

# FROM HIGH SCHOOL INTO THE FRYING PAN

Written by Charles F. Sturgeon

Born 9/25/23 at home in Sikeston, Missouri, Doctor Mayfield made the House Call to help in the delivery. I was twelfth (12) child born to Roberta and Semion Sturgeon. (A three-month old baby boy, "Eugene" was adopted into the family 14 years later in 1937). Attended school on Sikeston Public School through grade nine and Blodgett High School, Blodgett, Missouri 10<sup>th</sup> grade through 12<sup>th</sup> grade in 1942.

My family moved to a farm 10 miles North of Sikeston, Missouri in 1939. When the war started in 1941 three of my brothers were in the National Guard and were called up for service soon after the bombing of Pearl Harbor. I was the only boy left at home in 1942 when I graduated from High School. After graduating, I registered for the "Draft", and was looking for a college to attend. My dad arranged to get me a deferment because my three brothers were already in the army and he was not physically able to do the farming himself. I turned the deferment down because I did not want to be referred to as a "Draft Dodger". (I kicked myself many times later). "Draft dodging wasn't a prerequisite for becoming President back then".

February 3, 1943 – Drafted and reported this day into the Service of the United States. Reported to the Induction Center located in Jefferson Barrack, St. Louis, Missouri. Received a physical, was sworn in as S/N 37415946, got some shots, and the regular GI issue of clothing. After going through several tests and interviews, I was asked for my preference of branch of service. I requested the Air Force. After more tests I was given a choice of a Radio Operator or Aircraft Mechanic, I selected aircraft Mechanic, thinking it would be a good trade when leaving the services. I was assigned to the Army Air Force at this time.

I was shipped and received basic training in Miami Beach, and Clearwater, Florida. After completing Basic Training, I was transferred to Amarillo, Texas for the Aircraft and Engine Mechanic School on B-17 Bombers. Completed this School with top grades of the class. Advanced in rank to PFC. Took a test and qualified for Pilot's Training but after waiting a month for an opening, decided to change my choice to something available.

My second choice was the Douglas Aircraft Co. Inc. B-17 Factory Training School for the 1<sup>st</sup> & 2<sup>nd</sup> Echelon Maintenance in Long Beach, California. Completed course Oct. 28<sup>th</sup> 1943. Several ranks of airman attending this Factory School. I was a PFC, one of my classmates and my working buddy, when we went into the factory to work and see how the aircraft were put together, was a Colonel. He was commander of a B-17 Pilot Training Base located at Blyth, CA. I helped him with many of his lessons and tests; my previous training at Amarillo Air Force Base made everything easy. The Colonel was impressed that I knew so much about B-17s and asked me to transfer to Blyth with him. He offered me an advancement to M/Sgt. if I would transfer to his field as an Inspector. He promised that I wouldn't even have to get my hands dirty AND wouldn't be sent overseas. Being young and stupid, I turned him down because I had been training for overseas duty and wanted to see overseas service. Three of my older brothers were in the services and were probably going to serve overseas and I didn't want to be left behind. (Again, later I would kick myself many times).

My next assignment was to the 4<sup>th</sup> AF, AAFWFTC Command, 36<sup>th</sup> Training Wing, and 326<sup>th</sup> FGT GP Gunnery School located in Las Vegas. We flew in AT-6's and B-17s during air to air, shooting at sleeve

targets pulled by other aircraft and air to ground gunnery training. I did not receive the records of flight time in AT-6s but flew 20:15 in B-17s while on gunnery training exercises. Completed Gunnery School Dec.26, 1943 and advanced to the rank of Cpl.

Transferred to Salt Lake City, Utah for crew assignment.

January 21, 1944 stationed at Salt Lake City, Utah. Finished the day by going to Aircraft screen for milliseconds. My duty for tonight is to keep the fires going in the barrack. The whole group was restricted to the barracks all day, waiting for shipping orders.

Received shipping orders, transferring to Sioux City, Iowa for crew training. Assigned to the 2<sup>nd</sup> AF, 46<sup>th</sup> Wing, 393<sup>rd</sup> CCTS. I arrived at Sioux City ahead of the other members of Crew #3349. Got some first hand experience working on b-17 flight line. Changed out a starter by myself but mostly helping other permanent crew chiefs. Went along on two test flights but didn't sign log.

February 16, 1944, I received Special Order # 47 placing me on Flying Status.

February 26, 1944, Crew # 3349 arrived at Sioux City, Iowa.

Crew # 3349 consists of: Pilot-Thomas P. Smith Jr., Copilot-Louis G. Starks, Navigator-Alexander w. Calder, Bombardier- Ray Riettschel, Engineer-Upper Turret-Charles F. Sturgeon, Radio Operator-Delmer C. Spears, Ball Turret- Jess W. Britton, Waist Gunner- Calvin M. Seiler, Waist Gunner- Richard H. Hayes, Tail Gunner – Leonard Rogers. Our organization changed to 224<sup>th</sup> AAF Base, Unit CCTS (H). On March 1, 1944, Crew #3349 completed their first training flight school, shooting landings, (six landings in 4:30 hrs). During the month of March we logged 38:35 hr flight time, in B-17Fs and B-17Gs including five night flights. During the month of April 1944, we attended schools and flew 18 training flights for a total of 68:00 hr, including four night flights.

April 21, 1944, Crew # 3349 went on a night Navigation training flight in a B-17F. Our target was Marquette, Michigan. We were flying at 7,000ft altitude. As we approached our target, number three engine developed an oil line leak. Number three engine is located next to the fuselage on the right wing. The leak caused the engine to lose its oil and of course oil pressure. Due to the loss of oil pressure, Copilot, Starks was unable to feather the Standard Hamilton Hydromantic Full Feathering Propeller, which uses engine oil to operate. Attempting to feather the propeller resulted in pumping the remaining oil out of the 30-gallon oil tank. The propeller continued to windmill, turning the engine and caused the engine to overheat (no oil) and catch fire. As the engine became overheated, cylinders began to blow off, taking the engine cowling with them. When the cylinders blew, it sounded like we were being hit by antiaircraft fire. Debris hit the cockpit window and the side of the fuselage, making loud noises. We could see the red -hot crankshaft turning down inside the engine. The fire spread and burned into the wing, back to one of the main fuel tanks, located in the right wing. We diverted our course for Duluth, Minnesota looking for a field large enough to land the B-17. To get to Duluth from Marquette, we would have to cross Lake Superior. As we traveled a short distance over Lake Superior, the wing cover began to burn away and exposed the main self-sealing fuel tank, which had started to burn. Smith, Starks and I decided that there wouldn't be enough time to get to the Duluth landing field. The fuel tank would explode any moment and blow us out of the sky. Smith headed the burning aircraft for the nearest landfall and as soon as the Navigator, Calder determined we had reached land, the bail out order was given by the Pilot, Smith. There was a solid cloud cover below so there were no land sightings to help the Navigator. The Pilot instructed me to go back to the waist to find the crew that had not bailed out but were gathered in the radio room, Hayes was asleep and had to be awakened. I told them that they should have bailed out a long time ago and headed for the escape hatch (door). I pulled

the emergency release cable and kicked the door off. Fire and debris were sailing by the opening. Tail Gunner, Rogers was told to jump but he declined to be first. Waist Gunner, Seiler was then selected to be first but he also declined. Seiler told me that if I would go first the others would follow. Since I had first hand knowledge of the seriousness of the burning fuel tank, I was anxious to get out. I told them that I would see them later, placed my flashlight on the floor and fell out of the plane backwards. We bailed out at about 7,000ft, around 2:00 a.m. in a cloud-covered sky in pitch darkness. We were in a desolate area so there were no lights visible even after we passed through the clouds. I did spot a dim light just before hitting the trees. Seiler had bailed out second, but caught me. We couldn't see each other but were yelling to each other on the way down. I heard Seiler crash into the trees and prepared for my abrupt landing. My parachute canopied over three tall trees, which left me hanging in the center. I had broken a large limb out of the top of the trees when I came in. The limb had ripped the leg of my fleece lined flying suit but barely scratched my leg. I started swinging and caught a limb and pulled myself over to the tree trunk. I was able to remove the parachute harness, climb down the tall tree and started looking for and calling out for Seiler. Seiler did not answer my calls. The B-17 crashed and burned, just off the shores of Lake Superior, on the snow-covered Porcupine Mountains, near Silver City and Ontonagon, Michigan. The crew managed to bail out and land safely, with no previous "bail out" experience. Our training had been, count to three and pull the ripcord. We landed in the snow-covered virgin forest on the mountain. The trees I had landed in were within 50 yards from the shore of Lake Superior. If the crew had bailed out when the first order were given, they would have landed in the ice cold water of the lake. I think the wind, which the Navigator had no way of knowing its direction, carried us towards the Lake. We were told that a person would have died of hypothermia in a few minutes in that cold water. Seiler and I had landed within 20 yards of each other; he did finally answer my call. The rest of the crew landed deeper into the forest. Seiler had been knocked unconscious and received a large gash on the back of his head. His parachute had gotten caught in a tree and swung him into the trunk. I found Seiler, helped him get out of the tree, he was near the ground. After walking a long way through the snow, breaking through the top crust into snow up to our chins, on level ground the snow was three feet deep. We were crossing small streams and would fall through the snow, into the water. We found a small building with bailed hay. We took one half of a bale and started a fire. The fire was bright enough to bring a house into view. Two men, loggers, living in the shack gave us directions to the main road, they had no transportation. We were able to walk out of the forest, found a main road, walked about 3 miles to a little store. We aroused the owner of the store and he gave us a ride to town. We were the first crew to make it to Ontonagon to report the crash of the B-17. The Ontonagon newspaper stated that several people heard the plane flying low and saw it burning. The crew, except Rogers, gathered in Ontonagon next day. It took three days for trackers to find Rogers. A hundred or more people were out in the forest at one time looking for Rogers. He was running from bears and had taken off toward Canada; the Lake would have stopped him. He had seen three bears or the same one three times. Rogers had been walking in a large circle, walking in streams trying to loose the beats, carrying his parachute to sleep in, eating on one snicker bar, and eating snow for water, he was in good shape. When located, he was near the spot that he had originally landed. We had to wait out the weather in Ontonagon for a few days before returning to Sioux City. There was no transportation moving in or out of the snow-covered area. A Government Investigating Team was able to drive into Ontonagon a day or two later, to investigate the crash. They were able to reach the aircraft using a tractor. A sled was tied to the front of the tractor; the tractor was then backed through the deep snow and up the mountain. Smith, Rietschel, and maybe one other crewmember went to the crash site; I didn't make it. The burned plane was not accessible, except on foot because of the thick forest. I don't think the tractor made it all the way to the crash site. Their plan was to haul enough gasoline to the crash site to burn the remaining parts of the plane. I don't think that the plane was ever carried out. The

people of Ontonagon gave us a big welcome and we were invited to a party almost every night. Each crewmember has a great story about their experiences in Ontonagon. We were finally transported back to the military base by military cars and public trains. On the way back to the base, we stopped off in Madison, Wisconsin for 2 days and met Smith's family. I'm not sure our flight records reflect this mission.

May 13, 1944, C. Sturgeon and D. Spears were advanced to the rank of S/SGT. I skipped Sergeant or was never told that I had been given that rank.

May 14, 1944, crew #3349 was transferred to the 271<sup>st</sup> AAF BU. Kearney, Nebraska. We were assigned a new B-17G Aircraft which we flew across the Atlantic Ocean to Ireland. Crew #3349 was then assigned to the 8<sup>th</sup> Air Force 1<sup>st</sup> BD Command, 1<sup>st</sup> C.W, 91<sup>st</sup> B.G., 322<sup>nd</sup> B.S.

May 21, 1944, Crew #3349 took off at Kearney, Nebraska for Bassingbourn, England. On the first leg from Nebraska to Bangor, Maine, we ran into a severe hailstorm with very large hail. The hail beat large dents in the wings and the fuselage of this new aircraft but did not break the windshield. We flew a good portion of the night in this storm, one time we dropped, what seemed to be 1000 feet all at once. At daybreak, we discovered that we were about 90 degrees and hundreds of miles off course, somewhere in Oklahoma. We had used a lot of fuel, flying all night so we landed at Chanute Field; Illinois to refuel but they could not refuel us. The field Commander became angry because we couldn't tell him where we were coming from or where we were going. They didn't have any 100-octane gasoline anyway. We took off from Chanute and flew to Bangor, Maine. On the way we buzzed Roger's home near Niagara Falls and lost out trailing wire antenna. We were down to fumes in the fuel tanks when we landed in Bangor. Flight time 11:45 hours.

May 24, 1944- Copilot Starks and Navigator Calder were 2hrs late getting to the plane, the morning we left Bangor. They had been caught leaving the base the night before while being restricted. They were fined \$100 apiece and allowed to leave. They were angry with me because I had told them how to get off base. Hayes and I went into town the night before but we didn't get caught. Took off from Bangor, Maine and flew to Goose Bay, Newfoundland. Flight time 6:00 hours.

We planned to travel from Goose Bay to Iceland, the Northern Route but that didn't happen.

May 26, 1944- Took off from Goose Bay for Nuts Corner, Ireland, across the Atlantic Ocean. We were flying above the clouds most of the way, during one of the cloud breaks we were directly above a ship convoy. Lights were flashing from one of the ships, Calder said they were warning us to get away from them. We made a sharp bank and left the area and had to reset our course. There was a cloud cover at Nuts Corner when we arrived but when we let down through the clouds we were in line with the runway. Calder had brought us in directly in line with the runway. The runway at the Nuts Corner was made of landing mats, very noisy. We left the B-17G in Nuts Corner; it would receive some modifications before being assigned to a Bomb Group. Flight time 11:25 hours.

May 28, 1944 Boarded a sea going ship for the trip from Ireland to Scotland, had to load our own equipment.

May 29, 1944- Unloaded our belongings from the ship and then loaded them on the train for Bassingbourn, England, where the 8<sup>th</sup> Air Force, 91<sup>st</sup> Bomb Group, 322 Bomb Squadron is located.

June 6, 1944- went on a training flight, flew out to the channel to see a great number of ships and aircraft participating in the invasion of German occupied France on D Day. Witnessed several severely damaged British aircraft landing in our base. One had a part of a fence post with wire stuck into the

fuselage. Others had received damage from their own bombs.

June 9<sup>th</sup>, 10<sup>th</sup> & 11<sup>th</sup> we flew local training flights. Flight times total three days 3:20 hours.

Mission No. (293). June 17, 1944- Aimens, France Scheduled.

Saturday- Mission to Aimens, France, Scheduled but scrubbed.

Mission No. 180, June 18, 1944- Hamburg, Germany, Scheduled but aborted

Sunday- We aborted our first mission to Hamburg, Germany because of heavy fuel fumes throughout the aircraft. The fuel transfer pump located behind the copilot's seat and to the right of the upper turret, my position, was probably leaking but it could have very well been a leak inside one of the wings or just a spill during refueling. I don't remember the name or number of that old B-17 aircraft but was happy and felt lucky to get back to the base without it exploding. Flight time 5:00 hours. We took off in another B-17 to check it out. Flight time 00:40 hours.

**1<sup>st</sup> Mission** No.181, June 19, 1944- Bordeaux, France, Scheduled.

Monday- Got up this morning at 12<sup>00</sup> midnight for breakfast. Went to briefing at 12:30 a.m. Dressed and went to the B-17G-LG T, number 4210730 named Fifinella. Took off at 05:35 a.m. British double summer time. Our target was Bordeaux, France. We were escorted by P-51 Fighters as we approached the target and soon after dropping our bombs. Antiaircraft gunners were sending up very heavy flack. One B-17, not from the 91<sup>st</sup>, went down in flame and smoke after being hit by flack. The antiaircraft bursts were very close to our plane. We could hear the blasts and shrapnel hitting the outer skin of the airplane but none came through. The leader of our element had to feather number 4 engine and drop out of the formation. We were flying at 30,000 ft. and still experiencing heavy flack and smoke. Bad weather with heavy clouds separated our formation so we were fortunate to have P-51 Fighter protection on the way home. We saw a B-17 aircraft crash land in Southern, England. We landed back at our base (Bassingbourn) at 12:25 p.m., missed runway! Parked the airplane near the hangers to reload for another mission but that mission was scrubbed. This was my first mission even though we were scheduled on two previous ones. Our first was scrubbed and we aborted our second mission because of gasoline fumes in the cockpit area of an older B-17, not Fifinella. New schedule posted and my crew was on it. Hitting the sack early, missions are tiring. We were on oxygen for four hours. Total 7:00 hours.

**2<sup>nd</sup> Mission** No. 182, June 20, 1944-Hamburg, Germany, Scheduled.

Tuesday-CQ got us up at 4:55 a.m., he failed to give the wake up at 1:00am as scheduled.

Not enough time to go to breakfast. Dressed, went to the equipment hut, then to the plane and installed our 50 cal. Machine guns and other equipment. Due to the bad weather we were held up until 5:25 am for take off. Our target for the day was Hamburg, Germany in Northern Germany. We traveled most of the way at 7,000ft altitude. We passed a submarine base where subs and ships were setting out in plain sight as we were approaching the Netherlands.

Antiaircraft batteries were few in this area but it seems they would shoot down at least one B-17 out of one of the wings of planed as they crossing this Country. I wondered why the P-51 escorts didn't go down and knock them out. Just before reaching the Germany border, we climbed to 25,000 ft. As we crossed over the country, several cities put up smoke screens. Our target was also covered with a smoke screen. About six wings of B-17's hit several oil refineries in the same area. We could see several large explosions that sent flame and smoke up to around 5,000-ft. altitude or more. As we reached our IP we

saw B-17 in another formation take a hit of antiaircraft fire and go down. No parachutes were visible. I mentioned that the flack was heavy yesterday but compared to today it was only mild. One B-17 #996 flying on the right wing of the lead plane of our element developed a problem and was forced to drop out of formation. Since we were flying just behind, we pulled up and took that position. Another B-17 #892 from the 324<sup>th</sup> BS, DF, flying behind us then pulled up and took our previous position. This is a normal procedure to keep the element closed up to keep firepower protection from enemy fighters. As we reached the target, I made the remark that the flack was so thick you could probably walk on it, I had heard that remark before but I don't believe we are going to fly into that mess. There was a solid box of flack that had our altitude range perfect. It was hitting so close that the plane was being tossed around, like it was in a high crosswind. Antiaircraft fire was bursting all around the whole element. New bursts were occurring in front, in back, above, and below us. We could hear the bursts and some of the shrapnel was coming through the outer skin of the craft. As we dropped our load of bombs, the aircraft behind us that had moved into the position we had left, was hit in the number 2 engine and just a few seconds later took another direct hit in the center of the fuselage and broke in half. We saw one parachute open while still over the target but our sight was limited because of the black smoke. One of the crew made the remark that would have been our plane if B-17 #996 LG-N OF 324<sup>th</sup> BS had not had their problems. As we were starting our turn to leave the target area, another B-17 flying in another element to our right took a hit in left wing and the wing flew from the fuselage. We counted four parachutes coming out of this plane. More may have escaped but the clouds of flack and smoke hid the aircraft after a short time. We made it back to Bassingbourn and found that most of our B-17s had received considerable damage. Our aircraft had 15 to 20 flack holes and damage. Number one induction system was hit, number two-engine cowling was hit, and number four superchargers were knocked out. The wings and stabilizer were hit several times; our radio antenna was knocked off. The fuselage from the waist back had some large holes. Unexploded shells and large pieces of flack were lying around the interior. Britton (Ball Turret Gunner) gathered some of these and still keeps them as souvenirs. Several B-17's received severe damage and straggled back alone. Fighters mainly P-38 have escorted them out of Germany to keep the German fighters away. We saw one ship ditch in the channel just short of the English coast. Twenty-one were reported to have landed in Sweden, we always heard rumors of planed landing in neutral Sweden. If all these planes landed in Sweden, they would have been over run with Airman and have an aluminum mountain tall enough to build a ski run. The 91<sup>st</sup> BG lost one B-17 but the 322<sup>nd</sup> Squadron didn't lose a single aircraft. We landed at 12:25, after being on oxygen for about four hours. We didn't have anything to eat before or during this missions are rough, I went to bed at 2:00pm, without eating and slept until 7:30 am. Wednesday. Flight time 8:00 hours.

Mission No. 183, June 21, 1944- Berlin, Germany. Not Scheduled.

Wednesday- Got up at 7:30 am. Our ship was damaged to the extent that the ground crews were not able to get it ready to fly. How lucky can you be? We missed a big "B" raid, that's Berlin, probably the most guarded city in Germany. We had payday, received per diem and rested. Our Squadron 322 lost three B-17's and their crews, B-17 No 527, LG-H- No 117, LG-Q- No 626, LG-M. The 401<sup>st</sup> BS, lost 1 B-17 No 891, LL-M, piloted by Lt. John R. Follet, for a total of four B-17's, a total of 36 airmen from this field. We were told that they were attacked by around 100 German fighters. The B-17 crews and American Fighters reported 70 German Fighters shot down.

Mission No. 184, June 22, 1944- Maxengarbe Pont a Vendon, Not Scheduled.

Thursday, Some are going on a mission but I am grounded for two days because of my ear, nose, throat, and chest. I will be pulling guard duty tonight from 9:30 to 6:00am. Guard duty consists of watching

aircraft that are parked at various parking stands to insure that they are not sabotaged. We just walk around the planes and listen for unusual noises, boring.

Mission No. 185, June 23, 1944- Fleury, France, Aborted. Not Scheduled.

Friday- Nothing doing, I am still grounded. Purchased a bicycle for six- (6) Pounds English money, \$24 American. Never owned a bicycle before.

Mission No. 186, June 24, 1944- Distre, Crew scheduled, I am still grounded.

Saturday- Diary says crew went to Soumer, France, Hays flew Engineer Upper Turret and Seiler Waist Gunner. I saw a Doctor, slept and rested.

Mission No. 187, June 25, 1944- Toulouse, France. Crew scheduled-I'm grounded.

Sunday- Crew #3349 went on a mission with Hays as Engineer and Seiler as Waist Gunner. I am still having problems with my ruptured eardrum. Didn't go to debriefing, so am not aware of particulars of mission. BS #322 lost 1 B-17 LG-C (Bachelors Bride) and BS #401 lost 1 B-17 LL-G (Old Faithful).

Mission No. (303), June 26, 1944- Munich, Germany- Scheduled – Scrubbed.

Monday- I am no longer grounded. Scheduled for a mission to or near Munich, Germany to bomb a Jet aircraft factory. Loaded and boarded our plane and waited for word to take off. Finally received word that mission was being scrubbed because of bad weather over the target.

Mission No. (none), June 27, 1944 – Scheduled.

Tuesday-Scheduled for a mission but it never developed because of bad weather over the target countries which includes the whole country.

**3<sup>rd</sup> Mission** No. 188, June 28, 1944- Anizy, France-Scheduled.

Wednesday- Got up at 12:30 am, scheduled for a mission to Leon France with blockbusters (2000lb). We were escorted all the way by P-47s. Antiaircraft fire (flack) was very light. When we returned home to Bassingbourn, it was “socked in” with clouds. The weather cleared enough that we could return to our field. The landing was very rough; one wing almost hit the ground. All in all it was an easy mission. Flight time 6:00 hours for the mission and 00:45 for the trip between the fields.

**4<sup>th</sup> Mission** No. (305) June 29, 1944- scheduled for Leipzig, Germany

Thursday-Took off in very bad weather, our field was a “socked in” so we took off through clouds loaded with 42 bombs. We were unable to locate our group, which had been recalled and our mission scrubbed but Spears didn't receive the radio message. We did find and joined another B-17 Wing, Triangle-P and proceeded with them on toward their target, which was to be somewhere inside Germany. We couldn't ask because of radio silence. We had no idea how much fuel we would need to make the trip. Probably didn't have the proper bombs for their target either we went anyway. We did draw some antiaircraft fire (flack) but it was light. The weather conditions became worse as we were entering Germany when this Group received a recall. We returned with them to England and then went on our own to our base with the 42 bombs; we made our usual landing (one wing almost hitting the runway). Not sure this mission counted. Flight time: 4:30 hours. Recall

Mission No. (none) June 30, 1944- Not scheduled.

Friday- No mission scheduled because of bad weather over target areas. Pay day, received 57-7-lbs. Whatever that is. One lb. is \$4.00. Sent \$150 money order home.

Mission No. (none) July 1, 1944\_ Not scheduled.

Saturday- No mission because of bad weather. My brother John, is a Radio Operator with the Air Transport Command. His pilot flew him into Bassingbourn just for the visit. I introduced them to my crew and made some pictures and got John's phone number, have his address.

Mission No. (none) July 2, 1944- Not scheduled.

Sunday- No mission same old bad weather. The crew took our ship Fifinella, LGT No. 030 on a practice mission, gave me a break, hays flew as an Engineer and Seiler as Waist Gunner. Took it easy all day, received one letter from Bernadean case, South Sioux City, Nebraska. Mission No. (none) July 3, 1944- Not scheduled, received a 48 hr. pass to London, England.

Monday- No mission because of bad weather. Got up early after getting a good rest. Received a 48-hour pass and went to London. Joined a sight seeing tour to several areas of London. I didn't see my brother, John, today.

Mission No. 189, July 4, 1944- Tours, France, Not Scheduled, on Leave in London.

Tuesday- staying at the Imperial Hotel in London, England. We haven't seen any of the German P-Planes since arriving. Somehow John was able to locate the hotel where I was staying and gave me a call. Have been traveling all over London in trains, busses and the underground tube (subway) and enjoying myself. The subways are underground and are crowded with people living in them to escape the bombings. Met Lily Bradley age 19, Falcon Grove Battersea, S.W.11

Mission No. (none) July 5, 1944- Not scheduled, on leave in London.

Wednesday- Last Day of my 48-hour pass in London. John woke up this morning, we had breakfast together and he walked me to catch my train back to the base. While -waiting for the train we saw a P-Plane pass directly overhead above the train station. Just as it passed over the station, its engine ran out of fuel and it fell and we heard it explode about 5 miles away. Caught my train and returned to Royston station and Bassingbourn.

**5<sup>th</sup> Mission** No. 190, July 6, 1944- Aire, France. Scheduled

Thursday- Scheduled for an early mission to Germany but it was scrubbed. Later in the day we were rescheduled for mission to Aire, France. Our target was a P-Plane launching installation located just off the French coast of the English Channel. We took off at 6:55 a.m. in clear short distance of 20 miles. As we neared the French Coast, flack became moderate to heavy and accurate. We were lucky and received only one flack hole in the aircraft. A large piece of flack lodged in a heated blanket lying in the tail section of the plane, Britton found and still has it. Two ships returned with oil leaks but we didn't see any aircraft go down. Easy mission-short. We landed at 11:40 AM. Flight time 4:45 hours.

**6<sup>th</sup> Mission**, July 7, 1944, Mission #191, Lepizig, Germany. Scheduled.

Friday- Scheduled for mission to Leipzig. Got up at 1:30 am, went to briefing at 2:20 a.m., after breakfast. Our targets was a ME 109 and JU 88 aircraft factory. The weather was pretty good all the way into Germany. On the way to Germany we saw a B-17 that was flying in another formation off to our right explode and fall out of formation. We were not receiving any antiaircraft fire at the time so we were not sure what happened to it. I thought about the plane that we flew that day with heavy fuel fumes. No parachutes were seen coming from the falling plane. There were so many smoke screens being set off that the sky became hazy. Our load was 228-25 lb. Anti- personnel and incendiary bombs. After we dropped our bombs and made a right turn, we could see a lot of damage such as 10 oil/fuel

tanks burning and exploding. We saw another aircraft go down in a spin, burning. It wasn't identified but thought it was a German plane. As we turned home, we could see a very large number of B-17 aircraft off in all directions. Later during debriefing we learned that thousands of bombers and hundreds of P-47', P-51', and P-38' fighter escorts were on this mission. Flack was heavy but seemed to be concentrated on other formations. We received no battle damage but no. 2 supercharger threw six buckets. The mission lasted seven hours and thirty minutes with five hours and thirty minutes above 10,000 feet altitude on oxygen. A very tiring mission and my feet were killing me. My feet are always freezing while on missions because I stand on the steel base of my turret most of the time. The temperature drops to well below freezing at the altitude we usually fly while over enemy territory. Flight time 7:30 hours.

**7<sup>th</sup> Mission** No. 192 July 8, 1944- Etaples, France, Scheduled

Saturday- got up at 1:00 am for the third mission in three days. Went to the airplane and took off at 4:15 am for Calais, which is just off the coast of France. The weather was clear most of the way to the target area but heavy weather closed in over the target while we were on the down wind leg of our bombing run. Even in the heavy weather the flack was visible but light and inaccurate because of "lots of chaff" Spears was throwing out and the clouds also helped. We were flying deputy lead on this mission. We were not able to see the target and returned to our base at 8:15 am with our bombs in the bay. Easy mission due to short time in the air and receiving no damage to the aircraft. BS #323 lost one B-17 No. 7173, OR. Flight time 4:0 hours.

Mission No. 193, July 9, 1944- Cropicul / Fleury, France, not scheduled. Aborted.

Sunday-Didn't get up until 11:30 am, the most sleep since our last 48-hour pass. We were not scheduled for the mission today, first time we were not scheduled in quite a while. Received a 12-hour pass but since it was raining decided to stay on base and rest. Received seven letters today two from Adelle Hodges, one from Bernadean, one from Dora Dean, one from Mom, one from my sister Fannie Mae, and one from Margaret Klinge. Nothing to except answer them.

Mission No. 311, July 10, 1944- Cauchie D'Ecques and two others, Scheduled. Scrubbed

Monday- Got a very good nights sleep again, woke up at 6:00 am, had breakfast and went to briefing. Took my equipment to the aircraft and waited for take off instructions but was told the mission had been scrubbed because of bad weather over the target area. We were notified that we had been scheduled for another mission to Flere at 1:00 p.m. This mission was also scrubbed. We took the rest of the day off.

Mission No. 194 July 11, 1944- Munich, Germany. Scheduled. Aborted.

Tuesday- Awakened at 1:00 am Schedules for the mission to Munich. Had breakfast and attended briefings, went out to the aircraft but during engine check, the number 1 supercharge threw some buckets. We waited around to get it replaced but it could not be replaced in time for the mission. We were another B-17 number OR-S-267, from the 323BS for this mission. Our position was deputy lead of our element. We finally took off to try to catch the formation but after climbing to 11,000 ft our number 1 engine started throwing oil. It threw out about 10 gallon of oil before we could get it feathered. We returned to our field on three engines without any other problems, Smith even made it a smooth landing. There were 2700 B-17s and 800 fighter escorts on this mission. Nothing to do for the rest of the day except read or sleep. Flight time 1:35 hours. Aborted.

Mission No. 195 July 12, 1944- Munich, Germany. Not Scheduled.

Wednesday- Got up late for a change at 7:30 am. Went for breakfast and to operations for briefing. A large number of our ships went back to Munich today, we were alerted to stand by in the barrack for our mission. We finally were notified at 4:00 p.m. to load up for a mission but that mission was scrubbed before we got to the plan. All of the 91<sup>st</sup> Bomb Group aircraft returned safely but 20 B-17s from other Groups that participated in this mission did not return to their base. Switzerland was near the route in and out. Rumors!

**8<sup>th</sup> Mission** No. 196 July 13, 1944- Munich, Germany. Scheduled.

Thursday- Awakened early for a mission to Munich, Germany. This was the third mission to Munich by the 91<sup>st</sup> Bomb Group in three days. Took off early, for a rendezvous with the formation over the channel and headed for Munich. There were solid layers of clouds most of the way but the target area was clear. Antiaircraft gunners sent up a black box of flack over the target area. A B-17 flying in another formation off to our right took a direct hit at the waist door. The aircraft broke into two pieces and burst into flames just before going into the clouds. No doubt everyone in the rear of the plane was killed and the others in the front section would have a hard time getting out. Ten B-17s did not return to their bases, they were shot down or received severe damage from enemy fighters and flack. We heard that several landed in neutral Switzerland, which was only 20 miles off course. That pile of aluminum getting higher. Six of the ME109 German fighters were shot down by the Bomber crews and two fighter escorts. Our pilot, Thomas P. Smith Jr. learned that he had been promoted to 1<sup>st</sup> Lt. Today. Flight time 8:15 hours.

Mission No. (none) July 14, 1944- Not scheduled because of weather.

Friday-No mission scheduled for today because of weather over target areas. We were notified that we were on stand down. My crew took our plane Fifinella No.030 to another Bomb Group field to visit and compare living quarters. I ran into several airmen that had attended some of the training schools with me. A good friend, Johnnie Johnson from Iron Mountain, Michigan was stationed there. We attended mechanic classes together in Sioux City, Iowa.

Mission No. (none) July 15, 1944- Mereseburg, Germany. Scheduled. Canceled.

Saturday- Scheduled for a mission but was not awakened until late in the morning because the mission had been canceled because of the weather. Nothing pressing so slept some more and read, well-deserved rest, I think. Flight time 2:00 hours.

**9<sup>th</sup> mission** #197 July 16, 1944- Augsburg, Germany, Scheduled

Sunday Scheduled for the mission near Munich, actually Augsburg. Fourth time Munich was the target in five days. Got up early, at 12:30am. After breakfast and briefing, we sat in the plane several hours waiting on word that the weather would be clear over the target area. Finally received orders to take off. When we reached the target area, it was socked in so we could not see the target to drop our bombs. Some of the bombers were dropping their bombs through the clouds all around us making it very dangerous for the others. The flack was scattered and light. We made a second run over the target area and did catch an opening in the clouds. Our bomb bay doors would not operate normally so Bombardier, Rietschel had to use the emergency method to open them before dropping the bombs. This emergency operation works by pulling a cable that release "dogs" holding the doors closed. After dropping the bombs, Rietschel could not get the bomb bay door to close. He didn't know how to re-engage the cable dogs used to close the doors. He went to the bomb bay without a walk around oxygen bottle, which is against the rules. He then attempted to pull the doors closed using the bomb arming

wires that he found still hanging on the bomb racks. He lost his footing and almost fell out of the plane. He was barely able to catch the catwalk with his hands while his feet were hanging out of the plane. He was barely able to catch the catwalk with his hands while his feet were hanging out of the bomb bay in the slipstream. I turned just in time to see what was happening, pulled my oxygen mask off, went back into the bomb bay. I first acted as if I were going to step on his fingers but then grabbed his parachute harness and pulled him up onto the catwalk. The pilot saw me in the bomb bay without my oxygen mask and chewed me out but didn't say anything to Rietschel. Rietschel was farther from his station and had been without oxygen for quite a while; he was our Oxygen Officer. Smith was unaware that Rietschel had almost fallen out of the plane. Rietschel was noticeably shook up and went back to his station and informed Smith that he could not close the bomb bay doors. Smith asked me if I could close the doors. I told him that I knew how but that it was not my job, I was supposed to be watching for bandits. Smith asked me if I would show Rietschel how to close the doors and I agreed to help him. We met, in the tunnel, under the cockpit and opened a panel that covered the engaging dogs; re engaged them and closed the doors. After we returned to the base, I opened and closed the doors several times with no problems, don't know why they did not work for Rietschel. As far as I know, Rietschel never told anyone on the crew about almost falling out of the bomb bay. At least three of the airplanes making this mission had to ditch in the channel because they ran out of fuel after making too many passes over the target. Several were late returning. I don't know how they manage to stay in the air and not run out of fuel. Our squadron (322<sup>nd</sup>) lost one B-17 LG (Liberty Belle) ditched in the North Sea. Flight time 9:30 hours.

Mission No. (none) July 17, 1944- Scheduled, scrubbed early.

Monday-Early mission scrubbed so we stood all day. Worked on our B-17 and gave it a good cleaning, inside and out.

Mission No 198 July 18, 1944- Poenemunde, Germany, Not scheduled.

Tuesday-Our Squadrons mission to Poenemunde was scrubbed because of bad weather over the target. Some planes did not make the mission and one plane from the 401<sup>st</sup> LL-F was lost. Britton helped me do some laundry and cleaning. Britton also cut my hair; he was always doing something good for the crew. The crew made a practice-bombing mission later in the day. Flight time 2:30 hours.

**10<sup>th</sup> mission** No. 199 July 19, 1944- Lechfald, Germany, Near Munich. Scheduled

Wednesday, Mission was a German Me-262 jet fighter aircraft plant at Lechfald, I thought it was to be Augsburg, also near Munich, again. Got an early wake up, breakfast and briefing. There would be 1000 heavy American bombers taking off from England and we would have the protection of 700 escort fighters. We flew an indirect course to avoid heavy flack areas and to keep the enemy guessing where we were going. The weather over the target was clear and we did hit the target. As we approached the IP, two B-17s collided. A 91<sup>st</sup> BG aircraft, Bunky from the 323<sup>rd</sup> BS, No. 542, OR-T, flying in the lower right position of the squadron leader, pulled up in front of Champagne Girl also from the 323<sup>rd</sup> BS, No. 075, OR Q and was hit broad side causing it to brake into two halves near the waist. Neither B-17 exploded or burned but both planed went down into the clouds. We counted two parachutes coming from one of the planes before they entered the cloudbank. Another B-17, flying in another formation in front of us was hit after dropping their bombs and making a right turn, just as we were over the target area. It burst into flames immediately. No parachutes were seen coming from that plane. The flack was very heavy and inaccurate. We somehow managed to get through the flack box with only two flack holes. One piece of shrapnel went through the flack box with only two flack holes. On piece of

shrapnel went through the navigator's window and into the table and one piece went through the side of the plane above the left wing, into the bomb bay. We heard that there were about a hundred (100) German fighter interceptors somewhere behind us but they never did reach our formation. Three ME 109's did attack the wing just behind us. On the way back to our base, we saw a group of B-24's making a bomb run on a target closer to home and dropped off to sleep several times on the way home. It was a very tiring mission. Flight time 8:15 hours.

July 20, 1944 Mission No. 200 July 20, 1944- Leipzig, Germany. Not scheduled.

Thursday- several aircraft from our group went on a mission to Leipzig, Germany. A large number of German fighters (ME 109's and FW 190's) intercepted the formations during the gap of one group of escort P-51's leaving and the other group arriving. Fighter escorts are not able to stay with the formation throughout the mission because of their fuel supply even with their wing tanks. One group tries to time their arrival with the departing time of the other group so the German fighters must fight them instead of shooting up the slower bombers. The 91<sup>st</sup> Bomb Group lost eight (8) B-17s and three (3) of these were from the 322<sup>nd</sup> Squadron. B-17 No. 027, LG-A, No. 982, LG-S, (Superstitious Aloysius) and No. 819, LG. BS # 401 lost four B-17's: No.509, LL-A (The Liberty Run), No. 812, LL-H, No. 954, LL-Z, and No. 624, LL-P. BS # 324 lost No. 999, DF. The B-17 that we usually fly, Fifinella No. 030 was taken on this mission by another crew. I don't know why, unless they are considering assigning us to the PFF ship but think we are short of battle-worthy B-17's. We enjoyed the rest and Fifinella returned without a scratch. One of the gunners put in a claim for a kill on one German fighter. During my off time I met Junior Wallas. We were in school at Blodgett together but not in the same class. Received notification that Spears and I had been promoted to T/SGT. Another rough mission that we missed.

July 21, 1944, No mission No. (none) July 21, 1944- Not scheduled.

Friday- No mission today because of weather but we were held on standby just in case the weather cleared or another target area was selected. We received notice that the barrack was restricted because it did not pass inspections. After complaining to our Pilot and doing a little cleaning another officer came by and said it looked very good for a combat crew's living quarters and lifted the restrictions.

Mission No. (none) July 22, 1944- Not scheduled.

Saturday- No mission due to bad weather over target areas, on standby again. The crew, with exception of Seiler, Hayes and me received their first Air Medal. Hayes and I are two missions behind. Seiler is several missions behind because we use only one waist gunner on the crew at a time and for some reason Hayes is the one scheduled. Hayes' MOS is 748 engineer but I was selected for that position on our crew. My MOS is also 748 and I have a B-17 Specialist rating. I have the required number of missions but it takes several days for the medal to go through the system. Checked the schedule for tomorrow and my crew is scheduled. Slept most of the day.

Mission No. (none) July 23, 1944- Scheduled. Alerted /canceled.

Sunday- we were alerted and got up early but we were told the weather had moved in over the target area. We made arrangements to leave the field for a one-day pass to Cambridge. All passes were pulled because of a big push coming up tomorrow.

**11<sup>th</sup> Mission** No. 201 July 24, 1944- N.W, St. Lo, France. Scheduled.

Monday- Got up at 2:30 a.m., went to breakfast then to the equipment building for our armament. Took our 50 cal. Machineguns and equipment out to prepare Fifinella for the trip. Received notice that we

were on standby until 7:00 a.m. so went back to barrack and went back to bed. We were awakened at 8:00 a.m. and went back to the ship but didn't get clearance for take off until 10:00 a.m. Our target was near Cherbourg, France for American Troop front line support. We went in over the target at 17,000-ft. Altitude. We were guided by Flares and smoke rockets fired by soldiers on the ground. Flack was pretty heavy but not very accurate, no planes near us were hit. Very short mission landed at 14:50 p.m. Flight time 4:50 hours. Eleventh mission for me and thirteenth for three of the crew.

**12<sup>th</sup> mission** No. 202 Jul 25, 1944- NW St. Lo, France. Scheduled.

Tuesday- Went to breakfast and then to briefing for another mission for front line support. Target was to be laid out by ground soldiers much the same as yesterday and would be within one mile of the fighting troops on the ground. We were supposed to go in at 17,000ft. but due to the overcast, dropped down to 12,000ft. I wore my oxygen mask for about 15-min. and had at least one cigarette while on the bomb run. As we neared The target area, we could see ground fire from both sides of the Front Combat Line. The ground signals were very plain and we dropped right on target. I saw one burst of anti-aircraft fire over the target. Later there was a lot of flack over a small island but we were a long way from there. When we returned to our field we made the best peel off and landing yet, like a p-38. Easiest mission yet. Flight time 4:30 hours.

Mission No. (none) July 26, 1944 (none) Not scheduled.

Wednesday- cleared the barrack, cleaned clothing, and rested today, no mail. Changed out all four engines of Fifinella took her on a test flight. Flight time 4:00 hours.

Mission No. (323) July 27, 1944- Munich, Germany. Not scheduled.

Thursday- several crews scheduled for a mission to Munich but it was scrubbed.

Mission No. 203 July 28, 1944- Merseburg Taucha. Scheduled but placed on standby.

Friday- several crews were scheduled for Merseburg, Germany. My crew was scheduled but was canceled at the last hour. Got up early anyway. Caught up on mail, etc.

**13<sup>th</sup> Mission** No. 204 July 29, 1944- Merseburg, Germany, Scheduled.

Saturday- got up at 2:00 a.m. for a mission to Merseburg, Germany, the same one on neat the one wing missed yesterday. I thought it was Leipzig but records say otherwise. Anyway the target was a synthetic oil refinery and boy did it make a large fire. We were flying lead of the right element in a new aircraft, No. 126 LG P on her fourth mission. I saw my first red flack, which we were told was a signal to the German fighters that the anti-aircraft guns would stop firing and they could start attacking the bombers. We heard that there were several jet aircraft in the area and that they were attacking aircraft in a wing ahead of us. We saw our first jet plane but it did not attack our flight. Our p-51 escort fighters were somewhere strafing but came up when told about the jet. One P-51 pilot said he had the jet in sight and would catch it or burn the P-51 up trying. About that time the jet went straight up and left P-51 looking like it was sitting still. The pilot said "I guess I'll burn this thing up" and that was the end of chasing the jet. German fighters were hitting the wings ahead of us but we weren't bothered. Weather closed in and separated the whole flight. When we broke out into the clear we were alone. We decided to drop to a lower altitude hoping to evade being seen by the enemy. We hopped all the way back by ourselves, didn't see a single B-17 out of our group but did see a B-17 ditch in the channel. We were flying anywhere from 300 to 500 foot altitudes to prevent being seen and were the first aircraft to arrive back at our field. Flying Squadron leader isn't too easy on the Pilot and Copilot. We later learned that 19 B-17s and six of our escorts were lost none from the 91<sup>st</sup> BG. Bombers shot down seven German Fighters

and our escort P-51s shot down 20 German fighters. Flight time 8:10 hours.

Mission No. (none) July 30, 1944- (none) Not scheduled.

Sunday-Nothing moving today, either resting, repairing, or waiting on good weather.

**14<sup>th</sup> Mission** No. 205 July 31, 1944- Munich, Germany. Scheduled.

Monday- Up early for breakfast, briefing and preparation for a long mission. We flew lead of the high squadron of the high group. Good position for the Pilots and good view of the sky. Had very close P-51 escort most of the way in and out but BS 323 did lose one B-17 No. 304, OR-C (Priority Gal) near the target area, hit with anti-aircraft flack. On our way home we passed a group of B-24 on their 4-hr. milk run inside France. This was another rugged mission, most of the time we were on oxygen. I was very tired and it was 6:00 p.m. and too late to get our pay. Found out that our barrack had been restricted again for seven days while on that rugged mission. That is very P.P if you ask me. On schedule tomorrow. Flight time 8:45 hours.

**15<sup>th</sup> Mission** No. 206 August 1, 1944- Chartes, France. Scheduled.

Tuesday- Got up around 4:00 a.m., doesn't seem early compared to some mornings. Took off at 9:05 a.m. for Chartes, which is near Paris, France. We flew lead of the high squadron of the high group again today. We hit our target and several other wings of B-17 were bombing around the same area. Flack wasn't very heavy but seemed to be very accurate. The 324<sup>th</sup> BS lost one B-17 No. 879, DF-E and we saw one other B-17 of another group go down. I saw a shell pass through our right wing, it also passed through the main fuel tank and exploded up above the plane. It didn't cause a fire and evidently we didn't lose much fuel, the tanks are self-sealing, I didn't have to transfer any fuel to keep the engine running. Our P-51 escorts claimed several kills on German fighters. We returned to Bassingbourn at 14:30 p.m. Returned in time for payday, and received 31-1-0, whatever that is. The rate of exchange is four dollars for one pound English. Sent \$100 to Mom because there isn't much else to do with money over here. Barrack still restricted. Flight time 5:25 hours.

Mission No. (328) August 2, 1944- Lens, France. Scheduled/scrubbed.

Wednesday- didn't get up early because we were scheduled for another milk run to France. We were allowed to wait in the barrack for weather to clear. Finally we were told the mission had been scrubbed. Cleaned the barracks, got restriction lifted and answered mail.

Mission No. 207 August 3, 1944- Mulhouse Toul/Croix de Wetz. Not scheduled.

Thursday- several crews were scheduled for a milk run into France. Evidently the mission was successful; we didn't hear of any aircraft losses.

**16<sup>th</sup> Mission** No. 208 August 4, 1944- Peenemunde, Germany. Scheduled.

Friday- got up early for breakfast and briefing before going to a different B-17 equipped with PFF (radar) and no Ball Turret. We have a new Bombardier, Robert Bell. Bell was on the crew of the Liberty Bell that ditched in the North Sea. Don't know what happened to Rietschel; assume he was not checked out for the PFF equipment. We took off at 9:15 a.m. in exceptionally clear weather so the radar wasn't necessary for this mission. Peenemunde is on the Northern Coast of Germany, on the Baltic Sea, near Sweden. We traveled the northern route, over water almost all the way. When we arrived at the target area, which was a Nuclear Bomb Lab, we made a visual bomb run and hit the target dead center. We approached from the Sea, dropped our bombs while still over water and made a tight 180-degree to the right, back out to the sea. Flack was heavy but most of it was behind us. Several Wings were hitting

the target and one B-17 received a direct hit in the right wing and exploded into flames. As it was falling away there were several other explosions like the fuel tanks were going one at a time. We were able to see it all the way until it crashed. We were escorted by P-51s but we never did see any of them. They reported shooting down 20 German fighters. On the way home we saw a wing of B-24s and they joined our formation. A report said that German fighters were in the area looking for us. We returned to Bassingbourn at 18:45 p.m., I was standing the entire trip, as usual. Flight time 9:30 hours. Received two letters today.

**17<sup>th</sup> Mission** No. 209 August 5, 1944- Kienburg, Germany. Scheduled.

Saturday- got up the regular time for mission to France. Very short and easy. Received six letters and put in for a 48-hour pass the crew. Flight time 3:30 hours.

Mission No. 210 August 6, 1944- Brandenburg. Not scheduled.

Sunday- requested a 48-hour pass but was told that our barrack was restricted. I went over to see our pilot, 1st Lt. Thomas P. Smith about the restriction. Smith went to the office and managed to have the restriction lifted. Spears, Hayes and I got rooms at the Piccadilly hotel and traveled to the tourist spots around London and had a very good time. When we returned to our hotel, the rest of the crew including the officers was in our room sleeping all over the floor. I found Smith's hotel room keys and went to his hotel to spend the night in a much nicer room.

Mission No. 211 August 7, 1944- Sand/ Baurron- Marlotte. Not scheduled/ on a 48-hour pass.

Monday- made some more tourists spots around London. Never did hear from my brother, John or the Whittinghams, a family we met while in England. Today is a bank holiday; they probably had things of their own to do. I never did have any luck using the English Phone system.

Mission No. 212 August 8, 1944- SE of Bretteville Sur Laize- Not Scheduled.

Tuesday- Returned to Bassingbourn after my 48-hour pass to London, England. Had a good time and I'm sure missed some missions. Our Squadron lost one B-17 No. 367 LG-R (Chow Hound), near Caen, France. Another milk run turned bad for that crew.

**18<sup>th</sup> Mission** No. 213 August 9, 1944- Elsenborn, Germany. Scheduled.

Wednesday- Got up at 3:30 a.m. for briefing at 4:00 a.m., didn't have time to eat breakfast. Our target was to be a truck factory just 7 miles South of Munich, Germany. As we reached the target area, the weather failed to clear up enough to find the target. We received a recall and were told to pick a target of opportunity. Before the Wing could find a target of opportunity, the weather got so bad that we had to separate to keep from colliding with each other. We became separated from the others and were still 1:20 hours inside Germany. We were alone when we broke out of the clouds and headed home at a lower altitude. We passed over a German fighter field and there were several aircraft parked around the field. Smith decided we should make a bomb run on the fields and knock out the figures. Copilot Starks and I told him we would not let him put us on a suicide mission. I told him to let me out before he made his bomb run on the fighter field and I would just walk home. I fully expected the fighters to take off and come after us but they didn't, probably out of fuel. Needless to say we didn't bomb the airfield and we were able to find some good railroads to bomb. We just flew along down the rails and our bombardier Robert Bell, hit a long strip of railroad and wiped it out. Bombing at that altitude was very effective. Later we saw a German fighter off in the distance coming toward us. We alerted everyone and had all our guns trained on him waiting for him to come into our 50 Cal. Range but for some reason he turned away. Probably out of fuel or ammunition. A short time later a P-51 came in and

checked on us but by this time we were near France and the Channel, he went on his way. We made it back to our base after seven (7) long hours.

Mission No. (none) August 10, 1944- (none). Not scheduled.

Thursday- Got up late and had an easy day answering mail and cleaning.

**19<sup>th</sup> Mission** No. 214 August 11, 1944- Brest, France. Scheduled.

Friday- Got up at the usual time for a meeting. Instead of a meeting we were sent to get our equipment for a mission to assist our troops in France. We loaded our equipment at 10:00 but waited around until 12:00 Noon before taking off. Our target was German troop concentrations at the American Combat Troops front lines. We went in at around 10,000-ft. altitude and could see the markers outlining our target. We hit the target with our 500-lb. Demolition bombs and made a tight run to miss almost all flack. I could see our bombs hitting the target while the bomb bay doors were still open. As we were leaving the area, we saw our troops shooting at the other B-17s coming in to drop their bombs. Later we learned that smoke from our bombs had drifted back toward our troops and the later B-17s were bombing the smoke and hitting our own troops. The mission was almost uneventful otherwise, the way I like it. This type of mission is called a milk run because they are short and easy. Flight time 6:10 hours.

Mission No. 215 August 12, 1944- Buc, France. Not scheduled.

Saturday- Scheduled to flight test a new B-17. We took the new B-17 up to 35,000-ft altitude and then put in a dive to lose altitude at a very fast rate. I think I have the bends all over because I began to ache all over. The pain didn't last long after we leveled off but my ears are still giving me problems. Guess I'll have to see the flight surgeon and get grounded again if they are not better tomorrow. Got a letter with pin up pictures of Adele in a bathing suit. Flight time 2:30 hours.

**20<sup>th</sup> Mission** NOT IN WORLD WAR 11 DIARY, written from memory and conversations with other crewmembers and Government records.

**20<sup>th</sup> Mission** No. 216 August 13, 1944- Le Manor, France. Scheduled.

Sunday- Got up early for breakfast had fried eggs and bacon. On Sundays we were given two eggs for breakfast. We could cook them for ourselves or a cook would prepare them any way we wanted. Sundays we usually had chicken, with ice cream for desert, for the Noon meal. Went to briefing for another "milk run" mission to Le Manor, France, located South of Paris on the Seine River. Took off around 9:00 a.m. with our new Copilot, Joe Vukovich on his first combat mission and Waist Gunner Seiler, on his 3<sup>rd</sup> mission, replacing Hayes as Waist Gunner. I was told that our regular Copilot, Starks was flying with a new crew as pilot, Hayes was on sick call. Our Bombardier Robert Bell had been with us for the last three or four missions, replacing Ray Rietschel. The weather was fairly clear so we headed for Le Manor, France, near Rouen just across the English Channel. Our target was a double railroad trestle that crossed the Seine River. Without the use of this railroad bridge it would be more difficult for the retreating Germans to cross the river and take their equipment with them or bring in more troops. It appeared to be a pretty peaceful day with little or no anti aircraft guns firing at us. As we were approached the target "IP" area I made a remark that if we were back at the base we would probably be having fried chicken and ice cream because it was almost 12:00 Noon and I was getting hungry. We were flying lead of our element and our Bombardier; Robert Bell would be controlling the bomb drop. When he threw the switch on his Norton Bombsight to drop our bombs and called "Bombs away," all of the bombardiers in our flight would toggle their bomb release switch and drop their

bombs, all at the same time. We turned at the "IP" and Smith leveled out the plane with the automatic pilot. Smith then turned the controls over to Bell and the Bombsight. The Bombardier is then flying the aircraft with the bombsight controls so he can line up the target. It was clear over the target so there would be little chance of missing. All at once flack became heavy all around the area and just moments before we had bombs away; we were hit in the cockpit area. The bombardier, Bell was able to maintain control and did drop our bombs and hit the target. Soon after bombs away, the bail out buzzer was turned on by the Pilot, Smith and soon after, the crew started bailing out. Since we were flying lead the formation tried to follow us through some erratic maneuvers the plane was making even though the autopilot was still engaged, I thought. They soon realized we were in serious trouble and changed their course. The cockpit area exploded into an inferno, being fueled by the oxygen system, hydraulic system, and the fuel transfer system. These systems are located in the cockpit, to the right of the upper turret (my station) and behind the Copilot's seat. When I first became aware that our oxygen system had exploded, I pulled my oxygen hose off the regulator instead of the mask so I would be breathing through the hose instead of breathing the flames directly, this probably saved my face and lungs from being more severely burned, than they were. I'm not sure how the Pilot, Smith and Copilot, Vukovich got out or how badly they were burned. My first instinct was to put the fire out, so I grabbed the fire extinguisher that was located within my reach near the door of the bomb bay. The small extinguisher didn't even faze the roaring fire. I decided it was time to get out of there because my clothing was on fire and I was being burned on my face, the back of my neck, wrists and buttocks. When I tried to pick up my chest type parachute, it popped open because the cover had burned off; the chute was quickly consumed. I left it burning; I was able to get out into the bomb bay out of the fire and back to the waist. I kept three extra parachutes, spare oxygen regulators, extra intercom mikes and phones and other necessary items in a duffel bag for just this sort of emergency. The Radio Operator, Spears had tried to jettison the door / escape hatch, the door didn't fall away so he squeezed through it and jumped. Seiler or Rogers kicked the door and it fell away and the Tail Gunner, Rogers bailed out. I picked up one of the spare seat parachute and headed for the escape hatch. My flying suit and chest chute harness was still burning so the Waist Gunner, Seiler started beating the fire and was able to extinguish what was left of my clothing. The seams and pockets of my flying suit were all that was left, everything else except the cloth under the chest chute harness had burned. My nose, face, wrists, the back of my neck and my buttocks were covered with blisters, some had already burst. Seiler then started helping me put the seat parachute on. The leg straps on the chute had been adjusted too short so we were unable to extend them so they would reach around my legs, all the excitement and the erratic flight of the plane didn't help. I glanced out the door once and could see houses and trees going by and thought we were going to crash at any moment. I told Seiler to get out so he jumped. I looked around and saw the ball turret turning and Ball turret Gunner, Britton climbing out. Britton stopped to beat out some of my smoldering clothing. He also tried to fasten the parachute leg straps; my bare legs were scratched and bleeding. Thinking we were too close to the ground to wait any longer, I told him to leave so he jumped. I was alone, at least in the back of the plane. I made a practice jump, made the motion of pulling the rip chord and grabbing my elbows to prevent the arm straps from pulling out from under my arms when the chute opened. With time running out, so I thought, I jumped, counted three a couple of times real fast, because I still expected to hit the ground at any moment. I pulled the rip chord, grabbed my elbows and hung on for dear life. My parachute opened with a severe jerk on my shoulders, evidently I had been tumbling and was above the chute when it opened and there were no leg straps to help absorb the shock. I made several big swings before settling down. My arms were hurting but I had been able to hang on but didn't dare relax my hold on my elbows there didn't to be any feeling in my arms. My parachute harness was pulled up over my head because the leg straps were not fastened. There was no way I could hope to control it. When I was able to see again, I was really surprised to see

that I was up near the altitude of the other airplanes and could still see them or another formation which was probably 15,000 to 20,000ft altitudes. I saw Fifinella go into a steep dive and crash into a house, I did not see any other parachutes in the sky. I don't know how we were able to stay with the aircraft at that altitude as long as we did without oxygen. When we were hit, I disconnected my oxygen hose, emptied the fire extinguisher, went back to the waist, picked out a parachute, had my clothing extinguished, tried to adjust the leg straps, watched Briton exit the Ball Turret, all before jumping and then finding I'm still too high. Later I learned that our B-17 had made several dives and then would climb back up and was probably flying in a circle, before it made the final dive and crashed. Our Copilot, Vukovich told me that Fifinella was on an erratic course flying up, down around and even passed back through the formation once. Joe also said that the plane was in a climb as we were receiving many hits and was beginning to stall out. Our pilot, Thomas P. Smith had left the controls to get out of the inferno in the cockpit, Joe reminded him to set the bail out switch before he left. Joe was so busy with the controls, fire and smoke and parachute problems so he didn't see where Smith went. Joe was able to force the controls forward to prevent the plane from stalling out, evidently the autopilot had been turned off. Joe told me that he dropped his chute while wrestling with the controls and had problems reaching it as the plane went into a dive. At the end of the last dive, before it crashed, with sheer effort, Joe was able to make it to the escape hatch, snap on his parachute and lean out into the air stream to let it pull him out of the hatch when Bell bailed out, Calder had already left, he didn't see where Smith went. He didn't have any idea of what was going on in the rear of the plane. He wasn't aware that there were spare parachutes in the waist of the plane so I wonder what he would have done if his parachute had fallen out of the plane. Joe received flash burns on his nose and face even though he was still wearing his oxygen mask; his parachute was not on fire. It took fifteen years after being burned for the pigment on his face to clear up. I have to assume we were diving below 10,000ft, getting oxygen, and climbing to a higher altitude. As I was descending in my parachute, what was left of my flying suit, seams and pockets and the chest chute harness, that I had not removed, fanned by my falling, started to burn again. At this altitude it would be a while before I would land because I couldn't collapse the parachute and I wasn't sure I would ever be able to hold in that long. For a while it seemed that I was gaining altitude but I'm sure I wasn't. I don't believe the altitude was affecting my thinking or breathing but I'm not sure. One time I thought, "all you have to do to end all this is to release your hold on your elbows and raise your arms," but I couldn't do that. About this time I realized that the whizzing noise in my ears was antiaircraft shells going by. They were shooting at the formation as it was leaving. The shells seemed to be getting closer as I fell. All at once the shooting stopped. Then after a short time, the shooting started again. Now the shells were passing on the other side of my parachute. I think the gunners stopped shooting long enough to let me pass through their line of sight. Since they are aware of my position, it was almost certain they would be waiting for me to land. Finally after what seemed to be a very long time, I landed in a fencerow. My right leg became entangled in a fencerow so I came to a sudden stop. I didn't have any trouble releasing my parachute, just raised my numb arms. Hanging by one leg up in the fencerow and my head on the ground I was greeted by several German soldiers hollering "hands up" in German, (which sounds a lot like it does in English). If my hands hadn't been busy trying to hold my body up, to take the pressure off leg, I would have given them a gesture; I did call them a few names that I can't repeat now. They finally untangled my foot and helped me out of the fencerow, I was sure the leg was broken. The German soldiers gathered my parachute, removed the chest chute harness and put them in the back seat of a small car setting in the small one lane road. The soldiers searched the fencerow for my 45 cal. Pistol even though I told them that I was not carrying one today. As they were helping me to the car, the parachute caught fire from the smoldering chest chute harness and was destroyed. One of the German Soldiers was able to reach in, grab the burning chute and drag it away from the car before any serious damage, except smoke, was done to the car. That was

the second time today that my parachute burned up, one in the airplane and one in a car on a French road. It was then that I discovered that I had landed in a fencerow around a building the Germans were using as an advanced field hospital. Two soldiers carried me inside where another soldier splinted my right leg and treated my burns by pulling of the loose flesh hanging from the burn areas. My buttocks had received the more severe burns, my face, neck, and wrists were burned and loose skin from the blisters had burst was hanging from them. The soldier that treated me spoke very good Limey English. He stated that he had a brother, who owned a butcher shop, in Cleveland, Ohio, USA. I told him that he had better wish he was in the USA too because they were losing this war.

Two German soldiers took charge of me, with the leg splint, my privates exposed, no clothing except a tee shirt and we left the field hospital in a car. They took me to an antiaircraft gun site, made me stand outside the car and told the gunners that I was flying the plane that they had shot down earlier. The aircraft that they took me to was not burned, it looked like an English Mosquito. The gunners at this site looked to be about 14 years old their uniforms consisted of a pair of brown shorts, no shirt, not much more than what I “didn’t” have on. I was then taken to a small building with nothing but a table and a bench where they were keeping my Radio Operator, Spears. Spears was the first one to bail out of the back of the plane and I was the last but here we were together again. The first thing Spears said to me was that he was wearing two suits of OD’s. He then pulled off the other suit and handed it to me. What a True Friend! Spears helped me remove the leg splint so I could get the pants on, then replaced the splint over the paint leg. That suit of Ods turned out to be the only clothing I ever received while a prisoner of the Germans. There is another story about this suit of Ods and General Eisenhower later. Spears didn’t remember landing in his parachute, he had a large knot on the back of his head but didn’t know how he got it. He evidently was unconscious when placed in the building and I was the first person he had seen since bailing out. Spears and I spent our first night as Germany’s Prisoners of War in that small building somewhere in France, wondering what had happened to the rest of our crew. He slept on the table and I slept on the bench.

We somehow learned that Pilot 1<sup>st</sup> Lt. Thomas P. Smith Jr. was killed August 13, 1944 on this Sunday Mission. Vukovich informed me 50 years later that the French underground members reported that Smith’s chute was open but he was already dead when he landed. Smith was buried in a small French cemetery and later moved to the American National cemetery in France. Five members of the crew were picked up by the under ground and managed to evade being captured by the German Army. I’m sure each of them has an interesting story to tell.

Copilot, Joseph Vukovich

Navigator, Alexander W. Calder

Ball Turret Gunner, Jess W. Britton

Waist Gunner, Calvin M. Seiler

Tail Gunner, Leonard Rogers

Three of the crew were captured and spent the remainder of the war in a POW Camp.

Bombardier, Robert E. Bell, Stalag Luft 1

Radio Operator, Delmer C. Spears, Stalag Luft IV, & Forced March.

Engineer, Upper Turret, Charles F. Sturgeon, Stalag Luft IV & I

Delmer C. Spears and I spent several months together at Stalag Luft IV, Prisoners of War Camp. The

camp was evacuated because it was about to be overrun by Allied Troops (Russians). During January or the first of February, POWs without beds were told to fall out in front of the barrack with their belongings. I thought we were being moved to a new compound that was built. When we were assembled, Spears didn't show up, we were marched off to Grosstychow, Stalag Luft I. I believe this is the train that was bombed in Berlin. You would expect a bombing experience something you would remember but there were so many things happening that they become hazy. The 40 & 8 is the capacity of the cars. They were designed to haul 40 men or 8 horses. We were on this train for several days. There was little or no food and water, several did develop dysentery. We were happy to arrive at Barth in one piece. The citizens of Barth greeted us throwing rocks and spitting at us as we marched to camp. Shortly after, February 1945, the remaining POWs in Stalag Luft IV were forced to march out of camp, under horrible weather conditions, without food or shelter, until the end of the war. It snowed and rained and was always bitter cold. They were forced to sleep in open fields or in open barns in wet, cold clothes. They scavenged for their food which was usually kohlrabi or potatoes left for cattle. They were lucky to get a piece of German black bread that was almost half sawdust. Sometimes they stole food, even chickens, from the farmers. After many weeks of marching they finally met the approaching American Forces, crossed the Ebb River at Bitterfield, Germany and were liberated. Spears was Finally Free! Taken to Camp Lucky Strike to prepare for the trip home to the Good Old USA. Spears and I met again at Camp Lucky Strike May 13, 1945. German Guards left Stalag Luft I late in April. Russian Troops finally camp into Barth to liberate the Camp around May 1<sup>st</sup>. We were flown out of Germany to France May 13, 1945, by the 91<sup>st</sup> Bomb Group in B-17s. I flew out of Germany occupying the upper turret, my position. Spears and I were assigned to different shipments out of France for the trip home. We didn't see or hear from each other again for about 46 years, even though we looked for each other.

Our new Bombardier Robert E. Bell was also interned at Stalag Luft I, but I was not able to locate him. We were in different compounds and there were close to 8,000 prisoners there. Ball Turret Gunner of Crew # 3349, Jess W. Britton always kept his camera ready, even during the times we were on missions. Jess W. Britton has the best collection of air combat and associated type photographs of anyone I know. He has given me several copies of them.

The above information up to August 13, 1944 was copied from my WWII diary written almost 55 years ago. There are probably many errors and omissions but to the best of my knowledge, this is an accurate account of the way things happen.

August 14, 1944- The beginning of another long story as a German Prisoner of War.

To my crew: If I have omitted any important events or anything that you wish to add, just write me a letter or give me a call and I will be glad to include it. Do have any questions? As time allows, I will add our reunion in Ontonagon later.

NOTE

February 16, 2000:

I have received additional information from Copilot Joe Vukovich concerning the flight of the aircraft after it took the hit that set it on fire. I will add his comments and any other that I receive from other crewmembers at a later date. C. F. Sturgeon

- - - - -

THE ABOVE STORY IS THE PROPERTY OF THE AUTHOR AND MAY NOT BE REPRODUCED WITHOUT THE AUTHOR'S CONSENT

[www.91stbombgroup.com](http://www.91stbombgroup.com)