

"MEMORIES OF A POW"
SHOT DOWN IN ENEMY TERRITORY
WORLD WAR II



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PREFACE

Today there are many gentlemen in their late seventies and eighties who served in World War II and survived. I am one of those survivors.

We are part of the “Greatest Generation” that Tom Brokaw wrote about. This generation represses their feelings and tries to forget so many things that happened during World War II. Like others in my generation, I am guilty of not speaking out more. I have not shared my war experiences in detail with my wife, children or grandchildren. Now, as I am in my final years of my life, I realize how important it is for my family to know my story. It is not a hard core war story. It is a story of survival. I have never considered myself a hero. I was just another airman doing the job he was trained to do. The heroes were the ones left behind. And there were many.

World War II was a war that all Americans believed was necessary, almost without exception. Young men and women joined the military service to do their part and make their contribution. Throughout my life I have met many war veterans and read about those who had experiences similar to mine. I have been amazed at what they said and wrote. Things may not always come out as accurately as possible because we remember what we want to remember. My own memory is at times a blur. I don’t remember exact dates or places. Like others who served in the war, I was very young. The war created for me many tragic experiences and I lived with the uncertainty of not knowing would happen next. I feel now is the time to write down my experiences. I was a radio operator/gunner on a B-17 “Flying Fortress” during World War II. I will do my best to accurately remember how things happened.

I want to acknowledge those close to me as share my story. First, I must give my deepest “thank you” to my wife Carmella for giving me the encouragement to write this biography. She spent many lonesome hours while I typed away. Carmella is my true friend, a gracious wife and a wonderful mother.

I dedicate this biography to my two sons, Ed and Jim, and my five grandchildren whom I love dearly: Ed’s two sons....Josh, now a pediatric doctor and Tony....my pride and joy. Only eleven years old but what a kid! My son Jim’s three children....Erika, the apple of

my eye and most gracious young lady. Devin, now finished with high school and finding his way in life. Julian, a junior in high school and seems to know what he wants out of life. To all of you, I dedicate this biography. My only regret is that I didn't do this sooner and tell you more about my experiences. Thank you to my daughter-in-law Carolyn for her help in proof reading, editing and fine tuning.

When I think back on the war years, I was one extremely lucky guy. I was young and full of pride for my country. Along with my bomb crew, I came under many adverse conditions while flying missions over Germany. Yet I was able to survive and come home to start a new life. This is my story.

To My Wonderful Wife Carmella

**When one finds a worthy wife
Her values are beyond reproach.
Her husband, entrusting his heart to her,
Has an unfailing prize.
She brings him good and wisdom.**

WAR IS DECLARED

War was declared December 7, 1941. I was only 18 years old. I don't remember where I was exactly that Sunday when Japan attacked Pearl Harbor. Mom and Dad were listening to the radio when they heard the news and they told the family. Dad said, "The world will not be the same for many years to come."

After high school I worked at Aero Supply Manufacturing Company in Corry, PA. The company manufactured precision parts for the air industry and was noted for the precision bolts that they made. I worked as a drill press operator for \$.50 an hour. I guess I did a good job as I was soon promoted to set-up man for the drill press department. As the war continued, I became very concerned and thought I should get more involved. Like so many of my co-workers, I considered enlisting in the service. Many of my high school friends were already drafted into the service.

In September 1942, I decided to enlist in the Air Force. I wanted to become a pilot because I had always been fascinated with flying. It seemed like a good adventure. I talked to Ted Weeks, my fellow worker and good friend, about enlisting. He said "Ed, let's join the Marines. They look so handsome dressed in their blues." I said "Great." Ted and I went to Erie, PA, to enlist in the Marines. Unfortunately, I passed the physical but Ted did not. He could not join the Marines. I didn't want to join the Marines alone so I went to the recruiting office of the United States Air Force. I passed the physical and enlisted October 2, 1942. Several other friends from Corry enlisted the same day. We were all sent to Indiantown, CO. Our indoctrination included more physicals, written and oral tests, and issuance of uniforms. I thought I did well on the tests. After several days I received my orders to go to McClelland Air Force Base in Sacramento, CA, for training. It was a long way from home but I felt this was a start of my great adventure. Somehow Ted Weeks got separated from the group in Indiantown Gap. He volunteered for some kind of duty and was sent to a camp in Georgia. From there Ted was sent to the Pacific for three years in the Army Corp of Engineers.

My first time on a train was when I headed with others to McClelland Air Force Base in California. The train ride was long and we had to sit up the entire trip. We slept in our seats with a pillow. When we arrived at McClelland we were assigned 40 men to a

barrack. I was a 19 year old kid with no experience beyond working in the manufacturing plant in my hometown. I didn't know what to expect, what the service would be like or what it would take to become a good pilot. I had lots of questions and did not know the answers....but I knew one thing. I would do my very best!

TRAINING BEGINS

We started our physical training to get in better shape, I guess. I was already in good shape when I enlisted. As a result of the hard work on the farm I was 5'9", weighed about 180 lbs and had plenty of muscle. Our two physical training instructors were Max and Buddy Bear. Max Bear was the heavyweight champion of the world in 1940 & 1941. You guessed it....our physical training was all about boxing. Buddy Bear was our Physical Training Instructor. I was not a good boxer and did not like it. I was tough but not very good.

Three months later I was assigned to Cadet training in Santa Anna, CA. "Now", I thought, "I am on my way towards my great adventure". I did very well in my cadet studies and training. The training was very rigorous and disciplined. While I knew the Air Force was tough on training, I had not expected the training to be this difficult. Thank God for being in good shape.

The school work was difficult but I had always had good study habits so I managed well. Guess it ran in the family as both of my brothers were valedictorian of their senior class in high school. I was an honor student with straight A's. My Mom and Dad were very hard on us to get good grades. They always said that we must be good students to get anywhere in life.

My Dad passed away on March 3, 1943. In October he had fallen from an apple tree, landed across a fence post and crushed his spine while picking apples. Dad never recovered from this fall and developed Bright's disease. I was told of my Dad's death by my Commanding Officer and issued a 15 day leave. What a horrible experience as I tried to get home as soon as possible. I got a pass from the Air Force to fly from McClelland Air Force Base in CA to Denver, CO on a C-47 cargo plane. When we reached the Rocky Mountains, we had to turn back due to severe weather. I next

caught a train in Sacramento to Chicago. However, weather conditions caused a late arrival in Chicago and I missed the train to Corry, PA. The next train to Corry was 10 hours later. I decided to take the Greyhound bus to Corry.

I arrived in Corry tired, hungry and anxious because I didn't know what to expect. I had called Bracken Funeral Home to let them know when I would arrive in Corry. My oldest brother, Charlie, met me at the Greyhound bus terminal. The weather in Corry was typical....snowy, cold and miserable.

Due to the weather, the church service at Bracken Funeral Home was held earlier than planned. I wasn't able to see my Dad for one last time. I must say, this was difficult for me.

My brother took me to the farm on Baker Hill to meet with Mom, my sisters and other brother, George. This was a difficult time. I wanted to be alone with Mom and explain all the problems I faced trying to get home for Dad's funeral. Mom, being the Mom that she was, understood. This meant a lot to me. I was able to spend some time with Mom and my family before going back to California.

After my furlough, I boarded a train out of Corry back to California for another long tiresome trip. Upon my arrival at the base, I knew I would be behind in my class. I started to study at night after lights out by flashlight. This was a terrible decision on my part to try to catch up by this method of study because it strained my eyesight. At my next physical I received bad news. My eyesight did not meet the Air Force requirement of 20-20 vision to become a pilot. I was told I could not continue the cadet training program. I was "washed out". Believe me, this hurt a lot as I knew I wanted to fly in some way with the Air Force. I begged the doctors, pleaded with them to let me fly in whatever capacity I could. After a long review of my records, they decided that with some of my high test scores I could qualify for radio school. I was pleased as ever to know that just maybe I would be able to fly as a radio operator.

Sometime in June or July 1943, I was sent to radio school in Scott Field, IL. This was near St. Louis, MO. I had many good times while on passes riding Mississippi river boats and dancing.

After sixteen weeks of radio school, I passed all phases with honors. I was typing 60 words a minute in Morse Code. I enjoyed radio school and was proud that I had done so well. Now I thought....what is next? As all rumors went in the service, you had to attend gunnery school in order to be assigned to a flight crew on a B-17 or B-24 bomber.

Thank God for my good grades. I was sent to gunnery school in Tonopah, NV. How could all the smart generals in the Air Force pick the top of a mountain in the most desolate place on earth to build an air base? The training was called "air to air training". A large balloon type target was pulled by another small aircraft, a Piper Cub type 1-5. Shooting at the target, we learned how much lead time we would need to hit the target. Other training included flying a little larger aircraft with a 50 caliber gun mounted on a swivel as well as ground shooting. I really enjoyed the training at the air base.

What does one do on top of a mountain for recreation? No passes to go into town. Tonopah was an Indian village with nothing there. They set up tents for a movie house and we had movies every night. Old movies at that. When you see the same movie over and over, it gets boring. I used my free time reading about the Air Force and learning what training was needed to be assigned to a bomber crew. I knew this is what I wanted to do in the service.....to be a good radio operator and gunner. Our training at Tonopah lasted only four weeks, and I was thankful for that.

Next we were sent to Buckingham Air Force Base in Fort Meyers, FL. Needless to say, we didn't know what to expect as we were not told very much about the next chapter of gunnery training. On the second day at Buckingham, we were told what type of training we would do. My reading of the books paid off as I had some idea of what to expect. The training consisted of riding in a jeep type of vehicle with 50 caliber machine guns on turrets. We rode around a course and shot at stationary targets while our vehicle sped along. We did lots of shooting which I enjoyed very much. In fact, I got pretty good at shooting. After eight weeks of training we graduated from Buckingham with pomp, ceremony and a large parade. I finished with flying colors and good grades. Fort Meyers was good duty and a nice city when one had a pass, which was not very often. They kept us on the base most of the time.

Preliminary training for a flight crew was now over. The next step was assignment to a flight crew for flight training. At least that was what we thought. However, the Air Force didn't work that way.

ASSIGNMENT TO A CREW

A lot of us were sent to MacDill Air Force Base in Tampa, FL. Upon arrival at MacDill, we were assigned to barracks in different squadrons. Our duties were mainly going to the flight line and learning how to repair radios on board the aircraft. We did some flying on A-26 planes so we could learn how to repair radios in actual flight. The instructors were very good and taught us what could happen in actual combat. We also did some gunnery training on flights....shooting sharks!

The food was excellent as we had a Greek cook that was one of the best. When we got passes to go into Tampa, we often went to the movies or to Yubor City. I liked MacDill very much.

Our next assignment was Plant City, FL, just outside of Tampa. I never cared for this place as we were crowded in a hangar type of building with bunks stacked one on top of another. We were told that we would be assigned to a crew from this place. I don't remember the exact date...early 1944. Finally after a few weeks the news came out regarding flight crew assignments.

I was assigned to a B-17 bomber crew which was a 10 man crew: Pilot, Co-Pilot, Navigator, Bombardier, (all officers), Engineer, Radio Operator, Ball Turret, Gunner, Two Waist Gunners and Tail Gunner. The pilot, co-pilot, navigator and Bombardier were all officers. Our pilot was Charles W. Ward from Wetumpka, AL. He was young like all of us. In fact, I think he was a year younger than I was. Charles was blond, handsome and just a southern boy at heart.

***** THE CREW *****

Pilot: Charles W. Ward, Wetumpka AL
Co-Pilot: Charles I Thompson, Philadelphia PA
Navigator: Gilbert M. Kushel
Bombardier: Joseph G. Moore, Philadelphia PA
Engineer: Charles F. Finley, Tonawanda NY
Radio Operator: Edward J. Kovach, Corry PA
Ball Turret: Harold W. Blackman, Olympia WA
Waist Gunner: Leopold B. Maryasz, Philadelphia PA
Tail Gunner: Merle S. Schutt, Chicago IL
Waist Gunner: Robert B. Pratt, Kendrick ID

All members of the flight crew became very close. The B-17 crews trained together and had to function as a team. Training was the key for survival of the B-17 crew during combat missions.

We were sent to Gulfport, MS for flight training. The weather was very hot in Mississippi and I didn't care much for the heat. We would train high altitude of 20,000 to 25,000 feet. The temperature would drop to over 50 degrees below zero at this altitude. After a flight, we would take off our heated flight suits. With the hot heat on the ground, our uniforms would be soaking wet in a matter of minutes after landing. The perspiration was terrible. Because all of our flight training was at high altitudes, we had to wear heated suits and oxygen masks. This was good training for future combat missions. Because we were near the Gulf of Mexico, we did a lot of "over the water" training.

The best flight training mission I remember was the flight to Cuba. We landed at a Naval Air Base in Cuba and had the opportunity to do a sight seeing trip into Havana. One Saturday evening we went to a dance at one of the large hotels. I was always one that enjoyed dancing very much. All the young Cuban ladies were escorted by their mothers. Some spoke good English. I asked this young lady for a dance. Then I had to ask her mother for her permission. The language barrier was something. I prevailed to get permission. The music was by a 15 piece orchestra and they were very good. The girl was a good dancer. I could do many dance steps at the time. I learned these

dance steps from my sisters. When the evening was over, she gave me her “fan” as a souvenir. All Cuban girls carried their fans to all social functions. I told her that I appreciated this nice gesture and also thanked her mother.

While in Cuba we did a lot of flying over the Atlantic Ocean and the Gulf of Mexico. The Waist Gunners, Ball Turret Gunner and Tail Gunner had a lot of practice with the 50 caliber machine gun. They shot up a few sharks! As the Radio Operator, I didn't get many opportunities to shoot the machine gun because I only had a very small range of fire in my radio room. I always said that I only had a “moral” builder. I wondered what I could do when we would get into combat.....time would tell.

The time we spent in Cuba training was well worth the effort because our crew started to become very close. Flying back to Gulfport, we did a lot of low flying over the Gulf of Mexico which was good training for the Pilot and Co-Pilot.

I remember one training flight that scared the pants off of me. We were flying very low down over a railroad track. I don't remember how low but the trees were close to our B-17. I guess this was good training for the Pilot and Co-Pilot. We also did some long distance flying which was good experience for the Navigator and myself as the Radio Operator. I learned how to get fixes (location found by fixed beacons and used triangulation to establish position of aircraft) for the Navigator and Pilot by radio.

ASSIGNED TO THE 490TH BOMB GROUP

After all of our good training, both in our individual roles and as “one crew”, we were assigned as a replacement crew to the 490th Bomb Group, 849th Squadron, in England. The crew was gung ho for action. We felt that we were trained well and ready for combat duty. All of our crew members were very young. I believe the age spread was from 19 to 25 years old.

My Pilot, Charles Ward, told us that we would get a brand new B-17. We had to test this aircraft in a few days. The B-17 was the finest aircraft for combat duty, bar none. We were all very proud to fly this plane.

We flew to Georgia, I don't remember why. Then we started our flight overseas. First stop was Bangor, Maine where we stayed for a few days. One day on leave, we were invited to a clam bake. I didn't know what this was all about as I had never attended a clam bake. The clam bake is done outdoors and cooked in a pit covered with sea weed. The clams, corn on the cob, potatoes, and lobsters were cooked to perfection. I was a little afraid to try this type of food. I must say that when I got into the food, it was one of the most enjoyable experiences I have ever had with food. The whole crew had a great time and I will never forget this experience.

On to Goose Bay, Labrador. We stayed briefly to refuel. Next stop was Iceland. This was the most desolate place I have ever seen. No trees, just rocks. We stayed over night, refueled, and started for Scotland the next morning. We stayed at the Air Force Base in Scotland for a couple of days. I don't remember much about this part of our stay. We checked out our equipment, guns, oxygen masks and heated suits. Then we headed to Eye, England, where the 490th Bomb Group was stationed.

Eye was a small town north east of London and south of Norwich. When we landed at Eye, we were assigned to the 849th Squadron. We stayed in barracks in a Nissen hut. The huts held two crews for a total of 20 men. The huts were as comfortable as one could make them.

The town of Eye was very small. It had a few stores and a couple of pubs where a lot of the airmen went to for a few beers. The English beer was warm but very tasty. “Red”

Findley, our Engineer, and myself used to go to Eye and play darts with the old timers at the pub. They were very good dart players and fun to be around. Sometimes it was difficult to understand them as they had a very strong English accent which I have never heard before. Soon we got the other crew members to come with us to play darts at the pub.

We went to London once on a pass. London was OK but there were too many service men around. We went to a dance at a big hotel but it was so crowded that there wasn't any room to dance. The Tail Gunner and I went to Madam Tussard War Museum which was interesting. Quite honestly, I had more fun with the old timers at the pub in Eye than I did in London.

TRAINING IN ENGLAND

We did a lot of close formation flying for the training of the pilots. They sure had a job to do. During all combat missions over Germany, tight formation was key for protection from enemy aircraft. Flying in tight formation provided the squadron fire power of all the B-17's 50 caliber guns. Enemy aircraft didn't try to split up tight formations because of a lack of room to maneuver. The more concentrated firepower we had the safer we all were. After all of the training we had been through, we wondered when we would finally go on our first combat mission. The crew was young and eager to start flying combat missions. Even though we had heard about the many dangers of combat missions over Germany and were told of the many aircraft and crews the 8th Air Force had lost.....we paid no mind. Our only thought was "Let's get things going!!"

FIRST COMBAT MISSION

A notice on our squadron bulletin board stated the crew of Charles W. Ward would be flying tomorrow. The crew was very excited for our first mission. The anticipation was something. Finally after all of our training, we would be making this first journey.

If my memory serves me correctly, our first mission was Stuttgart, located on the southern part of Germany. The target was a ball bearing factory. We were eager, full of

pride, and anxious to get going. Our briefing was at 5:00 AM which meant that we got up at 3:00 AM for breakfast. One good thing about breakfast before a mission is that we got fresh eggs cooked any way we wanted them. Every other day we had powdered eggs. After breakfast we each received a small package containing candy bars and raisins to take along on the mission.

I attended a special briefing for Radio Operators and Navigators before the main briefing which all the crews in the squadron attended. At the main briefing the target was unveiled for all to see. Heck, we didn't know what to expect. They explained the route we would take to the target, how much flak to expect, (flak is pieces of metal from the when the shell explodes) and all the information for pilots and crews to make the mission. The Pilots had a lot of detail to remember.

Take off was at 5:30 AM. Before takeoff, every crew member had jobs to do to check over the B-17 including guns, radio, ammunition, flak vests, flight suits and all necessary equipment. The ground crew did an excellent job getting all equipment ready for us. One can not say enough about our fine ground crew. They were a great bunch of guys who did their job with excellence.

After takeoff, we circled the air base until the group got into tight formation. Seemed like this took forever. But, formation was the key to success. After formation we headed off over the English channel and on to the target in Germany. What an experience for our crew. To be a part of the 8th Air Force on this mission with hundreds of B-17 bombers. We saw a few mE-109 German fighters but did not get a chance to shoot at them. The flak near the target of Stuttgart was really something to see and be a part of. I never saw flak before but was told about what to expect. What they tell you and what you fly through is a different matter. The flak was so thick that I thought of the old cliché..."one could walk on this stuff". Believe me, it got a little scary at times when the flak was coming through your aircraft. We lost a lot of planes during and after the bomb run due to flak. How many.....I don't know.

My job as Radio Operator was to monitor several frequencies assigned at briefing. I gathered a lot of information as to weather, amount of flak to expect and intelligence such as the number of rail guns that may surprise us while flying in formation. An

antiaircraft gun is mounted on a flatbed railroad car and moved into various locations – i.e. Rail gun. I was kept busy but still was looking out of my window to see what I could see. What a sight with the B-17 airplanes in formation and flak all around. What air power! One other assignment I had while near the target was to throw out fine strips of tin foil out of a hole I had in the radio room. I had boxes of this stuff. Throwing out the tin foil was an attempt to mess up the German radar guns.

Before we got to Germany, no one in the crew knew what to expect for our first mission. We asked many questions of other crews that had flown before. They all said, “You have to experience the bomb run and mission by yourself.” How true this was.

THE BOMB RUN

On the bomb run to the target, we didn’t know what to expect. The flak was getting very heavy at our altitude. It seemed like the Germans knew the altitude we were flying at. One burst of flak came very close to our plane. Zing...zing....part of the flak pieces flew into our plane. Now we started to realize what flak was.

On the bomb run the Navigator takes over flying the aircraft from the command of the Pilot. The Navigator uses his bomb sights to release the bombs. We were carrying 500 pounds of bombs. After “bombs away”, the Pilot took over the aircraft again and started to turn away from the target area. The whole squadron followed in turn. Looking out my radio room window, I saw a plane burning and flying out of formation. I told the Pilot along with the Waist Gunner about the burning plane. I could not determine if anyone bailed out of the plane. We were told at our briefing that this was when we may expect German ME-109 fighter planes. We did get some German fighters trying to split up our formation which kept the Gunners busy. The action with the German fighters didn’t actually last very long but it sure seemed like forever. I don’t think our crew shot down any fighters that day. I had a 50 caliber machine gun in my radio room but did not have much of a cone of fire (cone of fire is the left to right degrees you have to move your gun). I always said the gun mounted on top of the radio room was more of a moral builder.

After the German fighters left us, we still were in tight formation. The crew started to evaluate the condition of the plane. We found many holes in the aircraft but no serious damage. We headed for our home base in formation using an assigned route that kept us away from the German flak batteries. We lowered altitude and generally got below 10,000 feet. Finally we could take off the very uncomfortable oxygen masks, have a cigarette, eat something and just try to relax a bit.

Before we got to the English coast, we turned on our IFF (Identification Friend or Foe) so the British anti-aircraft batteries would not shoot at us. After landing at our base in Eye, we went to our assigned parking area for our plane. Before we were picked up by a truck to take us to the debriefing room, we talked to our ground crew chief and the other guys assigned to our plane. We told them about the mission and checked our plane for damage. I don't remember how many flak holes we had but there were quite a few. The crew chief said his crew would have all the holes fixed and the plane ready to fly the next day's mission. No words can express how grateful we were to have a good ground crew. I can only remember the ground crew chief's name...Chuck. But the whole crew was a great group of guys.

We were taken to the briefing room for debriefing. The whole crew sat around a table along with an American officer taking notes and asking questions about the mission. A bottle of whiskey was set in the middle of the table. We were given a double shot of whiskey...I guess to settle our nerves. Some of the crew members declined the drink or gave theirs to a buddy crew member. We were all very tired and somewhat confused. But we were also very young and determined not to let stress bother us on our first mission. After debriefing we headed to the mess hall to eat and then to our Nissen hut to rest a while. It was a very long day but also a good day. The crew of enlisted men headed to the mission to talk. We now considered ourselves veterans. Around 7:00 PM we went to the squadron information hut to see if our crew was assigned to fly a mission the next day. Yep!! Our crew was scheduled. Back to the hut we went to take a shower and then to bed. 3:00 AM comes fast. Thinking back about the mission, we wondered how many crews didn't make it back. They didn't tell us but we found out through the rumors, observing which crews didn't show up for briefing the next day and by what crews were missing in their hut.

The next five missions were very tough missions as we were losing crews very fast.

We had a two day pass and our entire crew went to London to see the sights. We visited all of the notable places like the Tower of London, changing of the guards and the wax museum. London was crowded with many servicemen. I told "Red", my engineer, "Let's go back to Eye and shoot darts with the old timers." Drinking a few beers and just talking with them was a lot of fun. The old men loved the "Yanks".

SIXTH MISSION

Our sixth mission to Hamburg, Germany, lasted a lifetime. The enemy flak was terrible. Enemy fighters were all over the place. We got shot up pretty bad, mostly from the flak. There were shrapnel holes all over our B-17. Thank God no one was injured. We started to have some engine problems. After "bombs away", my Pilot feathered one of the engines as it was burning. We started to lose altitude and dropped out of formation. Our "little friends" P-51 and P-47 aircrafts watched over us like a mother hen. Out of Germany and over Holland they watched us. We flew low over North Sea. I think we lost another engine about this time. The Pilot issued instructions to the crew to lighten the B-17. Out went the 50 caliber guns, flak jackets and any thing else we didn't need. Over the intercom the Pilot told us that we would have to land at the emergency landing strip with a long run way. We did all the necessary checks and re-checks for this type of situation. The crew took their positions that we had practiced many times.

When the landing wheels collapsed upon hitting the runway, we started to veer off the strip. The pilot couldn't control the plane when we hit the soft dirt off the runway. The plane split in half in my radio room. The dirt was coming in a mile a minute. I was trying to get to the Waist Gunners area as fast as I could. After sliding and much turning, the plane finally stopped. I was scared as hell.....this was indeed a harrowing experience that never happened before. When we got out from the waist door, we started to count heads. All accounted for except the Navigator. "Red", my engineer, went into the nose area to check for our Navigator and found him badly wounded from the crash. The emergency crew from the British Air Base was "Johnny on the spot" and took our Navigator to the hospital. We were all shook up from the crash. I'll never understand

how no other crew members were hurt during the crash. Someone from upstairs was looking after us.

The British took us to the debriefing room where we told an officer what we thought happened. From what we learned later, the hydraulics system went out from the flak we received. After debriefing, we went to the British mess hall for the typical meal of mutton. It was terrible. But we were so hungry that we ate it. The British got in touch with our air base and they sent a truck to take us back to Eye. The Navigator survived and was back with us in a week. We received a two day pass for our harrowing experience. We sure were veterans now!! I will not forget this mission as long as I live.

I don't remember much about the next six missions. They were typical missions...hard and difficult. When our crew had a day off, we usually spent the time in the village of Eye, watching a movie or writing letters back home.

Many 8th Air Force B-17 and B-24 planes were lost during these missions. The 8th Air Force bombing missions were flown in daylight while the British flights were at night. From the statistics I read, typically 1,200 B-17 and B-24 bombers and 800 escort fighters were dispatched on a mission. Thousands upon thousands of air crews lost their lives during these missions. It wasn't easy. Many crews were shot down and became Prisoners of War.

Our crew's next mission, number 13, was also our last mission. It was the most eventful day of my life and the most harrowing experience that ever happened to our crew. I will do my best to remember most of the important things that happened. Exact dates and time are difficult to place, but I will share with you some of the trying and difficult times one experiences flying their last mission and being captured by the enemy.

OUR LAST MISSION

January 10, 1945

Cologne, Germany

13th Mission....."Unlucky or Lucky"

The day started out dismal, rainy, cold and uncomfortable. Typical English weather. The crew was awakened by a corporal who said, "Up and at 'em! Get ready to fly your mission." It was around 3:00 AM when we awoke, shaved, and dressed for breakfast. Our 5:00 AM briefing was typical. We were told about how many German flak batteries to expect and other important information. Then the curtain was drawn to show the target....Cologne. Lots of moans and groans from the air crews. We had heard that this was a priority target. General Patton told the 8th Air Force of the urgency to knock out some bridges across the Rhine River at Cologne. We assumed this was to prevent heavy German equipment retreating back home.

After briefing we got into trucks to take us to our dispersal area where our B-17 was located. The B-17 looked nice and shiny as the ground crew chief and his crew did a very good job of preparing our plane for this mission. They had worked all night patching holes from the mission the day before. While walking to the plane, the Ball Turret Gunner dropped his parachute into a puddle of water. This was a no-no as the temperature at our flying altitude would be about 56-60 below zero. The wet parachute would freeze at this altitude. My Pilot, Chares Ward, said he would exchange parachutes with the Bail Turret Gunner. I thought that just maybe we should abort this mission as I had a bad feeling about it. Why.....I don't know. My Pilot said "No way will we abort this mission." The crew loaded up at their positions in the B-17 and prepared for take off.

I didn't know this until later.....my Pilot had completed Lead Crew Training. Guess this was his "day". He would be flying deputy lead for the 849th Squadron, leading the group of three squadrons consisting of 36 B-17 planes. This was a lot of responsibility for the Pilot. Charlie was a good pilot and we knew he could handle this.

Take off was always scary when we were loaded down with a full compliment of bombs, even though we had a lot of faith in our Pilot. Our group, the 490th Bomb Group, assembled over Eye with the other squadrons before we headed for the English Channel. The sky was clear with just a few clouds. I always loved flying at these high altitudes. It was a beautiful sight to see the bright sky with the cloud over below.

During the flight to the target area, the usual tasks were completed. We checked guns, oxygen masks and other equipment for the bomb run. Flying at the 25,000 foot altitude was a sight to behold while watching the huge formation of B-17 planes. The crew was always busy watching for enemy fighters and ensuring the formation was in order. We had a solid crew which was well trained. Everyone knew their jobs. Of course, we considered ourselves veterans with many missions under our belt.

As we got closer to Cologne, the target area, the flak got heavier. We had several direct hits from flak. It seemed like cloud of black buffs all over the sky. My radio room took a direct hit of flak. It was a terrible sound, like a big swoosh. For some unknown reason, I turned my chair around to the right. That was when I was hit by some shrapnel of flak in my left leg shin. It was very painful. I could see the clouds below through the big hole in my radio room. I told my Pilot what happened over the intercom. The intercom was busy with other crew members giving damage reports.

The Pilot told us over the intercom that he would have to take over the Lead crew position as something happened to the assigned Lead crew. I hated the Lead crew position. We had heard several stories about Lead crews getting all shot up from flak. I don't know exactly when our Pilot took over the Lead crew position. During the "bomb run" the Bombardier would release his bombs over the target and the rest of the squadrons would release their bombs when they sighted his bombs. The sky was full of black flak. We took several direct hits. All hell broke loose. The intercom was busy with the crew calling in the damage information. We had a hole in the center of the plane, a hole in the radio room, a hole in the left wing, a hole in the nose compartment, and a hole in the right wing. I think two engines quit. The oxygen system was out of order. From my radio station I could see a big hole in the back of the B-17. A fire started as the fuel tank in the left wing was ruptured.

Over the intercom I heard that the Tail Gunner was hit very bad. The Ball Turret Gunner was hit and stuck in his ball turret. The Waist Gunner was told to check out the condition of the Tail Gunner. Things were really getting hectic from all of the severe damage. I tried to put out the fire in the bomb bays. I guess it was then that another engine went out. My Pilot questioned all of the crew regarding the damage in all positions. After a second or two, the Pilot issued instructions to "bail out". How my Pilot kept the aircraft from spinning out of control, I'll never know. He was a very good pilot. Again, my Pilot said...."bail out, bail out". I went to the waist doors to bail out.

We never had actual experience to bail out of a plane. We were told and taught by lectures what to do in this type of situation. But we had no practice in parachute jumps. Thank God I was so young and had no hesitation to bail out. I know my life was at stake if I stayed any longer in the plane. The plane was burning pretty good by now. I thought I better get out soon. After the Waist Gunners finally cranked up the ball turret gunner, I said "Let's get the hell out of here."

THE BAIL OUT

I didn't know what altitude we were at the time of bail out. My guess is that we were at about 23,000 feet. When we were instructed on bail out procedures, we were told to count to 32 at this altitude. Hell....I didn't get to three before I pulled the ripcord.

When I bailed out of the waist doors, I didn't even have the emergency oxygen bottle with me. Forgot it, I guess. It was such a hectic time that the only thought I had was to get out of the airplane. So many things happened so fast. I pulled the ripcord, hoping and praying the parachute would open. As I counted to only three, the jerk from the parachute was hard. I was in a downward position when the parachute opened. The shroud lines ripped into my face and cut it up pretty good. As a radio operator, I always had my harness loose when I strapped it on so I could operate the radio. Since the harness was loose, the jerk from opening the chute was very painful to my lower body. To tell the truth, I pee'd my pants I was so scared. Being so cold it froze and was uncomfortable. What a situation to be in, cold, and bleeding from my leg and face. The descent down was very quiet with just the wind blowing. I saw another parachute in the

distance. I didn't know who it was. I saw our plane circling in a crazy manner before it finally blew up in mid air. Talk about being lucky!

I noticed that I had lost my left flight boot when the parachute opened from the jerk. The descent was slow until I nearly reached the ground. I hit the ground hard and blacked out. When I came to, several German soldiers were on me with guns pointed. I thought "This is it." How does one prepare for the unknown? I just hoped and prayed that they would not shoot me.

The soldiers talked in German. Of course I didn't understand a word they said. A German soldier motioned for me to get up. I tried but had a difficult time because of my leg injury. One guard finally helped me up and got a piece of stick so I could walk. It seemed like hours of walking before we arrived at a small village. I was very hungry and thirsty. They took me to some kind of medical center where there were many German soldiers also being treated for wounds. A German doctor came over to me while I was lying on the floor. He said, in perfect English, "I will tend to your wounds." He also said that he didn't have much medication but would do the best he could. After he tended to my leg and face, I thanked him for being good to me.

After several hours of lying in a corner of the room, I spotted another airman on the other side of the room. I thought, "No way could this be one of my crew members." The more I looked at him, the more I was convinced that this was my Engineer, Charles "Red" Finley. I hollered over to him, "Red, is that you?" He answered, "Ed is that you?" We greeted one another. It was a good feeling to have a fellow crew member with you. Red and I were very close buddies. We did a lot of things together while in training. Red was wounded pretty bad in the leg and had shrapnel in his back. He was also hit by small arms fire from the German ground soldiers when they were shooting at him coming down in the parachute. Red was hit in the butt but it was only a flesh wound. He was treated by the same German doctor that treated me.

After spending a few days in this room, it was off with two German guards to who knows where. I was still very hungry. We marched through several small towns. The march was tiring and difficult with my wounded leg and swollen testicles (from the bail out with the loose parachute). I knew Red was in pain also. We talked about this along the way

and knew we had to keep up with the guards as they were always hollering at us all the time to keep up. If we didn't keep up, we had no idea what would happen to us. They did seem like decent men...we hoped. Where we were going, only the guards knew.

I started to get a severe earache. When the doctor checked me, he noticed blood was coming from my ear. I was told I had a broken ear drum. I must have gotten this when I bailed out of the plane at the high altitude. The doctor said he had no medication and it would get better in time. What an earache! I still suffer from earaches today.

ROAD TO PRISON CAMP

On the march through one of the small towns, we heard a siren blow. That could only mean an "air raid". The two guards took us in to an air raid shelter. We noticed a lot of old men, women and children in the shelter. The guards took us to a corner of the shelter as they didn't know what the German civilians would do to the US Airmen.

When the air raid was over, a woman walked by Red and me. The woman started yelling something in German at us. She looked mad as hell. She then picked up a shovel and hit me over the head. She did the same to Red. The two German guards took her away from us. The blows hurt pretty good. What could we do.....take it was all we could do.

After the raid, it was off again walking to where, we still didn't know. We were very tired and hungry. The guards stopped along the way to rest. They had some bread and sausage to eat. Our mouths were watering at seeing this food. The guards noticed us looking at them with a hungry look. They gave us a small portion to eat. It was so good. All we could do was bow our heads and say, "Thank You."

THE START OF INTERROGATION

We stopped in a larger city and the guards took us to a building. Off to some room and we had to sit down on the floor as there were no chairs. Both Red and I started to say that this was a place that we heard about back at our Eye base in England. It was

some kind of interrogation office. A German officer came in and started to ask us questions. He spoke very good English. We only gave him our name, rank and serial number like we were told to do when captured. The German officer told us we would be sent to another place for further interrogation. He said something about Wetzlar or Frankfurt. We were very confused as we didn't know about either of these places. The two German guards took us to a train station and after what seemed like forever, we arrived at the interrogation center north of Frankfurt. Both Red and I were put in solitary confinement. I remember there was a small trap door to tell the German guard when you had to go to the bathroom. I was very lonely and started to count all the cracks in the room. There was some heat that was turned on for brief periods of time. The cell was cold and damp and my wounds hurt. Thank goodness I was young and in pretty good shape from the training.

The next day the interrogation began. A young German officer came into the room dressed like some general with all kinds of ribbons on his chest. I think he was a Major or a Captain. He was a very mean S.O.B. and battered me around for awhile. I still didn't tell him anything beyond my name, rank and serial number. He wanted to know all about our crew, where we flew out of England, what group we were in and asked many other questions. He was getting madder by the minute and I just wasn't going to tell him a darn thing. He told me, "Solitary confinement for a week and you will talk at the next interrogation." The cell they put me in was small and only had a bucket to do your duty in. They gave me a piece of black bread and a cup of coffee that was terrible. At night I only got a small cup of broth. My stomach ached from hunger.

I think I spent nine or ten days in solitary confinement before I was brought out for the second round of interrogation with the same German officer. He asked me if I was ready to answer his questions. I told him again, "No way." I only gave my name, rank and serial number. The German officer was pretty upset and slapped me around again. I was sent back to my cell for more solitary confinement. My wounds hurt terribly. What an earache I had. I tried my best to sleep as much as I could. Then it was back to interrogation with the German officer. How I started to hate this man. He pulled a file from one of the file cabinets and started to tell me all about myself and my squadron. He knew when I graduated from radio school and gunnery school, when I came overseas and a whole lot more information. It was a complete surprise to me that the

Germans had so much information about me. He started to ask more questions and when I wouldn't say anything, he pulled out his Luger pistol and put it to my forehead. I was really scared. I thought this S.O.B. just might pull the trigger. I finally told him where I was born, raised and went to school. I didn't think this information would harm anything. Finally he said, "That's enough, back to the cell." Now I really started to worry. What would he do next?

One evening the British bombers came over and bombed the city with their huge blockbuster bombs. Seemed like it would never stop.

After a few hours, I was sent back to the German Major for more interrogation. After more questions, he changed the conversation to where my home town was, what my Dad did and what would my family think about me being a prisoner of war. I thought telling him about my family might be a good way for my family to learn that I was alive but a prisoner of war. I just hoped and prayed that he would give this information to the Red Cross. Just maybe they would pass this information home.

While in solitary, I never saw Red. I didn't know what happened to him. I knew he was in the same building, but where? My prayers were with Red as he was hurting very bad from his wounds. Red was a tough Irish person.

Later on I talked to other POWs and they told me they had similar interrogation experiences. The Germans had a file on each of them. From what we could gather, the German Intelligence started a file on each of us the day we enlisted in the Air Force. They must have gotten the information from newspaper clippings and other ways. The German agents in the USA must have been pretty busy collecting information and sending it back to Germany. When a crew was shot down, the Germans had information about each crew member. They sure did know a lot about you.

Our thoughts while in solitary confinement were focused mostly on food. We sure were hungry. The Germans finally gave us some bread and ersatz coffee. I hated the coffee but drank it. Interrogation continued. I lost track of time and days. One day the Germans took me outdoors to a small courtyard. I noticed Red standing near the corner of the building. I hollered over to Red to get his attention. What a happy feeling being

together again. Red looked terrible. I guess I did too. But now we could watch over one another. The buddy system.

We were sent someplace not very far and put in barracks. All we had was straw for bedding on the floor. Toilet facilities consisted of a can placed at both ends of the barracks. When one had to relieve himself, day or night, you used the can. Nothing to wipe yourself with except some straw. The smell was terrible as most of the guys had diarrhea from the food.

The food they gave us was terrible. For breakfast we received a piece of black bread and ersatz coffee. Nothing for lunch. For supper we would get a small can of soup. I think they put grass, bugs and worms in the soup. Sometimes it had some very small pieces of potatoes and some meat, if you could find it. It was tough eating this crap but when you are hungry, you eat to stay alive.

When we finally got a Red Cross parcel, we had to split it with four to six other POWs. The Red Cross parcels were very good and included cigarettes, powdered milk, span, candy bar, cheese and other goodies. These parcels were a life saver for all of us.

One thing I missed was a good hot shower and a change of clothes. Lice were a big concern for all of us. Lice were in all the clothing. The only way to get rid of these damn things was for the Germans to give us a de-lousing. Killed most of the lice but they always came back.

We were finally issued a new pair of pants, shirt, underwear and a blanket. We also got a razor to shave with. Both Red and I had to share the razor. Thank goodness neither one of us had tough beards like some of the guys. The razor was a good one and lasted a long time.

LIFE IN PRISON CAMP

It was now February 1945. The weather was very cold and snow was on the ground. Prison life was lonesome. I thought a lot about home, good food, Mom and the family. Waiting for the unknown was on ones' mind most of the time. But, we were survivors

because we were young and full of pride. For exercise we would walk around the compound with our stick in hand. My leg wound was starting to heal. How I never got an infection, I'll never know. To clean my bandages, I would rinse them in the latrine with cold water and try to dry them. Not very successful, as the weather was too cold. The body heat kind of dried out the bandages. My ears ached all the time. Red was holding up pretty good.

While sitting around in the barracks, we all became very close. We talked about home, family, sports and always about food. One of the guys made a "kriege" burner from the Red Cross parcel cans. This contraption was an engineering feat. It was clever as heck. This is how it worked.....the ends of the Klim (milk can) were cut out at each end. They were placed on a piece of wood to make a tunnel. Then a can was cut out to form a fan type of blades. In the center was a crank that was turned to give a wind type effect through the tunnel. At the other end there was another bigger can cut out with pieces of wood placed inside. You started a fire and heated up whatever you had for food. Maybe you wanted to warm up your evening ration of soup. You turned the crank to get the fire going good and behold, you could cook or warm anything. It really worked well. Time didn't mean very much as we had plenty of time to monkey around with this invention.

One of the POWs in the barracks got a set of Pinochle deck of cards. I think he got them from a man at the Red Cross. We started to play Pinochle every day. We talked to the senior allied officer of our compound and asked permission to have a Pinochle tournament. Each barrack had a team of two men as champion from their barracks. Red and I got to be pretty good. We won our barracks and went to other barracks to play their champion. We won quite often until we met two guys from New York City who played a lot together. Red and I lost to these guys. Playing Pinochle was a good way to spend time and forget about being hungry.

Life as a POW was very monotonous. Close friends like Red and Cliff were a godsend. Cliff Glenny was with the Canadian Air Force attached to the British Royal Air Force. Cliff was a Navigator on a British Lancaster bomber. When he was shot down sometime in November 1944, he was badly wounded in the right leg. He was a mess and was fortunate to have his leg. How he got into our American prison camp is a story

within itself. Cliff and another Canadian airman came in to our barracks in 1945. He slept next to Red and me. We became very good friends. His Canadian friend didn't stay with us long. After about a week, the Germans took him out of our barracks and sent him someplace. We don't know where.

Cliff had a pair of crutches, lucky guy. We three guys with sticks and crutches walked around the compound. What a sight to see. I used to get mad as hell with Cliff. Every morning when we got our ersatz coffee, he would always talk about glazed doughnuts and cold milk. He just wanted to see our mouths water.

When Carmella and I got married in 1951 we spent our honeymoon in Toronto, Canada, with Cliff and his wife.

Sometime in late February we were transferred to Nurnberg, Germany. We traveled in boxcars, packed in like sardines. We had to stand up most of the trip. The camp at Nurnberg was a little better. We had a double decker cot to sleep on with straw mattresses. The food was the same...lousy. We started to get more Red Cross parcels which helped with our hunger, even though we had to split up the contents with other prisoners. The Red Cross parcels kept us going. POW life continued to be monotonous. We did try to have some entertainment. We formed a chorus which I joined, as I liked to sing. We became pretty good and started to give concerts in other barracks. Some of the guys put on crazy floor shows.

Church was on our mind. I was catholic as were many of the POWs. We wanted to go to church but we didn't have a priest to say mass. We did the next best thing. A POW from New York said that he was going to study to be a priest and agreed to say the mass. We made an alter out of some old crates that one of the POWs found. We had to put a blanket on the alter as we had no sheets. One of the guys made a chalice out of tin cans. It looked very nice. The POW from New York said mass in Latin. We had several POWs as alter boys. American ingenuity at work.

The German guards came into the barracks once in a while and broke up the service. It made us mad as hell. We would set up the alter again and have mass, whatever the consequences. The mass started out slow in attendance but grew fast as word spread

to the other barracks that we held mass. Prayer was one thing I believed in and it kept me going. The German interrogator had taken away my rosary beads and cross necklace that Mom had given to me. How I hated that man for this.

Sometime in late February the 8th Air Force must have had a maximum effort bombing mission over Nurnberg. We saw B-17s and B-24s fill the sky. The city must have been leveled. Some bombs hit close to the prison camp. We saw a few B-17 aircraft get shot down by flak. Saw some parachutes come out of the planes. More POWs.

The guards at Nurnberg were OK. Some were mean as hell and others were a little more compassionate. We had one German guard assigned to our barracks that I will never forget. We named him "Lufty" but I don't remember why. Lufty was a tall German about 6'4" and carried himself with dignity. We noticed that Lufty was different from the other guards. In a short time he became talkative with one of the POW who spoke German. We started to teach Lufty English and he taught us some German with the help of the POW who spoke German. It wasn't long before we found out that Lufty had lost his whole family. Three sons died in the war and his wife along with his two daughters died in an air raid. We guessed that Lufty was about 75 years old. We asked him why he was a guard at his age. He said the Germans made him join the service as a guard. Lufty would sneak a loaf of bread into our barracks when he could. He had to watch the other German guards as they would report him to the officer and create trouble for Lufty. We always asked him how he got the bread. He would only shrug his shoulders and smile.

Sometime later Lufty stopped coming to our barracks. We tried to find out what happened to him. Even our senior allied officer asked questions of the German Commandant about Lufty, but got no answer. We all wondered what happened to Lufty as he was a good German and we like him.

The best time as a POW was when we received our Red Cross parcels. Seemed like the parcels got a little bigger as we noticed a lot more items were in the parcels. Getting the parcels was always a celebration and good chow time while it lasted. Even when we had to split the parcel many ways with other POWs, it was good eating.

Red, Cliff and I hung around together most of the time, looking after one another. We all were still hurting from our wounds.

One day, around the first of March, 1945, we were told by the Germans to pack up all of our belongings and be ready to leave the prison camp in Nurnburg. We packed our blankets and other personal stuff, which wasn't much. Rumors were running at a crazy pace. We didn't know where we were going or what would happen to us. Even our senior officers didn't know what was going on. Mass confusion reigned.

FORCED MARCH FROM NURNBERG TO MOOSBURG

The forced march to Moosburg was the most difficult time during my POW days. It is difficult for me to remember all that happened along the march.

I guess the Germans figured that it was time for all of us to leave. We heard many stories that the American armies were getting close. Rumors came one after another. From what I learned later on, the Germans thought that General Patton was getting very close and a Gustapo commander wanted to use us as hostages. I don't know how true this was.

We began the march on March 4, 1945, along the back country roads. We learned that we were headed to Moosburg which was 190 miles south. Moosburg was a little north of Munich. I wondered how many prisoners were on the march as it seemed like miles upon miles of men marching. I was told later that there were 15,000 to 18,000 POWs on the march.

The weather was cold. Snow was on the ground and the march was just plain miserable as we didn't have clothing for such cold weather. On the first day Red, Cliff and I stayed together. Cliff still had his crutches. Red and I had our walking sticks. The unknown was on our minds all the time. We talked about this but didn't have any answers. We just hoped for the best. The first night was a nightmare. We slept under some trees along the road. It was very cold. To seek warmth we got three other POWs together with us. We spread three blankets on the snowy ground after we brushed a lot of snow away. We slept close together to share the other four blankets and body heat

to keep warm. My feet were very cold as I had no fly boots, just sacks wrapped around my feet. This is when I had my feet frozen. We didn't get any food or after the first day. I don't know how far we marched.

On the second day the guards got us up early. It was still dark. We gathered our blankets and started off on the march again. Sometime later in the morning we stopped in a little town where we got a small piece of bread and hot coffee. I was so thirsty that I drank the ersatz coffee even though I didn't like it. The German guards had police dogs with them during the march. Anyone that fell to the side of the road would get the dogs sent after them. The dogs were trained to be very vicious. We saw them chew up a couple of POWs.

Sometime in the afternoon a few US fighter P-51 and P-47 aircraft fired on us POWs. They strayed a couple of times as they went over us. A few POWs were killed. The US fighters must have thought we were a column of Germans. When they realized we were POWs, they stopped firing on us. After that they would fly by us and wave their wings. This signaled that they knew who we were. Every day after that, they would fly over to keep track of us. We would all wave at them. Good old US fly boys.

We weren't pushed hard by the Germans to walk faster. For some reason they slowed down the pace themselves. This was good as some of the POWs had a hard time keeping up. Red, Cliff and I kept up pretty good. Determination, I guess.

If we stopped for the night close to a farm house, someone would go to the farm house and see if we could steal some potatoes or anything to eat. Once one of the guys came back with a handful of potatoes. We asked one of the German guards if we could build a fire. We showed him the potatoes we had and he said yes. We roasted the potatoes and had a feast. Our stomachs were finally full. The six of us were one happy bunch of POWs.

About a week into the march, we were put up by the Germans in a farm house with a large barn. We slept in the haymow. This was so much better than sleeping on the ground. I don't remember how many of us were in the barn. I do remember that the farmer gave us a few potatoes which we ate raw. I have never had raw potatoes

before. Red, Cliff and I decided we would try to hide out in the barn for a few days to rest as our legs were getting very sore. I don't think the German guards missed us as they had a difficult time keeping track of all the POWs. Getting food was the biggest challenge. We did get some more potatoes from the farmer and asked if we could boil them. One of the POWs spoke a little German and was able to explain to the farmer what we wanted.

We stayed in the barn for what seemed like a week. After much discussion we decided we had better get on the road again for Moosburg. We started to hear loud blasts from gunfire and thought the Americans were getting close. The safest place to be was in the prison camp.

Back on the road again, we met up with a column of POWs and just fell right in with them. I don't think the Germans knew the difference as they were getting kind of worried about the war. We just seem to blend right in with the other POW's. The guards always had the German Sheppard dogs with them on a lease. When a POW fell out of line by the side of the road, the dogs went after them. Some of the POW's got chewed up pretty good by the dogs.

Drinking water was hard to come by. At times along the road the Germans would have some big kettles filled with water for us to drink. Usually this was in some small villages. The water sure did taste good but you only could have a dipper full.

Of the sad things we noticed were the bombed out cities. The German elder people would watch us walk by. They all had a sorry look on their face and didn't look like they ate very well. It was very sad to see the skinny little children in their ragged clothes and they all had that sad look about them. Not a very pleasant sight.

Along the march we were told that president Roosevelt died. At first we thought another rumor. Guess it was the truth. It was a shock to all of us. He was a very good President.

One evening we stopped for the night by a farm house. We noticed a large fire going. As we KRIEGE's (German for Prisoner of War) got closer Red decided we should get as close as possible to get warm. It was then he pulled out 3 potatoes out of his pocket.

Where and how he got them we didn't ask and he wouldn't tell us. He threw the potatoes in the fire to roast them. They sure tasted good. Red, Cliff and I now just might get some sleep with our tummies a little full. It was still very cold but we were able to get some sleep.

ARRIVAL AT MOOSBURG

It was April 25, 1945 when we arrived at Moosburg Stalag VIIA. Cliff, Red and I were overwhelmed by the number of people imprisoned here. They had no barracks left so again it was sleep outside. We managed to get a bail of straw to spread on the ground. It was used as a type of mattress to keep off the wet ground.

We knew the American troops were getting closer as we could hear rifle fire and shell explosions. We could see some Germans retreating, rifle fire was getting close and we heard bullets flying over our heads. Suddenly a great cheer went up when American soldiers broke through the fence with their tanks. Many of the German guards raised their hands to surrender. Cheers went wild again as we all were yelling, "free at last, free at last".

The next memorable event was when General Patton waved at us from the top of his tank. We could see his famous trademark, a pair of pearl handled pistols strapped to his hips. The emotion was overwhelming. All the different nationalities at the camp became one. We were free at last. A feeling I will never forget.

We heard rumors after being liberated that Hitler gave the orders to kill all prisoners of war. This of course didn't happen as the high ranking German officers knew the war was finished some time ago.

The march to Moosburg was considered a forced march. We had no choice. Most of the area we walked was farm country. Sure was beautiful part of Germany. Reminded me a lot of our Pennsylvania hills and valleys.

GOING HOME

After our liberation on April 29, 1945 Red and I stayed together at Moosburg. We were told it would take some time before we could be flown out from a nearby Air Base. Our American troops set up a field kitchen to feed the POW's. The food was good and tasty and the bread reminded me of Mom's home bread she used to bake. We had to watch ourselves from eating too much as we got diarrhea from the rich food. We didn't care as we had diarrhea before and now was the time to fill our tummies. We did suffer from this error. Who cared....

Cliff was taken away by the Canadians to be sent home. He was able to leave early.

Somehow Red got into the prison camp office and found our German personnel files. They had the picture ID taken when we were at Wetzlar, Germany prison camp. Naturally Red took the files of him and me. I still have those pictures today. Must say, what a sight.

The Red Cross came into camp and provided us with some supplies, toothpaste, razors, and deodorant. No hot showers yet and I must say we didn't smell all that good.

We were restricted to the prison compound. They told us to stay within the fences as there was a war still going on outside our prison compound. A battle with retreating German SS troops was being waged in a building not from our prison compound. We heard bullets flying over our heads at times. This battle didn't last very long as the American troops wiped out the German SS troops pretty fast.

THE JOURNEY HOME

Now the question was..... when do we start our journey home? Days went by and we were told that we would be flown out soon. The waiting was terrible. A hot shower and clean cloths would have made the waiting more tolerable. We were all filthy from the forced march. We only had cold water to wash our face and hands. The 14th Armored Division finally set up some portable showers. Can you imagine several hundreds of

prisoners waiting to take a hot shower? What could we do but wait. It was well worth the wait to take our first hot shower in 45 days. Oh the joy of being clean again.

What amazes me even today is how they supplied the hot water for all the POW's. Mooseburg was a large prison camp that held many thousand of prisoners of different nationalities.

Even with all the hardships we went through the American POW's never seem to lose their sense of humor. Many of the guys told different stories. Jokes and one liners that me laugh. This helped to keep our spirits up as we faced tough conditions.

Again we were warned not to over eat as this would cause problems. What the heck... we still did and suffered for our ways.

On May 8, 1945 the German Army surrendered.... The War in Europe was finally over. What a happy time we POW's had yelling and screaming jumping up and down.

A week or two later we were scheduled to fly out of Germany from an air base not from the prison camp. We were taken by truck and loaded on a C-47 cargo plane. Red and I stayed together like a couple of stuck flies. We were told that we would be flown to a place called "Camp Lucky Strike" some where in France near the coast. Cliff Glennym our Canadian buddy got separated from us by this time.

The flight home was uneventful, except for the excitement of our journey home. Some of the POW's had to relieve themselves while flying and it was a mess. Who cared.....we were going home.

We landed some place in France near an evacuation hospital. They set us up in tents and treated to our wounds. We sure did have to watch what and how much we ate. Otherwise you spent a lot of time in the latrine. First aid stations were set up near the latrine to help us. We finally learned our lesson.

Slowly and surely the old military was set on..."Hurry up and wait". We had to wait to board a ship for home. Red and I stayed close to cap as we didn't want to miss our

chance to go home. I am not sure of the date we boarded a ship for home. I think it was late May. The ship was some kind of luxury liner converted to a hospital ship.

The trip on the ocean was not much fun for me. I got very seasick. Now I never got sea sick fishing on Lake Erie. Never got air sick with all the flying that I did. It took about eight or nine days to cross the ocean to New York City. I was sick the whole trip. Didn't enjoy this trip at all but...finally home to the good old USA.

We were greeted by many young ladies from the Red Cross. We thanked them for the food parcels and the gift bags. But I didn't care to eat anything. I hoarded my food as I remembered from my POW days. A short train ride to camp Kilmer, New Jersey. This was a gathering place for all POW's. We received a lot of medical attention. Doctors asking many questions about our mental state. After many days of debriefing by the doctors I was finally scheduled to go home. While we waited to go home they sure did treat us first class. Steaks with all the trimmings. Now we were getting spoiled for sure.

My dear friend Red Findley was with me through all of this. We went to a NCO (non commission officers) club and had a couple of beers. We talked about Red seeing his son for the first time. Red was getting anxious, rightfully so. He hadn't seen his wife for over a year and now his new son. Who wouldn't be anxious? Red was a very dear friend.

A SAD ENDING

When Red and I were processed for a 30 day furlough, Red asked me if I would travel to Buffalo, NY with him and then from Buffalo to Corry by train. I called my brother George in Munhall, PA and he said that I should get a train to Pittsburgh as he wanted to take me by car to Corry so we could talk on our way to see Mom.

Before leaving Red, I went to the PX and bought a Zippo lighter with a little note etched on it. "Red, friends forever...ED" We said our goodbyes at the train station, Red leaving for Buffalo and me to Pittsburgh. I must say that it was a very emotional time. Saying so long to Red after all we both had gone through was very difficult. We would meet one another in Buffalo in a few weeks.

When I arrived in Corry, many tears were flowing with Mon, my sister Emma and Ellie. After all the tears went by Mom told me that some lady called, a Mrs. Charles Findley. I told Mom she was the wife of a crew member who was in prison camp with me. I called Mrs. Findley and she told me what happened to Red. He was killed in a train accident outside of Buffalo. I completely broke down. How could this happen to Red after all we had been through. Believe me this was the saddest day of my life, my best friend and crew member gone. Why...how could this happen?

The next day I drove to Buffalo to see Mrs. Findley. I have faced many hardships but this by far was the worst I had to go through. It is very difficult to describe the feelings I had. Even today after all these years I still think of Red.

Mrs. Findley showed me the Zippo lighter that I gave to Red. It was smashed paper thin. Red must have had a violent death. God bless him. I met Red's little son. They named him Charles, a nice tribute to his father.

Red...you have been gone for these many years but I think about you all the time. You will never be forgotten by me my dear friend. I kept in touch with Mrs. Findley for several years after. She got married again and started a new life.

HOME ON LEAVE

The Air Force gave me a 30 day furlough before I was to report to Miami Beach, FL for rest, relaxation and medical evaluation. My furlough home was mostly trying to adjust to this peaceful life. I had many problems trying to sleep. Mom said I had terrible nightmares and she would have to wake me up during the night. Mom would talk to me to try to get rid of these nightmares. Mom was a big help to me in this adjustment period. Like all mothers, she thought I was too skinny and she started to fatten me up with only Mom's great cooking. Was it every tasty!!! I didn't do much running around. I just wanted to stay at home and read or visit with some old friends. Many were still in the service. This was mid June 1945. They gave me a 10 day extension to my leave. I appreciated this as it was wonderful to be home with my Mom and sisters. What a great

help they were to me while I was in this adjustment period. I started to feel much better by this time. Thanks to my family for their understanding.

I went by train to Miami Beach. They converted some of the very swank hotels into a hospital like facilities. Hundreds of ex-POW's were also here for R&R. The weather was wonderful, and the food was excellent. The hotel rooms were spacious and very comfortable. Two ex-POW's to a room. We had a lot of privacy that I liked. What a nice way to get spoiled. I went swimming in the ocean every day. They also had many other activities if a person wanted.

After about a week, we started to get checked for our old wounds and physiology evaluation. I asked the doctor why I had to go through these tests. He said, "To see if you are ready for society" after being a POW. How about that!!!! I guess we all had to go through the same thing. I wasn't alone. I didn't like it but if I wanted to get my discharge I had to go through this procedure. Sometimes it was very intense questioning. Guess the doctors were only doing their job and wanted us well before we got discharged.

I sure enjoyed R&R in Miami Beach. What a life. Made many new friends as we all were in the same boat and being ex-POW's we had many things in common.

It was late September when they sent me home on another furlough. This was only for two weeks and then I was to report to a air base outside of Harrisburg, PA. More medical evaluation was done at this base.

The war was over in Japan and we all were wondering, why can't we get our discharge. Couldn't get a decent answer from any doctor. Finally in late October, 1945 I was sent to Andrews Air Force Base, Washington DC.

Finally got my discharge from the Air Force on November 1, 1945.

"VERY VERY HAPPY MAN".....

POST WAR YEARS

Coming home for my final stay was exciting and a good feeling of relief. I still had my problems with nightmares at times. It was a lot less now. I knew with time I would get over this. I had a lot of confidence in myself. I knew that I went through a lot being a POW but having a lot of faith and support from my family I could get better. And I did.

After some time I decided that I wanted to go to school to become a control tower operator. I went to school in Kansas City, MO for this training. Having been a radio operator during the war I just thought this would be up my alley. After several months, I decided this was not for me. I was starting to get hearing impaired and thought this would not be a good line of work if I couldn't hear the pilots. I had very good grades in school and my instructors all wanted me to stay.

I came home and got a job at Associated Spring, Raymond's Division in Corry. I started this job in November 1950. It was a good steady company to work for. I worked hard and learned and was promoted to several higher positions.

While working as a production expediter I meet Carmella Pirro. I saw this very good looking young lady in her department and I knew I had to meet her. I asked one of her co-workers if they would introduce me to her. They told me that I would never get a date with her. Being very persistent I finally convinced her to go to a movie with me. Now this took me about five weeks to get to this point with Carmella. I must say that even on our first date I was very interested in her. It was difficult at times as Carmella came from a very strict Italian family. Her mother was very strict with all the Pirro girls. This didn't stop me. I just knew she was the one for me.

A few more dates and we were going rather steady. One evening while we were out for a drive, I stopped the car and said to Carmella "you know that I love you and I feel sure that you love me why not get married". She said "YES" and I gave her an engagement ring. We were married August 25, 1951 at St. Elizabeth Church.

This started a beautiful life together. Our son Ed was born Dec. 17, 1952. What a joy. Our first son. Son Jim was born June 14, 1954. Now we had two sons and a great

family. Our life together with the family was a good life. Carmella was a devoted mother. She helped me through many difficult times. Together we worked very hard to have what we have today.

In 1967 I was transferred to Plymouth, MI to be the production manager at Associated Spring. Carmella was a trouper to say the least. She took the new life style in Plymouth just like it was Corry. She made a very happy home for all of us.

Life has been good. Yes it had its ups and downs but we are very happy for all it has given us. Our faith in each other is paramount.

This is my story. Hope you enjoyed being part of this journey. We thank God for all of our blessings.

A RENUNION FIFTY YEARS LATER

In July 1994 I received a post card from the 490th Bomb Group Association Secretary, asking if I was Edward J. Kovach attached to the 490th Bomb Group in Eye, England. I wrote him a letter promptly, telling him I was that person. I also asked him if he would help me locate any of my crew members. Awhile later I received a letter back with an address label, Charles W. Ward, Sun City Arizona. I hollered to my wife Carmella, this is my pilot, he is alive. I was in a complete state of shock reading this news.

I must say right now that I tried to get in touch with my fellow crew members after the war. Wrote many letters but they all came back as under deliverable. I tried for about five years to reach them. Still no answers. I just thought they were all kill on the mission. Kind of gave up.

I immediately sat down and typed a letter to Charlie, asking many questions that I didn't have answers to. When Charlie received my letter, he called that evening. We must have talked for two hours. Many questions were unanswered by the both of us.

In early January 1995, Charlie said that he was coming to Florida with his brother Jack. The would be saying at a time share in Madeir Beach, FL. What great news this was. We would finally meet after all these years.

January 28, 1995 was a Sunday I will always remember. Charlie and his brother Jack came to our home in Tarpon Woods. The initial meeting was anticipated, emotional, lot of running tears flowing on our cheeks. It was unbelievable. His brother Jack took video tapes of the whole meeting. Needless to say, the conversation was all about the last mission when we were shot down over Cologne, Germany.

This is Charlie's story....."Our 13th Mission.....Bail Out"

I was very proud of my crew as we were promoted to deputy lead crew for this mission. We were the lead group of the 849th squadron which was the leading group of three squadrons consisting of 36 B-17's. From Charlie's early briefing, General Patton sent a note of urgency to knock out the bridges across the Rhine River at Cologne and trap the heavy equipment the Germans had as they retreated homeward.

After the 4:30AM briefing, the flight crews headed for the flight line where our B-17 was parked. All the crew squawked about the missions' high priority, the clear sky over Germany and Cologne, and the heavy defense around the target area. One could say we were clay pigeons, this being our 13th mission we all wondered.

After a heavy rain the ground was covered with several inches of water. When we reached our B-17 our ball turret gunner dropped his parachute soaking the back cover. The temperature was 56 degrees below at the altitude of our 26,500 ft. during our bombing run. Rather than abort the mission, I as pilot and commander decided to swap chutes with the ball turret gunner. I told Charlie that this was a good time to abort the mission as I had a bad feeling which I never had before. "No way" Charlie said, and off we were to start our mission.

There were heavy vapor trails long and silvery across the skies of Europe. Visibility was approximately 150 miles and naturally the target would be easily spotted. Over the radio the lead plane said that its bomb sights had failed. We as deputy lead moved up and took over as lead crew and the formation over the target area. All of the other crews would bomb on cue from the lead crews' bomb release.

As we all neared the target area, the blue sky blackened with exploding flak. All crew members started to call the direct hits to the aircraft. Over the intercom..."hole in the center fuselage....direct hit in the radio room, another in the left wing, hole in the nose.....one in the right wing. The flak was so heavy that one could walk on it.

Finally the bombardier called "Bombs Away". Then we started to turn for home. Right after the turn we took three direct hits. Three engines quit, the oxygen system was punctured, two large holes were in the fuselage, a third of the right wing disappeared and the fuel tank in the left wing was ruptured and began burning. The intercom system came alive with many crew members' feared voices. "Tail gunner hit in the stomach....ball gunner stuck in the ball turret....navigator hit in the hand.....radio operator hit on the left.....control cables shot away....oxygen system zero, the engineer said. I finally had to order silence on the intercom.

Things were happening very fast. Orders had to be issued. I told the crew to listen up and do the following. Right waist gunner, tie a jacket over his stomach, put his chute on and pull the rip cord as you push him out the back door. Airmen in the ball turret, tail gunner, and radio operator wore only the harness in their stations and strapped the bulky chest-pack parachutes on when needed.

"Left waist gunner, wind the ball turret gunner up with the manual crank, get the gunners chute on and push him out the door, have the radio operator help. All other crew members..."BAIL OUT"

The B-17 was falling in a slow flat spin, but somehow I overcame the G-force and crawled to the forward escape hatch. When I reached the hatch, left open by the bombardier jumped, I stumbled over the navigator. Nearly unconscious, I pushed the limp body out into space. I don't remember how many thousand feet I fell before I

pulled my rip cord. Nothing happened...then I remembered the back cover was frozen. Frantically, with my arms stretched over my shoulders, I started to claw away at the covering; I finally grasped the pilot chute and pulled it free. The main chute finally opened.

Loud zinging noises interrupted my moments of silence. Someone on the ground was shooting at me. The shooting stopped at the same time I heard the high pitched sound and whine of an aircraft engine runaway. Looking around I saw our B-17 heading straight for me. It missed and exploded not far from me.

Hitting the earth with a solid thud, I hit my head on something on the ground. Got to my feet after a moment, slipped off my chute then heard small arms fire so I raced to cover in a nearby building.

After a period of time the shooting stopped and I started to run for the hills. Nearing total collapse, I came upon a hedgerow and went into a ditch for cover. Resting and collecting my thoughts.

After 10 days of hide and seek, I finally made contact with the American troops. I was evacuated to Brussels, Belgium. Soon after I was back in England for some R&R, A month later I got another crew and started flying combat missions again. After three missions, my plane almost went down again but I managed to coax it back home and make a crash landing.

Leaving the Air Force after the war, I logged over 3,000 hours flying acrobatics, crop dusting and flight instructing. I was recalled back into the Air Force during the Korean conflict. I flew 52 missions in B-26's. After Korea, I stayed in the air Force and started training in Jets.

Vietnam War broke out and in F-104 "Star-Fighter" I flew 100 missions. I finally rotated back to the states in 1966. I guess I finally had enough and retired from the Air Force with 30 years of Service.

Now back to the reunion...

I was completely in awe with Charlie's war experiences. I can only say he had nine lives to say the least. Charlie gave a 65th birthday party for his brother Jack while in Florida. Carmella and I attended the party and I must say Charlie did it up right. I had a great time with his other friends and their wives. I kind of felt sorry for Carmella and the other wives. All of Charlie and Jack's friends were jet pilots from the war and civilian life. Great bunch of guys and a very nice time we had. Many comments about Charlie and I meeting after all these years. I hated to see the evening end.

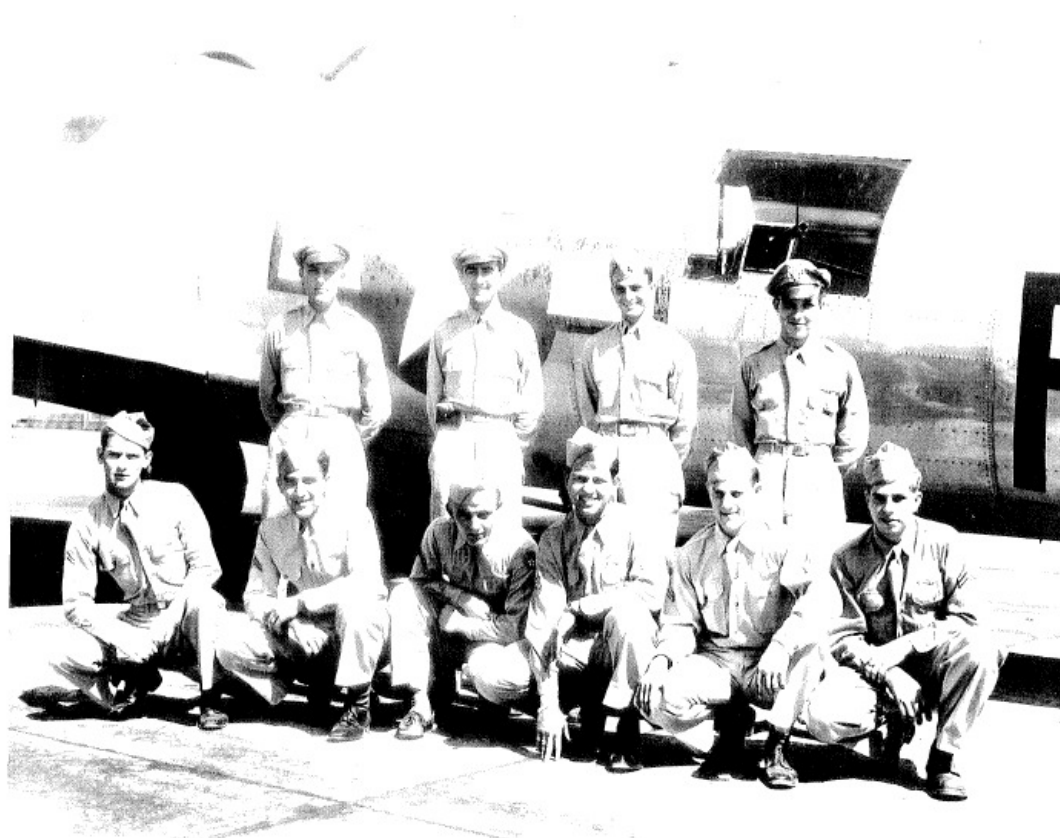
Charlie and I will be in touch even more from now on. Now that we have found one another so to speak, we will try to find out about the other crew members. A void in my life has been answered to some extent. We must fill all the other voids. For me only one chapter is complete..."Finding my Pilot"

I hope you enjoyed reading this added addition to my bio. I thought it would be interesting for all who read this. Many, many thanks to Charlie Ware for his help in filling in some of the details.

Flying Fortress



***** THE B-17 CREW*****

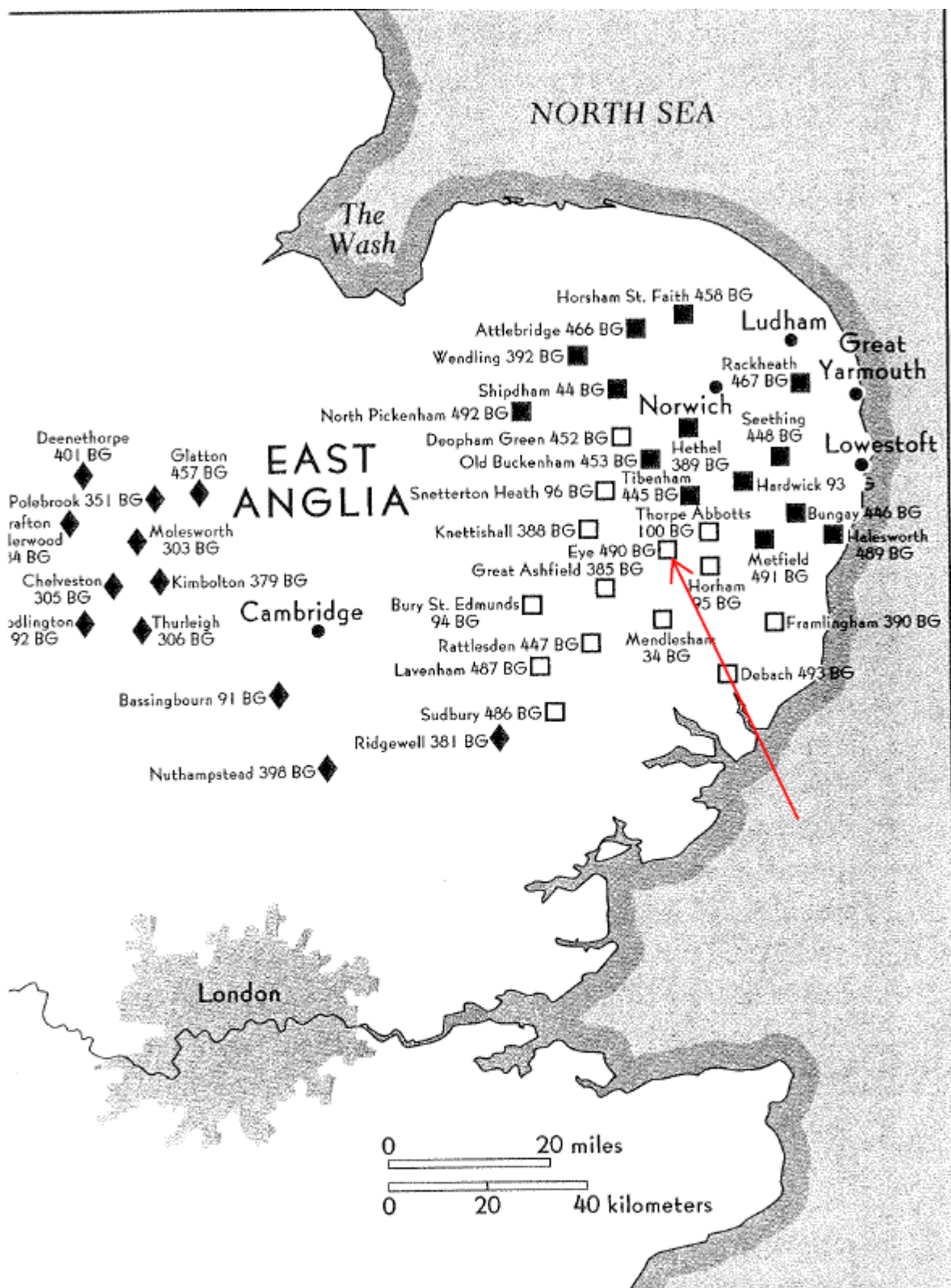


STANDING (L-R)

Pilot	Charles W. Ward
Co-Pilot	Charles I. Thompson
Navigator	Gilbert M. Kushel
Bombardier	Joseph G. Moore

KNEELING (L-R)

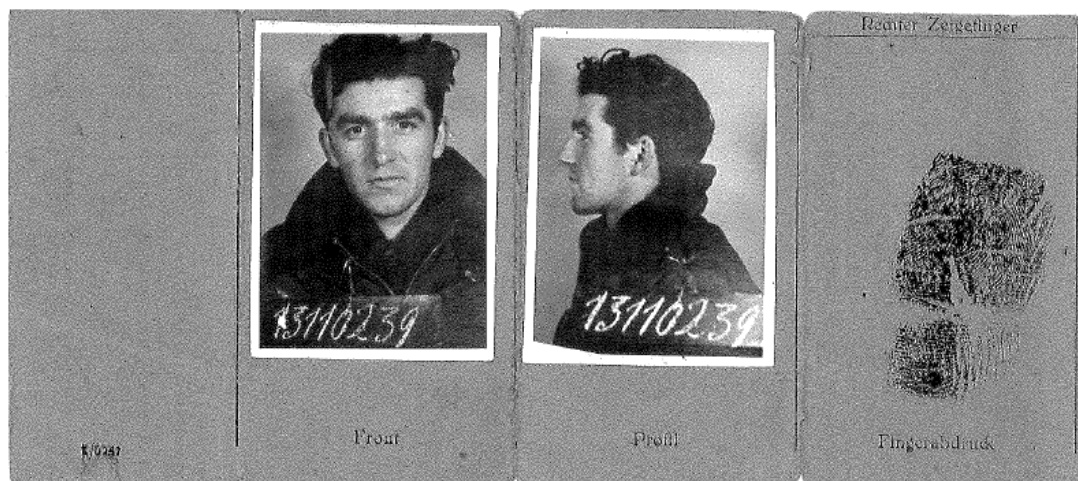
Engineer	Charles F. Finley
Radio Operator	Edward J. Kovach
Waist Gunner	Leopold B. Marysaz
Tail Gunner	Merle S. Schutt
Ball Turret	Harold W. Blackman
Waist Gunner	Robert B. Pratt



The U.S. Eighth Air Force in England, 1942-45

- ◆ First Air Division—Flying Fortresses (B-17's)
- Second Air Division—Liberators (B-24's)
- Third Air Division—Flying Fortresses (B-17's)

PHOTO TAKEN AFTER MY CAPTURE BY THE GERMANS

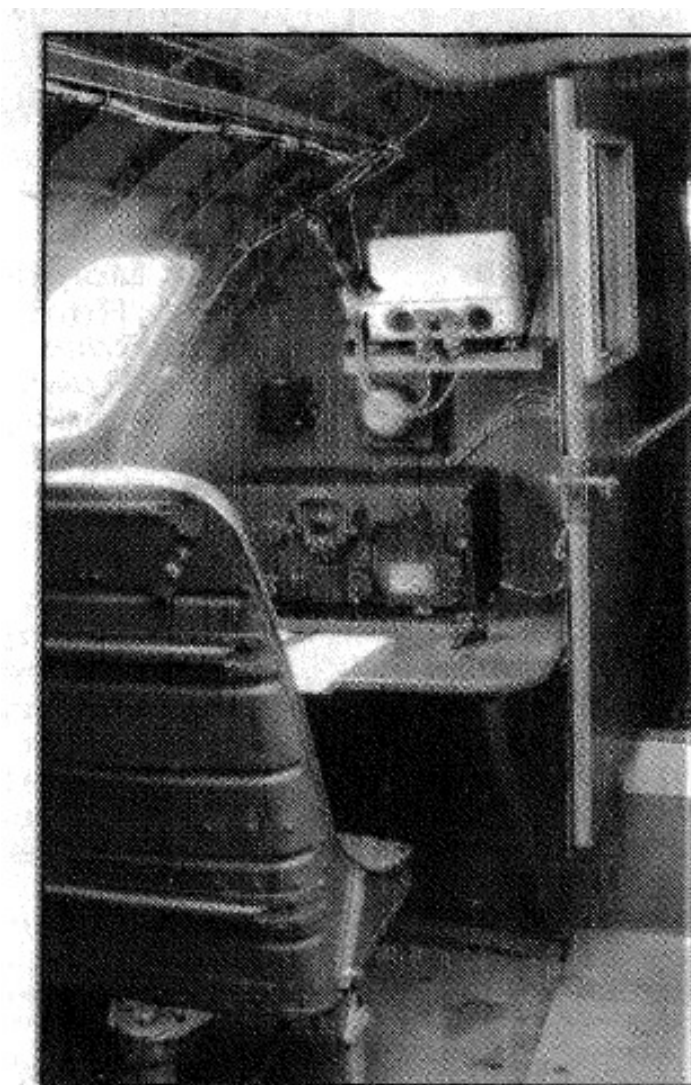


Dulag-Luft. Kriegsgefangenenkartei.		Gefangenen- Erkennungsmarke Nr. _____	Dulag-Luft Eingeliefert am: 18.1.45 W
NAME: KOVACH		Vorname des Vaters: _____	
Vornamen: Edward J.		Familienname der Mutter: _____	
Dienstgrad: T/Sgt. Funktion: R.O.		Verheiratet mit: -	
Matrikel-No.: 13 110 239		Anzahl der Kinder: _____	
Geburtstag: 13.11.23		Heimatanschrift:	
Geburtsort: H.Bradpock, Penna.		Mrs. Anna Kovach 516 1/2 E. South St. Corry, Penna.	
Religion: kath.			
Zivilberuf: Schüler			
Staatsangehörigkeit: amerikan.			
Abschuß am: 10.1.45 bei: Köln		Flugzeugtyp: B 17	
Gefangennahme am: " bei: "			
Nähere Personalbeschreibung			
Figur: mittel		Augen: braun	
Größe: 1,74 m		Nase: gerade, gross	
Schädelform: breit		Bart: -	
Haare: dunkelbraun		Gebiß: gut	
Gewicht: 76 kg			

MOOSEBURG / STALAG VIIA



RADIO ROOM IN B-17 (MY OFFICE)



CHARLES (RED) FINLEY
&
EDWARD J. KOVACH
HAVANA, CUBA
EARLY 1944



ME IN UNIFORM



MY BROTHER CHARLIE AND I



CARMELLA AND I OUT ON A DATE



MY SONS
Edward C. Kovach



James P. Kovach



OUR 25TH WEDDING ANNIVERSARY

