

Keith Conley Tells of His Experience after Bailout over Germany

By Keith Conley 369th Pilot
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Deceased

Our bombs had been dropped and we were heading west toward England with that happy feeling of having another mission under the belt, when we received a particularly vicious fighter attack. An ME-109 appeared from nowhere and flew straight through the formation with all guns firing.

After he completed his pass, our B-17 was a mass of flames and the left wing was practically shot away. So there was no choice but to bail out. I was last to leave and made it just before the plane exploded. I pulled my ripcord almost immediately and hardly felt the opening shock and the bitter cold as I sadly watched the Fortress formation disappear into the west.

Stalag Luft III

Prisoners of Stalag Luft III, Sagan, Poland, which includes a number of 306th men on its roster, will hold its final reunion, reports Bob Weinberg, who serves as president.

The gathering is planned for 8-13 May 2001 in the Adams Mark Hotel in Houston, TX, and it is hoped that a large number of its onetime occupants will be able to attend.

A quick count of records shows we had at least 84 men, almost all officers, in Stalag Luft III, beginning with Al LaChasse, and continuing through much of the war. LaChasse was MIA on the group's first mission, 9 Oct 42. He was a 367th bombardier on John Olson's crew.

My thoughts were mixed: I was happy to have escaped from the burning airplane, but angry and apprehensive at the prospect of capture. I thought about evasion: hide in the woods until dark, travel at night, keep a course south toward Switzerland, eat off the land and eventually escape. I was beginning to actually feel optimistic about my chances, until I heard the sound of an approaching airplane. It was a German fighter, coming much like the head-on attacks I had experienced often in my previous 22 missions.

The stories of airmen shot in their parachutes flashed through my mind. I tried desperately to think of an idea to escape this new danger. Before I could react the fighter was circling me, and much to my surprise lowered his landing gear and flaps to slow down. He waved a friendly salute and then flew away, letting down and out of sight.

As I hit the ground, I was met by an elderly man with a swastika armband, a Luger pistol, and a determined air. After assuring himself that I was not armed, he nervously escorted me about a mile through wooded country to a local tavern that seemed to be a collecting place for captured airmen. The survivors of my crew had all been caught immediately and had been brought there.

The tavern was a civilian place and many local people, excited and inquisitive, peered through the windows, but the military took charge; stripped us of possessions and then forced to stand against the wall at attention while what valuables we had were distributed amid cheering and laughter. We were then taken by truck to a nearby military camp where we received our first taste of German dark bread and potato soup.

The next morning we received a preliminary interrogation in an atmosphere almost the exact replica of Hollywood's Nazi pictures. Up to then I thought the movie versions of Germany were grossly exaggerated. Now I was subjected to a view of heel clicking, pushing, kicking, guttural commands and general military behavior that could have been lifted from a Warner Brothers melodrama. It was all extremely tiring and depressing, and it helped convince me that the fighter pilot's friendly salute of the previous day had been a hallucination.

The interrogation lasted about three hours. After it was over we were loaded into a truck and taken a short distance to a railway station in a small town near Hamburg. Here we were handed over to five guards and told that they would accompany us to Frankfurt, in southwestern Germany. We were warned of the futility of escape and threatened with what would happen if we tried.

The railway station was a typical European shelter for travelers, concrete, high ceilinged and dark. Its gray coldness and our dishevelled appearance perhaps contributed somewhat to the events that followed. We were a nondescript, rough looking group, not having been able to wash or shave or clean up at all since our capture. We had no hats and our clothing ranged from the familiar pale blue heated flying suit to leather jacket and olive dark trousers; our shoes varied from the copilot's high combat boots to the waist gunner's bare feet. He had lost his shoes when his parachute opened. We looked the living proof of the Nazi propaganda description of the American air gangster.

The station was filled with civilians, many wearing conspicuous white bandages. Most of them seem to be carrying all their earthly possessions. There were

also some military men and quite a few uniformed youngsters from the Hitler Youth Organization.

Most of the crowd consisted of ordinary middle aged and older people, many with babes in arms. They were refugees from fire-bombed Hamburg. They had lived through the nightmare of three days and nights of merciless bombing and now they were homeless, frightened, -- vengeful.

Our appearance among these air war victims was a red flag to a bull. With the first cry "Amerikanische Luftgangster" we could actually feel the rising emotion. The crowd had no leaders. None were needed. They all seemed intent on personal revenge for the misery our bombing had caused them. They wanted blood. Our guards were naturally averse to using their guns on their own people, and they themselves were badly frightened. I felt they were ready to desert us at any moment.

The guards' fright was nothing compared to mine. It is impossible to describe the fear of that moment. I had known fear in combat, but that was a fear that could be partially dispelled by the physical action of battle. This was a paralyzing fear, the kind that cannot be dispelled. This was lynch mob that was beyond reason. Any overt action toward us by any person there would have been the final signal for a lynching. There was no way out, and our only prospect was to sell our lives as dearly as possible.

But the action never came. At that moment, a most magnificent figure appeared between us and the crowd, a captain of the Luftwaffe—tall, beribboned and superbly uniformed.

He acted swiftly and with such authority that no one seemed to doubt his right to issue orders or dared to disobey them. He quickly formed the guards into a protective circle around us, with bayonets bared. He ordered the military men from the crowd, including the usually rabid Hitler Youth, and formed them into a further protective element. Within this circle he moved us quickly through a door into the street and then into a small building. The whole action took place so quickly that no one had time to stop it. I doubt that the civilian refugees really knew what was happening, or where we had gone.

The captain dismissed the extra uniformed men and issued our guards further orders. He then turned to me and in a pleasant, relaxed manner, with American-accented English asked what he could do to help us further.

I was still unnerved from the events in the station and hardly prepared for this friendly gesture. I was so wary of the motives of any German that it took a moment or two before I could do more than grunt an unresponsive answer. But in the light of the Luftwaffe pilot's action the previous day and our close call this day, I soon warmed to this German. We talked of air combat and flying. We even discussed the Milwaukee area and the ten years he said he had lived there. I never learned the man's name in the rush and intensity of events.

I told him of the incident of the fighter pilot while I was in my parachute on the previous day. He seemed quite affected. As he started to leave, I thanked him once more for our rescue.

At the door he paused and said, "I feel as though I owed it to you. You are fliers and so am I."

"But there is another reason," he said, just before he disappeared from our lives forever.

"I am the pilot who shot you down."