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A TEENAGE WARRIOR IN WORLD WAR II

BY
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CHAPTER 1

BREAKFAST AT THREE - BRIEFING AT FOUR

"Alright you guys, hit the deck. Breakfast at three, briefing at four", yelled the squadron clerk in a voice that sounded like a buzz bomb over London. At least now maybe the apprehension that's had me tossing and turning since I went to bed might ease up. The flak wounds in my right leg and both arms from my last mission and five weeks in the hospital were still on my mind. There was always a lot of work for me between briefing and take-off time. I had to get the two .50 caliber machine guns loaded in the chin turret of our new B-17G, check the arming wires and safety pins in the bombs and a final review of target photos.

In the combat crew mess hall we had the typical 'before a mission breakfast' of hot cakes and maple syrup, one fresh fried egg on top, a glass of real milk, and the ever present sulphur pills. That menu must have been a fringe benefit for flying combat because on the days we didn't fly we had either powdered eggs or S-O-S with biscuits and powdered milk. When we wrote home about it we referred to S-O-S as 'same old stuff' but among the troops it was well known by a different name.

Sitting in the briefing room waiting to learn the target for the day, I found myself studying the faces of the crew I'd be flying with that day. At least they weren't a new crew; they had already completed twenty-five missions. Their regular Bombardier was grounded because of a head cold so I was assigned to take his place. Their co-Pilot, Pete, and I had been good friends for some time. We went to London together frequently on three-day passes and we often were partners in bridge games.

"Attention!" Only the sound of their foot steps was heard in the room as the Group Commander, Colonel Burns, and his staff strode up to the front of the briefing room. The Operations Officer told us to be seated and he pulled the cover off the map. The usual oohs and aahs filled the room. It had always seemed strange that, no matter what the target, Berlin, Munich, Leipzig or a 'milk run', when the cover was pulled off the map everyone said either ooh or aah, myself included. A head shrinker would probably be able to make something out of whether a guy said ooh or aah.

Something special was on tap for that day. Our normal targets were strategic areas, marshalling yards, oil fields, ball bearing or aircraft plants, and air fields, all hit from 26,000 to 28,000 feet. That day we were going to join the "Battle of the Bulge". The fight up in Belgium had been going on for some time now, but practically all the aircraft in

Europe had been grounded for over a week due to the miserable weather. Just two days before Christmas, we were going to bomb from 15,000 feet and just over the front lines. That meant a special briefing and target study for the Bombardiers after the general briefing.

The rest of the crew were already in the aircraft when I got there. I climbed aboard just as the sun made a valiant effort to burn through the ever present British fog. Our takeoff time was two hours later than usual because of the special Bombardier briefing, and I discovered that the Gunners had already fitted the guns into the chin turret for me. That's a job that is next to impossible to do wearing gloves, and, in cold weather, without gloves, if you touched the guns your skin froze to the cold metal. After flying 36 combat missions, I was working on about the fourth layer of skin on my hands. I finished checking over the twelve 500-pound bombs in the bomb bay that we were going to deliver to Hitler's elite and climbed up to my office in the nose.

The green flare was fired from the tower and we pulled onto the runway. Our take off was smooth and we joined the rest of the squadron formation over King's Cliff. We were assigned as deputy lead for the squadron and our squadron was assigned to the high box in the group formation.

CHAPTER 2

FRIENDLY FIRE - BAIL OUT

Heading out over the channel in a good tight formation, I decided to experiment with the special map of our target area they gave us at the Bombardier briefing. The guy from Intelligence said that, in the event we were about to be captured, we should eat the map because it was made out of a special paper that was easily digestible. I bit off a small corner to test it and after a considerable amount of chewing, managed to swallow the cud. Eating that 36" x 24" map would have been tough on a billy goat.

Over the intercom came, "Pilot to crew, we are now at oxygen altitude. Bombardier, you run the oxygen checks today at ten-minute intervals." My reply was a rather guttural, "Roger", because that damn map might have been digestible, but it sure took a long time to get into the system. The Navigator advised the crew that we were entering the area where we could expect enemy fighters. We had all test fired our guns over the English Channel and now the Gunners began scanning their individual sectors of the sky.

The bombsight was all set up for the bomb run, and I used the last few minutes to go over the map of the target area to assure myself that I had located my exact aiming point. The Navigator told me that we were two minutes from the I.P. I had

always been amazed that, when we reached the Initial Point and started the bomb run, I was able to actually fly that big lumbering bomber through the use of the two correction knobs the size of silver dollars on the right side of the bomb sight.

Now it was time for me to go to work. As we turned onto the bomb run, the pilot turned on the PPI (planned position indicator), which transferred control of the aircraft to my bombsight. A quick check of the bomb panel revealed that everything was ready and I flipped the toggle switch that opened the gaping bomb bay doors. Our aircraft was being bounced around like a cork in a heavy sea due to intensely heavy antiaircraft fire. I raised up from the bombsight to give a last minute check of the bombing panel and I noticed that the sky was full of white flak. White! I had never seen white flak before. Our normal flak opposition from the German 88 filled the sky with flak that was as black as coal or sometimes red, when they tried to vector their fighters into specific areas. The white flak aroused my curiosity, but it would be some time before I would learn for sure the white flak was from our own antiaircraft weapons shooting at us. We were told later the MPI (main point of impact) for our bombs was exactly as briefed but after we took off on the mission, the ground troops, due to an erroneous order, advanced into that area and our bombs fell on them. Because of the heavy

clouds, miserable weather and a general lack of communication between ground and air, our ground troops must have thought they were being bombed by German planes and opened up with their 155mm howitzers.

With a salvo bomb drop, all twelve 500-pound bombs would leave the bomb bay at one time. The indices of the bombsight came together and the bombs all left their shackles. As all of those bombs dropped at once, our aircraft lurched upward like a kite in a March wind and then resumed normal flight. There sure wasn't any need to call, "Bombs away" over the intercom but I did so out of habit and then closed the bomb bay doors.

After putting the cover on the bombsight, I pulled the control box and gun sight for the chin turret over in front of me and began watching for enemy fighters. All at once there was a blinding flash and I was slammed back against the firewall as the aircraft did a wing over and went into an uncontrolled and inverted dive. There was a terrific pain in my head and I felt a complete numbness as darkness surrounded me and I began to slip into unconsciousness.

When I regained consciousness, Joe, the navigator, standing over me trying to clean the blood from my face and yelling, "Are you okay, Bill. my God, answer me, are you alright?".

I told him, "I think I'm Okay, Joe, all my parts seem to work." The aircraft was again in level flight but we had lost a lot of altitude before the pilots pulled us out of that dive. We were still loosing altitude and as I stared around what was left of the nose of the aircraft it looked like the inside of a discarded Catsup bottle. Blood was everywhere - my blood. I discovered we took a direct hit in the number three engine, knocking it completely out of the nacelle and setting the wing on fire. A piece of the flak had penetrated my flak helmet and lodged in the center of my forehead. The rapid descent of our dive must have acted as a pump attached to the hole in my head and pumped out my blood. The hole left by the number three engine was a ball of fire and the wing was starting to burn. All of the plexiglas in the nose was gone, only the bent aluminum frames remained. The wind rushing into the nose had the Navigator and me pushed back against the fire wall. Any movement we made felt like moving in thick molasses. The Pilot was yelling over the intercom at the Navigator, wanting to know if we were Okay because he could see the nose was almost all shot away. I nodded and Joe reported that we were all right.

"Pilot to Bombardier, open the bomb bay doors, Bill, I'm pushing the bailout alarm."

Joe and I helped each other out of our flak suits and he then jumped out the front escape hatch.

As I was opening the bomb bay doors, I glanced at the altimeter on the bomb panel and saw that we were at just over 2300 feet, which meant we lost almost 13,000 feet while the pilot and co-pilot struggled to bring us out of our inverted dive. I started to follow the Navigator out the front escape hatch but the Pilot, not knowing I had been wounded, called me on the intercom, "Bill, I can't get an answer from the Tail Gunner and all the other Gunners have bailed out, how about checking on him for me."

I replied, "Roger." Unhooking one of the 'D' rings of my chest-pack parachute, I tucked the chute under my left arm and inched my way back along the narrow cat-walk in the open bomb bay into the radio room, then into the waist section. I saw that we had much more damage than just the nose and engine. One of the waist Gunners was very obviously dead so I passed him and crawled back into the tail section. When I got up behind the Tail Gunner I could see that most of his head was gone. I retraced my way back up to the cockpit. When I stood up to tell the Pilot what I found, there was no one in the cockpit. I was alone in a burning aircraft that was now loosing altitude more rapidly.

I groped my way back to the bomb bay as I quickly re-hooked the 'D' ring on my parachute harness and dove out head first. Almost immediately, I pulled the rip cord. I must have been falling flat because when the chute opened I

was swung up like a pendulum. On my downward swing my feet hit in deep snow. God only knows how low I was when I pulled that rip cord.

On the ground, I clawed out of my parachute harness and stood up. I was elated just to be able to stand up and walk. The snow was very deep and made walking difficult but it no doubt had saved me from two broken legs, at the very least. My whole body was trembling, probably brought on by the fear of being alone in an enemy occupied country.

After looking around for a while, I found my friend, Pete, the co-Pilot. Pete said, "I saw the pilot and Ball Turret Gunner killed by small arms fire from the ground while they were coming down in their chutes and I wasn't able to find any of the others." I told him about finding two of the Gunners dead at their positions before I left the aircraft. Pete noticed my bloody face for the first time and asked me if I could walk. I put my hand to my forehead and could feel the metal still stuck in the center of my forehead. That was a very frightening sensation because I didn't know if my brains would come out if I removed the flak. The wound seemed to be well clotted so I assured Pete I was all right. He helped me clean the blood from my face with snow.

We walked for an hour or so before we rounded a clump of trees and walked into a German encampment. With all those guns pointed at us, all we could do was put up our hands.

CHAPTER 3

POW - A FOUR MONTH NIGHTMARE

Pete and I were placed in an enclosure made out of coiled barbed wire with very sharp points that the Germans were hastily building as we were brought into the camp. There was nothing to sit on in the containment area so we both sat in the snow and waited. Several Germans came into the corral and took all of our leather fur lined flying clothes and sitting in that deep snow became a very cold experience.

A German medic came into the corral to check on my head wound which was still oozing blood. After washing the blood off my face he found the hunk of flak sticking out of the center of my forehead and tried to pull it out. With a grimace I told him, "That hurts like hell" and I motioned for him to leave it alone. The guy actually had a look of concern on his face as he dusted the wound with some kind of powder and wrapped a rag around my forehead. That was the total medical treatment I received from the Germans during my captivity.

When the medic left, Pete and I began to plan how we would escape. We decided our best chance would be after the Germans were asleep because there appeared to be well over 200 soldiers in the camp.

It became dark as the camp fires burned lower and the Germans turned in for the night. The guard outside our corral sat down and leaned his back against a tree with his bayonet equipped rifle on the ground next to him. Everything became quiet in the camp and a couple of hours had passed since the guard started to snore, so we decided to make our break. Pete, a big Texan, told me, "I'll hold up the barbed wire so you can crawl under it and get a pole to hold the wire up for me." As I was crawling under the coiled wire it slipped out of Pete's hands and dug into my back, making it impossible for me to move. The noise awakened the guard; he grabbed his rifle and came running towards us, shouting, "Halte, halte". Pete raised his hands above his head and the guard motioned for me to stand up. I kept pointing to the barbed wire which was imbedded in my back and prevented me from moving, but the guard didn't understand my motions. He jabbed me in the rear with his bayonet. I yelled, "Son of a bitch!" as I plowed a furrow and stood up with my hands in the air. When Pete heard me cry out he shouted at the guard to leave me alone and went after him but the Kraut just pointed his rifle at Pete's face and fired, killing him on the spot. With my hands still in the air, I stalked slowly forward so I could get a real good look at that bastard. I wanted to remember his face in case I ever got out of this situation and had an opportunity to avenge Pete's killing.

By that time, the entire camp was awake and I was quickly surrounded. They blindfolded me and tied my hands behind my back with heavy rope. I remained in that condition the entire time of my captivity, except for short periods, twice a day, when my hands were untied so I could relieve myself and, if they brought me food, feed myself, but the blindfold remained.

I was taken to a cave and put inside. A German, who spoke to me in English, with a British accent said, "If you remove the blindfold, untie your hands, move the tarp at the cave entrance or try to escape you will be shot without warning and the guard who prevented your escape will be on duty at the cave entrance every night." Before leaving he took my 'dog tags', watch, and silver crash bracelet. In the right leg pocket of my flying suit he found my escape kit which contained gold coins, silk maps and a German phrase book. He took my escape kit and my flying suit as well. I was then left with only my robin's egg blue heated suit designed to plug into the plane's electrical system and the layered summer and winter underwear beneath the heated suit. The German departed, leaving me with my rage and disbelief, as I remembered Pete's being shot and dragged off by his feet just before I was blindfolded.

Since I last ate at 0300 hours, before taking off on my final combat mission, it had been well over 24 hours since I had any food and gnawing hunger pangs began. I laid down on

my side, on the cold dirt floor of the cave, and fell asleep due to sheer exhaustion. I was awakened by someone who brought me a hot bowl of rotten smelling turnip soup and a piece of stale black bread that had a sour odor. I was fed the soup and bread. No words were spoken, and the person left the cave. Only a short time passed when someone came back and fed me several raw turnips and water. When I took a bite of the last turnip I felt a worm or something crawling around in my mouth and spit out the whole mess. It seemed like at least a day before I was fed more foul smelling turnip soup. The guards were now removing the ropes from my wrists long enough for me to feed myself and relieve myself but the blindfold remained. At different intervals, more black bread and water. That same procedure went on for what must have been several days before my interrogation began. It became obvious to me that an attempt was being made to break down my mental processes by first making me lose track of time. It worked well because, being blindfolded and fed at irregular times made me lose all of my ability to keep track of time. All I could do was wait to see what would happen next.

Two men came into the cave, laughing and joking with each other. They grabbed me by both arms and led me to the interrogation room. I was placed on a stool. A man in front of me again warned, "If you try to remove your blindfold or ropes you will be shot without warning." He was speaking

English with a British accent, and I felt he was probably the same one who gave me the warning the first night in the cave. He began the questioning in a friendly tone of voice. I answered his first question about where my base was located by saying, "William L. Cramer, Jr., Lieutenant, O-2033061." I soon began to detect anger in his voice because I answered with name, rank and serial number to every one of his questions. Finally, I was taken back to the cave and pushed roughly inside. The rotten raw turnips, the horrible turnip soup, the stale black bread and the water with the stagnant smell and taste resumed at irregular periods. At that point, I had completely lost track of time and I wondered if their interrogation techniques would cause me to lose my mind, or worse, to lose my resolve not to answer their questions. Sleeping on the hard ground, with my hands tied behind my back, was now becoming more difficult and, at times, my arms felt like they would surely fall off. The irregular periods between receiving food and water became longer and longer.

After what must have been several days, I was again taken to the interrogation room with a man on each arm and the same German began to question me once more. He started out by making a noise shuffling some papers. "I have here a complete dossier on you. I know all about your training and the type aircraft you and your crew were shot down in." I thought he was just feeding me a bunch of bull until he said, "We know

about the big triangle J on the tail of your aircraft means the 351st Bomb Group."

That really shook me until I forced my thoughts back to reality and reasoned that they probably just went out to the crash site, got the tail marking and compared it with their intelligence list of bomb group insignia. He again became very friendly and asked me about the type of radar we used on the mission. I repeated my name, rank and serial number. Suddenly my head felt like it had exploded. A hard open handed slap was simultaneously applied to both ears. Next he asked about our bombing techniques -- name, rank and serial number - again, very hard simultaneous slaps to both ears. The ear slaps continued for a lengthy period even when no questions were being asked. The room became very quiet but I knew someone was standing directly behind me because I smelled his nauseous garlic breath. Even with the pain in my arms and the terrible ringing noise in my ears, I must have still been thinking clearly because I realized they were just trying to let fear build up and make me worry when the ear slaps would come again. Their technique was effective because those ear slaps were very painful outside as well as inside my head and I began to worry about permanent damage to my hearing. The room remained very still. Two men lifted me off the stool, led me back to the cave and threw me inside like a sack of

potatoes. The same interrogation techniques continued on a daily basis for what must have been a couple of months.

I prayed a lot during my captivity. When I was alone I prayed for God's help in resisting the German interrogation so that I would not reveal the classified information they were seeking. My prayers were answered because I never did give them information.

Once again I was taken into the interrogation room. The interrogator got very confidential with me and said, "I'm a Captain in the German Army and I assure you that I am not S.S. or Gestapo." He told me his name was Kurt but I didn't get his last name. Kurt told me, "My job is to learn from you every thing about your bombing and navigation techniques, with special emphasis on the box." I was sure he was talking about the 'black box' we used for radar navigation and radar bombing and which was then classified Secret. He finally said, "Look Lieutenant, you've held out much longer than I expected you would and I respect you for that. Why not spare yourself further pain and tell me what I need to know? You'll then be sent to a prisoner-of-war camp in Germany, where humane treatment will be provided. After we win the war you'll be sent back safely to your home in America. I must have the information because the Luftwaffe Intelligence people are on their way and I want to get the information first." He asked me to explain 'the box' to him. I just got

out my name, rank and serial number; the chair was kicked out from under me and I fell heavily to the floor on my left shoulder. With my hands tied behind my back, the pain was excruciating enough to almost cause me to black out. It would have been so easy to just pass out but I fought to maintain a state of awareness. After they placed me back on the stool, he next asked me about navigation. Name - rank - serial number, this time it was a rifle butt to the mid section. The feeling of helplessness from being beat up while blindfolded and not being able to see it coming was something I had never before experienced. I decided to forget about name, rank and serial number and just remain silent. He asked me several more questions which I did not answer. The room got very quiet but I could hear the whispering of three very low voices, then nothing. After a lengthy period of silence I was lifted off the stool and taken back to the cave.

It must have been the next day when two jabbering men came into the cave. They took me by the arms and led me to the interrogation room. The first question out of Kurt's mouth was about our special bombing techniques. I just sat there and waited for his next move. Suddenly I was grabbed by both arms while another person forced open my mouth, reached in with a pair of pliers that tasted rusty against my tongue and pulled out one of my lower teeth. My mouth quickly filled with blood. I was taken back to the entrance of the cave and

tossed inside. As I lay on floor of the cave shaking with pain and anger, I vowed I would escape, somehow! My prayers became more intense because I knew I must hold out and not give them the information they seemed to need so desperately.

Again, a lengthy period passed with no food. I was awakened from a deep sleep of exhaustion and taken back to the room for more interrogation. I was seated on the stool and nothing was said. Finally, Kurt asked, "Lieutenant, are you ready for a gentlemanly talk?"

I stood up and in the loudest voice I could muster with a very sore mouth, I told him, "Captain, You can go to hell." I was grabbed again from both sides and forced back on the stool. My mouth was forced open and the rusty pliers pulled out a tooth from the other side of my mouth. Once again, I was taken back to the cave and tossed inside like a sack of potatoes. I was so angry that I hardly felt the pain of the last extraction. As I lay on the cold floor of the cave, I knew that I must escape soon or that mad man would kill me trying to learn our radar techniques. I also knew if I revealed what I had been taught about radar bombing and radar navigation, they would be able to develop countermeasures, negate our advantage and it would probably cost the lives of many airmen.

Laying on the cold floor of the cave, I worried about how much longer I would be able to resist their interrogation and decided that I must make my escape that night or die trying.

CHAPTER 4

ESCAPE

My mouth finally stopped bleeding. I was making a determined effort to control my anger and to bring my mind back to reality. I had to think rationally so I would be able to make my escape. I knew it must be tonight. Strange how acute my sense of hearing had become until the two handed ear slaps began. My sense of smell had also increased. Apparently being blindfolded since my capture caused my other senses to take over to make up for my inability to see. It had been some time since they stopped the repeated ear slaps and my hearing seemed to be returning again. The noise of movements outside the cave and beyond the entrance were becoming clearer.

Since the outside activity decreased considerably, I struggled to my feet and backed up to the wall of the cave. Moving my bound hands slowly along the wall, I searched for the out cropping of a sharp rock or something to use to saw through the ropes. My search was finally successful and a crack in the wall with sharp edges became my tool. Sawing on the ropes took a long time and I cut up my wrists so much they began to bleed. The ropes finally pulled apart. With my hands free, I groped for the blindfold and yanked it off with

one motion. Everything was completely black. My fear and imagination began running wild -- the ear slaps and being blindfolded have caused me to go blind? Or was it just a dark cave?

I felt along the wall until my hands touched the tarp at the entrance of the cave. Listening intently and not hearing any sound of movement, I very carefully pulled the tarp aside. Being sure not to make any noise, I slowly stuck my head around the corner of the entrance. A cold wind and blowing snow hit my face but with my eyes wide open I saw nothing but blackness. There certainly was no way I could escape without being able to see so I lay down on the floor, waited and prayed for my vision to return.

Utter fatigue must have caused me to drop off to sleep because someone snoring awakened me. With a concerted effort I forced myself to think clearly and realized it must be the guard outside the cave entrance. Very carefully pulling the tarp aside slightly I began to distinguish shapes and what appeared to be the flickering flames of dying bonfires. It was very difficult to keep from rubbing my eyes, but I knew that probably would delay the return of my normal vision. Just closing my eyes for a while seemed to help because when I opened them again the shapes became slightly more distinguishable. It was soon possible for me to discern the guard laying on the ground a short distance from the cave entrance.

After resting my eyes a little longer and praying the guard would not awaken, it was time to make my break. Leaving the cave, I crawled on my belly through the wet, cold snow, up to the side of the still snoring guard. My hand touched his rifle and a chill went up my spine. I slowly stood up with his rifle in my hands. I realized I was staring down into the face of the guard who had so needlessly killed Pete. With all the strength I could muster, I brought the butt of the rifle down on his head four times. He did not make a sound so I carefully removed his shoes, took his rifle, and his helmet and slowly made my way to what, hopefully, would be the outer perimeter of the camp. It was difficult to keep from trembling due to the cold and intense fear. There was a half moon but the heavy clouds kept it hidden most of the time.

I finally reached a dirt road which, God willing, would take me away from the German camp. My breathing was very labored due to the excitement of what I was doing. I sat on the ground to put on the shoes I took from the dead guard because my fur lined boots were torn from my feet when my parachute opened after I bailed out. The only things between my feet and the frozen ground were two pair of socks and my woolen fabric heated inserts that were plugged into my heated suit. What a sight I must have been, walking down a dirt road in German occupied Belgium in my baby blue heated suit with the cord used to connect it to the electrical system of the

aircraft dangling along on the ground, carrying the German guard's rifle in one hand, his helmet in the other hand and wearing his shoes.

Before resuming my walk I paused to thank God for allowing me to escape and to avenge Pete's death. Writing this story I realize what a strange prayer that must have been, thanking God because I was able to kill another human being.

After walking along that dirt road for a considerable period of time, there was the beginning of a faint fringe of the sun arising in the sky behind me so I knew I was walking in a westerly direction. It seemed so strange to hear the peaceful singing of the morning birds when my heart was beating so loudly.

Suddenly, there was a noise from the gully beside the road. I dropped the helmet and brought the rifle up to fire. The noise of a rifle shot would have been stupid but I knew I would not allow myself to be recaptured under any circumstances. If I was to die that day, some Germans would die also. A young voice was repeating, "Mon ami, mon ami." I knew enough French to understand that meant 'my friend' so I decided to take a chance and lowered the rifle. A young boy, around 12 years old, came out of the gully. He held out his hand and told me, "Je m'appelle, Claude." We sat at the side of the road until I could stop trembling from our encounter.

Claude told me he was with a group from the Belgium underground and they had seen our burning aircraft fall out of the sky almost four months ago. That was my first realization that I had been a prisoner of war, under almost continuous questioning, for nearly four months. It seemed so much longer. My new friend told me he would take me to a Belgium safe house so I could get a bath, food and sleep for a while. My body order, after wearing the same underwear and socks for four months, must have been pretty potent because he emphasized the bath. My teeth felt like the North side of a tree covered with moss.

We had a very slow walk through wooded areas for over two hours. Claude kept asking me if I was able to walk without pain. I replied each time, "Oui, mon ami." I learned from Claude that I had been shot down near the town of Saint Hubert, Northwest of Bastogne. German army units had been back and forth through the area and there were still many Gestapo and S.S. troops throughout Belgium looking for downed airmen and their underground helpers. According to Claude, that was the most dangerous period for the underground since the start of the German occupation of Belgium.

As dawn broke, we arrived at a farm. Claude introduced me to Mademoiselle Marie, the only name I was given. Marie, a very pretty girl in her mid-twenties, spoke no English and I spoke very little French so Claude, with a mixture of French

and Pigeon English, was the interpreter. My first meal in almost four months consisted of eggs, cheese, a steak, white bread with freshly churned butter, lots of cold milk and coffee. Just the smell of that food caused saliva to form at both corners of my mouth. Eating everything put in front of me, I soon had to stop because of a strange rumbling in the pit of my stomach which made me feel I might throw up everything but I was able to regain control.

Claude and Marie filled a tub with hot water for me and Claude found some civilian clothes that would allow me to blend in with the people in the area. After I climbed into that wonderful tub of hot, sudsy water, Claude came in with a razor, brush and soap and gave me a shave while I just relaxed and soaked out the pain and filth of the last four months. While Claude was shaving me I asked him to leave the hair on my upper lip so I could train it like a curled RAF type of mustache. That was the first shave I had since the day I took off on my last mission. Although only 20 years old, I had the start of a beard.

When the bath was finished, I put on the clothes that Claude had brought in for me and exhaustion suddenly took over my body. Marie showed me to a room in the attic with a downy soft bed and I laid on the bed fully clothed. Marie was worried about my head wound. When she felt the piece of flak still imbedded in the front of my skull and she could tell

from my expression that it still hurt. She applied some medicated salve and wrapped it with a sterile bandage. She then pulled the soft comforter up to my chin and left me. Sleep came over me so fast that I did not even hear Marie close the door. My sleep lasted for an unbelievable 16 hours. In my dreams I relived my last days as a prisoner-of-war. When I awoke, remembering how much pleasure I received from bringing the rifle butt down on that German guard's head really began to bother me. Not the killing itself, but the fact that I derived so much pleasure from killing the guard who had killed Pete.

A large basin and pitcher of water was on the table next to the bed so I splashed cold water on my face. Claude and Marie heard me moving around and they both came up to the attic to see if I was all right. Marie had prepared a late meal for all of us and she left to finish putting it on the table. Claude said he had arranged to get me some papers in the morning at the next safe house, if I was able to travel.

Marie's meal consisted of a delicious roast beef with potatoes, carrots and onions cooked with the beef, a salad, freshly baked bread and a homemade rhubarb pie. The aroma of all that food drifted to the upper floors of the house and my mouth really began to water. At the table, I tried to explain to Marie that my grandmother fixed that very same meal every Sunday when our whole family congregated at her house. Marie

told me, through Claude, that I was welcome to all of the food I wanted but I must be careful not to over load my stomach too soon. After a wonderful meal, Claude informed me that we must leave for a new safe house very early in the morning as the S.S. had been seen in the area. With Claude's help, I tried to express my gratitude to Marie. However, what could one say to a person who knowingly placed her own life in great danger to help you escape. I did not want to have her address on my person, in case I was captured again so I gave her my full name and address, as I did to all of my helpers and asked her to let me hear from her after the war. She put the address in a jar and buried it in the flower bed. She promised to contact me after the war. However, like all of my other helpers, Marie must not have survived the war because I did not hear from her.

The next leg of my journey to freedom was a long trip in a produce truck with Claude to another farm where fake German identification papers were made up in my name with my photo attached. The farmer's wife laid out a big meal for us and again, I tried to eat too much. I had to run outside where I lost everything in my stomach. The retching caused a very sore throat and the only thing I could swallow was some warm milk that Claude heated for me on the kitchen stove.

My new helpers were an elderly couple who Claude said were long time members of the French underground (FFI). It

was difficult for me to say thank you and then good-bye to Claude but I said to him, "Please write to me after the war is over". He said that he would but unfortunately I never heard from him or Marie and was not able to find any trace of them in later years, when I returned to Belgium.

My two helpers and I started walking to a small nearby town where we were to board a train for Lille. They both spoke English fairly well and explained to me, "German soldiers will probably ask you for identity papers several times before we reach Lille. Don't worry, just show them your papers because they are very well done." I was never told the names of my new helpers so I referred to them as Madame and Monsieur during our very long trip. The train was loaded with German soldiers and they checked identity papers each time we stopped. My helpers and I spent most of our time in a baggage car because they had noticed the soldiers did not seem to be interested in that car. Our food consisted of bread, cheese, wine and apples that either Madame or Monsieur obtained whenever we stopped at a station. Not exactly a feast but it kept us going. That evening I asked Monsieur, "Why do you and your wife risk your lives to help me?"

His reply was, "Je n'en sais pas, it just seems like the proper thing to do." His mixing of French and English was very helpful. We were not bothered by the German soldiers until our last day on the train. One of them wandered into

the baggage car to just look around. He walked up to me and said, in very poor French, "Donner du feu." I thought surely my escape was over because I did not understand what he said and he glared at me. Monsieur immediately came over and struck a match to light the cigarette hanging from the soldier's lips. He glared at me again and walked out of the baggage car.

When we arrived at la gare (the train station) in Lille, my two helpers introduced me to Mademoiselle Rosa, who would take me to a safe house outside the city. Rosa, like Madame and Monsieur, was from Algiers. They all spoke French with a strange dialect and English with an odd accent. The Madame and Monsieur immediately got back on the train as it was departing. It happened so fast that I did not even have a chance to thank them.

Rosa and I went by taxi to a safe house outside of Lille. She introduced me to several men in the house and then quickly departed. I remember the name of only one, he was called 'la pipe' (pronounced la peep and meaning the pipe). In later years, when I was involved with clandestine intelligence work, I took 'la pipe' as my code name in memory of some wonderful Belgium and French people who helped me return to England and thus saved my life. La pipe spoke English with an American slang accent.

Later at the safe house, La pipe showed me a room in which weapons were stacked like cord wood. He told me the rifles, machine guns and pistols had been dropped to the underground by American and British planes. Since they were all still in some type of a heavy dark preservative and no one in their group knew how to take them apart to clean them, they couldn't be used to kill Germans. I saw they were mostly U.S. weapons. I told La pipe that maybe I could repay them, in a small way, for their help because I had been trained as an weapons specialist.

La pipe called the others into the room and explained to them what I had said. There were lots of 'tres bons' as I started to take apart a .45 caliber automatic pistol. I then taught them how to field strip, clean and reassemble that weapon and we cleaned about six of the pistols. Using the same method, I taught them how to clean a machine gun and a carbine. We must have cleaned over a hundred weapons that night. Over several days, they became very adept at the field stripping, cleaning and reassembling the weapons. During that week we cleaned all of the U.S. weapons in that room but I became sicker each day. The last day of weapon cleaning, I became very ill and passed out on the table. I thought it was probably from the solvent we used for cleaning the weapons but, La pipe sent for a doctor immediately.

The doctor removed the bandage and examined my head wound. He became very concerned when I told him it was from a flak wound about four months ago. He applied a salve and bandaged the wound with a sterile dressing. He told La pipe I must be sent to an American hospital immediately. I hurt all over and knew that I badly needed medical attention.

Early the next morning, La pipe and I started on a long trip by truck and train that took us to Bailleul, St. Omer and finally to Calais. At Calais, I was placed in the care of a French fisherman. La pipe helped me onto the boat and made me as comfortable as possible on a bunk below deck. He tied a string around my neck to which was attached his Cross of Lorraine, the symbol of the French underground. He then placed the rifle and helmet I had taken from the dead guard under the bunk. The fisherman told me, through La pipe, "We will cross the Straits of Dover to Hythe, England, where I will put you in the care of the English." While we were still in the Straits of Dover, I must have gone into a coma because I remember very little from that time until I woke up in the 303rd General Hospital.

CHAPTER 5

BACK IN AMERICAN HANDS

The first morning that I awoke in a lucid state I learned the doctors operated on my head the same day I arrived at the hospital, four days ago. In preparing me for the operation, they had shaved my head but left my scraggly mustache.

The nurse went to get the surgeon when she found that I was awake. The doctor sat down next to my bed to explain the operation he had performed. He told me, "When we got you on the operating table I could easily tell the flak wound in your head was dangerously close to becoming gangrenous." He smiled and said, "We usually have to amputate when gangrene is present but in your case we decided we better not."

I sure didn't feel like listening to jokes, so I just replied, "I'm glad."

The doctor informed me it was necessary to take out a small section from the front of my skull and insert a silver plate, about the size of a quarter. He told me, "You'll probably have headaches but medication will take care of the pain." In a much more serious tone he said, "You are a very lucky young man, in another day or less, it would have been too late for me to do anything for you." He then patted me on the shoulder and said, "I'll look in on you every day, but you

have a special nurse assigned to you since you are not to get out of that bed for at least a month."

When the nurse, whose name was Helen, came back in, I asked her, "How can I shave and shower if I'm not allowed to get out of bed for a month?" She replied, "We bathed you before your operation and we'll bathe you every day. You must remember it's critical to your recovery that you stay in that bed. I'll take care of you until the doctor says you can get up and move around." I asked Helen if she would help me grow an RAF mustache when she shaved me. She laughed and agreed.

Two weeks after my operation, the doctor permitted two people from Army intelligence to debrief me about my period of imprisonment, interrogation, abusive treatment, how I escaped, and who helped me after I got away. Their last question of the day was, "During your interrogations what information did you give to the Germans?"

My reply was, "Name, rank and serial number until they started beating me up and pulling my teeth. After that I just did not answer their questions." I told the intelligence officers I could not identify the people who helped me during my escape because, if I was given a name it was only a first name or a code name and there were so many in both Belgium and France. "I must tell you that, in order to escape, I killed the German guard who had killed Pete, my co-pilot, the first night after we became prisoners-of-war." The Major who was in

charge of intelligence team said, "Lieutenant, you only did what had to be done. Don't dwell on it or even allow yourself to think about the incident. I'm sure the Army will have ways of telling you what a great job you did. I just want to shake your hand and, as one officer to another, say to you, well done."

Two days after the intelligence team debriefed me, my new Squadron C.O., Major Frank Richardson, came to visit me. He told me, "I read the intelligence report about what you went through. 8th Air Force Headquarters has authorized me to present you with the Silver Star Medal for gallantry in action. By resisting German interrogation and escaping from your captors you reflected great credit upon yourself and all of us who are fighting this stinking war. He pinned the Silver Star Medal and another Purple Heart Medal on my pajama shirt. Frank also gave me my old A-2 jacket that he had retrieved for me, saying, "When you were shot down, the rest of the formation reported that your aircraft blew up. I'm sorry, Bill, but you were all reported as KIA (killed in action). No one knew that you and Pete had been captured. Your records have been reactivated and the Red Cross has been instructed to notify your family."

When I asked Frank who had my A-2 jacket he smiled and said, "Don't ask." So I didn't ask because I was so glad to get it back. It had always been a mystery to me why flying

personnel develop such an attachment to their A-2 jackets, almost like a love affair with a beautiful woman. Whenever someone was reported as KIA or MIA (missing in action), all his friends helped themselves to his flying gear, personal items and anything that was not locked up tight. It may seem heartless and immoral but that's the way it was done in combat.

With great sadness I learned from Major Richardson that my good friend Robbie, our Squadron Bombardier, and his entire crew were killed when their airplane crashed into a mountain in Scotland on their way back to the States after completing their combat tour. Frank got up and walked around as I laid there for a few minutes and cried about Robbie.

After Major Richardson left, the doctor came back into my room and told me, "If you can gain back some weight and get some meat on your bones you should be able to go back to the States in a few weeks. Meanwhile, you're still not to get out of bed until I give you the word. I'm sure you're not aware of it, Bill, but the day of your operation you weighed 97 pounds even though your medical records showed your normal weight ran about 140 pounds. You've only gained back one pound since the operation but that was expected. I really think the best medication I could prescribe for you would be to send you back to your family in the States with a 90 day

rest and recuperation leave. However, you need to gain at least two more pounds before we can do that." A week later, I was finally allowed to get out of bed and encouraged to walk around with crutches as long as it did not cause too much pain in my head. It was very painful, but I forced myself to do it because I knew I wouldn't get out of there until I was ambulatory. Helen, the nurse, went with me on my walks and she was very supportive in my recovery.

Helen had promised to help me grow an RAF mustache. She found a baby hair brush at a shop in town and while I was confined to bed, she had sat next to me for hours, just brushing that mustache until it was thick and had a natural upward curl. Now that I was allowed out of bed she gave me the brush and said I could take care of my own mustache.

The day finally arrived when I weighed in at 100 pounds. Before he discharged me from the hospital, the doctor gave me three different containers of pills to relieve head pains. He explained to me, "One is for a frontal headache, one if the pain is behind your eyes and one if the headache is at the top of your head". When I asked how long I would need the pills he just shrugged and said, "You're young enough that you'll probably out grow the pain."

On the day I was to leave, Helen and the doctor walked me to the front of the hospital. I told them both how much I appreciated all they had done for me and I thanked the doctor

for giving me back my life. A hospital staff car took me to town where I boarded a train for London. Several passengers and I stayed in the same rail car when we reached London and the car was attached to the Royal Scot, headed for Preswick, Scotland.

We learned that Colonel Jimmy Stewart, the movie star, was the Commanding Officer of the Bomb Group at Preswick. While waiting for assignment to a crew, I went out to the ball park one day just to watch him play in a softball game.

There were hundreds of B-17s at Preswick waiting to be flown back to the States by make-up crews. I was assigned as the Bombardier on one such crew. Our aircraft had a big WW on the vertical stabilizer. We learned later that meant 'war weary'. The aircraft that we were going to fly back to the United States was made up from three different B-17s that had been on the scrap pile. What a comforting thought. Our ship had a bomb bay fuel tank so we flew direct from Preswick, Scotland to Bangor, Maine with no trouble. When we landed at Bangor, I got out of that airplane with the crew and we all got down on hands and knees to kiss the earth of the good old USA. My only trouble was I had to have help in getting back up on my feet and I still had to use a cane for walking.

Our processing was very quick, probably because everyone on the crew had been wounded during their combat tour and we had just completed a non-stop flight from Preswick. Part of

the processing was to bring our pay up to date. I had not been paid since I was shot down, which meant I had about six months pay and allowances due. I was loaded with over \$3000. Not much now, but then it was a small fortune.

We were all given railroad tickets to our home towns and a bus ride into the city to catch our trains. I was very glad the train for Cincinnati pulled out just fifteen minutes after I got on board. The crew members I came home with were all scheduled on different trains to different home towns. Since I didn't know anyone on the train, I just stayed to myself so I could sleep all the way to Cincinnati. In my dreams I saw all of my friends I had left just three short years ago. They all seemed so young - but I knew I could never be young again.