

Albert was born in Bayonne, NJ, the city where Josephine's parents (Mowry) lived. At the time of the 1920 census Al Hillier, Josie and Albert were living on North 5th Street in Paterson in the house owned by Arthur Holt, the husband of Grace Hillier, Al's sister.

Albert grew up on North 5th Street. He had completed 3 years of college when, on December 7 1941, the Japanese launched their sneak attack on Pearl Harbor and catapulted the United States into World War II. Five months later, on May 12, 1942, Albert enlisted in the US Army as a private. He became a Technical Sgt. and Radio Operator on a "Flying Fortress", the famous B-17G. His aircraft was a part of the 337th Squadron in the 96th Group of the Eighth Air Force which entered combat in May 1943 and functioned primarily as a strategic bombardment organization throughout the war.

From their base in England, B-17s of the 8th Air Force attacked shipyards, harbors, railroad yards, airdromes, oil refineries, aircraft factories, and other industrial targets in Germany, France, Holland, Belgium, Norway, Poland, Hungary, and Czechoslovakia. During 1944 in addition to strategic operations, missions included bombing coastal defenses, railway bridges, gun emplacements, and field batteries in the battle area prior to and during the invasion of Normandy in Jun 1944; attacking enemy positions in support of the breakthrough at St. Lo in Jul 1944; aiding the campaign in France in Aug by striking roads and road junctions and dropping supplies to French resistance members.

On October 18, 1944, 337 B-17s were dispatched to make an attack on Kassel Germany. Two of these bombers were lost. One of those two was Albert's B-17. His plane was shot down and the nine crew men were captured. The following account is taken from the journal he kept.

*"October 18, 1944 !!*

*Was roused up at 1:30 AM. Ate Fried eggs for breakfast. Briefing at 2AM. Briefed for "K" - a long haul. Radio briefing at 3AM, takeoff at 4:30AM. Went thru 3 flak areas before reaching target. At target flak stopped meaning enemy fighters may come. They did.*

*Gas tank hit, engine smoking. Dropped out of formation over Holland. Fuel low - Must land.*

*Everyone has chutes on. Tony in bombbay ready to jump. 10,000 smoking, #4 blown off. 20mm burst inside waist. Tony, Walt hit. Ditching positions. Sent message to base of our plight. Sent SOS, clamped key down.*

*500 feet now bombardier and navigator in radio compartment for ditching positions. All in ditching positions, prayed to God for a safe landing(wheels up)*

*Crashed. Everything black for a moment; hiss of oxygen escaping – can't breathe- everything a mass of wreckage. Thought jig was up."*

Miraculously, all nine crew members survived the crash. Local Dutch people helped get them out of the wreckage but they were captured immediately by the Germans. The men were moved to an interrogation area, then transported by rail on a "*nightmarish ride that would make the Black Hole of Calcutta seem like a marshmallow roast*" to Stalag Luft 4, one of the most notorious of the German prison camps located near Grosstychew, Poland.

The following description is taken from the Congressional record VOL 141, MONDAY, MAY 8, 1995 NO.75:

*"... CIVILIANS AT TIMES WOULD BEAT, SPIT UPON, OR EVEN TRY TO LYNCH THE CAPTURED CREWS, AND IN THE CASE OF STALAG LUFT IV, ONCE THE POW'S HAD ARRIVED AT THE RAILROAD STATION NEAR THE CAMP, THOUGH EXHAUSTED, UNFED, AND OFTEN WOUNDED, MANY WERE FORCED TO RUN THE 2 MILES TO THE CAMP AT THE POINT OF BAYONETS.*

*THOSE WHO DROPPED BEHIND WERE EITHER BAYONETTED OR BITTEN ON THE LEGS BY POLICE DOGS. AND ALL THAT WAS JUST THE PRELUDE TO THEIR INCARCERATION WHERE THEY WERE UNDERFED, OVERCROWDED, AND OFTEN MALTREATED."*

By the end of January in 1945 Russian artillery could be heard in Stalag Luft IV. The first week of February, the Germans decided to move the prisoners. A train load of prisoners (primarily the sick and injured) were sent to Stalag I at Barth, Germany. Albert was included with this group and as a result was saved from the fate of the bulk of the population.

The remaining 9,500 prisoners although poorly clothed, malnourished and suffering from dysentery and other ills, were forced to endure an 86 day "Death March" of 488 miles to Halle, Germany. They marched in harsh winter conditions on starvation rations living in filth and sleeping in open fields or barns. Many did not survive. Others suffered amputations of limbs or appendages. Many more endured maladies that would affect them for the rest of their lives.

On May 1, 1945 Albert and the other prisoners at Stalag I were set free when the German guards and their Commandant fled from the approaching Russian army.

Although the prisoners had been released from the camp their future was uncertain. Tensions rapidly building between Russia and the Allies made the Allies fearful that the POWs would be sent to Russia. To prevent this, the 8th Air Force organized an urgent rescue mission called "Operation Revival", a massive airlift that between May 12 and May 14 successfully flew about 9,000 POWs from Barth to safety at Camp Lucky Strike in Le Havre, France for the Americans and to England for those from the Royal Air Force.

As he was being flown out of Germany to the American base in France Albert concluded his journal with the following account of his feelings as he flew over a devastated and ruined Europe.

*"... That day I'll never forget. We flew at low altitude over the great battlefield of Europe. After flying over Cologne on 3 successive missions, the sight of it at low altitudes made me sick in the stomach. Compared to the terrific destruction wielded on Cologne they must have been dropping BBs on Coventry. We saw the Rhine River with its blown up bridges and bomb and artillery craters by the thousands. We even saw the tank and truck tracks of both Allied and German armies –the scene of a terrific struggle. We saw the plain leading to Cologne and its battle scarred earth. From there to the boundary of France – and even there- was an endless trail of ruin – bomb craters, blown up bridges, bombed out towns, earmarks of Allied regrouping and marshalling of forces, destroyed planes, straffed railroad engines, bombed roads where the Germans were retreating and many more things. A few months ago this was the scene of the biggest battle on earth but now it was like a deserted ghost town, devoid of cars, trains, people or any kind of activity. I can't describe the feeling I had on this flight. I'll never forget it."*