

CHARLES R. ESPARZA

3021 Franela Drive  
San Jose, CA 95124-2408

Phone (408) 978-7140  
Fax (408) 978-7155

---

March 8, 1995

Joseph J. Rosa  
2284 Windham Drive  
Melbourne, FL 32935

Dear Joe:

I have read your letter with interest. I was especially surprised to read your account of our failed escape attempt from the passenger train that was taking the three of us from Paris to Frankfurt. I remember the factors concerning that escape attempt very clearly. The events that actually took place and which we three jointly reported to Major Clermont E. Wheeler, the X Escape Committee Intelligence Officer who interrogated us when we arrived at Stalag Luft III to insure we were not Nazi infiltrators. That initial interrogation was a normal procedure.

When we arrived at Stalag Luft III, we were told to talk to nobody until cleared. Within a short time, Major Wheeler arrived at our barracks, introduced himself, and asked us about our outfit, our plane, etc., etc. Satisfied we were not Nazi infiltrators, he left.

The factual events leading up to and during our escape attempt, which we reported to Major Wheeler, are as follows:

When our B-26 named "Cactus Jack" was disabled by a FLAK barrage, we bailed out. You bailed out first, popping your chute prematurely. Your chute caught on a bomb-bay door and you were dragged by our airplane, which had gone into a shallow dive and was then traveling about 300 miles per hour. Your chute eventually ripped loose and you broke free. The rip on the chute was causing your chute to collapse. In an effort to keep it from collapsing completely, you pulled on the

parachute shrouds with all your strength. Your hands kept slipping on the shrouds, burning the skin off your fingers. I saw your hands a few days later, and I could see the white of your bones. Your hands were seriously injured.

Falling with only part of a parachute, you hit the ground hard. The impact knocked you out and broke several of your ribs. You had landed on the run-away of the Beauvais-Tille German airfield we had just bombed. The German soldiers picked you up and took you to their base hospital where they administered first aid to you. While at the German hospital, you saw another airman lying on a bed. He appeared to be missing a leg. His color was pale. You told us he appeared to be near death, if not already dead. The Germans would not let you go near to see or identify this person.

The Germans kept us in solitary confinement for two to three days until they put us on a train which took us from Beauvais to Paris.

This was the story you told Harry L. Metzger, our Bombardier, and me. Harry and I could see you were hurt. You had trouble standing up and, while you could walk, it appeared you could do so only with great pain. We both helped you. Harry and I were also bruised and banged up, but not enough to immobilize us or to restrict our ability to stand or walk.

When we arrived at Paris, the Germans transported us by vehicle to another railroad station where we were placed on what appeared to be a luxury passenger train. We were being taken to Dulag Luft, the German interrogation center near Frankfurt, Germany.

All three of us were convinced that if we got to Germany, we would never see home again. Escape was our only hope of survival. We planned our escape using extreme American slang to confuse our two German guards. Our plan was to knock out the two guards and jump off the speeding train before anyone realized we had escaped.

Up to now, the guards had treated us civilly. They fed us and gave us water to drink from the large glass bottles they had purchased in Paris



Each guard was armed with a burp-gun (a machine pistol) and a Luger pistol. The guards placed us in a six seat compartment. On the seats facing the rear of the train sat Harry Metzger nearest the window. Next to him sat the older of the two guards. I estimated him to be 38 to 40 years of age. He had lost one eye in the Russian Front. The guards placed their backpacks and the two large bottles of water next to the older guard and nearest the compartment doors, and placed their two machine pistols in the overhead compartment directly over the seat that held the two bottles.

To get to the bottles and to the machine pistols, we had to reach directly over the seat that held the bottles over the guards. On the seat facing the front of the train, you sat on the seat nearest the window directly in front of Harry. I sat between you and the youngest of the two guards, who was on my right. You were on my left.

After we left Paris and had been on the train for a few hours, the older guard next to Harry started to dose and finally fell asleep. The younger guard was dosing and trying desperately to stay awake. The only handy escape weapon we had were the two large bottles of water. The most physical among us had to start the attack. That was me. I was about 175 pounds and confident in my physical capabilities, having participated in the Olympic Wrestling trials only a few years before. I was confident of my ability to physically overpower a person.

While I had been banged up and bruised when I parachuted out, my injuries were not serious enough to immobilize me. Harry was small, but very strong and in good condition. Because of your physical condition, it was understood the attack had to be initiated by Harry and me. I informed you and Harry that, since I was nearest, as soon as the younger guard fell asleep, I would reach across the aisle and pick up a bottle of water. Harry stated he intended to use a small screwdriver, which he had concealed in his A-2 jacket pocket. This was the same screwdriver he used to remove the bomb-sight off its base stabilizer. Harry intended to hit the older one-eyed guard in his good eye with the sharp end. I told Harry not to, because if we failed, death would be the

only thing we could expect. We compromised. Harry agreed to use only the handle end of his screwdriver on the good eye of the one-eyed guard. I told you and Harry that as soon as the younger guard fell asleep long enough, I would reach across the aisle, pick up one of the bottles, hit the younger guard on the head, knock him out and in a sweeping motion, hit the older guard on the head, also knocking him out. We would then go out the door of the compartment and jump off the train.

Our compartment was the last one on the rear of that railroad car. Stealth was to be our only ally. How we would manage to jump with you immobile as you were never discouraged us. As I sat next to the younger guard, waiting for him to dose long enough for me to make my move, I thought I'd better not hit him too hard. I might crush his head. I only wanted to knock the guards out, not kill them. I was remembering stories where pre-WWII coke bottles were used to crush a person's head. In pre-WWII, a coke bottle could be a deadly weapon.

The guard dosed. I moved perhaps half an inch and he would snap up his head. Soon he dosed again and again he would snap his head up. Each time I would move perhaps no more than half an inch closer. My heart was racing. Finally the guard dozed and appeared to fall asleep. Standing up, I reached across the aisle as quietly as I could, grabbed one of the bottles by its neck, and in one sweeping motion, hit the younger guard over the head. The bottle broke on impact with a loud crash, drenching the guard and cutting him on his forehead. I stood there dumbfounded. I never dreamed the bottle would break.

The guard seeing me with the bottleneck in my hand probably thought he had seconds to live. He let out a terrified scream, and threw up his arms for no apparent reason. I guess my subconscious mind took over. Without thinking, I automatically locked his arms in a very basic wrestling hold. He was able to get his feet under my shoes and push my legs off the floor. I hung on to his arms, not knowing what else to do. Somehow or other, he managed to slip one of his hands down to the belt holster that held his Lugar pistol, open the holster, and grasp his pistol. The next thing I knew, he had shoved it in my face. I released his arms



and jumped back. For some reason, I have never been able to explain, I yelled "Comrade" several times.

All the time this was taking place, Harry was on the older guard, hitting him on his good eye with the handle of his screwdriver. By this time, all hell broke loose. As the train was loaded with German troops, they poured into our compartment to help their comrades. Harry and I were given a savage beating. I don't remember you being hit. I remember being knocked out and falling as a consequence of one of the blows I received. Then someone, who I believe was a German trooper, picked me up and placed me in my seat. I was blurry-eyed and dizzy. I don't remember too much of what happened on the balance of that trip until we neared Frankfurt. By then, I had recovered enough to become mobile again.

When we arrived at Stalag-Luft III, Major Wheeler asked me about all the black marks all over my summer flying suit. I told him it was black shoe shine boot marks from the boots of the German soldiers. The black shin marks were souvenirs from the German kicks I had received.

Joe, these are my recollections of what happened on that train 52 years ago. I have no recollection of you having a physical part in the escape attempt. The fact that you survived being dragged by your parachute by the plane and that you again survived your hard landing are miracles enough. You were in no physical condition to give Harry and I any real assistance. In order for you to hit the guard over the head meant you would have had to reach over and across me to reach the bottle, which was diagonally across the compartment from you, then hit the guard by reaching over me. Impossible! In your condition, I don't believe you could have held onto the bottle with your injured hands.

This is the story we told Major Wheeler when we arrived at Stalag Luft III. Joe, for your information, the POWs we lived with and who I am sure heard this same story many times are:

Joseph J. Rosa

Page 6

Capt. John Brady  
Capt. John Ward  
Lt. Doug J. Sier  
Lt. Leslie J. Breidenthal  
Lt. Fred Freiburger  
Lt. Philip Dreisenzua  
Lt. Bill Moore  
Lt. Philip K. Rokosa  
Lt. Bill Ungemack  
Lt. Dwight Curo

Lt. Robert T. Dekaney  
Lt. Harry Moffett  
Lt. Dale Emmons  
Lt. Ernst Warsaw  
Lt. Frances Harper  
Lt. August Gasper  
Lt. Valario Magnaboso  
Lt. Robert L. Pioli  
Lt. Bernard Segman

If asked or questioned, I have no doubt they will recall and agree with my story.

Joe, I've written this long letter to set the facts straight. I am sure once you have read it, you will agree. Frankly, it was hard to believe your story of being dragged by your parachute from a speeding airplane, ripping your chute, and landing with only a part of a parachute. I never said anything, but both Harry and I had reservations about your story. I believed you could not have survived if the story you told was true. However, you'll be pleased to know your story was vindicated and confirmed 51 years later. I attended the 387th Bomb Group Reunion held at Covington, Kentucky in September 1994. At the end of the convention, I left my hotel at 6:15 a.m. and took the hotel courtesy van to the airport nearby. Another couple also took the same van. We exchanged greetings. They had also attended the same reunion. He had been a gunner. The man then told me that one of his worst memories was seeing a crew man being dragged by a parachute from a B-26 during a raid over France in about September 1943. I asked him, "Was that on September 21, 1943 at Beauvais-Tille, France?" His answer was, "I believe that was the date and place."

I then told him that person was Joseph J. Rosa, the navigator of our B-26 Cactus Jack. I further informed him that you had survived the war and had told me that story 51 years ago. I told him I frankly had not believed