

MAYDAY ON MAY DAY

"Mayday on May Day" is the story of Al Platt, a B17 waist gunner,
based in England during World War II.

This is his story, in his own words.

Al Platt

February 05, 2012

MAYDAY ON MAY DAY

May 1st, 1943 started out like any other day that we were alerted for a mission, but certainly had a different ending: breakfast, briefing, and getting our guns put together. I was a waist gunner, flying on a B-17 named _____, which was part of the 91st Bomb Group, 323rd squadron, flying out of the Bassingbourn airfield in south-east England. We kept the working parts of our machine guns in our rooms to see that they didn't collect any dust or rust. We kept a lot of oil on them, but they had to be wiped dry before putting them together. We found by experience that the least bit of oil or moisture would freeze in combat conditions. One of the requirements of a gunner was that he be able to field-strip his 50-caliber machine gun and put it back together blindfolded with gloves on. I don't remember how many parts this involved, but I think it was a dozen or more. The reason for the gloves was the cold temperatures. Would you believe 70 degrees below zero? The waist gunner position was the coldest spot on the plane. With both windows open and cruising at a couple hundred miles per hour, there was always a nice breeze. The later models had windows in the waist with the guns swiveling in the window. At 70 degrees below zero, if you blinked, your eyes would freeze closed. I had that happen once, and had to pinch the ice out of my eyelashes with my heated gloves - and then try not to blink. I don't know which is worse, not being able to see what is coming, or being able to see and having a gun that is not working and unable to do anything about it. Either event is something you don't want to experience. Take my word for it. I have had both of them happen to me and I wouldn't recommend either one of them. I had a gun freeze up one time, and it's a strange feeling, especially when there are enemy fighter planes trying to get your attention.

* On this not-to-be forgotten day, we had mechanical problems with our plane and we figured we were going to miss the mission. There was another plane ready to go, but one of the officers was sick, so we were able to take their ship. We didn't have time to change guns. We didn't realize until later that they were experimenting with some new anti-freeze oil. When we test-fired over the English Channel, everything seemed to be working okay. The warmth of the firing must have created a little moisture that froze, because a little later when the pilot reported on the intercom that there were German fighters coming in at 11 o'clock high, I got them in my sights and squeezed the trigger and got one shot off, instead of the twenty-five or thirty I would normally get. I charged it several times manually and got it to shoot again. It was on the slow side, but was picking up, so I kept firing it until it got back to normal. I called the pilot on the intercom and informed him of the problem and told him not to think we were being attacked if he heard me shooting, because I wanted to keep my gun warm and would be shooting every few minutes, whether there was anything to shoot at or not. I wanted to be sure the next attack would get their normal allocation of 50-caliber rounds from me at the left waist gun position.

MAYDAY ON MAY DAY

To get back to May 1st, new groups were arriving daily at the airbase, and as was customary, a new pilot would ride along as co-pilot with the seasoned crews to get an idea of what they would be getting into before they had the full responsibility. Major Rosener, a commanding officer of a new group, would be flying with us as co-pilot. The target was one we had been to several times before in the sixteen missions we had flown, so we weren't expecting any surprises. As usual, when we hit the sub pens on the French coast, we would approach the target from land, so the bombardier would have something on which to line his bomb sights. This was harder to do over water. As we approached the target, the bombardier actually flew the plane with the controls on the bomb sight. We had to fly straight and level for several minutes while he got lined up on the target. This is when the flack would really get heavy. At this point, the enemy fighters would leave us until we got out of the target area, because they didn't want to get hit with the flack. After we had dropped our bombs, we would then go out to sea and descend to a lower altitude, below the enemy radar screen, and return to England. This way, the crew could get off oxygen and relax a little.

Major Rosener came back through the waist area to use the porta-pot and I asked him how he had liked that one. It had been an easy run. He said he didn't think he would have any trouble making 25 of those. I think he changed his mind before the day was over, for within thirty minutes, we would be talking in a dinghy.

It was almost impossible to navigate over water without dropping a slick to calculate your drift. We didn't drop a slick, because we didn't want to give away our location. We had to penetrate a broken cloud formation at about 6,000 feet, and the group of bombers split up going down through the clouds. The group leader made no attempt to reassemble the squadron after breaking out into the clear. We were at about 1,000 feet and the visibility was poor. We got into a diamond formation with several other planes. There was no way we could tell that, after leaving St. Nazaire, we would encounter strong winds from the northwest that would blow us back toward the French coast. We were flying through fairly heavy cloud cover, and when land was sighted, it was thought to be Lands End, England, but when I got a glimpse of it, I recognized it immediately as Brest, France. There are several peninsulas that resemble the fingers on a man's hand. Once you have seen Brest from the air, you will never forget it.

I called the pilot on the intercom and informed him the land we had spotted was not England, but France, and it might be a good idea to get into better formation. Before we could do so, we were attached head-on by a group of German FW 190's, and took several hits. You can feel it when a 20 mm cannon shell hits the ship and explodes. We lost our pilot and engine on the first pass and fell out of formation. When you get out of

MAYDAY ON MAY DAY

formation, you receive lots of German attention. I don't know how many times we were hit. I don't think anyone was counting. Time passes pretty fast in situations like this and you don't take time to look at your watch. The German fighters made numerous passes at us from both directions. The right waist gunner took a direct hit and was blown against the bulkhead between the waist and the radio room. I'm sure he was killed instantly. I thought maybe I ought to put my parachute on, and when I bent over to pick it up, it was blown right out of my hand. I got some shrapnel in my legs, and probably a 30-caliber bullet hit me on the outside of my right thigh and came out on the inside. I sat down on an ammunition box, and could still use my gun, but it wasn't long until we hit the water - and I mean "HIT". More details to follow.

This is where the miracles began. We had rehearsed the ditching procedure on a regular basis. Those in the rear of the ship were to be in the radio room, which is the only opening in the top of the ship, with our backs to the wall to prevent whiplash when we hit the water. The only problem was that we didn't know that we were going to hit the water. The plane was on fire and Major Rosener said the cockpit was so full of smoke he couldn't even see out. The Air Force hymn says, "We live in fame, and go down in flame". I don't know about the fame, but I know about the flame. The wind that had blown us off course was making swells that were about 40 feet high, which would have made ditching a hazardous operation at best. The left wing was folded back against the fuselage, blocking the window when I tried to get out. The fuselage probably broke behind the radio room and let enough water in to provide a cushion for me as I flew forward, and taking the place of the air bags we didn't have. I was immediately under water in a lot of debris. I could see light at the waist window, which I swam to, but it was blocked by the wing and I couldn't budge it. I have always been able to hold my breath for quite a while, but I was beginning to wonder where I was going to get my next one. Just then a wave caught the wing and pulled away from the window and I was able to swim out and inflate my Mae West life jacket. As I came to the surface, I saw the tail of the ship sinking out of sight, and half the crew with it. Can you guess the hymn I hummed and sang the rest of the day and through the night --- "Love Lifted Me."

No one had had time to release the dinghies. One of them had been thrown out on impact, but it was so full of small shrapnel holes that we had to pump it continually to keep it inflated enough to at least keep the five of us together. When it would float to the top of a swell, the white cap on top of the swell would drench us. We were wet anyway, and the salt water probably cauterized my wounds. The temperature of the water was considerably below the comfort level, but must have been a few degrees above critical hypothermia because I don't remember a lot of pain, and I must have had some. We took

MAYDAY ON MAY DAY

turns pumping for the rest of the afternoon and of the night and the next day. It was only a 4-man dinghy and only partially inflated, so we weren't really riding in style.

I knew there was a preacher in California that prayed every day, and more than once, for his son that was a gunner on a B 17 based in England, but I didn't know that on this day this preacher was going from his home in Ripon to his church in Manteca and that he had the feeling that his son needed some extra prayer at this time, so strongly that he pulled his car off the road and prayed. I'm thankful that he realized the urgency of the situation because I could never have held my breath until he got to his office in Manteca. I wish now that I had asked him the exact spot, while he was alive. I would have built a little memorial there. Coincidence isn't a kosher word. Neither of us felt that this was a coincidence when later we compared our notes and checked the date and time. Just like the nobleman in John 5 that had his son healed. When he checked with his servants he knew it was at the same hour.

Gospel of John

The Bible

When my father heard on the news that evening that the 8th Air Force had lost seven B17s that day in a raid on the submarine pens at Saint Nazaire on the French coast, he wondered if the urge to pray for me on his way to Manteca and the loss of the B17s had any connection. A call from Stan Bannister that evening confirmed that it had. I had met Stan & Mary Bannister at church in Royston where it was the custom to take the service people home after the evening service for tea and crumpets. We became friends and I visited them quite often when I would get a three-day pass. They had greenhouses and, one time, on one of my passes I helped him with some plumbing. I spent quite a few three-day passes with them. I even had a key to the house in case they weren't home when I came to town. Their home was in our landing pattern and they were always out in the yard with their two young sons when we returned from a mission and would wave to the planes and I would wave my scarf out the window to them. If for some reason our crew did not fly, I would usually get a pass and go out to visit them. On May 1st, when they heard the planes take off for a mission and no one waved to them when the ships returned, Stan went right out to the base to see what the story was. Stan was in the Home Guard and could get on the base without any problem. The crews that he spoke with didn't give him much encouragement and doubted if there were any survivors, for several of them had seen us hit the water and they thought the ship had exploded. I guess we did make quite a splash. Water skiing in later years, I witnessed on more than one occasion firsthand what a splash 200 pounds makes when it hits the water at 40 miles an hour so it doesn't surprise me that several tons hitting the water at 200 + miles per hour might resemble an explosion. Stan called the folks and gave them the information, but told them not to give up hope.

MAYDAY ON MAY DAY

Many of the details of the previous paragraph can be found in the book entitled "Stormy Weather, a B17" written by G. P. Birdsong. When I saw the book advertised in a flyer quite a few years after the war, and it said you could get an autographed copy by calling a certain number in Pleasanton, California, I called the number. We were planning on being in the area soon. When Captain Birdsong answered the phone, I thought he sure wasn't as excited hearing from an old squadron member as I would have been. When I picked up the book later he explained to me that he thought we had all been lost and was very surprised to hear from me. In the book he had written, the last they saw of us we were going straight down through the clouds. All the officers on the crew that he was acquainted with had been lost.

I would like to mention another related incident. I was very close to my Grandmother, who lived with us after Grandpa died. She was crippled with arthritis and used a cane. We had a flight of eight to ten stairs at the entrance to our church and I used to pick Grandma up right out of the front seat of the car and carry her up the steps and into the church and put her in a chair we had especially for her. This is small pay for the stories she used to read me out of her Bible when I was a little boy. She passed away on the day I was liberated. She had been comatose for several days, but on this day she got real excited and was trying to tell the folks something, but all they could understand was my name. She passed away before they could find out what she was trying to say. Someday I hope to find out what she was trying to tell them.

When wondering about Grandma's emotions on the day of my liberation, another thought entered my mind. When we could hear Russian cannons to the east of Stalag XVII-B, the Germans took us across the Danube into Germany, encamped us in a forested area, and put guards around the site. They didn't have time to build a fence, and no one wanted to escape at this time, and so the POWs (Prisoners of War) wandered around looking for food. In one of the searches the POWs ran into a group of American soldiers setting up mortars. The soldiers told them that there must be a large group of Germans in the forest, since there was so much smoke coming out of the area. The POWs told the soldiers that there was a large group in there, but they were American POWs. The soldiers surrounded the camp and captured the German guards - and we were no longer POWs. According to the Gospel of Luke, Chapter 16, in a narrative titled "The Rich Man and Lazarus", a story is presented describing visual contact between the Rich Man and Abraham and a two-way conversation that takes place between them. If we can draw conclusions from the Gospel story, perhaps it's possible that my grandmother saw the above scene, where we were almost fired on with mortars - if that's so, it's no wonder she got a little excited.

Just before noon we sighted a lighthouse and started paddling in that direction with our hands. The wind came up and the sea got rough, making navigation all but impossible. The wind direction had changed and was now taking us in a westerly direction, and as bad as we wanted to go home, none of us wanted to go home in a raft. What if something would go wrong with the pump? There were some flares in the dinghy, so we fired one, hoping for air-sea rescue. I guess we were closer to France than we were to England, because it wasn't long until we saw a small German observation plane circle us and then flew off and turned and came straight for us. It looked like a bomb run to me, and, if I had been able I probably would have gone overboard. The bomb turned out to be another dinghy. The Major and I transferred into the German dinghy. I opened one of the cans in it, and it was another flare gun. A little German would have come in handy here. We found out later that there were ^{food} rations in some of the other cans.

We landed at the town of Saint Malo, France, and were taken to an army camp and given first aid, and our wounds were bandaged. They gave us some supper, which I promptly returned. One of the German pilots that had been in the group that shot us down came to visit us. Before he left he asked if there was anything he could get for us. I said I would sure like some water to drink, and he went out and got me two bottles. I didn't know until years later that he visited Major Rosener in another part of the camp and he told him that if he would promise not to try to escape, he would take him out to dinner, which he did.

MAYDAY ON MAY DAY

I think I slept some during the night in spite of the conditions. It might have been because I didn't sleep much the night before. We had hot meals the next day, but my stomach was in no condition for food. Instead of changing my bandages they just put more on top. They separated us the next morning. The rest of the crew went to their respective camps, and David Hatch and I went to the hospital in Paris, France. On our way from the depot to the hospital we passed a building that was in very bad shape. There was part of a twisted sign that had UL T on it. I asked the guard if that was the Renault Machine Works (which had been one of our targets earlier in the year.) He said, "No, the building we are passing was a hospital."

We were put in separate rooms and were not allowed to talk to any of the other patients. When they took off the old bandages, the smell almost knocked me out. They put my legs in traction and gave me a good supper. It was the first food I had been able to keep down since my bout with John Barleycorn. The next morning the attendant came around and asked me if I had had a movement the day before and I said no, and before I could explain that I hadn't eaten for several days I had a firm hand on my nose and a shot of castor oil. I'm a regular fellow and very seldom need any help. Never having been checked out on a foreign bed pan, and with my legs in traction, the results were something you wouldn't want to talk about. One of the attendants walked by my door and got the drift. He turned and came back and asked me if I needed a bed pan, not realizing it was already too late. He came in and looked the situation over and picked me up and carried me into the bathroom and put me in the bathtub. One of the stranger parts of my treatment was a bath every morning in a tub full of medicated water.

They moved an Englishman in with me several days later and it was good to have someone to talk to. They moved him out a couple days later and moved another American in with me. His name was Powell Griffm, whom I called "Griff", and we got along so well together that we stayed together until the war was over. Just before we left the hospital the last of May one of the guards, that I had become acquainted with, asked me if I would like to write a letter home, and you probably guessed the answer. He brought me a piece of paper and a pencil and I wrote a note to my wife Mary, which she received on our first anniversary, July 6th. This was the fastest mail service that we had while I was a prisoner. It usually took two or three months. They had received word soon after I was shot down that I was missing in action. A few weeks later they received word that I was a POW. In the note I wrote to Mary, I mentioned that I was sleeping between sheets. When she showed it to one of the officers at McClellan Field where she worked, he told her that I was in the hospital. She said, "He didn't say he was in the hospital." The officer said, "He wouldn't be sleeping between sheets unless he was."

MAYDAY ON MAY DAY

We left the hospital the last of May and I attracted quite a bit of attention going through the Paris, France and Frankfurt, Germany railway stations. My uniform was my electric flying suit which resembled one-piece underwear with a flap on the back, and my flying boots. The button was missing from the flap and I could feel the breeze every time I took a step. It seemed to amuse the civilians in the stations.

I spent a couple days in solitaire and then was moved to Stalag VII-A where I met several guys from the squadron, who were shot down after I was. They were very surprised to see me. Having heard the reports of us exploding when we hit the water, they were surprised to see any survivors. It was good to see the guys.

One of my favorite pastimes in the camp was to stand near a window during an air raid, until the Germans turned the dogs loose and I could see how many guys could come through the window at one time. On one occasion the dogs got into the barracks and everybody scrambled for the top bunks and so many guys scrambled to this one bunk that the bunk collapsed and they all fell to the floor.

A bunch of new prisoners came in one day and, after roll call, the guard called one of the prisoners out and asked him if he was from North Dakota. The prisoner replied, "All I can tell you is my name, rank, and serial number." The next day the guard called him out again and showed the prisoner a picture of his home in North Dakota. The prisoner asked, "Where did you get that picture?" The guard replied, "That is my Brother John's place." The prisoner replied, "You must be my Uncle Charlie."

While we were in Stalag VII-A, some of the prisoners that were captured in Africa were brought through our camp on their way to the camps where they would be held. They spent several days at our camp. One of them was a Major General and, when one of the guards came down to tell him the camp Commandant wanted to see him, the English officer didn't pay any attention to him. Finally the English officer turned and asked the guard if he was talking to him and, when he said he was, the English officer told him to stand at attention. When the guard was at attention, the English officer asked him what he wanted. The guard told him the camp Commandant wanted to see him. The English officer asked the guard what rank the camp Commandant was, and the guard said he was a Captain. The English officer said, "In your army, when a Captain wants to see a Major General, does he send for him or go to see him?" The guard answered, "He goes to see him." The English officer said, "I will be right here." It wasn't long until several officers came down from camp headquarters. The English officer had them all stand at attention before he would even talk to them.

MAYDAY ON MAY DAY

All the Air Force prisoners, which were about 1200, were moved from Stalag VII-A near Mooseburg, Germany to Stalag XVII-B near Krems, Austria on October 13, 1943. We arrived at Krems the next day and had about a 3-mile hike to the camp. We were stripped, searched, and given a Yule Brynner haircut. Our clothes were dumped into a large container and fumigated. After we got out of the shower, our clothes were dumped in a large pile in the center of the room. The fumigant was so strong it made us all cry so that we had trouble seeing. To see fifty naked guys with tears in their eyes, searching through a pile of clothes, trying to find something that looked familiar and would fit, is a sight you don't soon forget. We were then moved to our new barracks – a bald and tired bunch.

Responding to Mother Nature was a sociable experience. The restrooms had long planks with numerous holes in them similar to what we had at home on the farm, only with more capacity. Soon after we got there we ran out of toilet paper. This is serious business where there isn't any grass. We found that an air letter that was ruffed up good was probably comparable to the old Sears catalog as far as being non-skid and puncture-proof. In one instance two guys were sitting next to each other with their letters and one noticed that his neighbor's mail had the same postmark. Upon closer examination they found that their letters had the same return address. They came to the conclusion that it was a hardship for their wife to get by on one allotment. What are the odds that her two husbands would sit next to each other in a German POW camp restroom! We made our needs known to the Red Cross and several weeks later we received word there were a couple box cars at the station to be unloaded. This was good news as we were getting low on food parcels. When the supply got low they issued a parcel to two or more guys until more were shipped in. When the boys went down to unload the box cars they found they were full of toilet paper. Our kitchen crew arose to the occasion and came up with several recipes for "toilet paper a la carte".

The Germans said we would never win the war, because we were never serious. Rain or shine or snow, we had roll call every day and sometimes more often. And if someone was missing, they would keep us out there for several hours. On New Year's Day in 1944 they called us out for roll call. We were all in ranks and the guard was already starting to count when one of the smaller guys came running out of the barracks, in the snow, wearing only a diaper and a ribbon with 1944 on it. Right behind him was a guy dressed in a sheet with a sickle in his hand.

One of the funniest things was, after another delousing, some of the prisoners shaved their heads and one of the artists in camp painted a face on the back of his head. He did such a good job that, from a distance, you could not tell whether he was coming or going

MAYDAY ON MAY DAY

until you got close enough to see his ears. The next morning when we were called out for roll call, he put his coat on backwards and stood in the front row. The guard, who was counting, was so shocked that he lost his count and had to go back and start over again.

We stayed in Stalag XVII-B until April 1945, when we started a forced march back into Germany. We were herded into a forested area on the Inn River and they put guards around us, but there were no fences. We dug trenches for latrines and had to carry our water from the river. We tried to rig up a little protection from the rain, but weren't very successful. The guys would wander around and scrounge for food. Griff and I still had cigarettes to barter with, and Jimmy Farrar would go into town and barter and return with all different kinds of food to mix with our ration of soup. One of the guys found a field that had just been planted with potatoes and lots of us had potato soup that night. We could hear big guns from both directions so we knew it wouldn't be long before we might be liberated.

It's a good thing the guys were scrounging around, because one of them ran into a group of American soldiers that had seen all the smoke from our cooking fires coming out of the woods. They thought it was a German camp and they were setting up mortars, when the American POW ran into them. It would have been rough to go through what we went through and then to be killed by friendly fire. The Americans surrounded the camp and liberated us without incident. They brought in trucks and moved us to an old aluminum factory where we were able to sleep inside for the first time in several weeks.

They brought in trucks several days later and moved us to an air field where they picked us up and flew us to Camp Lucky Strike in France. While we were waiting for the planes at the airport, there was an American soldier standing by a motorcycle. I went over and was looking at it and he asked me if I could ride it. I told him I could ride it frontwards or backwards. He asked me if I would like to take a ride on it and you have probably already guessed the answer. I asked him if I could go over and pick up my old lady. He was really surprised. He didn't realize that for the past 2 years I had been referring to Griff as my old lady. I rode over and picked Griff up and we rode around the airport until the planes came to pick us up. I got the soldier's name and address and wrote him a thank-you note after we got home. At Camp Lucky Strike we received the first real food we had had for quite some time. They had to watch us that we didn't over-do. It wasn't too long before we were on a ship headed for the Good Old USA. It was quite a switch from the ship Queen Mary that had brought us over to England, but this one was headed in the right direction, and no one complained.

Some of the best news we received in the camp was that mail was in, or parcels had arrived. We were given two postcards and one letter per month to write home. I guess

MAYDAY ON MAY DAY

some of the guys didn't know how to write, or didn't know anyone that knew how to read, so I was able to purchase extras for a nominal fee. The only problem with the mail was that it was so slow, that when you received a letter with lots of answers in it, you had forgotten what the questions were. My brother-in-law, who was in India during the war, made copies of his letters, so he didn't have that problem. We were allowed to receive two cartons of cigarettes and a parcel per month, as well. My folks said they certainly wouldn't be sending me cigarettes, but my brother said that he was going to send me everything that was allowed, for which I was thankful. Cigarettes were money and could be used to purchase things from the other prisoners or the Germans. There were several packs of cigarettes in the Red Cross parcels that we received occasionally and, with the ones I was getting from home, I was one of the more affluent prisoners. Several of our radio men were pretty sharp and had constructed a crystal set so they could listen to English newscasts when conditions were good. An American fighter plane came down near the camp and one of the prisoners bribed the guard to get the radio out of it. The price was several cartons of cigarettes, so they had to come to me, the bank. I never did see the radio, but after that, we always had up-to-date news from BBC. Several prisoners would come down when they brought the news. One would read, and a couple would watch for guards. The most exciting news to me was when our forces landed on the beach at Normandy on June 6. At that time I figured the war would be over in a month or, at the most, two. Would you believe it was eleven months? On a scale from 1 to 10 that would be very near the top of all the good news I have ever heard.

The only news that I know of that is better came from, of all places, a cemetery. This isn't breaking news. It happened a couple thousand years ago. There were two women looking for a body, and the body wasn't even there. When they finally found the tomb there was an angel there that gave them the good news, "He is not here, for He has risen as He said." I think what happened next is an understatement, if I ever heard one. It says, and I quote "they (the women) departed quickly." If I had been there I probably wouldn't have been too far behind. If you are interested in the rest of the story, as Paul Harvey used to say, it can be found in a book that has been a best seller for centuries and is still in print, and can be found in any book store and most hotel and motel rooms. What you believe about this "Good News" will change your eternal destiny. You can get more details from any Bible believing church or yours truly. I would be glad to tell you more about the "Good News". For something this important, I am available 24\7.

Several months ago I was talking to a friend here in Salton City that used to work for Boeing in Seattle, and I asked him, how fast a B 17 would go if it was going straight down and he said he didn't know, but he knew someone that would, so we gave him a call. He said it would be somewhere around 200 miles per hour. If it hit the water at that

MAYDAY ON MAY DAY

speed there would be no survivors for sure. I told him I was sure glad that I didn't know that. He said let me put it another way. There would be no survivors except for the hand of God. I said, now we are on the same page.

God Bless,

Al Platt

MAYDAY ON MAY DAY – ADDENDUM

ADDENDUM

A DIARY RECORD OF THE EVACUATION OF STALAG 17B

This is the story of the forced march from Stalag XVII-B to the temporary camp near Brannau in April of 1945. A.B. Platt, Powell E. Griffin and Jimmy Farrar traveled together. When rumors of the march began to circulate, I unraveled a braided jump rope and wove some shoulder straps for a pack. I didn't have time to finish a set for Griff so I worked on his while we were traveling and had his straps finished the second day. Jimmy had been in a poker game not too long before we left, and he didn't have too much to carry, so he really didn't need straps. Griff and I had 30 cartons of cigarettes between us. What we couldn't get in our packs we carried in a YMCA suitcase on a stick between us.

Sunday, April 8:

We left camp at 1100 hours in Group #7 and went through Spitz and camped high on a windy hill. We could see front line activity and hear the big guns. A pretty good climb out of Spitz and quite a bit of surplus clothing and other non-essentials were dropped by the roadside. Jimmy picked up a couple of army jackets that proved very useful. That night we cut the pockets off and, by hooking them over his belt, Jimmy made a money belt. Every morning Jimmy would fill his money belt with cigarettes and sometimes we wouldn't see him until evening when he would find us and share the proceeds of his bartering. Most of the time the guards didn't pay much attention to anyone leaving the group, but this one morning Jimmy took off and headed for a farmhouse and the guard hollered "Halt!", and when Jimmy didn't halt, the guard fired a shot from his rifle over Jimmy's head. Jimmy didn't even turn around and the guard muttered something and kept on marching with the group. No Jerry rations.

Monday, April 9:

We marched west thru the mountains and made camp again in the hills. No Jerry rations.

Tuesday, April 10:

Camped all day. Had a ration of sweet barley for breakfast. Eight men to the loaf of bread. Spuds for supper. Saw two P51's flying overhead.

Wednesday, April 11:

Marched thru Mulesdorf to Holgnice Pogstall. Eighteen men to the loaf. Had a nice bath in a small stream.

MAYDAY ON MAY DAY – ADDENDUM

Thursday, April 12:

Still in the mountains. Marched thru Altenmarket in light rain and put up in a barn. Most of the barns were connected to the house with other buildings in a square. Griff and I spotted a loaf of fresh baked bread cooling in an open window and were sharpening a stick to see if we could spear it, when one of the guards saw what we were up to. Had soup that looked like rain. Our clothes were wet, but our blankets kept us warm enough to sleep. Heard a chicken squawk in the night and I'm sure it was his last. Somebody will have meat in their soup tomorrow night.

Friday, April 13:

Jimmy's birthday, but no cake. Marched thru Somerstien in a slight drizzle. Wet clothes and equipment add quite a bit of weight to our packs. My dogs are really barking. Had a dry place to sleep and soup for supper with a piece of meat in it. Heard rumors that President Roosevelt had passed away.

Saturday, April 14:

Laid over in Somerstien for the day. Washed my fee in the blue Danube. Did some work on Griff's pack. Got a ration of cheese and some sour barley soup.

Sunday, April 15:

Left the Danube at Grien and marched thru Klam and put up in another barn. The weather was quite a bit better today but the issue of soup still looks like rain. Jimmy traded some cigarettes for some eggs and ham, so we had a good supper.

Monday, April 16:

Got an early start and marched thru Naarn. Had some pretty good soup for lunch, five men to the loaf, and some dog biscuits. Marched a few kilometers after lunch and pitched camp in a small grove. Picked some dandelion greens to add to our Jerry soup for supper.

Tuesday, April 17:

Marched thru Mauthausen, Saint George and Steyregg. Griff and I sneaked off and had a swim in one of the tributaries of the Danube. Lots of dud bombs along the roadside: a few 100's, but mostly 500's. Saw them throwing a little flack at a couple of allied fighters. Had soup for supper, 2 spuds, and ten men to the loaf of bread. Several planes came over during the night and dropped some flares and received some flack in return.

Wednesday, April 18:

Broke camp at 0730 hours and marched 13 kilometers to Linz by 0930 hours. Just out of Linz we heard fighters over the town, but very little flack. Had two thundershowers

MAYDAY ON MAY DAY – ADDENDUM

during the day. Made camp in an apple orchard near Withering. Had Jerry soup, 2 spuds, and eight men to the loaf. Looks like it might be a damp night.

Thursday, April 19:

Got an early start and marched thru Alkoven. Passed a large airport and, while we were resting nearby, 2 P38's came down and strafed the area. It was close enough that one of the guys that had walked off to answer Mother Nature came running back hanging on to his pants which he hadn't taken time to button. Had a good barn to sleep in near Edelfrine. Pretty fair chow for a change. Nine men to a can of meat, nine men to ½ pound of butter, 2 spuds, and five men to the loaf of bread. Heard sirens several times during the day.

Friday, April 20:

Marched thru the hills to Wildorf and then on past New Market. Made camp in a pasture. Two truckloads of Red Cross parcels arrived and more on the way. They are holding up issue until they have enough for one per man. Waited in line until 2300 hours for one-half klim tin of what they called soup. Can't climb many hills on this kind of fare. Maybe get some parcels tomorrow.

Saturday, April 21:

Laid over all day and received one-half klim tin of soup. Jerrys aren't taking any chances of foundering anyone. Saw some P47's and several groups of bombers. Three Red Cross trucks arrived and our spirits soared, but took a slump when it started to rain. There was a barn nearby, but by the time Griff and I got our stuff there was standing room only. We put our blankets next to a fence and stretched a sheet over them. We got our parcels just before dark. Jimmy had traded off a shirt, which the folks had sent me, for some bacon, bread and some spuds, so we had a pretty good dinner. After we got in bed I turned over and stuck my foot right in a puddle of water. Never did figure if the water was coming from above or below, not that it made any difference. No place to move so we sweated it out. I don't think "sweated" is the right word, but I can't think of another. The rain let up just before daylight.

Sunday, April 22:

Sun came out soon after we got underway, but the wind was very cool. We marched thru Peersham and Aroulmunster in rain, hail and snow. If the weatherman could have thought about anything else, he probably would have given it to us. We had a bowl of soup and five men to the loaf. It was still raining when we went to bed, but we had a dry barn to sleep in, even though our clothes and blankets were wet.

Monday, April 23:

MAYDAY ON MAY DAY – ADDENDUM

Marched thru Gurten in the mud and rain. We have been going thru rolling country the last few days and it really burns up the groceries climbing the steep hills. We keep a chunk of D-bar handy to throw in the hopper for the steeper ones. Saw several deep at the edge of some woods. Had a hailstorm in the afternoon, but had a barn to sleep in at Althiem. Had a tin of soup and five men to the loaf. Had a pretty good night's rest except for the guys walking over us during the night. We'll be careful not to bed down too close to the door next time.

Tuesday, April 24:

Laid over at Althiem for the day. Weather is really cool here. The socks I washed at our last layover are not dry yet, and I have been carrying them on the outside of my pack. Soup for supper and twenty men to the loaf. Got to bed early and listened to the air raids.

Wednesday, April 25:

The sun came out soon after we got underway and, even though it's a little cool, it looks like it's going to be a nice day. Lots of allied air activity this morning. A P51 made a pass at a German observation plane that was flying just a couple hundred yards from where we were eating lunch, but the little plane was too quick for him. He must have seen him coming. Lots of allied air activity all afternoon. Passed thru Brannau and reached our destination about 1730 hours. All there is here is a fenced wooded area, mostly fir and pine. About a mile to a spring for water and the guards will only let so many go at a time. Three Red Cross trucks arrived and the place started looking better already. We gathered some fir boughs for our bed and some wood to heat some water for a brew. Glad to finally have reached our destination, such as it is. This is the first time in my army career that I have really suffered from de-feet. There were a couple of incidents on the march that I didn't get recorded and I'm not sure of the date or place, but will never forget. I think it was at one of our layovers that an elderly Austrian lady came by with her ox. The Germans confiscated it and, in spite of her tears, slaughtered it on the spot and cut it up and rationed it to the prisoners. I never saw meat like that before. You cut off a small piece and started to chew it, and the more you chewed it, the larger it got until it finally got so big you had to spit it out. Maybe we didn't get one of the better cuts. The second incident, although it was not as traumatic for us, I'm sure it was for the pig. One of the nights when we were camped in a barn, we heard a pig start to squeal and stop very abruptly. Although we were given a pretty thorough search the next morning, there were quite a few fires that night that had meat on them.

Thursday, April 26:

MAYDAY ON MAY DAY – ADDENDUM

Worked most of the day on our lean-to. Detailed plans available on request. Made a pilgrimage for water. Jerry issued us a spoonful of barley, 4 spuds and eighteen men to the loaf. P51's overhead continually.

Friday, April 27:

Worked some more on our lean-to. We think it will shed water now, but are not anxious to check it out. Six trucks of parcels came in. Griff and I went down to the Inn River and washed some clothes and had a swim. This is real pretty country. Got our Jerry rations when we got back---3 spuds, salt and one-half spoon of butter. We cut cards for the meat and I won one-half of a 25-man ration which might be enough to flavor a couple tins of soup. It has started to rain and there is no protection for the parcels, and the French parcels do not seem to be very waterproof. We hate to see the parcels spoiled, but our dear German Major will not allow anyone to touch them. Our lean-to is just mediocre when it comes to shedding water. We'll have to make some alterations tomorrow.

Saturday, April 28:

It's still raining. The American and English parcels are standing up pretty well, but the French parcels are slowly melting to the ground, but the German Major still won't let anyone touch them. We peeled the bark off a couple trees and added this to the lean-to, which helps considerably. It rained all day and, while our stuff isn't soaked, it's still pretty damp. Jerry gave us a can of broth and 4 spuds.

Sunday, April 29:

It stopped raining this morning. The trees are still dripping but the sun is coming out. Jerry gave us a spoonful of grain and 4 spuds. We received a French and an American parcel for four men. Our clothes and blankets dried out fairly well today. Heard the rumor that the war was over. We all think it's overdue. The Germans told us two years ago that it was over for us.

Monday, April 30:

Average day. Jerry rations were a tablespoonful of beans, a spoon of butter and some salt. Sprinkled several times today, but no real rain. Can hear an almost steady rumbling to the north. Hope it is Patton or Patch. Saved some biscuits and chocolate out of our parcel to celebrate our anniversary.

Tuesday, May 1:

Two years ago we had it, and I think we still have it. We are looking forward to the May flowers replacing the April showers. Sprinkled several times during the day. We dug a small excuse to close to the lean-to, and I will tell you later how it really paid off with more than the convenience. I have been trying to think of a tasteful way to describe the

MAYDAY ON MAY DAY – ADDENDUM

next item, but I'm having a hard time so I guess I'll just tell it like it is. Around the camp are a series of narrow trenches that we use for latrines. When you are straddling one of these trenches, the view in either direction leaves quite a bit to be desired, and, as if this wasn't bad enough, I think the majority had diarrhea since they had been eating anything they could get their hands on. A side view from a little distance gave the impression of an inverted sprinkling system. It is humorous looking back, but I don't remember too many smiles at the time. I guess roll calls are a thing of the past. They tried to have one the day after we arrived and again today without success. The only way they would be able to get us out of these woods would be to have something like a rabbit drive, and I don't think they have enough troops for that. Jerry rations were 4 spuds, some salt and twenty men to the loaf.

Wednesday, May 2:

U.S. Tanks are on the other side of the river. Some of the guys that were out scrounging ran into some American soldiers setting up mortars on the perimeter of the camp. They had observed all the smoke coming out of the woods and figured there were troops in there. Good thing our guys ran into them before they started pulling the triggers. Two years ago the German that lifted us out of our rafts said that for us the war was over. This afternoon an American tank captain came in and told us we were no longer prisoners of war. It snowed during the night and it was really cold, but we are soldiers now instead of POW's, so we can take it. Hope something happens pretty quickly. Our chow box is looking like Mother Hubbard's cupboard and it is rumored that we have received our last Jerry rations.

Thursday, May 3:

An infantry outfit came in and unarmed our German guards, which caused quite a bit of excitement. It rained on and off during the day, but it would take more than that to dampen our spirits.

Friday, May 4:

Laid around camp all day. Jimmy went to town and didn't come back until Saturday. The guys have been running all over, confiscating anything they can get their hands on. Here is where the little hole we had dug behind our tent began to pay off. I don't think whoever laid out our camp went to the planning commission because it was not very well organized. No streets or alleys, so the guys would just wander around until they found their spot. The guys coming home after dark with their arms full would fall in our hold and they seldom found everything they were carrying in the dark. Griff and I would get up early in the morning and our back yard was a gold mine. I wish we had kept an inventory of everything we found. One morning we found several boxes of lemon

MAYDAY ON MAY DAY – ADDENDUM

pudding. The recipe called for milk, but we thought it would be okay if we made it stronger with water. It really didn't taste too bad, but after we had finished we got thirsty and couldn't get enough water, and the more we drank the more we swelled up, until we had to unhook our belts and unbutton our pants. We waited up until 0230 hours, but no Jimmy.

Saturday, May 5:

Pulled guard duty around the kitchen and received two eggs and a box of knackebrot for pay. We were getting worried about Jimmy, but he finally showed up none the worse for wear. Some of the boys confiscated a fire engine and laid out the hose and started pumping water from the spring. They have been coming in with teams, cars, buses, trucks and motorcycles. Left camp about 1800 hours for a factory near Brannau. It was raining pretty hard and we got into an old wood burner German truck that ended up in the ditch, leaving us to finish our journey on foot. Arrived at the factory about 2200 hours and received some army K rations, some C rations and some white bread. Made our bed on a concrete floor in a big machine shop.

Sunday, May 6:

Did a little exploring. Griff and I went to a deserted work camp about a mile from where we were staying and brought back some stray mattresses on an old wheelbarrow. Got a new pair of German shoes from Ash. My old ones were kaput. Got some C rations and some white bread. Found a big old pot and put some water in it and a fire under it and had the first hot bath I could remember for some time.

Monday, May 7:

The boys are sure having a time. They are driving around in anything from motorcycles to railroad engines. A yard engine just went by with at least four heads sticking out the window and ringing the bell and blowing the whistle. Must have been some old railroad men the way they were switching the cars around. I had my first ride on a horse since I left the farm. Went over to a Red Cross truck to get some coffee and donuts and after standing in line for almost an hour and almost reaching the truck, we received the order to pack up, and they didn't have to ask us twice. We left Ranshoven about 1700 hours and arrived at the airport, but no planes, so we gathered some wood and made a fire and set up camp. We were issued C rations and had a very good supper. Jimmy, Griff and I played pinochle around the fire until 0230 hours. Too excited to go to sleep. We each have a blanket so we will be okay by the fire. Was sure good to ride in GI trucks again and especially since we were on the way home.

Tuesday, May 8:

MAYDAY ON MAY DAY – ADDENDUM

I was walking around while we were waiting for the planes and I saw this officer standing by a motorcycle and I was looking it over and he asked, "Can you ride one of those?" I said, "Yes, sir, I can ride one of those forwards or backwards." So he asked if I wanted to ride it, and he got another "Yes, sir." He was kind of shocked when I asked him if I could go over and pick up my old lady, until I explained that that was how I referred to my combine partner Griff. I took his address and promised to write a thank-you note when I got home. The C47's arrived and we loaded up and headed for Nancy in France. Landed in Nancy and went to a mess hall and had a real meal with plates, silverware, and all the fixins, including French waitresses. Heard bells and whistles about 1500 hours that were signaling the official end of the war. Got into some box cars and moved to a ramp camp at Empinal.

Wednesday, May 9:

Spent most of the morning on the sack. They sure treat us swell here. We have German POW's for waiters. We got some Hershey bars, soap and razor blades from the Red Cross. We expect to move any time. Weather has been good the last few days.

Thursday, May 10:

We packed up and went down to the station just before noon. We have had it pretty nice here and kinda hated to leave, but know we are heading home. Headed north and would bet the French would like to know how we made a 7-passenger Pullman out of one of their 8-passenger coaches.

Friday, May 11:

Traveled north all day. Everybody is happy as long as we are moving and dry.

Saturday, May 12:

Arrived at Camp Lucky Strike in the wee small hours. Lots of men here, and all chomping at the bit.

Sunday, May 13:

Met Major Rosener, our co-pilot when we were shot down, and Pinky Bell, bombardier on our original crew. Had a nice visit with them. Pinky was with another crew and was shot down before we were.

Monday, May 14:

Received our PX rations. Are on alert to finish our processing. Plenty to eat here but only seasoned lightly. They don't want to shock our stomachs.

Tuesday, May 15:

Sprinkled enough to settle the dust this morning. Still processing.

MAYDAY ON MAY DAY – ADDENDUM

Wednesday, May 16:

Had a good hot shower right after breakfast and played a little softball. One of the negro shortstops is really comical. If he gets a hot grounder he will turn his back on it and let it hit him in the back and then turn around and pick it up and usually throw the batter out at first. Took a sun bath. Maybe I will get a little tan before I get home.

Thursday, May 17:

Played a little softball in the morning. Moved in to a new area, supposedly for the final processing. Was separated from Griff after two years of seldom being out of each others sight. We shared lots of experiences that I know neither of us will ever forget.

Friday, May 18:

Continued our processing for the next four days. Issued more new clothes. Had a physical (and they think I will make it home), and had a series of interrogations.

Tuesday, May 22:

Left camp in the afternoon in English buses and traveled to LeHarve. On 30-minute alert.

Thursday, May 24:

On 30-minute alert.

Friday, May 25:

Alert was lifted and we are allowed 4-hour passes to town. Met Bill Allan and we went down to the Red Cross and wrote some letters.

Saturday, May 26:

Lazed around camp.

Sunday, May 27:

Got a pass and went into LeHarve. Didn't have any money so just went window shopping. Some enterprising young French girls had pitched a tent on the path in to town and the lines were longer there than they were for the free donuts at the Red Cross in camp.

Monday, May 28:

Lazed around camp.

Tuesday, May 29:

Lazed around camp.

Wednesday, May 30:

MAYDAY ON MAY DAY – ADDENDUM

Received 6 bars of candy from the Red Cross.

Thursday, May 31:

Lazed around camp.

Friday, June 1:

Packed up and boarded our ship the “Marine Dragon”. Our packet was given guard duty for the trip home. Hadn’t had an MP band on my arm since Bassingbourn. Having duty will give us more freedom and no chow lines.

Saturday, June 2:

Still loading. Bill Allan came aboard. Pulled away from the dock at 1410 hours. Left the harbor about 2000 hours and sailed to South Hampton.

Sunday, June 3:

Left South Hampton about 1200 hours. The chow is really good. First ice cream in almost 3 years. Some of the guys are traveling by rail already. I asked one of the guys if he had a weak stomach and he responded, “No, I’m throwing it as far as the rest of them.” So far, my stomach hasn’t given any trouble. Not too much wood around here to knock on. The “Marine Dragon” is not as fancy as the Queen Mary that we had come over on, but no one is complaining.

By S/Sgt. “A.B.” Platt, Left Waist Gunner
91st Bomb Group
323rd Bomb Squadron
8th Air Force
Bassingbourn Air Base

