

TPIECES OF NOSTALGIA

Written by Bill Turcotte (contributed by Dave Hanst)

Camp Shelby, Kelly and Randolph fields, Ellington, Hondo, Salt Lake City, Blythe, Walla Walla, Grand Island, Bangor, Goose Bay, Iceland, Prestwick – these are familiar names and places – steppingstones to many aircrews of World War II. Reception, classification, preflight and advanced training, assignment, aircrew assembly and 1st phase, 2nd and 3rd phase, overseas staging, transfer and arrival to base for aerial combat overseas.

Our original aircrew of 10 men left Grand Island, Nebraska with our provisional group on July 1, 1943. On to Bangor, Goose Bay and Iceland on July 4, Prestwick next day and Bovington for orientation, then to 91st Bomb Group, 322nd Squadron, Bassingbourn. More orientation and training flights over East Anglia and our crew was split to fly first missions with experienced crews as replacements. The first combat mission is always memorable and no exception when our bombardier, Capen Simons, and I were assigned to the Jack A. Hargis aircrew. The 91st was briefed on July 26 to bomb port facilities at Hamburg (350-plus ack-ack guns!).

The Hargis crew was assigned as a spare ship to fill in any position aborted for mechanical or other reasons. After assembly at altitude and leaving the coastline there were no aborts in our squadron or group. The pilot, having completed several missions, elected to fill a slot in another group heading to Hanover, target a synthetic rubber factory. Over enemy territory and guns were test-fired, there were reports over the intercom of "bogeys" – two B-17s going down – the I.P. or turn on bomb run, flak barrage, "bombs away", and we were out of it. With a "mouth full of cotton" and the enemy coastline in view, fear turned to exhilaration and excitement over the North Sea, but not for long. We had left formation and descending when we heard over the intercom, "Prepare for ditching". Looking down, I could see the pattern of waves and the sea was fairly calm. Taking up our positions seated on the floor of the radio room and backs to the bulkhead wall, we soon felt a jolt as the ball turret hit the water, then jam-up together as the ship hit the water and plowed to a stop. We were out the radio room hatch and pilots out the cabin windows and launched the two dinghies, 5 in each off the wingtips and watched as "Destiny's Tot" (42-3119) sank slowly, then broke at the radio hatch making crunching sounds and went under, its "triangle A" group mark and tail gun the last to go. My first reaction? "There go my Luckies and Zippo under the compass cover."

"May Day" by the radio operator before ditching and a handcranked radio signal soon brought two Spitfires circling low, then a converted Lockheed Hudson (Anson to the RAF) dropped a large dinghy, almost a bulls-eye between our two dinghies. Next, two single-engine, pusher-type Walruses (affectionately called "Shagbats" by the British) landed, taxied up and loaded 5 into each. They were plainly overloaded, like sardines packed in a can. We never saw the other Walrus after it taxied away.

The sea now had whitecaps and swells. The pilot and co-pilot wireless operator made a takeoff run, the waves had whitecaps and swells were rough and jolting as we bounced along and came to a jarring stop. The wireless operator had a fainting spell and passed out. We pulled him into the hatch and stuffed a rag between his teeth, thinking he was having a seizure. Within a few minutes, he came out of it and the pilot tried another takeoff run riding a swell until we plowed under a wall of water that momentarily submerged us. It broke off part of the horizontal tail plane. We taxied for hours over rough sea until a high-speed ASR motor launch picked us up along with the rest of the crew. The other Walrus took off back to base after unloading. Ours taxied behind until it took on water that caused an electrical

short and had to be towed. After a 25-mile taxi ride at 6 knots and 15 more aboard the launch and "Shagbat" following our stern light, we reached Yarmouth at 04:00. The Walrus was beached and 18 inches of water drained. After repairs, it flew back to Coltishall base. After the engine was taken down, the cylinders were caked with salt. Some craft!

About mid-morning after a short nap, there was a sort of celebration by rescued and rescuers, and the Hargis crew signed their names on a 50-franc note from our escape kit. A stripped-down B-17 picked us up at a nearby B-26 base. Back at the Group, we had our picture taken and a week of R & R at "Flak-city" near the Channel coast – customary for ditched crews at the time.

Strategic bombing of industrial targets required deep penetrations into Germany with no fighter escort. The Luftwaffe fighter force was dreaded by bomber crews. Flak was usually just a few minutes of sweat over the target. The fighters hit you coming and going. They hit the lower elements in the low groups by choice. If you were in the high group, high squadron, your chances of getting back were better, and we knew it, and the high, lead, and low squadrons and group positions were rotated.

So it was when the 322nd led the 91st Group on the first Schweinfurt mission, August 17, 1943, our 4th with all original aircrew. ME-109s and FW-190s attacked head on, wings blazing, peeling off belly up below us. Repeated passes wing to wing and the Hargis aircrew on our left wing in "Dame Satan" (42-2990) was hit by a 109 that came barely over our left wing. I watched as it left formation. Over the ball-bearing factories at Schweinfurt, bombs raked the target area, and great columns of brown smoke and dust were rising. I hardly noticed the flak in the absence of fighters. They met us again and again on the way out. All ammunition in the nose was expended. Hot cartridge cases were 3 inches deep and burned your ankles. We made it, but 4 of the 322nd crews went down, including "Dame Satan". Fifty years later, I learned their fate, although I had heard that some of the crew were P.O.W.s. We had 20-mm. shrapnel damage, a direct hit at the waist window, the gunner with shrapnel leg wounds, and a gaping hole in the left wing from flak. The mission cost 65 B-17s, 11 from the 91st Group. It was the first great air battle of the War. We were just scared and glad to be back, as we watched a B-17 land safely with wounded aboard. We learned that Lt. James A. Judy had been shot down and pulled out of a slow spin, ordered the crew to bail out, then hedge-hopped the crippled ship with only his badly wounded engineer aboard to crash land at Manston Airfield in "My Prayer" (42-5712).

All aircraft and aircrew losses were not due to enemy action. Not just a few were caused by pilot error, accidents, assembly at altitude, mechanical failure, bad weather conditions, and just plain foul-ups.

After the Schweinfurt raid, aircrews flew "milk runs" to bomb airfields occupied by the Germans in France (a "milk run" was only when you were back on base).

On August 31 on missions to Amiens and Romilly airfields, the 91st was just over the Channel coast of England. As I watched the squadron above and to our right, a B-17 started to fill in a vacant slot. At the same time, another one attempted to fill the position from below, and they spanked together, disintegrating and falling below. As I watched the falling debris and bomb loads, a damaged 'chute with part of a body floated to our right. I thought, "No survivors, 20 men gone to Glory." "The Eager Beaver" (42-29816) and "L'il Audrey" (41-24523) were no more, but by some miracle, one of the tail assemblies spun downward, then leveled off, and S/Sgt. Charles E. Allen, tail gunner, bailed out, surviving with slight injury when rescued. Eight bodies were recovered, the others MIA in the Channel.

Upon base again, we learned that "Paddy Gremlin" (42-29972) was damaged by falling debris from the collision and crash-landed at Polegate. Three of the crew bailed out over the channel and drowned. Pilot Lt. Jess D. Rogers, 322nd Sq. and 4 of the crew died in the crash.

After the Schweinfurt raid, we had about figured out the odds against completing a 25-mission tour – 3 to 1 – or after 7 missions, your number was due up. On a long mission to Stuttgart, the 91st was briefed to fly above 29,000 ft. where we had a 55-knot tail wind and a front over France reaching up to our altitude. Going in to target with no fighter support, we saw no enemy fighters. The target was obscured by cloud cover, and our group orbited for another unsuccessful bomb run. The leader turned southwest to an alternate, the marshalling yards to Kehl. After seeing bombs rake the railyard, we turned for home. In the high group, we saw enemy action below and two B-17s going down, another beelining for the distant Alps.

Over France, we were getting low on fuel, and the pilot was leaning the fuel mixture and the engineer was switching fuel tanks before we left formation and headed for cloud cover. The pilot called for a heading. I had marked a temporary Spitfire landing field on Beachy Head before leaving base, the nearest point of land on the English coast. I started getting fixes on the G-box we luckily had that day. In cloud cover, the pilot ordered all loose baggage including our guns salvoed. Off went the nose hatch and unspent ammunition out. I gave the pilot a heading and ETA to Beachy Head. When we broke through to scattered clouds, the Channel was ahead, and passing over it heading for the white cliffs we saw two ditched B-17s and one about to ditch. Our pilot, LeRoy B. Everett, sat us down on the mat runway, and we stopped just short of the cliff overlooking the Channel. We were one of the few B-17s to land there safely since it was abandoned soon afterward. While we were being refueled, the RAF gave us tea and cookies and were only a couple of hours late getting back to base. Fifteen forts ditched in the Channel. The 91st lost 2 ditching and one to fighters over France. The crew of "Mizpah" (41-24497) ditched just offshore, and one dinghy paddled to safety ashore. All the others were rescued by ASR. Another 91st fort, "Bomb Boogie" (42-5763), the one hit by fighters, was abandoned by the crew, and all survived, five as P.O.W.s. Five evaded, two to Switzerland, one to Spain, one to the U.K., and one evaded but was captured in Paris in December 1943.

After missions to Nantes and Romilly, Fr., in short order came Frankfurt, then Bremen, then Aklam, East Germany, on October 9. The 91st was briefed to lead a decoy diversion while the mainstream bombers with Tokyo and bomb-bay tanks went on across the Baltic Sea to hit port facilities at Gdynia and Marienburg, Poland, fighter factory. Our target was across the enemy Baltic coast on a heading to Berlin, then 60 kilometers to I.P., from there to a fighter assembly plant, target for today. Enemy fighters were waiting. Our ship was hit at the I.P. The number 4 engine was out and afire when we left formation. A single-engine fighter hit us in the cockpit at the co-pilot's foot. The cockpit was full of smoke from the shellburst, and hydraulic fluid was leaking down from the cabin bulkhead into the nose and crawl space. I went and stood up behind the cockpit where the engineer was helping the co-pilot get his 'chute on and out the bomb bay with a crippled boot. The pilot hollered, "Get out", so I went back through the crawlway soaked in hydraulic fluid. Our new bombardier, 2nd Lt. James R. Brown, a671275, was on his first mission. We snapped on our chest-packs and bailed out the nose hatch. Our original co-pilot, Lt. Alex Stewart, then first pilot, stayed at the controls of "Green Fury" (42-29778), and it went down with the rest of our crew, except the engineer and co-pilot, Lt. Donald Strunk. Our original 1st Pilot and bombardier were flying with other crews.

The bombardier, Lt. James Brown, and I landed in a rutabaga field near Stavenhagen, where a woman was pulling and piling them. Home guards had us surrounded. After capture, the Luftwaffe took us to pick up our badly crippled engineer, who landed and fell off the roof of a farmhouse. After leaving him at a prison hospital, the bombardier and I were put in separate cells at Neu Brandenburg air base. Late at night, we were escorted down a hallway and saw our badly hurt co-pilot on a wooden bunk with a

swollen foot and ankle. The next day we went by train with a non-com escort through Berlin to Frankfurt rail station, then by truck to Dulag Luft, the German interrogation center.

Needless to say, that 14th and last combat mission is always memorable to survivors. The 91st lost 6 aircrews on the Anklam mission, 36 total on the "diversion", and the main force was almost unscathed. Lt. Simons, our original bombardier, went down with Lt. Judy's "Old Standby" (42-5178), and all were P.O.W.s except the waist gunner, who was killed in the air. The rest of 18 months, 20 days at Stalag Luft III and Stalag VII-A is too long a story to tell.

Liberation came at Moosburg on April 29, 1945 by the 14th Armored Division, 7th Army attached to Patton's 3rd Army. Evacuation on VE-Day was memorable to about 6,000 airmen, all evacuees from Luft III. We learned the war was over when the message came over G-47 (Goonie Bird) radio on the way out from the German airfield at Straubing to Liege, Belgium.

Fifty years later with wife, Dorothy, and a party of 250 ex-P.O.W.s were on a return visit to Luft III and Stalag VII-A. Along with scenic tours, we revisited the sites of our P.O.W. camps in Poland and Austria. The Poles gave us memorial services and rifle platoon salutes. The Czechs and Austrians, royal treatment. On April 29 at Moosburg to the day and hour we commemorated our liberation with a memorial service at our P.O.W. camp site with a large delegation of French ex-P.O.W.s at their memorial marker on a small green space by a weeping willow and surrounded by a new residential subdivision.

Dot and I left Munich on our own and stayed 10 days with friends in London. They treated us to return visits with friends gathered at a pub in Royston near our old air base, to the Wall of the Missing at Madingly American Cemetery, and a return visit to the site of our forced landing on the former Spitfire base at Friston, now a large sheep pasture. Nostalgia flowed freely as we toured Beach Head with our hosts and Bill Land, the Air Sea Rescue pilot that helped pick up our Hargis aircrew from the North Sea. He still has the 50-franc note signed by the crew. He and his wife, Joan, a well-known landscape artist, presented us with a treasured painting of the white cliffs of Friston and Beachy Head as we left their home in West Sussex.

Our good friends and hosts in London, John and Iris Bayles, were our guides to the sights and for all of the VE-Day commemorations in Hyde Park. We joined their neighbors and a group of Seniors who experienced the Blitz and watched the flyovers of vintage warplanes on their "commons" or "green". We had weekend London Transport tickets, the only way to Hyde Park, and reserved bleacher seats with the other vets next to the VIP viewing stand. We saw the Queen's party arriving and all events to the closing ceremony when she lit a gas "beacon" and simultaneously 2,000 other flares or bonfires over the United Kingdom commemorating 50 years of peace in Europe and victory over aggression and oppression. Some tears and nostalgia flowed. W.W.II was history long remembered, and those who gave all, never forgotten, and with thanks to our hosts who gave us red carpet hospitality reserved for Air Force vets.

They remember us and the days when East Anglia skies and landscapes roared and were blanketed with U. S. warplanes. Lest we forget, they gave us their Celt and Anglo Heritage, and we gave part of it back. Our comrades who lie in their hallowed ground and MIAs, they remember and join us, lest we forget.

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