

The Saga of "My Buddy"

Written by Leon Finneran in a letter to Don Boyle

Willard (Hap) Reese's editing in italics

I am writing this introduction to "The Saga of My Buddy" because all of her crew are now gone and there is no one to tell this touching story. I'd like to set the stage for a letter, written by Leon Finneran who was the engineer and top turret gunner on "My Buddy" on the day she went down. His letter was written in 1987, shortly before his death, and was addressed to one of the other surviving crew members, Donald Boyle, flying tail gunner on that mission. This letter tells in detail the experiences of one man who survived a deadly, harrowing experience while flying in combat. It is a story that all of us who flew in B-17's can relate to.

"My Buddy" was a B-17, s/n 42-31552, of the 748th Squadron and on this fateful date was flown by Lt Gerald Kerr and his crew. The mission was to Munich on July 12th, 1944. The crew of "My Buddy" consisted of:

Lt Gerald Kerr, pilot, from Lufkin, TX

Lt Arthur H. Lindskoog, copilot from Alcove, NY

Lt Melvin L. Levine, Bombardier, from Casha, NB

Lt Edward A. Schilling, Navigator, from Easton, PA

T/Sgt Leon Finneran, Engineer, from Providence, RI

T/Sgt Earnest J. Hegedus, RO, from Columbus, OH

S/Sgt Harold E. Ahlfors, gunner, from Chester, MA

S/Sgt Donald B. Boyle, gunner, from Ashland, WI

S/Sgt Samuel P. Younger, Jr, gunner from Halifax, VA.



The above is a photo of the Kerr crew taken in Texas. Gerald Kerr, the pilot, is standing on the left and Leon Finneran is kneeling directly below him. Don Boyle is kneeling on the extreme right.

This is Leon Finneran's letter to Don Boyle:

Hi Don,

Sorry for the delay in answering your letter. My wife and I went on a few days of vacation for the holiday weekend. Now that everything is back to normal, I will try to answer some of the questions you probably have been asking yourself all these years about the rest of the crew and the plane. Bear in mind my memory isn't what it was then. I will tell you now what I remember at the time of seeing the burst of AA (Antiaircraft fire) that got us.

We were on the bomb run and I had the turret facing straight ahead. I saw about three shells break in front of us, each one getting nearer the plane. The last shell (which one whether the 3rd or 4th I can't remember) hit us and knocked out both our outboard engines. Lindskoog (Copilot) immediately began to try to restart one of the engines. I could see gas was pouring over the starboard wing. I reminded Kerr that trying to restart the engines might start a fire. He then feathered both engines. There was no hope of getting home but Kerr said he thought we could make it to Switzerland. We couldn't hold our altitude so Kerr ordered us to throw out everything we could find to lighten the plane.

After pulling out of formation, Kerr told me to get the flare gun and continue to fire hoping we could find fighter protection. I did this and it seemed almost immediately we had fighters on each wing. Kerr was talking to the pilot on our left wing using the FM radio and asked for an escort to Switzerland. They headed us toward the Swiss border but after some time the pilot told Kerr that with all the cloud cover he could not be sure whether or not we were over Switzerland, but thought we were very near the border. The fighter pilot wished us luck and left us. I was standing between Kerr and Lindskoog looking at the clouds below and wondering how we were going to get down through them safely. I was talking to Kerr about the conditions and how we were still losing altitude when one of the other members of the crew said over the intercom that he saw a hole in the cloud cover and that he could see mountains. I then also saw a break in the clouds and told him that I could see we were below the peaks. He then pushed the light signal to prepare to bail out and almost immediately sounded the bail out signal (the bell). He asked me to stay a little longer to see if we could get down. (at this point the four gunners in the back of the plane bailed out but for some reason no one in the front of the plane did....electing to stay with the pilot.) I believe he knew none of us would have much of a chance if he left the controls.

We were flying blind and still losing altitude. I don't know how long it was but I noticed we were beginning to lose oil pressure on the overworked #3 engine. It acted like it was about to give out. There was no way of knowing what damage the flak had done to the two engines that were still operating.

Not being much of a hero, I told Kerr we I didn't think we were going to make it and I thought it was time for me to jump. He agreed. I went forward to the nose hatch, put on my chute pack and released the hatch. Lindskoog, who followed me down, was kneeling beside the hatch waiting for me to go. The nose hatch looked too small so I took off one of my flying boots. Lindskoog reminded me I might break my foot without my boots so I left the other one on and went headfirst out the nose. Lindskoog jumped after me, but I don't know if his chute didn't open or if he was too low. (the search party later found his body on the shore of Lake Constance). I flipped over in the air and pulled the ripcord and the pilot chute came out but it seemed to me real slow. I started to panic and pulled at the parachute cloth. The chute opened and at the same moment I heard the sound of the plane crashing. It's hard to describe how you feel at a time like that because I knew there was no way the others could have gotten out. I knew that none of them survived. I experienced an odd feeling as I floated down. After I heard the plane hit, it was as if I was in a vacuum, no sound, nothing, it seemed so quiet that if someone whispered miles away I would have heard it.

It seemed like only a few seconds after I pulled the cord that I could see I was headed for the side of a mountain. I tried to control my direction but it didn't do any good. My chute caught on the peak and I was knocked very hard against the side of the mountain. I don't know how long I was out but when I

came to I found the ripcord was still in my tightly clenched fist. The clouds had almost gone and I could see across the valley and the I could see our burning plane.

I was high on some Swiss mountain in the middle of July and there was snow all around me. I don't think I have ever felt as alone in my life, not knowing where you guys were, and knowing what had just happened to the others.

My chute was caught on the peak and there was no way I could get it down. On one side of the slope was snow, on the other, after I looked, was a sheer drop of about three or four thousand feet. The trouble with the snow side was I had to brace my back against the mountain and go sideways on top of the snow an inch at a time. If I slipped it was a quick ride to somewhere.....I didn't want to find out where. After reaching a level spot and removing my parachute harness, I took the top part of my underwear off and wrapped it around the foot with no boot and with a lot of Irish luck slowly made my way down into the valley. I broke into a barn and slept in the loft that night. If anyone had said one word to me at that time I think I would have jumped through the roof of the barn.

The next day I took my escape kit maps and compass out and plotted my course. Before going into the service I was a city boy, I knew nothing about a compass or about reading a map. Nevertheless, there I was in the barn with everything laid out as if I was Columbus about to discover the New World. Needless to say, the course I took was later proved completely wrong. (When I was picked up by the Swiss border guards, I was heading back into Germany).

Some time before I met any border guards, I walked quite a way thinking I was headed into Switzerland. The next day I came across a small cabin with all the windows boarded up. I had plenty to drink from the stream coming down the mountains. I must have been out of shape on the trip because I fell quite a few times and could only walk a few minutes at a time. My head still hurt from the landing so that could have been the reason. I found a pick near the cabin and broke one of the boarded up side windows. I hadn't eaten in a couple of days so I looked for food. There were canned goods on a shelf but I couldn't read the labels so I was still hungry. There were four big bunks against the wall with straw in them, so I took a big knife from the drawer in a table and stuck it in the straw beside me when I laid down.

I don't know how long I was asleep but the next thing I knew the door opens and three men in uniform come in. They put their rifles in the corner and started to take their coats off. They still hadn't noticed me as the side boards on the bunk were high. When you were captured you said you thought they were Swiss guards, in my case I thought they were Germans soldiers(Swiss and German uniforms are similar). As I said, not being much of a hero, I let go of the knife and made a little noise but did not move out of the bunk. I told them I was American and when they pointed to the buttons on their uniform (Swiss cross) I almost laughed out loud. They gave me cheese, wine and raw bacon (My mother would not believe me because I cut all fat off any meat I eat) When we left, one of the older guards (over 50) gave me his shoes and socks and went barefooted. One gave me his jacket because he said we were only 200 yards from the Germans and if they thought I was American they might shoot.

The next day they sent me to a Swiss hospital to have my head x-rayed and in a couple days I was with other American crews that had landed in Switzerland. I was interned for about 6 months until four of us got in touch with the French resistance fighters who took us through the German lines and we made it back to England. After leaving Switzerland we stayed on the outskirts of Nancy, France near the Swiss border. We were later taken to Lyons and flown from there to England. From England I went home for a few weeks and then to Atlantic City for R & R.

It feels good after all these years to tell my experiences to someone who cares. I know you want to know about the officers too.

A couple days after being placed with the Americans, I was told that the Swiss found our wrecked plane. They were going to bury the three officers the next day . They were Kerr, Levine and Shilling (they could not locate Lindskoog's body since he was not with the plane wreckage). I went to the funeral with officers from the American Embassy and a Swiss honor guard. They played Taps and had

the Swiss Army fire a last salvo for them. They found Lindskoog some time later and he was given the same burial service. They were all buried in a small Swiss town called Thun.

To this day I can't get over how lucky I was. By all rights, I should have been with you men, or with the real unlucky ones, the officers. Your luck was bad, mine got better.(editors note - The four enlisted men who bailed out when the order was given by Kerr, were Boyle, Ahlfors, Younger and Hegedus. They too landed in the mountains but on the German side of the Swiss border and were taken prisoner and ended up in the prison camp at Stalag Luft #4 and endured considerable hardship before they were freed.)

That about does it Don. You made a mistake when you asked me to tell you everything that happened after you jumped. If you tell someone about what happened on that last mission, they listen but unless you've been through it, no one really cares, so I hope it sheds some light on what you wanted to know. In my mind I've gone over that mission hundreds of times and still can't get over how lucky I was. Lucky not jumping and becoming a POW. Lucky not waiting too long and ending up with the others. It was only a matter of seconds that I missed ending up with them. Compared to what you guys went through, my experience wasn't much.

I remember some details as if they were yesterday....Kerr saying "Okay, you had better go too" and I know that Lindskoog's last words to anyone was when he told me I might break my foot in landing without my boots. I still feel sad seeing him kneeling beside the nose hatch talking to me and waiting for me to jump. I still feel sad that we never shook hands or wished each other luck, I hope it was because we were either scared or being young never thought anything bad could happen to us and would see each other on the ground. It's been a long time to say it, but I'm happy for every one of you that made it out. Maybe not in the best of health, but at least alive. After all these years it feels good to tell of my experiences to someone who cares. Hoping to hear from you soon.

Your friend from another time,

Lee Finneran



This is the mountain into which My Buddy crashed. The wreckage can be seen in left center of photo.



This is the largest surviving piece of the wreckage clearly identifying it as "My Buddy" of the 457th Bomb Group.



This will give you some idea of the force of the impact. This is the scattered remains of "My Buddy".



This is the lifeless body of Lt Arthur H. Lindskoog with his parachute still attached but unopened.