers riding bicycles with their girlfriends. Frank put his head down and tried to walk away nonchalantly when he heard the dreaded, "Halt!" Turning around, Frank saw that the officers were coming his way, one with his Luger pointed at him. After identifying Lt. Bolen, the officers treated him professionally and left him with a Flak battery.

Frank was sent to an airfield and then to the interrogation center at Oberusel near Frankfurt. From there he went to Wetzlar, and then was sent to Stalag Luft 1 in Barth, Germany. Frank would spend the next nine months at Stalag Luft 1, North II Compound, Barracks 3, Room 13. There he was also reunited and was bunkmates with his Navigator, Don Brazdzones. Frank would also learn that his daughter was born while he was walking in Germany. Frank and his wife Frances reside in Selma, AL.

Sources: The Sky Was Black by Frank Bolen, 322nd BS USAF Archive Records, and Frank Bolen.

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