



A PILOT'S STORY

BY ROBERT B. CLAY

Memoirs of Robert B. Clay

Lieutenant Colonel (Retired)
United States Air Force
8th Air Force
351st Bomb Group
509th Squadron



Prologue

On April 23, 1999 retired Lieutenant Colonel Robert B. Clay sat in his room of the hotel that was hosting the 54th Anniversary Convention of POW's held captive in Stalag Luft III during World War II. The war that changed the entire world and liberated it of Imperial Nazism had also created a generation of American heroes, the last of the breed of men and women that engaged in a truly worldwide conflict between good and evil. Their upbringing during the Great Depression had proved to be a necessary ingredient in developing the character and stamina needed to lead this nation and its Allies to victory.

This POW reunion was just like past conferences where the aging men reunited to share a common story, relive wartime experiences, and ruminate over the decreasing number of attendees. They represented the surviving prisoners from Stalag Luft III, the prison camp for downed airmen run by the Luftwaffe. During the war these men were stationed at one of many airfields somewhere in England, North Africa, or Italy. Robert Clay was stationed in Polebrook, England where the 351st Bomb Group launched their offensive attack on Hitler's Third Reich from across the English Channel.

After the War, the 351st Bomb Group Association created and published the publication of a newsletter called The Polebrook Post. Its intention was to preserve the comradeship established in service and commemorate members who sacrificed their lives in defense of the country. Daniel Surprise, former POW, and waist gunner on Clay's final mission over Berlin, came to visit him while he was in Kansas City during the conference. He carried the recent edition (March 1999) of the Polebrook Post to Clay's hotel room where the two old crewmates had planned to meet. Surprise had something he wanted to show his former captain. After a quick and cordial greeting Surprise asked Clay if he'd seen the recent edition of the Post. Clay responded that he had received it, but hadn't yet found time to look at it very closely. Surprise opened his copy and showed Clay the editorial section that contained a photograph of a crashed B-17. Clay nonchalantly glanced at the photo and replied, "If you've seen one crashed plane, you've seen them all." Surprise encouraged him to take a closer look. Clay studied the photo for a moment and noticed the plane had the familiar triangle J insignia on its tail, that being the insignia of the 351st Bomb Group. As Clay stared at the photograph of the B-17 wreckage a dark and long forgotten memory came sharply into view. He recognized the rolling farmland. He recognized the cottage tucked away in the woods. A flood of emotion filled his being as he realized that it was his plane, "Stormy Weather" that he was staring at. Tears stung the eyes of this old pilot as he thought how miraculous it was to see this scene after so many years.



"Stormy Weather"
Als, Denmark, June 1944

The follow are excerpts from the letters that accompanied the photograph:

Dear Mr. And Mrs. Stickford,

I have recently written to Ann Richards of Polebrook, England and she furnished me with your address concerning a 351st B-17 that crashed on the island of Als Denmark in 1944, but I shall start at the beginning of the story if I may.

My late uncle, Flight Sergeant Arthur Waite flew as an air gunner with the RAF Bomber Command on Halifaxes and Lancasters, on the night of 28/29 January 1944. His Lancaster JA-967 collided with another 'Lanc' HK-537 and crashed (also on the island of Als, Denmark). All crewmembers were killed and buried together in the town of Aabenra on 2nd February 1944. In 1996 I decided to document my uncle's life and have researched all his missions flown for the RAF and traced all the crews' families and gained photographs of them. During this research it came to light that there was a witness to Arthur's death by a seventeen-year-old boy by the name of Gunnar Hounsgaard. Gunnar is now 72 and has been responsible for erecting two large memorial stones near the spot where my uncle's aircraft crashed. Gunnar has become a close friend of ours and has sent me many photographs of the wreckage from Arthur's Lancaster. We have visited Denmark on a number of occasions during the past few years and laid flowers on his grave and sprinkled soil from Arthur's old garden here in the village of Little Addington, Northamptonshire, England. Gunnar continues to correspond with me and often includes interesting items concerning World War II. Now to the reason for writing to your good selves:

The last letter I received from Gunnar Hounsgaard included a photostat copy of a crashed B-17 which came down on the Island of Als. Gunnar wished to know where the aircraft was based in England. I have enclosed a copy of his letter giving all the relevant information on this B-17 – as you may read within his notes that all ten airmen survived. I can only trace one mission during summer '44 which was on 21st June...I would like to know if any of the remaining crew members survive today and if so would like a copy of their aircraft after the crash. I trace the 'Fortress' to the 351st by the "J" in a triangle on the tail. I'm afraid the copy I have included is not particularly clear but I believe I may be able to gain a good quality print from Gunnar at a later date. I have many books written on the subject of the 8th Air Force but this particular photograph is not included in any of them. I am informed by Gunnar that it was taken by the Germans during the clearing up operations, anyway I shall try and send one on as soon as I can if you wish. May I take this opportunity of thanking you for your time and look forward to hearing from you very soon. Until then I shall continue to try and find more information on this particular photograph. Thank you once again...

Yours in Friendship,
Mick Austin

GUNNAR HOUNSGAARD'S LETTER: (partial)

The copies of the airbase at Chelveston are very interesting. I wonder if the B-17 on the photo enclosed should have relation to this airfield. The pilot and one of the crew forced landed the aircraft in this island Als in the summer 1944 after a raid against Berlin. They tried to shoot the aircraft in fire with a signal pistol. Eight of the crew abandoned the aircraft by parachute. All 10 airmen survived and was POW until the end of the war...Look at the old peaceful house in the background. In the photo you see the Germans already have demolished some of the aircraft.

Yours in friendship, Gunnar

For 40 years after the end of the war Clay had not even spoken of his experience. He didn't wish to relive the anger and the bitterness that the war had caused him so many years ago. Only in the last decade had the 80 year old veteran decided that all those events were far enough in the past that it was like talking about a different time, a different world, a different person. Time had healed the wounds that had scarred his mind with an indelible memory of the tragedies of war. He slowly began to share his war-time experiences. Now before him, in a lonely hotel room in Kansas City was a kind of tangible evidence that substantiated all those stories that he had verbally related to his children, grandchildren and hundreds of school children for the past 10 years.

Robert B. Clay never imagined that the discovery of the photo and subsequent correspondence with eyewitnesses to the crash would be the beginning of the final chapter in his story. The experience, like those of many others, instill the current generation with awe and respect for a past generation, whose sacrifice and valor we can only read and dream about.

Here is his story...

THE PREPARATION

Farm Boy

I was born on the 29th of June 1918, at the home of my parents, Wallace A. Clay and Bertha G. Clay, living on the “South String” of Willard, Utah. My father was an entrepreneur fruit farmer who did very well until the early 1930's, when the Great Depression plus frozen crops forced him to lose two 30-acre fruit farms. If President F. D. Roosevelt's New Deal had not been legislated, we undoubtedly would have also lost our home, because Dad had kept the land and fruit farming equipment mortgaged to the hilt.



Clay fruit stand
Willard, Utah

Consequently the impact of the economic depression years (1930 to 1940) had an effect on my adolescent years on the farm. Looking back, I can better understand my feelings of inferiority and negative attitude toward school and life and the future, which, in turn, was a mental millstone around my neck. The clothes I wore were indicative of the financial condition of most farm boys. I wore striped overalls, which left me feeling envious of the boys who wore “real” pants. I used to think how nice it would be to be dress like that. One positive goal I did have was that I was not going to be a farmer, so after graduating from high school, I found out I could work my way through a two-year trade school course at Weber College. During that time I learned that the CAP (Civil Air Patrol) was giving a free flying course in Piper Cub planes culminating in a private flying license.



Clay at age 5

Flight Training

I had no problems during this flight training and I enjoyed the sensations of aerobatics and satisfaction of attaining a goal I had dreamed of since my youth. So when I saw the Army ads in 1940 asking young men to join the air corps and receive silver wings and a commission as 2nd Lieutenant, I decided to see if I could qualify. I learned that the first qualification was educational, that is, a minimum of a two-year academic college school or the equivalent. Since my trade school did not count, the alternative was two days of written tests of college-level courses including English, Mathematics, Science, History, etc., and writing answers to written instructions. The written description and examples given about the above categories were somewhat overwhelming, but I spent all my spare time for nearly a year preparing to take the test, which I passed with no problem. The second qualification was to undergo a strict physical examination, which I also passed with no problem.

The pace of the military before WWII was extremely slow, but in the fall of 1941, I and a half dozen other cadets were sworn in at Fort Douglas, Utah, and boarded a train for Ontario, California to begin training at Cal-Aero Academy.

We were met at the train by upperclassmen who ordered us to button all buttons, zip all zippers and told us our answers were to be only “yes, sir,” “no, sir,” or “no excuse, sir.” That was the beginning of military hazing, which I detested and which I never participated in as an upperclassman.



Robert B. Clay
Aviation was a dream of youth



Robert B. Clay
Cadet Training
Ontario, CA

Cadet punishment was meted out by a demerit system of “gigs.” Punishment was based on the weekly accumulation of gigs. An upperclassman could harass (haze) and even gig a lower classman for no valid objective reason. Each weekday was spent ½ day flying and ½ day ground school, and cadets with low test grades were given gigs. The punishment consisted of either restriction to the base on weekends, or walking “tours” (walking up and down a runway with a seat pack parachute banging on ones legs).

I never received a gig because of class work, but because I was less than cooperative with the hazing routines, I spent many weekends walking tours with those cadets who had trouble with the class work. One time while studying in my room I failed to jump to attention with enough enthusiasm to send my chair flying to the opposite end of the room, which apparently was a measurement of the degree of respect for the upper classman. For that I was given a demerit. I often thought that the best place to study was in the bathroom!

The following are examples of hazing lower classmen (LCM) by upperclassmen (UCM):

1. An LCM meeting an UCM must initiate a salute.
2. An LCM hurrying to class must slow to a walk upon meeting an UCM.
3. Before changing direction, an LCM must stop and make

- either a left face or a right face.
4. All commands which were not physically abusive must be obeyed.
 5. All violations by an LCM were subject to gigs by an UCM.

I soon decided to renounce my commission after the seven months of flying, and become an airline pilot. This plan came to a screeching halt on December 7, 1941 (Pearl Harbor Day). At the end of December, I finished my primary training flying PT-17's; spent two months at Bakersfield, California in basic training flying BT-13's; then two more months at Stockton, California in advanced training flying AT-6's where on April 24, 1942 (Class of 42-D) I received my silver wings and 2nd Lieutenant bars without a ground loop or any other flying misfortune.



Boeing-Stearman PT-17

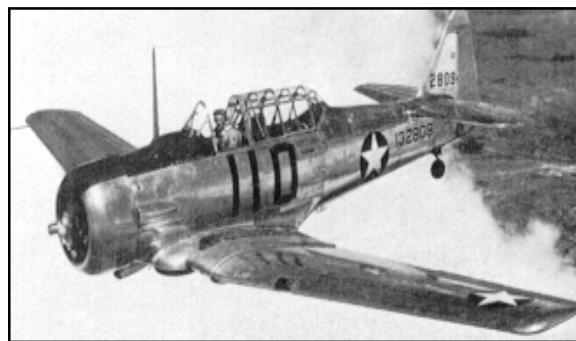
Because of the hazing by the upperclassmen, which were 2nd Lieutenant West Point grads, the day I graduated, I said to myself, "If I had known cadet life was so unnecessarily miserable, I would never have joined the air corps." But from then on, my lifestyle was so improved that I was glad that I had seen it through.

Following a graduation leave at home, in early May of 1942 I boarded a bus for Albuquerque, New Mexico, to fly Bombardier Cadets. I soon located a good 1936 yellow Ford V8 roadster with a rumble seat. It only cost \$300 and I drove it for 1 ½ years with no repairs. I sold it at Moscow, Montana in the fall of 1943 for \$300 prior to flying a B-17 overseas.



BT-13 Valiant

Also known as the "Vultee Vibrator" because of the rattle of the canopy during maneuvers, the *Valiant* was the Basic Trainer used by the Army Air Force during WWII. Representing the second of the three stages of pilot training (Primary, Basic, and Advanced), it was faster and heavier than the Primary Trainers. Training with this plane required the student pilot to demonstrate a higher skill level through the use of two-way radio communications with the ground, landing flaps, and a two-position variable pitch propeller.



AT6 "Texan" Advanced Trainer

The AT-6 advanced trainer was one of the most widely used aircraft in history. Evolving from the BC-1 basic combat trainer ordered in 1937, 15,495 Texans were built between 1938 and 1945. The USAAF procured 10,057 AT-6s; others went to the Navy as SNJs and to more than 30 Allied nations. Most AAF fighter pilots trained in AT-6s prior to graduation from flying school.

Soon after starting to fly Bombardier Cadets in AT-11's (which carried Norden bomb sights), actor Jimmy Stewart, who was inducted into the Air Corps as 1st Lieutenant, was assigned to fly Bombardier Cadets just like the rest of us pilots. My impressions of Jimmy Stewart were that he shunned publicity and wanted no special treatment. He slept and showered in a standard BOQ (Bachelor Officers Quarters). He even played tennis with the rest of us on the courts just north of the BOQ area! Often, if a General or some other person of importance vis



AT-11s
Albuquerque, NM

The AT-11 was the standard WW II bombing trainer; about 90 percent of the more than 45,000 AAF bombardiers trained in AT-11s. Like the C-45 transport and the AT-7 navigation trainer, the Kansan was a military version of the Beechcraft Model 18 commercial transport. Modifications included a transparent nose, a bomb bay, internal bomb racks, and provisions for flexible guns for gunnery training.

Student bombardiers normally dropped 100-lb. sand-filled practice bombs. In 1943, the AAF established a minimum proficiency standard of 22 percent hits on target for trainees. Combat training missions were flown taking continuous evasive action within a ten-mile radius of the target and final target approaches had to be straight and level and no longer than 60 seconds. After September 30, 1943, these missions were generally flown using the Norden Bombsight and the C-1 automatic pilot, the aircraft being guided by the bombardier student during the bombing run.

ited the field, Stewart was asked to join in the formalities. He didn't want anything to do it, but instead spent his time as just another pilot in the military.

Although my flying record to this point was without incident, there is one memorable experience in Albuquerque when I nearly got myself in trouble. Flying was scheduled in six-hour increments: 6:00 PM until midnight, midnight until 6 AM, 6 AM until noon, and noon until 6 PM (in the summer, this time slot was canceled due to rough air). We all took our turn flying each time slot.

After the bombardier instructor flew with two cadets for about 6 weeks, he would assign the cadets to drop bombs without him on board the plane. One cadet would man the Norden bombsight while the other would be in the tail section photographing where each bomb hit. Each cadet would drop six bombs (one at a time). The bombs were about 6 inches in diameter by four feet long, painted light blue with 2 or 3 lbs. of black powder in the tail. When the bomb hit the ground, it would fire the black powder, producing a bright flash at night and plume of black smoke during the daytime. The target was a 500-foot-long bulldozed cross in the desert with a pyramid-shaped wood "shack" at the center (about 20 ft. square) while the bulldozed trenches were about two blocks long with electric lights every 100 ft. on short poles in the trench.

Once while flying the midnight to 6 AM shift, with two cadets and no instructor, our second bomb knocked the lights out. If that happened we were instructed to circle for up to an hour while a maintenance worker fixed the problem. After an hour we would fly back to the airfield for our second three-hour mission. It was about 2:00 AM so I set the plane on autopilot flying in a big circle so I could keep the target area in view. After about a half hour, I dozed off. I was suddenly awakened when the engines began to miss and sputter. I knew in a flash that the carburetors had iced up so I hit both carburetor heat levers. The heat immediately melted the ice, flooded the engine with water and both engines went completely dead with the props windmilling. In about 10 seconds both



Lt. Clay
Albuquerque, New Mexico

engines cut back in, and I checked the altimeter -- we had gone from 10,000 ft. to 8,000 ft., the target lights were still out and it was time to head for home. The cadets were both asleep and never knew what happened. You might guess that I never reported the incident.

Another time I was flying at night and in the middle of the mission, I lost all electrical power, so I headed back to Albuquerque. Since I had no radio, I buzzed the control tower and received a green light. When I landed, a tow tractor was at the end of the runway so I did not taxi in to the parking area. I told the tractor crew chief that the cadets had hand cranked the landing gear down, but it had landed OK. I was sitting in the pilot seat filling out the logbook and all of a sudden I heard a loud "bang!" The tug had jerked both wheels out from under the plane, dropping it on the runway. The next day I was called into the CO's office for interrogation. I was told I could be court marshaled for the accident. I asked how come and he told me that the crew chief checked out the electrical system and everything worked okay. I said nothing worked, no radio, no instrument lights, no flying light, no landing lights, and no hydraulic pump. But I never heard another word about it. That is the only plane I damaged during my military career except the B-17 I crash-landed in Denmark.

In the fall of 1942, the bulletin board called for volunteers to transfer to Carlsbad, NM and open up a new Bombardier training field. Several of us decided to volunteer and I loaded up my yellow Ford convertible and drove down to Carlsbad.

It turned out to be low altitude bombing with a fixed bombsite and the cadets were all newly commissioned 2nd Lt. Navigators. Here's how it worked: On the way out to the bomb range, the navigator would calculate the wind by making two runs at 140 mph at 90 degrees apart and noting the drift, then reading the wind direction and velocity from a table. He would set up the calculated reading for the wind, 140 mph, 500 ft. above the target and the direction of travel. The pilot would fly at 140 mph straight at the target and when the cross hairs of the sight crossed the target, the navigator would toggle out a bomb. Needless to say, the shacks took a beating at that low altitude.

I remained in Carlsbad for five months. While there I was promoted to 1st Lieutenant.

One memorable experience and for reasons unknown to me, I was chosen to fly to El Paso to fly Carlos Romulo back to Carlsbad so he could help the War Effort by giving an inspirational and motivating oration about his involvement in defending the Philippine Islands against the Japanese. Colonel Carlos Romulo was an aide-de-camp to General Douglas MacArthur and is considered to be the last man to have escaped from the Japanese in Bataan in a last minute rescue ordered by General MacArthur himself. Romulo had written a book entitled "I Saw the Fall of the Philippines." A day later I flew him up to Alamogordo, New Mexico as a continuation of this speaking tour. He was gracious as he told me he felt very secure flying with me. He said he wished I could be his pilot for his entire speaking tour and before deplaning he presented me with an autographed copy of his book.

That winter Lt. Honeywell, a fellow pilot, and I checked out a plane to fly to Albuquerque for a weekend. I was to fly the plane up and Honeywell was to fly back. Sunday afternoon on the way back to Carlsbad, we encountered rough air over the mountains southeast of Albuquerque and Honeywell opened the throttle and put the nose down, making the ride much rougher. I asked him



1st Lieutenant Clay

why he was doing this and he answered that he wanted to hurry and get to smoother air. Since I outranked him, I took over the controls, telling him that he did not understand what we had been taught in ground school; namely, that in turbulent air he should have slowed down, not sped up because updrafts and downdrafts put much more stress on the wings at higher speeds. We were good friends and he never resented my taking over.

B-17 Training

Pilots in the training command did not get promoted as soon as pilots in combat, so there was much griping about the “lucky” guys in combat. In the early spring of 1943 a bulletin board notice called for pilots to volunteer for B-17 transition training at Hobbs Field, New Mexico. Out of all the complainers only five (out of 50) of us signed up to transfer out.

The Hobbs B-17 transition lasted little more than a month and then I was assigned to a B-17 photo unit at Colorado Springs, CO. I only recall a couple of memorable incidents while stationed at Hobbs. Oddly enough one memory was that while on a cross-country flight over Texas, we landed at Dallas. Upon deplaning I had never experienced the hot humid atmosphere of the South. Transitioning from the cool air at 10,000 ft. to near sea level was like walking into a steam room.

The other memory I have of Hobbs was far more serious than the first. During a night cross country flight the B-17 crew consisted of an instructor and three trainees. I and another pilot were in the nose taking in the sights of cities and noting hundreds of natural gas flare-offs (at each oil well) when I noticed lightning at a distance. Pilots always fly around thunderstorms. The lightning kept getting closer and the air rougher, when suddenly we were bouncing around in the nose, grabbing the bombsight and anything else solid since there were no seat belts in the nose. After the air smoothed out I went up to the cockpit to ask why did we fly through the thunderhead and the instructor said he did it so we could gain the experience. He should have been court marshaled for being so careless because even B-17's have lost a wing in a thunderstorm.



**1st Lieutenant Clay
Colorado Springs, CO**

The two months at the Colorado Springs Photographers school was a pleasant interlude since we flew very little, but completed a course in photography. Each student was issued a Speed Graphic camera and all the film we wanted. The only requirement was that we each had to develop the negatives, then print the photos. One month, in order to qualify for flight pay, we flew over Pike's Peak in a B-17.

At the end of photographic school it was decided by the Air Corps that a B-17 would not make a good photo reconnaissance plane and the program was canceled.

First Crew

In the early summer of 1943 I was assigned to Moses Lake, Washington. Arriving there, I was given orders to report to the 401st Bomb Group at Glasgow, Montana to meet my combat crew and commence phase training. The 401st was one of the first double strength groups flying two 18-plane formations rather than one. Thus, each of the four squadrons of the 401st had a separate training field of about 16 B-17's.

My newly assigned crew consisted of Lt. Emerson, copilot; Lt. Pullen, navigator; Lt. Walaszek, bombardier; Sgt. Jilcott, flight engineer; Sgt. Belsinger, radio operator; Sgts. Surprise and Riley, waist gunners; Sgt. De Marie, ball turret gunner; and Sgt. Travis, tail gunner. It was a somewhat awkward situation in that I outranked most of the squadron command personnel (who were still 2nd Lts.) and yet I was treated like the other pilots who had received their silver wings one year later than I had.



First Crew

Standing: Pilot, Lt. Robert B. Clay; Co. Pilot, Lt. James W. Emerson; Waist Gunner, S/Sgt. James W. Riley; Waist Gunner, S/Sgt. Daniel Surprise; Navigator, Lt. Marshal R. Pullen; Bombardier, Lt. Stanley A. Walaszek
Kneeling: Radio Operator, T/Sgt. Frank H. Belsinger; Ball Turret, S/Sgt. Michael DeMarie; Top Turret/Engineer, S/Sgt. Charles B. Jilcott; Tail Gunner, S/Sgt. Franklin L. Travis

The summer of 1943 was spent getting ready for combat. Nearly every day we flew and trained as a crew. In descending importance, we flew day formation, night formation, day cross-country, night cross-country, air to ground gunnery, takeoffs and landings, emergency procedures, etc. On the ground we studied the engineering of the B-17, friend and foe aircraft identification, shot skeet, practiced with the Colt 45 pistol, and learned to hate the Japanese and Germans. This was easily accomplished because the targets that we were shooting at were images of Japanese and German soldiers. Missing the target only made me more determined to try harder at the next round of target

practice. This form of conditioning, along with the other propaganda that the military used, soon led me to the point that I would just as soon shoot a German as look at one. It wasn't just Hitler that was the enemy, but the entire German citizenry. It wasn't until the end of the war that my hatred toward the German people changed. More on that later.

I never drove further than the six miles to the little town of Glasgow. Once I had to go to the Glasgow jail and pick up one of my drunken waist gunners.

The most memorable event was a flight to check out the maximum height our planes could attain. At 31,000 ft. altitude, we encountered cold stable air, which produced a heavy contrail from the plane's engines. I kept climbing until the plane "mushed" out at 32,000 ft. (the plane was still flying straight and level, but we kept losing altitude). As I dropped down below the contrail altitude, I decided to have some fun. (At a contrail altitude the atmosphere is so saturated with moisture that it causes the water vapor from the engine exhaust to condense, leaving a stable white vapor cloud behind each engine.) I climbed back to 31,000 ft. and started a shallow but steady left turn. About three minutes later I was back at the beginning of my circular contrail so I quickly dipped the plane into a shallow right turn. By maintaining my 31,000 ft. altitude, I was soon back to my starting point. I pushed the nose down and dove out of the contrail air layer, leaving a large white figure eight against a solid blue sky, with no contrail path going into or from the figure eight. When we landed about 45 minutes later, a perfect looking "8" was drifting to the East. That week the Glasgow newspaper had a picture of it on the front page.

Although one B-17 from our squadron crashed, I never had any serious problems. Early in October 1943 we received orders to transfer the 401st Bomb Group to England. I sold my roadster and sent home a box of stuff I had no need for.

To England

Our first stop was at Scott Field where we traded our B-17F for a brand new B-17G (with the nose turret), which I named the "Clay Pigeon." Heading east we circled Niagara Falls and spent a couple of days at Bangor, Maine, then on to Gander, Labrador. We spent several days there waiting for good weather to fly over the North Atlantic. The night we took off, over 100 planes headed East at two-minute intervals. Our bomb bay contained a 500 gallon gas tank on one side and hundreds of cigarettes on the other side. The extra gasoline was needed for the 12 hour transatlantic flight. The cigarettes were given to the personnel in the military who smoked, which looking back, seemed to have been just about everyone. Two habits were formed by most men who joined the service, smoking, and cursing.



**Polebrook Airbase
3 enlisted men at left
Hap Arnold at the wheel, unknown, Capt. Clay on back of Jeep**

A few hours into the 10-hour flight, I noted a huge cloud ahead, so I decided to fly over it. I called the crew on interphone and told them to go on oxygen. A few minutes later, the waist gunner I had retrieved from the Glasgow jail called back and said he could not find his oxygen mask. I angrily told him to stick the oxygen hose in his mouth and not go to sleep, or "you might wake up dead." I never heard another word from him until we landed at the designated Ireland airport without incident.

The next day we flew to central England and found out that half of the double strength 401st Group was being sent to establish a single strength bomb group (the 351st), making it easier for the 401st to begin operations. Since I was a sore thumb to the 401st, because I outranked most of the squadron command personnel (who were still 2nd Lts.), they were happy to transfer me over to the 351st, stationed at Polebrook. My crew and seven other crews were assigned to the 509th Squadron.

We had just settled in with the 351st when we were alerted to fly a combat mission. Custom decreed that I was to fly “Tail End Charlie” (more about that later). As I was climbing up to the assembly point, my left outboard gas tank (in the wing behind the #1 engine) was siphoning fuel out of the tank air vent. This was a fairly common occurrence and could be stopped by momentarily interrupting the flow either by slowing the plane (to reduce the partial vacuum above the wing); pulling the nose up sharply (to put more g’s on the gas being sucked up through the overflow/air vent); or waiting until the tank was more or less empty, etc. After about 15 minutes of trying to stop the flow of gas and noting the significant loss by the #1 fuel gauge, I decided to return to the base at Polebrook. Upon landing, I was surprised to be met by an irate Group CO and the 509th Squadron CO. They were upset that even before my first mission I had acquired “battle fatigue.” They complained that the 401st BG had transferred all the misfits to the 351st Bomb Group. They were going to send the plane up right now and see if it still siphoned gas. While I was being chewed out, a staff car pulled up and told them the mission had been scrubbed and the planes were on the way back. I never heard another word about the incident.

A couple of days later, I completed my first combat mission to Solingen in the Ruhr Valley of Germany. Ironically, that first mission was, in many ways, my worst mission.

COMBAT

First Mission – Tail End Charlie

At this point in the war, theoretically, every crew would complete 25 missions and not return, but in reality about one fourth of the crews were lost on their first few missions, principally because of flying “Tail End Charlie” (TEC) and lack of experience; another one fourth were lost during the remaining 25 and about half finished up and went home. Flying TEC you were more vulnerable to being attacked from the rear by German fighters. The tighter the formation, the more protected each plane was because of the coverage of all the 50 caliber guns on each plane.

The high and low Squadron leaders fly on the Group leader, the second flight leader flies on the Squadron leader and TEC flies on the second flight leader on the outside of the 18-plane formations. Many factors, i.e., throttle changes, turbulence, anxiety, etc., produce an accordion effect on the formation with TEC coping with the whip-lash effect of being in last place. It can be compared to the stop and go on an overcrowded freeway, except you can’t stop.

Here is a typical oscillation: As TEC, I am closing in on my flight leader, so I ease back the throttles — I’m still gaining so I pull the throttles all the way back — I’m still gaining because he had de-throttled before I did, so I pull the nose up — I’m still gaining so there is nothing to do but pull the nose up until I can no longer see my flight leader — as the nose starts to mush down, my flight leader comes into view 100 yards ahead and accelerating away — so full throttle. This sequence can happen over and over every few minutes. The only way to break the chain is to drop back and smooth out the oscillations — maybe that’s why many new replacement crews never survived their first few missions.

In the fall of 1943 my copilot Emerson was grounded with bad ears, so I was given a new replacement, Lt. Cavanaugh, son of WWI Medal of Honor winner Sgt. Cavanaugh. I flew the plane in the “Tail End Charlie” position until we were over the English Channel, and then turned the plane over to my new copilot. He over-corrected and within two minutes he was completely out of position, so I took over. I gave him a couple of more chances, then resigned that he was yet ready to take the controls, and flew the rest of the mission myself. We encountered enemy fighters and flak. Endless flak, the only time I remember seeing colored flak -- red, yellow, and green. I swear the lead navigator led us down the Ruhr Valley. On the way back, we could see a jagged hole in the mid-

dle of the right wing, where an 88mm AA shell passed through without exploding. (The right wing was replaced.) After six hours of hell, I landed but was so exhausted that I could barely walk. That night as I recalled events of the “nightmare” mission, I concluded that I probably would not last five missions, let alone the 25 missions required to complete my tour. Because I was a 1st Lt. (among mostly 2nd Lts.), after about four missions I was advanced from Tail End Charlie to a flight leader (i.e., the lead plane of a three-plane V formation). At that time I vowed that if I ever became a leader, I would not be a “throttle jockey.”

The Interim

On December 31, 1943 our group was assigned to lead the wing to Bordeaux, France to bomb a German submarine pen. Our 351st CO, Col. Hatcher, flew the lead ship along with the group bombardier and group navigator. As a result of Col. Hatcher’s plane being downed, and the subsequent reshuffling of personnel, I was moved up to Squadron Operations Officer for the 509th Bomb Squadron. I proceeded to designate my crew and Lt. Brooksby’s crew as “lead crews.” A lead crew would fly a mission only when our squadron was assigned to lead the Group (18 planes) or the Wing (54 planes). At the same time I replaced Walaszek with George Arnold, whom we called “Hap,” and made him the Squadron Bombardier. Since a lead crew only flew a mission once every two or three weeks, I had to give, the “Clay Pigeon” to a new replacement crew (Lt. Neuberg, who inherited the “Clay Pigeon”). About five missions later my old plane was shot down and I never heard what happened to the crew.

In the meantime, the lead ships required the ability to bomb by radar if necessary because of cloud under cast. Consequently, these lead planes were maintained at Wing Headquarters and flown to each group the afternoon before a scheduled mission.

The various subdivisions of a Bomb Squadron such as armament, engineering, etc., exist only for support of flying missions. The Squadron Operations Officer schedules and controls the assignment of crews and planes when a mission is scheduled. The 509th Squadron had about 20 crews and B-17's and totaled about 800 men. I had a private room with my own telephone and was kept busy every day with bombing missions, practice missions, training sessions, staff meetings, discipline of crews, certifying flying hours, arranging R&R, etc.

In the early spring of 1944 I led a six-plane “milk run” (as easy as the milkman making a milk delivery) a low-level attack across the English Channel on the French coast. Photographs showed several launch sites under construction. After I was shot down, I learned that they were launch sites for the V1 rocket-launched, unmanned airplane that once up to speed with the launching rocket, a pulse jet would be used for propulsion. The Germans mass produced these and used them extensively along the French coast to launch across the Channel.

At 12,000 ft. altitude the German flak was much more accurate than at 25,000 ft. and we took shrapnel from a near burst. Since we had seen no enemy fighters, at bombs away I broke up the formation by violent evasive action and headed back across the Channel. Soon I noticed oil streaming off the wing behind the left inboard (#2) engine, so I feathered the #2 prop. I started a gradual descent toward the white cliffs of Dover. I was feeling at ease because with three engines and no bomb load there was little cause to worry, when I noticed the oil pressure on the left outboard (#1) engine was falling fast. I immediately pushed the feather button, but there was not enough oil left for the electric feathering motor to pump the engine oil into the prop hub, which in turn would force the piston in the hub to rotate the prop blades to the feathered position (i.e., the prop blades parallel to the flight path). The natural forces on a “windmilling” prop tend to drive the prop to a low pitch or high rpm condition so the outboard engine started to “run away.” The rpm tachometer rose past the 2500 red line and then past 3000 rpm.

Immediately I knew I had feathered the wrong prop. (The oil from the runaway engine #1 had run down inside the wing, then drained out behind #2), so I pushed the unfeather button of the feathered inboard but it would not unfeather (the oil in the nose cylinder of the prop shaft is kept warm by circulating oil when the engine is running, but when the prop is feathered, and the engine is stopped, the oil becomes cold and thicker than molasses and the same electric motor in reverse could not move the viscous engine oil out of the prop hub).

Now I was in big trouble because the runaway #1 was absorbing the equivalent work of one of my two good engines and turning it into friction heat inside the now smoking runaway engine, leaving me with the equivalent of only one good engine. Meanwhile the runaway engine increasingly vibrated the entire plane until I was afraid it would start popping the rivets that held the surface aluminum sheeting on the frame of the plane. I was now over the coast of England looking for an emergency landing field. They were so well camouflaged I couldn't spot one. So I broke radio silence and called for help on a special radio. A man answered that I was directly over an emergency field. I still couldn't see it, so I called again. This time the voice said "follow me." Twenty seconds later a P47 dove past my nose headed for the ground. I put my nose down and all of a sudden I could see a grass landing strip. I banked around and landed with no altitude to spare. As soon as we stopped rolling, we all scrambled out to find that the runaway engine had burst into flames. The crew started using the onboard fire extinguishers on the engine, but to no avail. The fire kept getting larger and I thought what irony, we survived possible disaster intact, but now the plane would be destroyed as soon as the gas tanks ignited.

At that moment someone shouted, "Look what's coming." Across the field a team of white horses pulling a red wagon was coming toward us at a full gallop. As it braked to a stop we could see it was an antique fire wagon. Two men on a hand pump and one man with a hose quickly doused the engine fire with a large stream of water. That incident always reminds me of the unsung resolute spirit of the English people who stood up to Hitler and helped make it possible for the Allies to win the war.

On my 12th mission I led the Wing over Germany. My copilot was Lt. Col. Cobb, a Wing staff officer. He told me at briefing to lead the best I could and if he had any suggestions he would let me know. Takeoff and assembly were uneventful. At 28,000 feet over Germany, clouds covered our primary target and secondary target. In the distance, I could see a large break in the under cast. We were approximately 10,000 ft. above the clouds and as we approached the opening it was like a slow motion uncovering of the landscape. At first we could only see green fields and trees. Then, buildings began to increase in number. (Most of the roofs in Germany are covered with red tile.) The near field of view showed increasing red across the full width of the cloud opening. Suddenly it dawned on me that we were almost over a very large city, which meant anti-aircraft (AA) guns. I knew we should not risk AA damage unless we were on a bomb run, so I started the gentle left turn necessary to maintain the 54-plane formation.

Within about 50 seconds about 100 bursts (called a box barrage) of black flak appeared off to the right, at our altitude and just where we would have been if we had flown straight ahead. So far, so good. Gentle turns are the only evasive action which can keep a wing in good formation. Should I start a right turn, or hold the left turn? Ordinarily, evasive action involves a turn one way, then a turn back the other way. I knew that it took the Germans two minutes to follow the formation by radar, and then set the time for the AA shells to detonate at the selected altitude, and finally the flight time for the shell reach our altitude. I reasoned that the Germans would assume I would zigzag, so I kept turning left. Another barrage of flak appeared off to the right. I kept turning left and the flak kept blossoming on my right. After a 180-degree turn I went back the direction I had come from. Behind me the sky was black with flak, but not one plane had been hit. My evasive actions proved successful and I felt a sense of personal victory for having outguessed those jokers below!



**12th Mission
February 21, 1944 (Clay Pigeon 42-38032)
Lead Crew.**

**Lt. Pullen, Navigator; Capt. Clay, Pilot; Lt. Col. Cobb, Air Commander;
Capt. Baird, Bombardier**

Soon we saw a column of smoke erupting through the clouds and we dropped all 54 x 4 tons (216 tons) of bombs into the smoke column. Ironically, I heard later that Lt. Col. Cobb received a commendation for leading a successful mission under adverse conditions without losing any aircraft.

With 16 of 25 missions completed, the spring of 1944 found me in good spirits. The Allies were controlling the skies; we now had P-51 fighter cover in and out of targets deep into Germany; most of my friends which had been transferred with me from the 401st BG were finishing up and going home; the weather was much nicer; I had recently been promoted to Captain; and I felt that my chances of going home were very good. The new replacement crews needed to fly 35 missions to complete a tour of duty because of decreasing losses on bombing missions.

Final Mission

The “Final Mission” as reported in the book, *The 351st Bomb Group in WWII*, by Peter Harris and Ken Harbour.

May 24th 1944 MISSION NO. 133

Another mission was flown to Berlin by eighteen planes. They were led by Captain Clay and Lt. Hatten with Lt. Pullen as navigator and Lt. Arnold as bombardier. The bombs fell in a widely scattered pattern over the eastern edge of the city. No enemy fighters came close enough to be identified, but flak over Berlin was intense and accurate.

The lead ship 42-38005 piloted by Captain Clay abandoned the lead position, because of a feathered engine, shortly before the target. This ship was reported as flying with the low group of the wing for a time after the target, but it finally left the formation altogether and failed to return.

I’m sure that each member of our crew would write widely differing accounts of our final mission because each individual sees the world through a different pair of eyes.

On the 23rd of May 1944, the group was alerted for a mission the following morning. Since the 509th Squadron was to lead the 351st Group, I assigned my crew and myself to the lead ship, which had been flown over from Wing HQ that afternoon. It was equipped with a newly improved Norden bombsight, which included an auto-leveling gyro, markedly increasing the accuracy of a bomb strike. My bombardier, Lt. “Hap” Arnold, told me it was worth about \$50,000.

This was to be my 17th mission, but I was not worried about it because the 8th Air Force loss ratio of one in 25 missions flown in 1943 when I had arrived had decreased to one in 30 and was approaching one in 35 missions flown. In addition, I had survived several potentially disastrous predicaments with luck and good management and, like everyone who continually faces danger, I was resigned to my fate with little apprehension to interfere with my ability to cope with any situation.

About midnight on May 23, 1944 I was awakened by my phone ringing — it was Lt. Wimmer, an assistant operations officer from another squadron asking if he could fly the tail gun position in my plane (the group lead ship utilized a pilot in the tail gun position to keep the pilot assessed of events and conditions which were beyond the sight of his lead pilot position). I explained to him I was not pleased to be awakened and besides, I already had assigned a pilot from my squadron.

Wimmer persisted, saying he wanted to get his 25 missions in and go home, so I relented and told him okay, for I knew most pilots did not relish getting in a mission as a tail gunner.

The next morning, May 24, 1944, I discovered my copilot, Lt. Emerson, was grounded, so my crew now consisted of myself, pilot; Lt. Hatten, copilot; Lt. Pullen, navigator; Lt. Arnold, bombardier; Sgt. Jilcott, flight engineer; Sgt. Belsinger, radio operator, Sgts. Surprise and Travis, waist gunners; Sgt. DeMarie, ball turret gunner, and Lt. Wimmer, tail gunner.

In the briefing room when the curtains were pulled back showing the red line out over the North Sea then into Big B (Berlin), no common groan was heard as had occurred in January of 1944 when the first Big B raid was unveiled. We had been there several times during the intervening five months and we all knew it was a tough target, but not a particularly dangerous one because we now had P-51 cover all the way.

Nothing unusual happened as we assembled and headed east over the North Sea on a course that would minimize the time we would be over enemy territory. Two things of note as we turned right over the German coast: First, we enjoyed a 100 mph tail wind, and second, the IP (initial point of the bomb run) was on the same beeline as the route to the target.

About three minutes from bombs away, the oil pressure on the #2 (left inboard) engine started down, so I feathered the prop. Ordinarily I would have aborted and let the deputy leader (a wing man) take over, but I was afraid the time was too short for the deputy bombardier to successfully synchronize on the target so I simply upped the manifold pressure to about 40 inches on the good engines to maintain the prescribed airspeed.

After bombs away, I aborted, cut the manifold pressure to 34 inches and made a 180-degree turn and headed back toward the coast, thus avoiding the extra distance to the rendezvous point.

The best evasive action at that time was to vary altitude because the German anti-aircraft artillery shells did not have proximity fuses, rather their flak exploded after a preset time. Because diving and climbing pulled the formation apart, the only evasive action allowed by the lead ship was gentle horizontal turns. So it was sort of exhilarating to fly back across Berlin alone, doing altitude evasive action with flak bursting on all sides and all altitudes.

After clearing the Berlin area, I settled into a 110 mph gas-saving slow descent. The 100-mph tailwind going in was now a headwind going out. The bomber formations above and to the right gradually passed us up. By the time we reached the North Sea coastline, we were alone except for a P-51, which dove down and dipped his wing, then headed west. Up until now, I felt no particular worry about our predicament. However, I did feel almost naked and alone at 20,000 feet over the enemy coast. Suddenly, the #4 engine (right outboard) started to run away and pushing the feathering button had no effect.

Now, the situation was serious. With the 100-mph headwind we were almost standing still with respect to the coastline far below. Months before, the crew had voted to never ditch in the North Sea, if there was any possible alternative. With that in mind, I turned parallel to the coastline, hoping we could make it to Holland or France before going down.

My mind was racing to figure out some options when I recalled that even though Sweden was officially neutral, some bombers that had made it to Sweden somehow were flown back to England.

Without a word, I made a 180-degree turn and asked Lt. Pullen for the heading to Sweden. Now we had a 100-mph tailwind and I felt better.

At about 18,000 feet we ran into clouds so I went on instruments. Now that fighter attacks were improbable, I ordered the men to throw everything possible overboard — flak suits, guns, ammo, etc. Lt. Arnold asked if that meant his new self-erecting Norden bombsight. “Especially that,” I said. One of the gunners asked if he could shoot his ammo. When I asked why, he answered, “We were told to shoot bursts of five seconds or less to prevent the guns from overheating and jamming and I’d like to see how long it takes for that to happen.” So I said “OK.” I could feel the familiar faint chatter of the 50-caliber for about 20 seconds before it stopped. Later, he told me that the barrel was smoking and too hot to handle before it jammed.

A few minutes later, at about 13,000 feet, in a straight-ahead slow letdown, the plane was surrounded and racked with black balls of flak. We were out of it in a few seconds with no apparent direct hits. Later I determined that we had flown over Flensburg, a German city near the Danish border. Within two or three minutes the #3 engine (right inboard), damaged from the flak, started losing oil pressure, so I feathered it.

There we were at 12,000 feet, on instruments, with both inboards feathered and the right outboard windmilling. The situation was now critical. Where would we be when we broke out of the clouds? No time to worry about that, because I noticed a conflict in the instrument readings. The tiny plane on the blind flying artificial horizon looked okay, but the airspeed was increasing at a steady rate.

For a few seconds I couldn't understand what was happening; then in a flash I understood the problem. Earlier in the year, I had held a series of engineering classes for pilots and I remembered that the two inboard engines ran each vacuum pump for the pilot's blind flying gyro instruments, and now both inboards were feathered. So the airspeed indicator was right and the flight instruments were wrong.

When a plane starts to dive, the natural instinct is to pull back on the wheel, but if you are in a turn the plane rapidly rolls over and goes into a vertical dive. Overcoming my instincts, I held the wheel, as nearly as I could, to a straight-ahead wings level position. The airspeed crawled up to 200 . . . 240 . . . 260 (the red line). I had never pushed a B-17 to that limit. Meantime, as the airspeed had gone up, the noise increased in intensity and pitch. The controls became tighter and tighter. I strained my eyes into the white void ahead hoping we would break out of the clouds in time to avoid a crash. The full view came in a flash — ocean straight ahead. We were in a 45-degree dive with wings approximately vertical. I rolled out and zoomed back up to the cloud base about 4000 ft. above the water. Ahead was water and behind was land. I had no choice but to make the 180-degree turn back to the land.

Passing over the seashore I gave the order to bail out. Arnold and Pullen crawled out of the nose and went rearward. A minute later I told Hatten to check the rear of the plane. He returned and said all were gone.

By that time we were at about 2000 feet with the left outboard pulling a manifold pressure of 44 inches of mercury at 2300 rpm and the plane requiring strong left rudder and wheel to keep from flipping over to the right. I told Hatten to hurry and bail out and that I was going to crash land because I couldn't cut the outboard engine at 90 mph without stalling out and crashing, and if I simply let go of the controls, the plane would wheel over and dive in. He answered, "If it's all right with you, I would rather crash land than bail out." I said, "Okay, buckle up."

We had descended so fast that the thick bulletproof windshields were cold enough that frost had formed on the inside, so we could not see straight ahead. So we opened the side windows and peered around the edge of the windshield.

The terrain below consisted of rolling wooded hills with flat farm clearings and houses about every quarter mile in all directions.

With my side window open, I circled left for a half turn looking for a suitable spot, but there was none and we kept losing altitude. We were soon flying in a wooded gully between two wooded hills, when straight ahead was a dirt road fill between the hills on either side. I aimed for the top of the road and, just as we passed over, the right wing stalled out and struck the road. I dimly recall grinding and banging noises and streaks of light as we were jerked around.

Suddenly all was quiet. I could hear birds chirping and the gentle hiss of escaping oxygen. For a moment I wondered if this was Heaven, but when I could focus my eyes, I looked over at Hatten. His entire face was dripping with blood and I knew we had survived.

The nose of the ship was headed directly back toward the road we had struck with the tail next to Hatten's side window. The control cable had pulled the pilot wheel solidly against my chest.



**"Stormy Weather"
Als, Denmark
May 24, 1944**

Somehow I managed to make my way out of my seat and up through the open side window. Hatten could see only dimly, so I helped him out of the plane and led him about 30 yards away.

I went back to burn the plane (it was required by regulations to destroy your aircraft in the event of a crash landing) as best I could with the 80 gallons of fuel remaining in the left wing tank. The baseball size incendiary charges behind the pilot's seat designed for just such an occasion were not there. Silently, I cursed Wing for providing such an inadequate plane. (I had noted before takeoff that the engines had over 200 combat hours, which was the usual time to change them with rebuilt engines.)

I was determined to try and burn the remains of the crash anyway. So I reached in the cockpit and grabbed the Very Pistol and some shells. (A Very Pistol, sometimes called a flare pistol, was used to shoot various colored flares through the roof of the cockpit to instruct the formation without breaking radio silence.)

I took the gas cap off the left outboard tank, stepped back and aimed the pistol at the opening. The double red flare bounced off the wing and zoomed up over the same road that had caught the right wing. Until then I had been only dimly aware of a group of five or ten adults and children on the road. As the flare swished over their heads, they ran screaming in both directions.

Now I was really upset with the situation. I was going to burn the remains of that wrecked plane even if it killed me. I loaded another shell into the pistol, stuck the barrel of the pistol into the gas fill spout, closed my eyes and pulled the trigger. I could hear the flare sizzling about inside the tank, so I opened my eye and a blue one-foot-high flame curled lazily out of the opening. I unconsciously stuck the Very Pistol under my belt and started leading Hatten up to the nearest farm house, leaving the object of my frustrations to its own fate.

A kind old man with a Red Cross armband met us outside the back door. I motioned to Hatten and then to the house. Surprisingly, he told me in English that this was Denmark, which was occupied by the Germans, and he could not help me because of reprisals. So I asked him if I could wash the blood from my copilot's face and he reluctantly led us into the kitchen where his wife had a pan of water ready.

I was washing Hatten's face trying to determine the seriousness of the laceration when the family started a verbal commotion. I glanced out a window and spotted a well-fed German soldier, Tommy gun ready, sneaking up on the house. He kicked open the door and yelled at me loudly in German while swinging the gun menacingly. The old man told me to drop my pistol to the floor, which (after realizing it was under my belt) I did, quickly. Later, I thought what irony if, after the struggle to survive, a Very Pistol with a spent cartridge would have been the reason for my death.

C'est la guerre (such is war), we were now POWs.

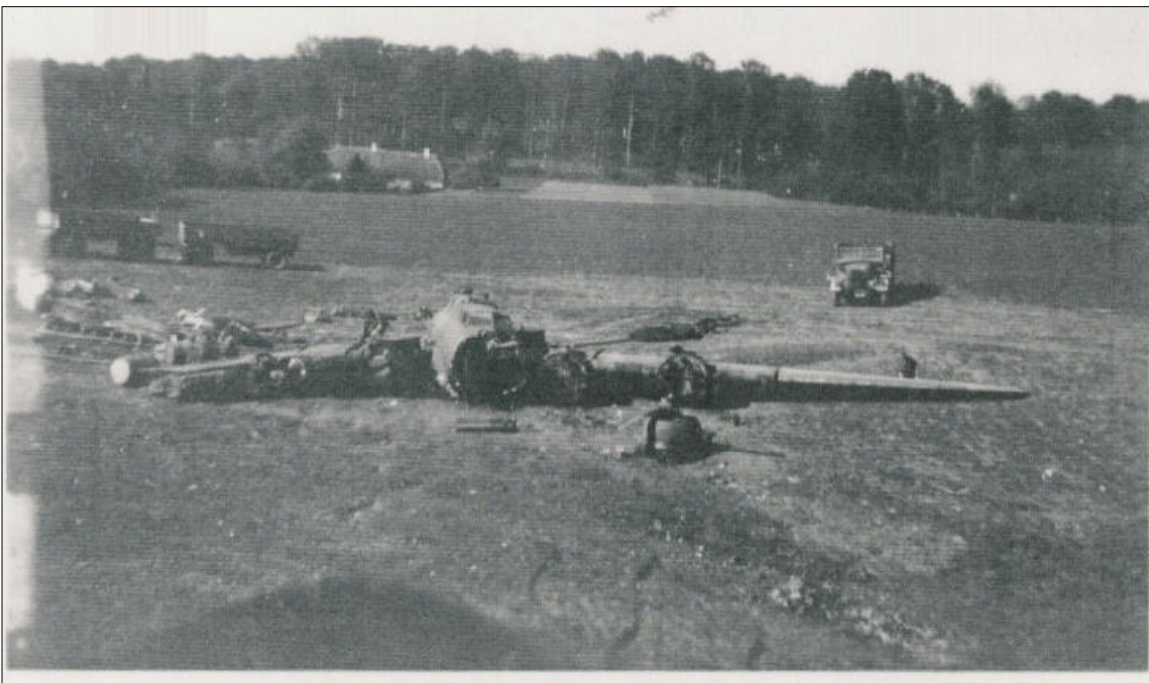
Various photographs of Stormy Weather

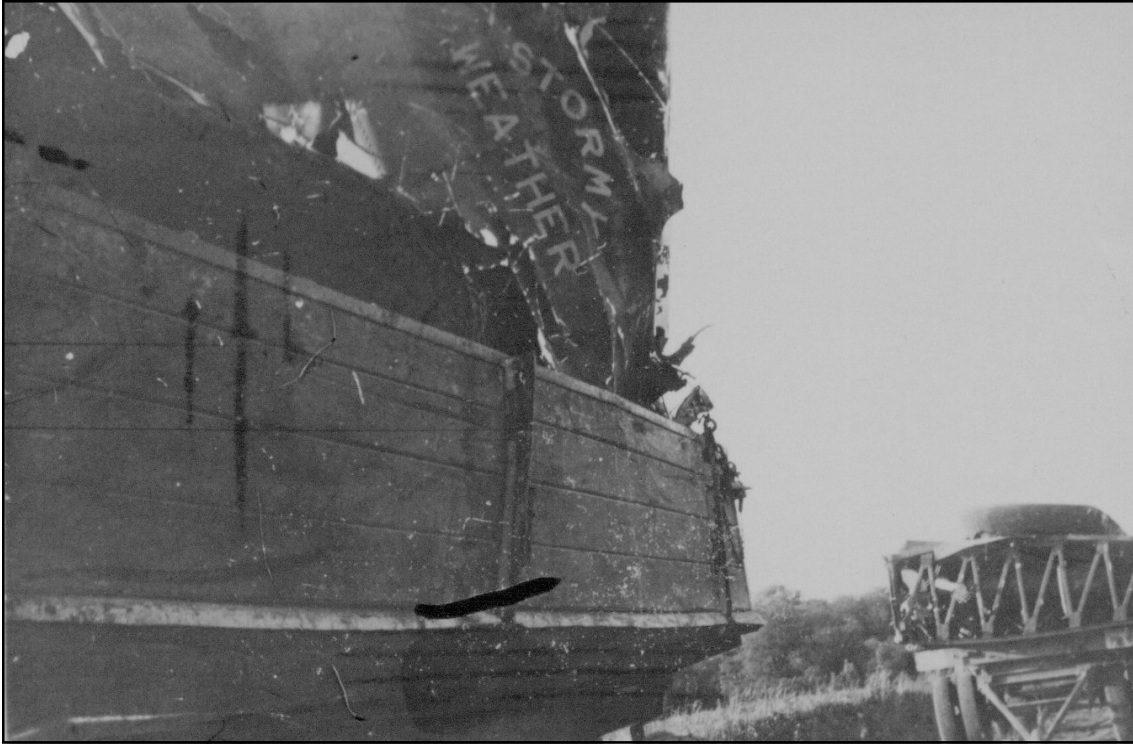












ONE YEAR BEHIND THE WIRE

Captured

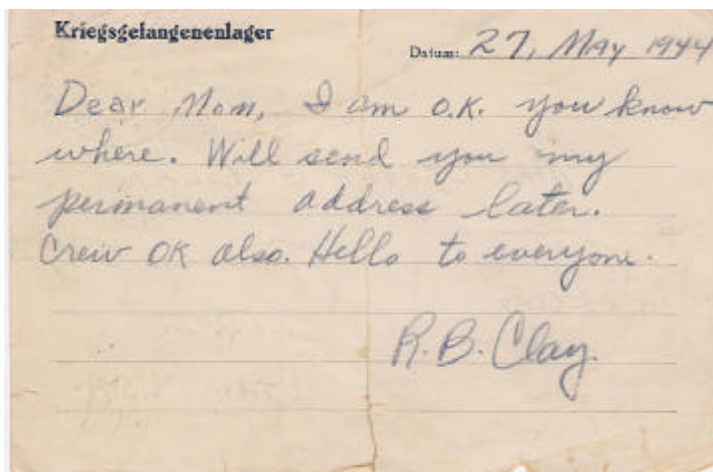
By late afternoon of May 24th, 1944, a German Army truck had picked up all of my crew members, who had parachuted out, and arrived at the house where Hatten and I had been held captive by a German soldier.

All had survived our final mission with only scratches and bruises, except Hatten, who had sustained a long laceration across his forehead between his eyes and hairline.

We were driven to a German naval base on the east coast of Denmark where Hatten's wound was sewn up like a potato sack (stitches through both sides of the wound, then over the top to the next stitch, etc.), which healed to a long welt across his forehead.

The next day our crew was put on a train with four or five guards armed with fixed bayonets and transferred to Dulag Luft at Frankfurt on the Rhine for solitary confinement and interrogation. My new quarters for the next two weeks were an eight-foot-square underground dungeon surrounded by concrete and steel bars with a small frosted window about 10 feet above my bed of wooden slats. The only lights were in the hallway. If I needed a rest room, a guard would unlock my cell and escort me to the john. Three times a day, a bowl of soup and a cup of water were pushed through the bars.

After four or five days of no outside noise, no outside sunshine or view, I began to think it was all a big stupid joke. It was spring outdoors, and I was wasting away in a dungeon. On the seventh day I was led upstairs for interrogation. I was ready to state my name, rank and serial number. The first question the German interrogator asked was, "Captain Clay, do you think 1st Lieutenant Newman Van Tassel can take your place as operations officer?" The implications of that query stunned me mentally because Van Tassel was my assistant operations officer, and I had no idea they knew so much about the details of our supposedly confidential Group organization.



Captain Clay's first communiqué home



Ogden Standard Examiner
June 24, 1944

He next took a liquor bottle off the shelf and offered me a drink. I said, "I don't drink liquor." He said, "We are now stuck with cheap liquor. Your Colonel Hatcher finished off the last of the good whiskey earlier this year." I glanced around the room. On one wall was a detailed layout of the 351st air base at Polebrook showing labeled areas such as revetments, buildings, hanger, etc., stamped "SECRET." I could see their psychology — since they knew so much, anything I would say wouldn't matter. I pled ignorance to most of their questions, i.e., Where was the IP (Initial Point for the beginning of the bomb run)? Why

OFFICE OF THE CHAPLAIN
AAF STATION 110
APO 557

S-A-1

7 June 1944.

Mr. Wallace A. Clay,
Route # 2,
Brigham City, Utah.

Dear Mr. Clay,

Your son, Capt. Robert B. Clay, O-724896, has been officially reported by the War Department as missing in action. This letter is written pursuant to the request of the Commanding General, Eighth Air Force, and it is also an attempt to convey the fact that we are deeply concerned over this announcement. Nothing would give us greater pleasure than to receive word of his safety.

We are extremely proud of the manner in which he has performed his duty. We feel confident that his contribution will help to bring our country closer to victory and ultimate peace.

Our Commanding Officer assures you of his continued interest in the one who has so ably represented you in the armed service of his country. We regret that we are not permitted to give you any specific details. All that we can say is included in this letter. Any questions you may have regarding your son's personal effects may be forwarded to the Quartermaster General, AEF, Washington, DC.

We are hoping and praying with you that the news when it comes will be good news. Until then, it is our sincere prayer that God may bring you strength sufficient for the day.

Respectfully yours,



Thomas B. Richards,
Captain,
Station Chaplain.

Letter to Captain Clay's father notifying him that his son was missing in action.

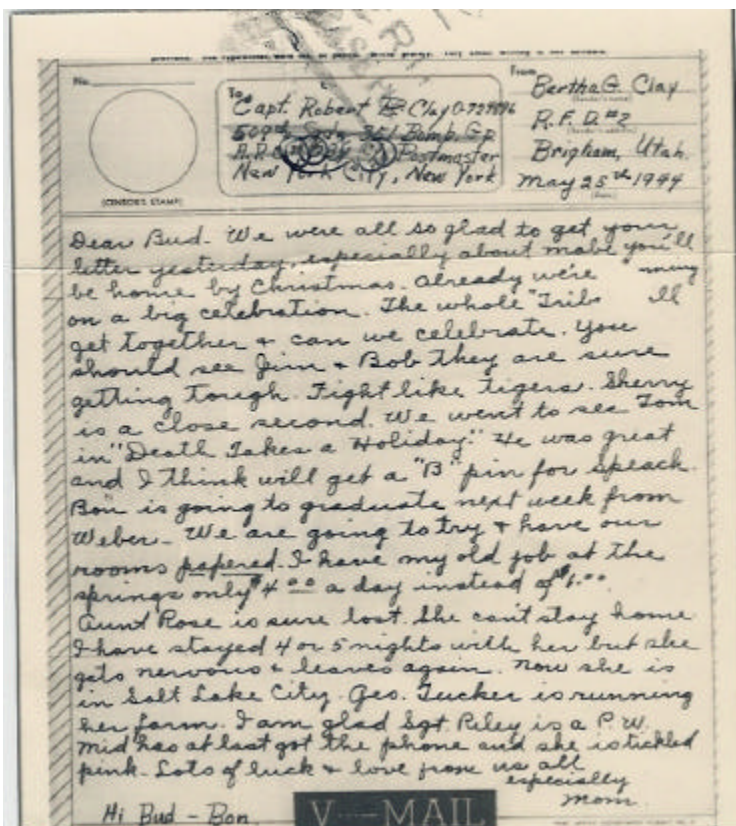
five officers aboard? What about the Black Widow night fighter? Why didn't I bail out? When was the invasion coming? etc. A few minutes later I was dismissed with the reminder that "For you, da var is offer."

A couple of days later I was taken upstairs again and interrogated this time by a young man who spoke English with a southern accent. I asked him about that and he told me he was born and raised in Texas and was visiting relatives in Germany when the war broke out and the Nazis would not let him out of Germany. At the end of the meeting, someone brought in a young, good-looking blonde girl. The Texan introduced me to "Greta" and, pointing through a window to a small, brightly painted house about 50 yards away, said, "See that bungalow, if you would care to, you can spend a couple of days with Greta over there. She doesn't speak any English, but she sure is a lot of fun." I said no thanks and was hustled back to my dungeon cell. I had figured out that they wanted me to feel obligated to be cooperative, or even worse, even blackmail me with photos.

About two days later a little obnoxious German came down to my cell and started to ask questions from outside the bars. When he got around to the invasion question, I suddenly thought, "You have invaded my territory in

this dark hole, you ratty little Joker, and I'm going to feed you all the garbage I can think of."

During the previous month I had led two, six-plane, night fake invasion missions whereby we were part of a thousand plane effort that would fly directly across the English Channel, turn right about two miles from the French coast, fly about 10 minutes, turn right and fly back across the Channel, turn right and fly back up the English coast to our original position. They called it the invasion box pattern, which we would repeat about 10 times. By the 10th time around most of my squadron had dropped out of formation and I could see the dim blue night formation lights (the blue light on the every plane that helped the pilots see the other planes in order to help them stay in formation during night missions) passing me, going in all different directions. The 8th Air Force never said how many bombers we lost on those missions (which did not count as combat), but I knew it was dangerous and stupid but part of our psychological warfare. I really thought they would not invade at such an obvious place as across the Channel.



V-MAIL sent from Capt. Clay's mother one day after he was captured.

With that background, I told the arrogant little interrogator that we were going to invade across the Channel and that we were going to invade real soon. I explained that we were going to invade with one million men and that the Germans were "kaput." To cap it off, I told him that if his leaders were smart, they would give up before it was too late.

About five days later when I was allowed outside into the sunshine, the other officer crewmen were lying on the grass asking where had I been and why I was so late coming out and had I heard about the invasion on the 6th of June? I counted back the days since I had sounded off to the ratty little German and figured it had been two days before D-Day. I suddenly felt guilty wondering if it had affected the outcome of the invasion. I have since learned that my pretentious talk had made no difference.

During interrogation at Dulag Luft the Germans took whatever GI equipment they wanted, i.e., flying boots, warm clothing, hats, and insignia, even GI hack watches. Bombardier "Hap" Arnold wore a Rolex instead of a GI hack watch and the Germans took his Rolex. When he argued that his watch was not GI and not subject to confiscation, they still would not give it back. He then said "Okay, Buster, after the war, I'm coming back and look you guys up" and the head interrogator answered, "Ve vill see who iss da victor."

Stalag Luft III

That afternoon we were herded on board a "40 and 8" box car (40 men or 8 mules) and began our journey from Frankfurt to Sagan, Germany (Stalag Luft III) located on the Polish border about 100 miles southeast of Berlin. The enlisted men were taken to Stalag Luft IV in Poland.

Much has been written about the conditions in the "40 & 8s." With 60 men crowded into one box car for long pe-

riods, conditions were extremely miserable. There was no hole to see out or urinate through. No room to lie down. If half the POWs were sitting, the other half had to stand up and if someone had the "GI's," we all suffered the consequences. The train would stop for about 10 minutes every six or eight hours and sometimes we would get a drink of water. Once the train stopped unexpectedly because of an air raid and the engineer released all his steam (so it wouldn't blow up in case we were strafed). In my mind, I can still see hundreds of Kriegies squatting along side the railroad tracks reliving themselves then enjoying the 30-minute delay to build steam pressure back up, in the mean time stretching our legs and basking in the sunshine.

The next day we arrived at Stalag Luft III (Prison of Flyers #3) and marched into the West Compound. The five officers from our crew were assigned an unoccupied room together with three other Air Force officers. Since I was the ranking man, I automatically became the room commander. Each room was about 20 feet by 20 feet with four triple deck bunks. From time to time during the summer, other new POW's were assigned until all the bunks were filled. Each bunk had wooden slats across the bottom with a sack of wood shavings for a mattress. The wood shavings gradually changed to sawdust with usage and sifted through the burlap cover onto the bunk below.



"40 & 8" Box cars



**Typical barracks room
Stalag Luft III**

The compound was new, with single story barrack-type pre-fabricated buildings atop several three-foot-high concrete pillar-like foundations running the length of the building so that the "ferrets" (unarmed guards) could patrol under as well as alongside and through the buildings. Each ferret carried a long steel rod (similar to a short fishing rod), which he periodically plunged into the ground in search of tunnels dug by the Kriegies (short for Kriegsgafangden, or war prisoners).

Because we had been "shook down" of all our flying gear at Dulag Luft, when we arrived at Stalag Luft III, we were issued a GI helmet liner, two GI blankets, an Eisenhower jacket (a waist length, lightweight jacket), a pair of cheap shoes, a large bowl, and eating utensils (a large aluminum spoon and fork, and

a regular case knife). Everyone sharpened his knife on a concrete step or a rock.

The Germans were always giving us a bad time. For example, the Christmas of 1944 they promised us a bottle of beer, only to tell us later that there was none because the Allied "Terror Fliegers" had bombed the beer factory. Several times they would say "No Red Cross parcels this week because your bombers blew up a trainload of Red Cross parcels." Another memorable harassment was that morning and night the Germans would line us up for Appel (French for roll call) to count us. Soon after I arrived, 2000-plus U.S. Air Force Officers assembled on a rainy morning and the count showed two Kriegies missing. (They had escaped during the night). The Germans kept recounting then decided to keep us in formation while they searched all the buildings in the compound. The end result was that we stood for six hours in the rain with no protection from the elements. We could not even break ranks to visit the latrine.

Soon after I arrived in Stalag Luft III, arriving POW's told us there would be no more attempts to escape or evade because we had successfully invaded France and were winning the war, so it was safer to stay together. Another reason was because, just before I was shot down, the English compound at Stalag Luft III had made a mass escape of about 70 English POW's, and all but three were rounded up and massacred. This tragedy is accurately portrayed in the popular movie entitled "The Great Escape."

The fact that we should no longer attempt to escape was no reason we couldn't give them a bad time. For example, there was one day that a truck loaded with coal briquettes got mired in the mud outside our barracks. It was raining cats and dogs but the guards came into our barracks and ordered everyone out to push the truck out of the mud hole. The 100-plus Kriegies could have picked the truck up, but with not a word spoken we all began to rock the truck back and forth while pushing downward rather than forward. In about a minute, the wheels were mired to the axles both front and rear! The goons (Germans) gave up and brought in a big tractor the next day to pull the truck out of the mud hole.

Another example of the fun we had was that on one day we decided to get even with a particularly obnoxious ferret. The floor in each room of the barracks consisted of prefabricated sections looking similar to 4'x4' pallets. There were cracks between the sections as well as cracks between boards in each section. To clean the floor we would throw buckets of water on the floor and simply sweep the floor, which allowed the muddy water to leak through the cracks. One day this troublemaker ferret was probing the ground under our barracks. A lookout gave a pre-arranged signal as the ferret reached the middle of the long concrete supporting wall foundation, and everyone in their rooms began to flood the floors with water. A half-minute later the ferret emerged from his inspection soaked to the skin with dirty water. It was a good thing he had no gun because he was angry enough to shoot all of us. The reason the ferrets were unarmed is because they were continuously walking through the compound and it would have been easy for a group of prisoners to overtake a single ferret and take his gun.

The British compound at Stalag Luft III was about 60 feet to the south of our West Compound (four barbed wire fences away). The British occupied the first compound (built in 1939) and one English pilot had been a POW since before the start of World War II. He had crash-landed in the North Sea and was picked up by a German boat two days before war was declared, but was still in Germany when English declared war on Germany. Over the years the British had built a clandestine radio, which could receive the BBC news. They would summarize the news on a slip of paper, fasten it to a small rock and at a pre-arranged time there would be Englishmen exercising and swinging their arms near the fence and if there were no ferrets in view, the rock would come sailing over the fence to be picked up by one of us in the West Compound. The Compound was well organized and operated just as any other military unit. The Security leaders would arrange to read the news summary in each barracks during the same day.

The main memory I have is that the German newspapers (furnished by the Germans) told how Hitler was winning the war, while the BBC news broadcast that the Allies were also winning the same war. However, Kriegies who could read German kept a map of Germany on a bulletin board up to date showing the East and West Fronts. The newspapers told how Germany was conducting a "Victorious Retreat."

Past Times

At Polebrook, in England, the small talk between crews and friends involved dances, parties, and weekends in London usually involving girls, with little mention of food, because it was adequate and plentiful. However, in Stalag Luft III, the opposite was the case. The Germans gave us daily a large serving of soupy stew consisting of a little meat and mostly vegetables (Brussels sprouts, cabbage, carrots, potatoes, etc.) plus a fifth of a one-kilo loaf of black bread, which was said to contain some sawdust.

Some pre-med flying officers in camp calculated that the diet furnished by the Germans was about 1200 calories per day, which I can verify is a starvation diet. The thing that made life livable and hopeful was the food in the Red Cross parcels, which the Germans gave out sparingly and irregularly according to their fancy. (A Red Cross parcel weighed about 10 pounds, contained concentrated food which added up to about 30,000 calories, plus six or eight packs of cigarettes). It was a good week when each of us received a half parcel, and a bad week when we

received none. After the war was over, I read that even though only one in ten Red Cross parcels reached the POWs, our government claimed it was well worth the cost and effort because it saved many POW lives.

In our room we pooled our food and shared equally not only the rations, but the household duties of cooking, washing dishes, etc. The person who served the food into each bowl had last choice to choose a bowl of the divided food.

After the second day in Stalag Luft III the number one subject became FOOD. During a good week, I could trade a package of cigarettes for a chocolate bar, but during a bad week I would simply give my cigarettes to a buddy who smoked but who prized food more than smoking.

When lights were turned off at 9:00 at night, a favorite pastime was lying in our bunks taking turns telling what we were going to do when we returned home. Nine times out of ten it was about food. One hungry prisoner would say, "When I get home I'm going to keep my pockets filled with candy bars, so whenever I feel like it I can just reach in and eat as many as I want." Another might say, "Every morning I'll have my wife cook three eggs with ham and plenty of toast covered with melted butter."

I don't remember once hearing about drinking at a bar or cavorting with the girls.

The British compound had been in operation since 1939 and had accumulated a fairly large library, which they shared with us. About once each week our room would get a book to read. I used to read most of them but after two or three months the words became so blurred that I stopped reading. I had developed double vision along a line parallel to my two eyes.

The Luftwaffe pilots knew about Stalag Luft III and would occasionally buzz us for spite. One afternoon an ME 109 made a low altitude turn over the compound and when I saw it, the double vision caused me to see a double fuselage fighter and I blurted out "There's a P-38." Everyone near me started to move away wondering if I was "over the hill." My double vision problem did not clear up until I had been back in the U.S. for three or four months. So, I finally figured out it was mainly caused by a dietary deficiency of some kind.



P38

In the summer months we were allowed to bathe as often as we wished. The temperatures in the summer time reached near 90 degrees. There were spigots placed around the camp that were used out in the open for washing and bathing. In the winter months the temperatures would drop to below freezing. We were given one warm shower per month in the winter.

Staying warm in the wintertime was a miserable challenge at best. We were issued two thin GI blankets, which were made of wool. Most prisoners would fashion a type of sleeping bag from them by folding them over to form a couple of layers and then safety-pin them together. This was sufficient to keep us somewhat warm enough to sleep during the nights when the temperatures didn't drop too low.

I never suffered any serious health problem as a POW, but I did develop a chronic case of athlete's foot. My sister recalls the problem when I arrived home in June 1945 with the phrase "I never saw such awful looking feet in my life." To me, it never seemed like a big deal, but it did take months to clear up.

People ask, "How was it in POW camp?" One answer is that one year then seemed like five years now, mainly because of the uncertainty of the future and the hope of earlier liberation. Another is that even if we were not tortured, we were treated much worse than the Allies treated the German POWs. It turns out that each Stalag had

its "death march."

Christmas

The Christmas of 1944 was one I shall never forget. Some time before Christmas, the Red Cross had sent our compound of 2500 U.S. airmen food parcels and other various gifts, one of which was a small wind-up phonograph, along with several 78-rpm phonograph records. By the time it arrived at my room in our barracks, the needles were so worn that nothing legible came from the speaker. Nobody wanted it in our building.

Having been born and raised on a farm, I had a background of solving endless problems. So I decided to grind a new point on one of the worn out needles. I did this by simultaneously rotating and rubbing it gently on a rock until it looked like the ones used on our old phonograph at home.

Sure enough, the needle produced loud and clear music from the recordings. My favorite song was one that I had never heard before. It was "I'll Be Home for Christmas" sung by Bing Crosby. It gave me new hope that it was an omen for a miracle to somehow take me home by Christmas time.

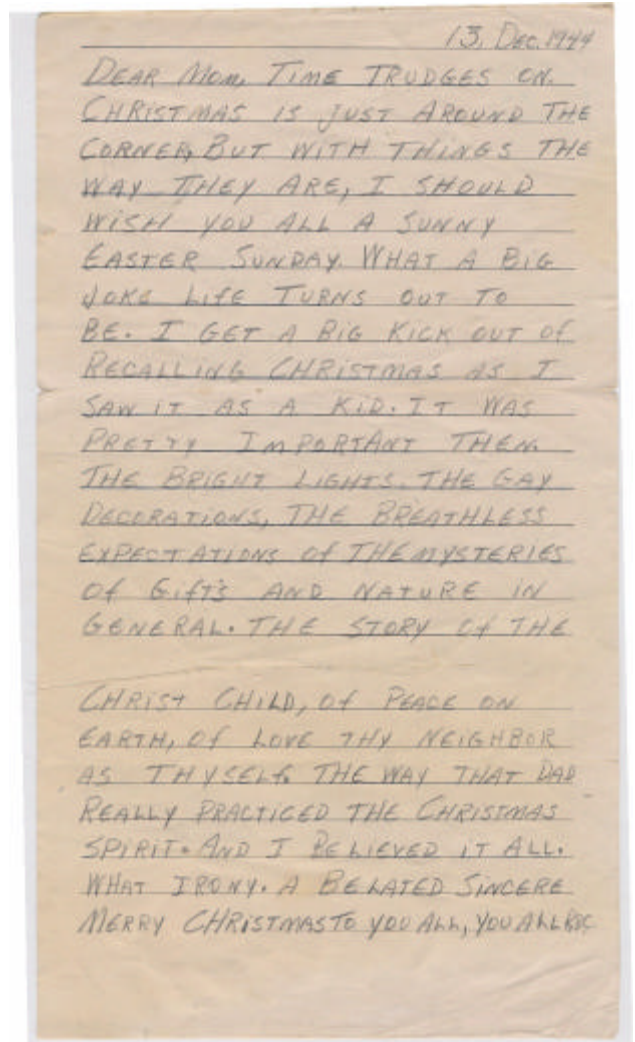
But it was not to be. The morning of December 25th dawned cold and wintry and I still locked up in Stalag Luft III.

When I hear Bing sing that favorite carol at Christmas, I still feel the same nostalgic emotional rush I felt just before that Christmas in 1944.

Anecdotes of Stalag Luft III

- ?? Our compound was built on forestland. About 20 feet in any direction was a stump of a tree about two feet tall and the size of a telephone pole. As a supplement to the meager allotment of coal briquettes for cooking and heating, a Kriegie could dig up a stump and drag it to a supervised area for cutting with an axe and splitting with wedges. The only catch was, we had no equipment for digging up the stumps, except the empty cans from the Red Cross parcels. During the summer of 1944 I decided to make a one-man project of harvesting a stump. I scooped dirt all day long for one week. I found out that big cans are better than small cans; some roots went out 20 feet before I could break them off and the taproot went down four feet. It took one more day to split and chop the wood into usable pieces for our little stove.
- ?? The coal briquettes that we used for fuel for cooking and keeping warm were about the size of a bar of soap and consisted of fine (slack) coal pressed together with a small amount of a tar-like binder. It was difficult to make a fire hot enough to burn the coal completely, because as a briquette heated up it fell apart into a pile of slack coal particles. Consequently, about half of the coal wound up on the compound dump. I noticed that some of the unburned particles were up to 1/4" in cross section and these larger particles burned much better than the fine powder portion. So I constructed a comb to rake out the larger particles from the fines and ashes.

Making the comb was fairly easy. The ends of a tin can from a Red Cross parcel were cut out by a small, hinged can



opener (similar to a backpacker's can opener) found in some Red Cross parcels. Then, using a narrow crack in the floor as support, my sharpened case knife could cut through the rim of the can then split it endwise. Straightening it out into a flat sheet furnished the basic component for making large pans or pots, etc. In this case I cut the strip in two in the long direction leaving the rim on one side for a rigid handle. I next slit that side into strips about 3/16" wide by 1" long. Rotating each strip 90 degrees produced the needed comb. To prevent copycatting, I would visit the garbage dump when no one was around and in 10 minutes I could fill a small pan with a couple of pounds of coarse coal that burned much better than the briquettes.

?? During the fall of 1944 another Kriegie and I fashioned a high jump standard from some sticks we found at the dump. Even now I recall the sun setting and I was jumping higher than I ever did before or after. It seemed dreamlike as I cleared the bar set even with my chin. It amazed me how losing 30 pounds or so made such a difference.

Leaving Stalag Luft III

From *The Last 100 Days* by John Toland:

On the morning of January 27, 1945, there was an air of restrained excitement among the 10,000 Allied occupants of Stalag Luft III (Air Prisoner of War Camp) at Sagan, only 100 air miles southeast of Berlin. In spite of the biting cold and the steady fall of snow in large flakes, prisoners huddled outside their barracks discussing the latest report: the Russians were less than twenty miles to the east and still advancing.

Two weeks earlier the first news of a great Red Army offensive had begun seeping into the camp from anxious guards. The prisoners were in high spirits until several goons - guards—hinted that orders had come from Berlin to make the camp a *Festung*, a hedgehog fortress to be defended to the end. A few days later another rumor spread that the Germans were going to use the Kriegies (short for *Kriegsgefangenen*, "war prisoners") as hostages and shoot them if the Russians tried to take the area. This story was succeeded by an even more terrifying one: the Germans were going to convert the showers into gas chambers and simply exterminate the prisoners.

Morale dropped so alarmingly that Arthur Vanaman, an American brigadier general and the senior Allied officer at Sagan, sent a directive to the camp's five compounds urging that all rumors be stopped and that preparations for a possible forced march to the west be accelerated.

By the morning of January 27 the prisoners of Sagan were ready. Evacuation kits were stacked near the doors of each barracks. Other equipment lay on the bunks, ready for hasty packing. As the snow piled up, the men waited watchfully, with a strange feeling of peace and calm. Many kept looking out past the high wire fences at the even rows of snow-laden pine trees. Beyond lay the unknown.

Upon our arrival at Stalag Luft III, our building CO had admonished us to keep in shape to walk out of Stalag Luft III if necessary. Consequently, most of us walked around the inside of the West Compound (about ½ mile) several times a day. The only maverick was a guy by the name of Arragona, a second-generation Italian Second Lieutenant. When most of us were ready to walk, I would try and roust everybody out. Usually Arragona would be lying on his bunk and he would say, "Go ahead, you eager beavers, because I'll be walking past while you're lying alongside the road." Arragona had been shot down and had evaded for some time. He had stolen clothes off a clothesline and discarded his uniform, even his dog tags. He had a dark complexion and a large hooked nose. When he was captured, the Germans thought he was a Jew and put him in a Jewish prison. After two or

three weeks, the Germans decided he was an Air Force officer and sent him to Stalag Luft III, then to my room. When he told us how terrible he was treated, we all figured he was full of stories, but now I think maybe he was put in a concentration camp. More about him later.

Late in January 1945 the distant cannon fire to the East became louder each day. We all surmised it was the Russian Front pressing westward.

At 10:00 p.m. on January 27th word came to be ready to walk out at midnight during one of the worst blizzards of the year. We each put our necessities on our two blankets, rolled them into a cylinder, tied the two ends together, threw the bedrolls over our heads, onto our shoulders, and we were ready.

It was an eerie feeling with snow about a foot deep and snowflakes swirling about our head. Marching out through the gate, that had confined us continuously for about eight months left me with an eerie feeling.

The road out went past a row of long storage buildings. On a concrete dock in front of a well-lighted building were pallets of U.S. Red Cross parcels and piles of German black bread for us to take all we wanted. I looked inside the building and I could see pallets of parcels stacked to the ceiling. I guessed there were thousands of pallets each with about 100 parcels. And to think that the Germans had been telling us we could only receive a half parcel each occasionally because the "Terror Fliegers" were bombing and strafing all the trains. Later when I told others about all the parcels the Germans were hoarding, they were skeptical. However, at the 50th POW reunion in 1995, I saw a picture of what I had seen. I took a picture of my wife Mildred, pointing to a man about halfway up the mountain of Red Cross parcels.



Our West Compound was one of five (Central, East, West, North and South), each with about 2500 Kriegies. Consequently, over 10,000 of us moved out that night. The South Compound moved out first and then we followed. It turned out that we would walk 50 minutes, and then rest for 10 minutes. I had picked up one Red Cross parcel while others grabbed two or three. At the first rest stop, I opened my parcel and packed most of the items in my bedroll, leaving the rest behind.

Walking in the wet, freezing weather was miserable. My shoes were the cheap worn out pair that the Red Cross had issued. I had worn holes in the soles and my attempts to repair them with cardboard from a Red Cross parcel box proved feeble in the winter conditions.

About 4:00 a.m. that morning along a lonely stretch of road, which was cut through heavy forest, a shot rang out. Immediately the guards began firing in all directions and everyone dove into the borrow pit alongside the road. The entire scene seemed unreal with the blizzard swirling around us. Soon the firing stopped and a minute or two later some of the Kriegies started to crawl back onto the road and rifle fire started up again. This time we waited until the guards ordered us back on the road. It would have been a cinch to evade at the time, but nobody did.

Years later, I read that a guard had accidentally fired a shot and the others thought it might be a Russian patrol (the front lines were only a few miles away).

We arrived at a small town the next morning and were told to get some sleep. Kriegies were everywhere, but "Hap" Arnold and I found an old shed where we could get out of the weather. That night we started marching again. During the ten minute rest stops that second night, most of the excess black bread and Red Cross food taken

by the naive but hungry Kriegies had been discarded. However, they were not wasted because peasants lined the route waiting to pick up anything thrown away.

While many have described it as a "death march," I personally know of only one Kriegie who did not make it. He was from another room in our barracks and marched out with a sore throat. He was put in a horse-drawn wagon after the first day out, but died en route to our planned layover destination about 50 miles northwest of Stalag Luft III.

At dawn of the second night of our frantic march, we arrived at a town with a huge warm building full of large tanks and specialized vessels made of clay for the chemical industry. It turned out to be a one-block square building for drying large chemical vessels prior to being fired into ceramics. Arragona, the dissident back in Stalag Luft III who belittled the walking workouts, came around begging for help. He had thrown away all his food during the evacuation march so I gave him a half loaf of black bread and two cans from my Red Cross parcel.

For two days we alternately ate and slept, at which time the more able Kriegies were marched out. My toes had been frostbitten and developed large blood blisters so I and a couple of thousand others remained behind.

We were crowded into the despised "40 & 8" rail cars and two days later we arrived at a deserted prison camp just outside Nuremberg known as Stalag Luft XIIID. I surmised it had been filled with Italian POW's because of all the Italian tin cans at the dumpsite.

Stalag Luft XIIID - Nuremberg

Life here was much worse than at Stalag Luft III because the camp was an old camp and consequently infected with several types of vermin. We received no Red Cross parcels during the two-month stay at Stalag Luft XIIID. We were often being herded into air raid trenches both day and night, and we had too little fuel to keep warm during February and March of 1945. We burned bed slats, tables, etc. to stay warm.

The most memorable event was the total destruction of Nuremberg during February 1945. The first day the Americans had a maximum effort (1000-plus bombers) and soon Nuremberg was enveloped in smoke and dust. That night, the British came over en masse, three or four planes a minute for several hours. Every two or three minutes a pathfinder (radar equipped planes) would drop a parachute flare which would light up several square miles of the city like daylight. The following planes would drop their bombs on the flare. Being only two or three miles away provided fireworks like I have never seen before or since. We were supposed to keep our windows shuttered, but we disregarded that order. I can clearly see in my mind's eye the following panorama: A two-mile-long by two-mile-high stage filled with swinging searchlight beams, continuous bursts of flak, salvos of bombs shaking the earth, bombers on fire slicing downward, intermittent flares lighting the entire stage bright as daylight. I was transfixed by the enormity of the sights and sounds. Suddenly a brilliant flash followed immediately by a blast of air that smashed the partly opened shutters into our faces and sent us reeling backward amid the noise of everything being knocked off shelves and tables. A stray British bomb had landed at the edge of our camp killing a guard in a watch tower and collapsing a couple of barracks but not killing any POW's.

The next day another maximum effort by the 8th Air Force finished off Nuremberg. From my viewpoint it appeared that the only visible target was a huge cloud of smoke and dust to drop bombs into.

From Nuremberg to Moosburg

About mid-March of 1945, the faint booming of artillery indicated that the Western Front was slowly moving eastward. The battle sounds grew closer day by day until the order came to evacuate Stalag Luft XIIID and head southeast to avoid liberation.

In contrast to the apprehension when we were marched out of Stalag Luft III, we all welcomed the chance to leave the vermin-infested buildings behind. The weather was spring-like and I knew we were winning the war

because we were told no "40 & 8" rail cars were available.

The 100-plus mile trek from Nuremberg to Moosburg was especially memorable. Our guards were agreeable old men who admitted, "Deutschland was kaput." They were more like grandfathers than guards. Since we were younger and stronger than the guards we often carried their knapsacks and rifles.

The weather was so pleasant and it felt so good to be "free" that the entire march was a lark. In one little town we went through, the people thought we were the conquering army. They threw flowers at us and some came forward to give us food. It kept the guards busy, trying to keep the people away from us. Sometime during the march, word went around that President Roosevelt was dead. We knew he had been elected to a fourth term, but it was a great shock to try and comprehend his death.

We marched through several small towns on our way to Moosburg. A typical little town of about 1000 people would have a boarded up Shell gas station at the edge of town and a boarded up Woolworth store in the middle of town. This started me to think that the Germans were more like Americans than the English. The entire war suddenly appeared to be a big crazy mistake and I felt like a born-again conscientious objector. I had joined the Army as a cadet several months before December 7, 1941, planning to learn to fly, then renounce my commission. But before that could happen, I was caught up in the wave of national patriotism following that infamous day the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbor. I was glad that I would not have to drop bombs on the Germans any more. The brain-washing I received between 1941 and 1944 that we should rid the world of Japanese and Germans had been replaced by my pre-war feeling of good will toward mankind.

In one town we spotted a "40 & 8" on a side track prominently marked "Red Cross." We talked the guards into checking it out. They opened it up. Hallelujah! It was full of American Red Cross parcels. Needless to say, we spent the rest of that day and night gorging ourselves.

About the middle of April we finally arrived at Moosburg (Stalag VIIA) in southern Germany. I was happy to be reunited with the members of my crew whom I had not seen since we were separated early in February. I was surprised to learn that the 80,000-plus Allied officers at Moosburg constituted bargaining power for any negotiations Hitler might have with the Allies. Rumor had it that we would all march to Burchtesgarten in the Alps if necessary. Many of the POW's were high ranking officers from France, Russia, etc. One memorable fellow walked around every day stark naked talking to himself and yelling unintelligibly. I was told he was a Russian general.

Moosburg

Moosburg was a city of tents, each housing about 10 bedrolls, laid on the ground. When new POW's came in, we would simply move our beds closer together.

Security was getting more lax every day, so one dark night "Hap" Arnold and I decided on an adventure. There was no guard at a well-used hole in the barbed wire so we slipped out and headed for some buildings. We carefully opened a door to the first building and could see it led into a dimly lit hall the full length of the building. We opened and entered the first hallway door and it was very dark inside. Just then we heard a door slam and two men, conversing in German, walked down the hall past our closed door and left the building. I fumbled about in the darkness and felt a heavy wool blanket. I started to wad it up and felt that part of it was stiff with a dried residue (I'll always think it was dried blood). We searched further until we each found a good blanket, then decided to return to camp while we were still ahead of the game. Heading back toward the hole in the fence, stumbling in the darkness, I heard a splash. I said, "What was that?" Hap replied, "I fell into a ditch of water, help me out." I cautiously helped him out and discovered he was still clutching his dripping blanket. His teeth were chattering so I wrapped my dry blanket over his shoulders and we continued. At the hole in the fence I could make out a guard with a rifle. I figured with Hap half frozen I needed to bluff my way back into the prison camp. The guard could speak English so I told him I was bringing back my buddy who had tried to escape without my permission. The guard let us back inside, warning us that we could be shot if we left camp again.

Toward the end of April, occasional cannon fire was heard from a northwest direction. Everyone knew the end

was near and apparently we were not going to march out again as rumored.

Liberation

The 28th of April 1945 dawned clear and warm. About mid-morning we could see several tanks coming toward us from the rolling hills to the northwest. In a few minutes we could make out five Sherman tanks bearing down on us. When at about 200 yards, some of the guards opened fire with their rifles. The tanks stopped and answered back with 50 caliber machine guns as all the POW's hit the ground. The skirmish was over in 30 seconds, when the guards threw down their rifles.

The two lead tanks drove through the prison gate and were immediately surrounded by thousands of celebrating Kriegies, shouting, jumping up and down with arms flying. The GI's in the tanks started throwing out K-rations and cigarettes. The tumult started to die down when someone pointed toward the small town of Moosburg about 1/3 mile to the south. From a flagpole on the highest building flew a large stars and stripes flag. That was a moment to remember. We were all swept up simultaneously to an emotional climax. The tanks could not move because of the surrounding crush of the wild ex-POWs.

After about 30 minutes things started to calm down and someone asked what they were going to do with the 40-odd guards who had been rounded up. The tank commander answered, "We do not take prisoners," inferring that they simply killed the enemy, then kept going. A Kriegie spokesman said, "Let us keep them as POW's until the foot soldiers arrive," and the tank commander said, "Okay." An hour after the spearhead tank column moved off to the east, the Kriegie leaders told the guards to "get lost." They had been treating us humanely and now we had the chance to return the favor. This was no occasion for reprisals.



**POWs surrounding liberating tank
Moosburg, Germany
April 28, 1945**

So now we were free, but instructed to stay put until after the war was over so that an orderly evacuation of the 80,000 men could be achieved. We were not confined to the POW camp so, after a couple of days of staying put, Hap Arnold and I decided to walk around the town of Moosburg (population 4-5000). Some of the Allied POW's were more familiar with the spoils of war than we were, because as we walked up and down the residential area every house had a sign posted on the front door stating "KEEP OUT — THIS HOUSE IS OCCUPIED BY LIEUTENANT JOHN DOE R.A.F." or a similar message.

A few Kriegies left Moosburg and headed west by hitching rides but my crew all waited another couple of weeks before being trucked to an airfield east of Moosburg.

Prior to boarding a C-47, we were thoroughly dusted with a new de-lousing powder called DDT. On the trip west to Camp Lucky Strike in France, the pilot of the transport plane let me and the other pilots fly the plane for a few minutes.

After deplaning, we all enjoyed two consecutive showers with GI soap and were issued new uniforms. That system worked, because body vermin did not torment me again.

A week of rehab (i.e., soft food, vitamins, exercise, etc.) at Camp Lucky Strike was followed by an ocean trip to the U.S. aboard a Victory ship. My bunk was #10 (about 25 feet up) in the bow of the ship. All I remember is that I was nauseated every time I raised my head from my pillow, and the anchor kept banging against the outside of

Print the complete address in plain block letters in the panel below, and your return address in the space provided. Use typewriter, dark ink, or pencil. Write plainly. Very small writing is not suitable.

No.

R.B. Clay
Capt. A.C.

(CENSOR'S STAMP)

To MRS. BERTHA G. CLAY
BRIGHAM CITY
R.F.D. #2
UTAH

From

CAPT. R.B. CLAY
(Sender's name)
BRIGHAM CITY R#2
(Sender's address)
UTAH.

APRIL 6, 1945
(Date)

DEAR MOM,

NOW THAT I AM NOT A P.O.W. I can write in long hand, or Print ANY WAY I might CHOOSE, And I KNOW THE GOONS will not censor it all out. The past few days has seen EX-Krieges stuffing themselves. A person who hasn't gone hungry for a year, can never comprehend what an obsession food can become, especially when you had nothing to occupy our time or efforts. Yes, a week ago today I had the first white Bread I had eaten in nearly a year. It tasted like cake.

The march out of Sagan last winter has left me with a sore knee, but other than that I am as hale and hearty as ever.

We are supposed to fly out of this filthy hole soon, so I should be home in about a month. Notice my address and save all your letters.
Your thankful son,
R.B.C.

V--MAIL

Letter from Nuremberg

the ship about 10 feet from my head.

We landed at Camp Miles Standish, New Jersey, and after we regained our land legs, Hap Arnold and I wandered around the camp. Discovering a small PX, we went inside to buy something to eat and were informed by the girl behind the counter that this was a sub-PX which allowed sales only to Italian and German non-com POW's. I was already bitter about the entire sequence of POW life, delayed repatriation, and the long ship ride home, and this only added fuel to my bitterness.

Post War

I decided to forget the entire five years of my life from 1941 through 1945 and never think of it again. That was more than 50 years ago and it took about 40 years to overcome my phobia.

Around 1985, at the urging of my navigator, Marshal Pullen, I began attending POW reunions and 351st Bomb Group reunions, along with some members of my crew.

After the war I had put GI clothing, papers, letters, pictures, etc., into two footlockers and never opened them. My daughter Karen went through everything pertaining to my military history and decided if I would help her, she would compile a detailed book and memorabilia for our posterity so they could better remember and understand World War II from a first-person viewpoint. These memoirs are the result of those efforts.




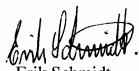
Standing: Marshall Pullen, Robert Clay, Hap Arnold



**Frank Hatten, Marshall Pullen, Robert Clay, Hap Arnold
351st Bomb Group Convention**

Epilogue

Captain Clay's story comes to a storybook ending 57 years to the day that "Stormy Weather" went down on the Island of Als. On May 24, 2001 Clay and four other surviving and healthy crew members (Hatten, Jilcott, Pullen, and Surprise) stood on the exact field where he and Hatten crashed landed. They visited the sites where the 8 other crew members bravely jumped from the plane and parachuted on to a foreign soil. The good people of the surrounding communities honored them by holding commemorative events and celebrations. The citizens of Als, Denmark consider Captain Clay, his crew, and all the other allied airmen as "...our heroes...and seeing them up in the sky gave us hope in a dark time in our history." Thanks to many kind and generous individuals these heroes returned to the quiet, peaceful place where their heroic efforts came to an end and were reunited with themselves, their memories, and a country that silently supported them and honored the valiant spirit and courage of these once young men. This bravery and heroism sealed for them, and all the Allied countries, the freedoms and customs that they proudly enjoy today.

	AUGUSTENBORG KOMMUNE Mayor of Augustenborg	STOREGADE 20 6440 AUGUSTENBORG
Captain Robert Clay		Telefon: 74 47 15 82 Telefax: 74 47 11 56 E-mail: Radhuset@augustenburg.dk Hjemmeside: www.augustenburg.dk Servicetelefon: 44 83 93 93 - 501
Dato: 27. januar 2001 Ref.: 20010131H/JOB J.nr.: Telefon direkte: 74471708-239		ÅBNINGSTID: Man. - Ons.: 10.00-14.00 Torsdag: 10.00-17.00 Fredag: 10.00-12.00 TELEFONSTID: Man. - Ons.: 9.00-15.00 Torsdag: 9.00-17.00 Fredag: 9.00-12.00 E-mail: job@augustenburg.dk Side: 1 / 1
Dear captain Clay.		
As we are aware of your intentions to visit our island ALS to see again the places, where the B-17 "Stormy Weather" crashlanded in 1944, we would like to invite you og your crew to an official arrangement and to meet the population, who still remember those days.		
We have appointed an arrangement committee, who will inform you about the getting through af your visit.		
With kind regards and on behalf of		
A. P. Hansen Mayor of Sønderborg		J. Prokopek Jensen Mayor of Nordborg
 Erik Schmidt Mayor of Augustenborg		
✓ <i>Augustenborg Bys 350-års jubilæum i august måned 2001</i>		

Official invitation to come to Denmark

Robert B. Clay's 17 Missions

(Summarized from *The 351st Bomb Group in WWII* by Peter Harris and Ken Harbour)

Mission 1

Date: November 5, 1943

Plane:

Summary: The target was the City of Gelsenkirchen, Germany. Twenty-one planes took off but seven of them returned for various reasons before reaching the target. Flak was meager and inaccurate until the formation neared the Rhur valley where an intense barrage of accurate, continuous, following fire was put up.

Mission 2

Date: November 29, 1943

Plane:

Summary: Bremen, Germany was the assigned target. Twenty-four planes took off. The formation turned back before reaching the target. No bombs were dropped, with the exception of one ship which bombed a target of opportunity in the Friesian Islands.

Mission 3

Date: December 1, 1943

Plane: 42-37832 "Casa De Embriagos"

Summary: The briefed target was Solingen, Germany. Nineteen 351st planes and two Pathfinders flew the lead box of the Combat Wing. Another 21 planes were put up. Five planes returned early. From 30 to 50 Me 109s and FW 190s were encountered in the vicinity of the IP, where the fighter escort turned back. Most of the attacks were from head on.

Mission 4

Date: December 5, 1943

Plane: 42-30499 "My Princess"

Summary: This mission was to bomb a ball-bearing factory in Western Paris. Thirty-five planes took off. Solid cloud cover prevented the Group from bombing the target. Bombs were jettisoned in the channel or brought back to base.



"My Princess"

Mission 5

Date: December 11, 1943

Plane: 42-37832 "Casa De Embriagos"

Summary: Two combat boxes from the 351st took off for the port area and city of Emden. Eighteen ships in the lead box and sixteen in the high attacked the target. Results were not accurately observed because of ground haze and a smoke screen in the target area. Only six enemy fighters were seen, concentrating their attacks on the lower echelons. Flak was moderate and inaccurate. All ships returned without casualties.

Mission 6

Date: December 30, 1943

Plane: 42-29860 "Snoozin Susan"

Summary: Two boxes were put up to bomb the IG Farbenindustrie Chemical and Explosive factory at Ludwigshafen, Germany. A total of 36 planes attacked the target, but bombing results were not observed because of solid cloud cover over the target. About 15 enemy fighters were encountered, but only a few ineffective attacks were made on the formation. Flak at the target was moderate to intense, and only fairly accurate.



"Snoozin Susan"

Mission 7

Date: January 4, 1944

Plane: 42-29925 "The Dutchess"

Summary: Seventeen planes took off for a raid on Kiel. Fifteen of the planes bombed the target. Bombing results could not be observed because of solid cloud cover. The only enemy fighters seen were three or four ME 109s, attacking stragglers. Flak was fairly accurate both at the target and at various points on the route in and out. All planes returned without casualties.



"The Dutchess"

Mission 8

Date: January 7, 1944

Plane: 42-39848 "Archi-Ball"

Summary: The briefed target was a chemical factory at Ludwigshafen. Twenty planes took off. Bad weather over England caused great difficulty in forming, forcing thirteen planes to return without attacking. Bombing was on Pathfinder markers, but dense cloud in the target area made it impossible to observe the results. About twenty-five enemy planes were seen, the inevitable ME 109s and FW 190s and a couple of ME 110s. None of which attacked the Group. Flak was meager and inaccurate. All planes returned to England.



"Archi-Ball"

Mission 9

Date: February 3, 1944

Plane: 42-38005 "Stormy Weather"

Summary: The first mission for the month of February was flown to Wilhelmshaven. Sixteen planes flew in the lead group. Bombs were dropped on Pathfinders, through 10/10th clouds, and results were unobserved. Only about 15 enemy fighters were seen, and flak was only meager. All planes returned without casualties.



"Stormy Weather"

Mission 10

Date: February 4, 1944

Plane: 42-38005 "Stormy Weather"

Summary: Twenty-five planes flew a Pathfinder mission to Frankfurt. Ten-tenths cloud over the target made observation of the bombing results impossible. There was considerable flak but no enemy fighters, and all aircraft returned without casualties.

Mission 11

Date: February 6, 1944

Plane: 42-29863 "Ain't it Gruesome"

Summary: The assigned target was the aerodrome at Dijon. As this area was covered by solid cloud bombs were dropped instead on the aerodrome at Caen, with excellent results. Heavy concentrations of hits were seen in the area of repair shops and administrative buildings, and several direct hits on four hangers. Twenty planes flew in a low box, led by Major Ledoux and Lt. Clay, with Lt. Pullen as navigator. About 10 FW 190s and Me 109s were encountered, but extremely good fighter cover prevented any persistent attacks. Flak was generally meager and not very accurate. There were no losses and no casualties.



"Aint it Gruesome"

Mission 12

Date: February 21, 1944

Plane: 42-38032 "Clay Pigeon"

Summary: The target assigned was Gutersloh, Germany but bad weather forced the planes to bomb elsewhere. The airfield at Achmer was picked as a target of opportunity. Sixteen planes were assigned to the lead box led by Colonel Cobb. Over the target 15 to 25 enemy fighters were encountered, including several twin-engine planes. However, most of these did not make vigorous attacks, but considerable accurate flak was encountered.

Mission 13

Date: March 19, 1944

Plane: 42-3120 "Gremlin's Delight"

Summary: Twenty-one planes completed the mission to the secret weapon installation at Watten, France. The formation was led by Captain Clay and Lt. Emerson, with Lt. Pullen as navigator and Lt. Matthews as bombardier. The bomb pattern fell to the right of the target area. There was some accurate flak, but none of the planes were seriously damaged.

Mission 14

Date: April 26, 1944

Plane: 42-38005 "Stormy Weather"

Summary: Seventeen planes flew a mission to Brunswick led by Captain Clay and Lt. Van Tassel with Lt. Cleveland as navigator and Lt. Arnold as bombardier. Bombing was through solid cloud. There was no fighter opposition and flak was light and inaccurate.



14th Mission

April 26, 1944 Brunswick Raid

Lt. Butrum, Tail Gunner; Lt. Arnold, Bombardier; Capt. Clay, Pilot; Lt. Cleveland, Navigator; Lt. Van Tassel, Co-pilot

Mission 15

Date: May 1, 1944

Plane: 42-97193 "Star Duster"

Summary: The first target briefed for the month was a 'Noball' installation in the Pas de Calais area. Eighteen planes took off led by Captain Clay and Captain Crews with Lt. Pullen as navigator and Lt. Arnold as bombardier. They completed the flight as scheduled, but no bombs were dropped because the target area was covered by cloud. There was no fighter opposition or flak.

Mission 16

Date: May 7, 1944

Plane: 42-38005 "Stormy Weather"

Summary: Berlin was briefed as the main target. Thirty-four planes completed the mission led by Colonel Romig. Bombing was by Pathfinder technique through solid cloud cover. There was no fighter opposition but the Berlin flak was intense and accurate.

Mission 17

Date: May 24, 1944

Plane: 42-38005 "Stormy Weather"

Summary: Another mission was flown to Berlin by eighteen planes. They were led by Captain Clay and Lt. Hatten with Lt. Pullen as navigator and Lt. Arnold as bombardier. The bombs fell in a widely scattered pattern over the eastern edge of the city. No enemy fighters came close enough to be identified, but flak over Berlin was intense and accurate.

The lead ship 42-38005 piloted by Captain Clay abandoned the lead position, because of a feathered engine, shortly before the target. This ship was reported as flying with the low group of the wing for a time after the target, but it finally left the formation altogether and failed to return.



"Stormy Weather"
May 24, 1944
Als, Denmark

Acknowledgements from the family of Robert B. Clay

There have been many individuals and events that have encouraged the compilation of these memoirs and also made it possible for the crew of "Stormy Weather" to return to the field where they crashed so many years ago.

First, and most obvious, thanks to our father for telling his story, and taking the time to write it down. He'll never know the impact he's had on his posterity. We cannot thank him enough for revealing this part of his life that could have been tragically left untold had he left this life without doing what he taught all of his children, to share.

An unusual mention of gratitude goes out to Gammy, our father's mother whom we never knew. Were it not for her habit of keeping everything (a Clay trait!) we wouldn't have all the photos, letters and other invaluable memorabilia that has made this story complete.

A special thanks to Marshall Pullen for motivating our father into attending his first POW reunion in Seattle around 1990.

Also thanks to Daniel Surprise for being the spark that led us to our friends in Denmark and England. Were it not for him pointing out the picture of "Stormy Weather" in the Polebrook Post we may not have even known the last chapter of this wonderful story.

The following individuals have personally contributed these Memoirs and, or the trip to England and Denmark in both small and gigantic ways:

Mick Austin....the one who asked the most important question of all, "I would like to know if any of the remaining crew members survive today...."

Barbara Baker....her generous contribution to this project has been quiet, yet greatly appreciated.

Derek Baker....thanks to his editorial comments he helped make parts of these memoirs come to life.

Art Brothers....his interest and generous investment of time and resources is unparalleled.

Mogens Dyer & Gunnar Hounsgaard....were it not for them the Stormy Weather Reunion would not have taken place.

David Gower....his selfless devotion to the men of the 351st Bomb Group is truly honorable.

MF Jorgensen....a source of wonderful eyewitness information, and honorary Stormy Weather cartographer.

Lori Wood....our travel agent extraordinaire.

We cannot thank enough the good people of the Island of Als, Denmark. The following individuals have made it possible for our father and his crew to return to the fields they landed on so long ago:

Presidium and Arrangement Committee

Presidium: Jørgen M.Clausen, chairman and CEO Danfoss Industries.

A.P.Hansen, Mayor of Sønderborg.

Jan Prokopek Jensen, Mayor of Augustenborg (and also chairman of below mentioned committee)

Erik Schmidt, Mayor of Augustenborg

J.P.Rasmussen, Col. Chief Army NCO-Academy.

E. Lundsgaard, President "People & Defense" (NATO)

Arrangement Committee:

Jørgen H. Bonde, Vice-principal Mommark Business-school.

John Borggreen, Municipal director Augustenborg.

Finn Breuning, Director Danfoss.

Leo Bram, Engineer Danfoss.

E.Sejr Christensen, Ret. Capt.

Michael Sommerset, Sergeant-major NCO-Academy.

Mogens Dyre, M.Sc. (E&M) Ret. Research Man. and Major .

Gunnar Hounsgaard, Engineer and lecturer Engineering College.

Lastly, and most importantly, we are morally and socially indebted to the men who fought, lived, and died during the War. Their valor will forever be a constant reminder of the freedoms that we enjoy today.

The Wedding Dress

If there is such a notion that any romance could result from that fateful day in May of 1944, it is in the discovery that one of the local girls on the island salvaged one of the crew's parachutes, and, as wartime shortages bred ingenuity, fashioned a wedding dress from the nylon chute. The bride who wore the dress, still living, sent Clay a photograph of her in the dress on her wedding day and a small sample of yellow-faded material.

A romantic appendage to Captain Clay's Memoirs is the endearing story of the fate of one of the crew's parachutes. The following letter was received from Ilse Wietzke on August 10, 1999, recounting this enchanting tale:

About my wedding dress, I can tell the following story. After the plane had crashed my fiancé found one parachute on his land, the farmhands found another, they were hidden in the barn until the Germans had stopped searching. Ours was then divided into four parts: [one for me,] one for my mother in law, one for my sister in law, one for my brother in law. I know it came to good use, all of it. Since all sorts of material were scarce at that time it was an obvious idea to use our part for my wedding dress.

I remember there were letters and figures printed in blue all around the edge, which it took me hours to wash off with brown soap. The wedding was on the 5th of November 1944.



Ilse Wietzke
November 5, 1944



Ilse Wietzke
August 11, 1999

The origins of the dress seemed to be the talk of our little town, somebody even said that it was dangerous to wear that dress; surely the Gestapo would turn up at the church and arrest me. Perhaps the Germans had more important things on their minds at that time so nothing happened. I was not afraid – only happy that the wedding really came off. Because my fiancé shortly before then (5/11) had been arrested by the Germans suspected of being in the resistance movement – which he was – but got free – mainly it was thought because he ran a big farm and the Germans needed all the food they could exploit. His mates were sent to a KZ camp, thank God they all survived.

After the wedding the train was cut off and I dyed the dress in a nice yellow color and wore it quite a lot.

The cords that ran in the strong seams were wound up and used for mending clothes. We were out of everything in those days my mother in law even used it for knitting into socks to make them stronger because the wool was home spun from her own sheep.

Images from England May 2001



Mattingly American Cemetery
Cambridge, England



Robert B. Clay
351st Bomb Group Memorial
Polebrook, England, May 22, 2001



The Crew at Duxford Air Museum
Charles Jilcott, Frank Hatten, Dan Surprise,
Robert Clay



The Crew and Mick Austin
Polebrook Airfield



David Gower, Robert Clay, Karen Cooley
Laying wreath at 351st Memorial
Polebrook Airfield



Robert and Mildred Clay
Polebrook Airfield

Address of Welcome

Given by Ann Richards at the Service of Remembrance and Reunion in All Saints' Church, Polebrook on Friday, May 22, 2001 for the Stormy Weather Reunion.

I was seven years old and living in Polebrook in 1939 when World War II was declared and, young as I was, I knew from the adults' faces how serious this was. Because civilians as well as service personnel were subject to emergency regulations, my parents had first the surveyor and then the man in charge of building your airbase, together with his two assistants, billeted on us. My involvement with Polebrook Airbase had started and has continued. Even when the R. A. F. was there, we had their two meteorological men living with us.

Nothing, however, prepared us for the 351st invasion. Oh the glamour of all those impeccable gabardine uniforms, the unfamiliar accents, the constant traffic of wheeled vehicles when we were more used to horses. Above all, for us children, there were the candy bars with exotic names and the wonderful Christmas parties when we were collected in jeeps and trucks and driven inside the fencing, past guards bristling with arms and then given unheard-of treats like ice cream and canned fruit and cartoons. We were thoroughly spoilt for a few hours.

Though only eleven, I soon realized that what went on up the hill was not glamorous. Many of you came to sit by our fireside for some peace and home comforts or to be with our farm animals. The local bus was machine-gunned near the base; our house rocked when a B17 crashed fully loaded on take-off; and when Al, a young navigator, was killed on his final mission my family grieved for one of its own. We were conscious of what you risked and sacrificed when you came so far to help us.

It's an historic day for this ancient church for you to be here as part of your Reunion. You helped to ensure that our heritage and our freedom were preserved and our debt is incalculable.

Thus we welcome you wholeheartedly today, giving thanks to God that we can be together in this ancient building that you helped to protect. We do so value your friendship, your continuing interest in our community and your great generosity. I am always impressed by the motivation and organization of your Association and the participation of the younger generation is so heartening. You can be certain that you are all fondly remembered in this small corner of England.

God bless you all and all who cannot be here with us today.



Ann Richards in front of her home
Polebrook, England
May 20, 2001

Highlights of Trip to Denmark As recalled by Robert B. Clay

Our group of four crew members of the B17 bomber "Stormy Weather," together with 13 family and friends, were cordially welcomed at the Danish airport by the committee of Danish citizens who had invited us to commemorate the 57 anniversary of the ill-fated B-17. I was attempting to reach Sweden with only one engine, but crashed on the small Danish island of Als. The island itself is about four miles wide by 30 miles long, connected to the mainland by a bridge.

On the 24th of May 1944, during World War II, a member of the committee, Gunnar Hounsgaard, a teenager during the time Denmark was occupied by the Germans, had taken a picture of the wrecked B-17 and by a series of improbable events located me in Salt Lake City. Corresponding between Gunnar and my family culminated in the invitation for our bomber crew to visit Denmark for a special commemoration on May 24, 2002.

The trip committee drove us, in a new military bus, to our living quarters, which turned out to be a small college campus vacated for spring holiday. That evening we all met to discuss the four full days of scheduled activities. The next morning we enjoyed a great breakfast and boarded the bus to visit and place flowers on various simple monuments at the crash sites of nine Allied bombers during WW II. Seven of the nine were English bombers, and the other two were from the U.S. 8th Air Force based in England. Oddly enough, four of the seven English bomber crashes resulted from two mid-air collisions.



Tour bus, driver Poul Jensen



Living quarters at Mommark School



Monument where 2 British bombers crashed.

This was the location where Mick Austin's uncle, Arthur Waite was killed. Gunnar Hounsgaard conducts the memorial service while Robert and Mildred Clay look on.

During that day I learned answers to some of my questions:

- a) The English bombed Berlin at night by flying across the North Sea eastward to Denmark, then south to Berlin in order to eliminate flying over the anti aircraft guns surrounding the large German cities located on a more direct heading to Berlin. That answered the reason for

the two mid-air collisions because on the occasion the bombers were coming and going the same route back and forth all night long.

b) The only survivors of the nine bomber crashes were the entire crew of “Stormy Weather”: with eight bailing out while the copilot and myself successfully crash-landed the B-17. Since 1940 the only tangible hope of liberation from the oppressive German occupation was the sight and sound of Allied bombers. Thus the crash sites represented a physical reminder of the heroic men who had given their all to defeat the Germans. The people wanted to honor these men but the only survivors were unknown until Gunnar finally contacted me. Thus the stage was set for the belated reunion to praise and honor the only survivors, who for 55 years had not known they were heroes in Denmark.

The following warm dry day was May 24, 2001, the long-awaited day for the 57th Anniversary of our crash, the day many islanders had anticipated for over half a century. Gunnar told us he expected 200 or 300 older people. The entire program was scheduled to the minute. We were to arrive at the exact time of day as the crash. Since we were 15 minutes early, our bus pulled off the narrow road to the crash site.

About one mile from the site we could see cars and bicycles lining each side of the narrow road as far as the eye could see. Finally we arrived at the turnoff to the crash site. The hundred yards to the parking area was filled with spectators. We inched along through the crowd that Gunnar later estimated to be 1500 men, women and children. As we stepped out of the bus one at a time, the people crowded in clapping, taking pictures, and gazing at us as if we were strangers from another planet. We finally arrived at the roped-off stage area where we could sit down. The military band was playing martial music and scores of flags were flying. A large U.S. Flag was flying atop a high pole, surrounded by 4 angled poles with Danish flags, indicating the exact site of the B-17 crash site. A military plane fly-by was followed by a large helicopter, which landed in the center of the grain field adjacent to the podium. From the helicopter emerged about eight military personnel, the leader, a Colonel, saluted me. There I was in full uniform bedecked with ribbons and medals surrounded by my crew in uniform and returning the salute. I really felt as if I was really a returning war hero.

Several dignitaries gave speeches honoring us, which were spoken in Danish, then translated to English. After that our crew was awarded honorary members of the Danish Home Guard by a ribbon with an attached medallion placed around our necks, together with an impressive certificate. I promised to accept the same award for each absent crew member and present it to the member or family to the best of my ability. Then I was asked to speak. I gave tearful thanks to our sponsors and the large crowd and told them this overwhelming 57th anniversary commemoration was repayment



Lt. Colonel Robert B. Clay
Arriving at the field 57 years to the day he crash
landed “Stormy Weather”



for the bitterness I felt for the one year I was forced to endure as a German POW.

At the conclusion of the program, we were surrounded by a wave of spectators. They all wanted a handshake, or an autograph, or a photograph, or an answer to a question. They gave me parts of the B-17, a hose clamp, a strip of aluminum, a piece of Plexiglas, my headset and throat mic, and a part of a wedding dress made from a parachute. But more importantly, they gave my crew, both present and missing, the most sincere honor and praise possible.

I now know how a hero really feels, but I still don't feel like a real hero.



Captain Clay's headset is presented to him by a local citizen, Gunnar Hounsgaard serves as a translator.

That night we were the guests at an elaborate banquet attended by about 100 of the most eminent citizens and civic leaders of the island, several who spoke words of praise and gratitude to the young heroes who had suffered and died to end Hitler's diabolical plan. A marching band played popular WWII music.



The following two days we visited the three major cities of Als. Everywhere we went we enjoyed the major tourist attractions, namely a museum, a WWII German Stalag, a seaport, the home where I led Hatten for first aide, and the house where six members of the crew, who bailed out, were fed.

For four days we were wined (literally) and dined and bused around like royalty. For the greatest trip of our lives, Mildred and I owe a debt of gratitude to the committee of Mogens Dyre, Gunnar Hounsgaard, Leo Bram, Ken Harbour, Kevin Blyth and Jing Jeppesen and the citizens of Als, together with my family for making the dream come true.

Images from Denmark May 2001



Entrance to the field where Stormy Weather crashed.
Als, Denmark May 24, 2001



Mogens Dyer
Member of the Danish Resistance and first person to contact some of the crew that had bailed out.



Robert Clay laughing with the crowd of 1500+ people who attended the ceremony.



In the kitchen at Myrholm.

L to R: Herdis Bonde (who was a little girl at the time of the crash and was present when Clay and Hatten came to Myrholm), Frank Hatten, Robert Clay, Peter Clausen (who was also present on that day in 1944) .



Leo Bram presents Robert Clay with the Danish flag that had flown over Myrholm for generations.



Robert B. Clay and his wife Mildred Clay (on his left)
Stormy Weather Reunion Day, May 24, 2001



Stormy Weather Reunion



Mogens Dyer
Charles Jilcott, Frank Hatten, Robert B. Clay, Daniel Surprise.



Ester and Gunnar Hounsgaard
Charles Jilcott, Frank Hatten, Robert B. Clay, Daniel Surprise



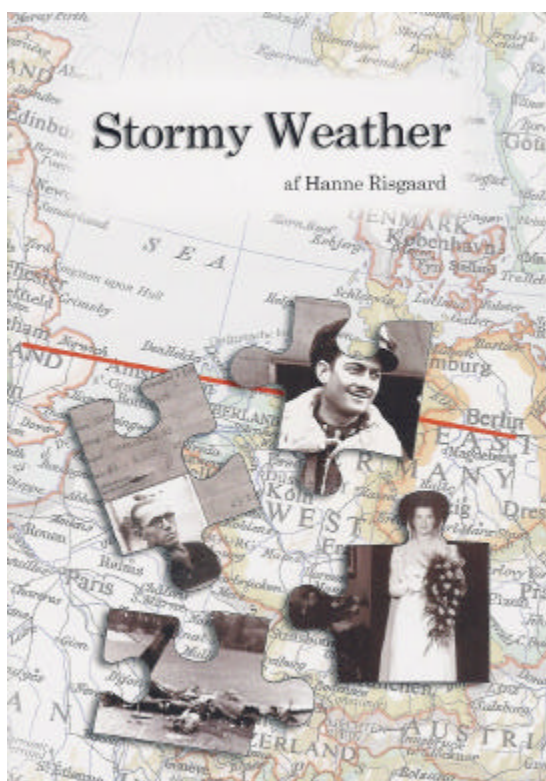
Lone and Leo Bram (current residents of Myrholm)
Charles Jilcott, Frank Hatten, Robert B. Clay, Daniel Surprise



“Myrholm” May 2001
The farmhouse where Clay led Hatten to dress his head wound. They were soon captured by German soldiers.



Hanne Rinsgaard, Jorgen Bonde
Sitting: Charles Jilcott, Frank Hatten, Robert Clay, Daniel Surprise.



"Stormy Weather"
book written by Hanne Rinsgaard.

For Pilots Only

My navigator, Marshall Pullen, had kept in touch with me and others of my crew. In 1987 he was retired and living in Houston, Texas and I was on business in Dallas, so I decided to spend a weekend with him and his wife Virginia and recount our World War II experiences.

The first morning I was there Marshall asked if I would like to visit a B-17 being restored at Hobby Field—of course—a great idea!

We drove right up to this elegantly restored B-17G on a calm sunny morning. Marshall introduced me to the 3 or 4 ex-Air Force men working on the final details before the test flight. As he talked to his friends, I wandered around the ship almost in awe because I had not been near one since 1944. It was completely equipped. I walked all the way around—every 50 caliber in place—olive drab paint gleaming—engine clean and black—props shining. I slowly climbed in the rear door—even an electric generator in place. As I went forward I had to duck my head—somehow it seemed smaller than I remembered—past the waist guns (I noticed they had been demilitarized) through the radio compartment—along the cat walk to the pilot's seat—I settled in and looked around—first time in 43 years. I slid open the left window—radio crank above and a hundred instruments in front.

As I sat there with my right hand on the throttles, studying each instrument I heard in the distance a prop-jet—coming toward me, now it was by my left wing tip—motors running.

Suddenly, I was translated—a flood of hidden memories hit me like a tidal wave—I was at 28,000 feet—the deep blue sky was streaked with contrails—the dusty red city far below was slowly sliding beneath me—I was again leading the Triangle J group—we streaked through a black flak cloud and the plane shuddered slightly—the chatter of the machine guns shook the plane—an ME was coming head on blinking his yellow warning prop hub lights at me.

Then it was all over—the prop jet roar faded away as the plane moved down the parking ramp. Shades of Walter Mitty—I was back sitting in my beloved B-17 on a beautiful Saturday afternoon I'll never forget.

Bitterness

Many people have asked me why I was so bitter when I came home after World War II. Recently (2001) I decided to remember and analyze my feelings which quite naturally can be described under the headings of physical and mental.

Physical

In roughly chronological order:

1. Approximately 13 days in solitary confinement in a 6 by 8 foot underground cell at Frankfurt, Germany (Dulag Luft) on the Rhine, underfed and interrogated three times. Learning that the Germans knew in detail, information which I understood to be confidential or even secret.
2. Three day trip from Frankfurt to Stalag Luft III in "40 and 8" box cars which were so crowded that of the 60 odd POWs only one half had room to sit down while the other half were forced to stand.
3. From the middle of June 1944 to the end of January 1945 in Stalag Luft III on a 1200 calories per day diet consisting of a bowl of soup with one third loaf of the worst black bread; promised portions of Red Cross parcel of food which were seldom kept by the Germans; two olive drab GI blankets for sleeping on a burlap bag filled with wood shavings; a GI helmet liner, an Eisenhower jacket and light-weight pants and shirt (the Germans took all of the good flying clothes during interrogation).
4. Once a month, warm showers in winter and bucket baths in summer.
5. I developed double vision due to diet deficiency so I could barely read.
6. Marched out of Stalag Luft III at midnight during a blizzard on the last day of January 1945. The Germans offered us all the Red Cross parcels we wanted from a warehouse filled with thousands of pallets which fell into the hands of the advancing Russians.
7. Marched 50 miles during two nights and one day before finding a warm building for the 10,000-odd POWs of Stalag Luft III. During the march I wore out three sets of cardboard insoles (made from Red Cross parcels) to help protect my feet in my worn out shoes.
8. After two days about 9000 POWs marched out leaving about 1000 not able to go. My feet suffered from frost bite, blood blisters and athlete's foot so I was one of the 1000 who stayed behind for two more days then crammed in "40 and 8" box cars headed for old POW Stalag XIIIID just outside of Nuremberg, Germany.
9. At Stalag XIIIID conditions were much worse than Stalag Luft III. The bunks were vermin infested. There was no fuel for heat except the wood from our own building which was trashed by the time we marched out on the first of April, 1945 to avoid being liberated by the advancing US Army.
10. We marched the 100 miles from the Stalag XIIIID at Nuremberg to the Stalag at Moosburg. During the one week march we lived off the land because everyone knew the Germans were "kaput."
11. At Moosburg I was reunited with the four other officers from my crew.
12. Liberated by Patton's tanks the end of April 1945, but remained for another two weeks before being flown to France.
13. Too seasick to eat during the eight day boat ride home to Camp Miles Standish.
14. Tried to buy food at a small PX at Miles Standish but was refused service because we were "not German or Italian POWs".

Mental

1. In prison but not guilty of any crime.
2. Guilt for causing my crew to become POWs.
3. Wondering what happened to the enlisted men of our crew.
4. Uncertainty of the future for one year.
5. The deceit and treatment by the Germans.
6. Seeing our silver bombers fly by only five miles up in the sky.
7. Finding out that my money, radio, camera etc, from my room in England, was not returned to me.
8. No credit for my final (17th) mission because I did not return to my base in England (credited after my complaint).
9. A wasted year of my life plus 10,000 fellow officers
10. Time to decide how stupid wars are.



In memory of all those who lost their lives fighting for our freedom.