True Account: Frank Bertram, 445th Bomb Group

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Frank Bertram (center)

The Kassel mission of Sept. 27, 1944, actually was percentage-wise the worst loss of any mission throughout the war. Of the 35 planes that went in to the target, I believe only five – to be completely accurate, you have to talk to George Collar or Bill Dewey – got back. Twenty-five of the bombers went down immediately around the target, or were crippled badly enough that they went down within a radius of maybe 15 miles of the point of combat.

You mentioned something the other day about post traumatic syndrome that apparently a lot of the veterans from Vietnam have had, which was not even heard of in Korea or in World War II. However, it must have been there to a certain extent. It is my opinion that nobody who went to war, particularly if they went overseas and more particularly if they got into combat, you came back, you were not the same person. For guys who were prisoners of war it was even worse, because you actually felt that you were looked down upon. It's very demeaning to be a prisoner in war. You're stomped on to a certain extent. Some people more than others. If you get the full stories of POWs; you talked to Mr. Levine [Bernie Levine, whose interview is on the World War II Oral History web site], I don't know how much you talked to him about it but I like his deal, that he's never gonna be cold or hungry again. Boy, those were bitter winters. Every once in a while something snaps you into it. You try to forget about it and then something snaps and bingo, you start thinking. Things like that happen to me where I actually relive every moment I was in that plane that day, after coming under attack.

In all the missions I was on we had never been attacked by fighters. The primary reason for that is our particular group, the 445th Bomb Group, was known exceptionally for their close formation. And when you have a close formation, usually enemy fighters are not going to attack you because you throw up such a concentrated cone of fire it was not feasible for them to try and penetrate it, whereas the groups that were spread around were sitting ducks. That's why it was such a shock when so many of our planes went down that day. But we were scattered. We were just getting back into position, into our close formation, when we were hit.

The day of that mission, my crew was not supposed to fly. We were a radar crew, so we alternated with another crew. They had their plane, we had ours. We had flown the day before and we actually led the mission; our squadron was deputy lead squadron and in the lead squadron both planes with radar were knocked out by flak, so we took over. That was going into the town of Hamm. We had no problem going in; we got out of there, came back and we landed safe. So it was a surprise when they asked us to fly the next day. We were looking forward to a little rest and recreation, to going into Norwich and raising a little hell. But fate intervened and here we are.

When the group flew in toward the target – the tactics of the Air Force were I won't say to zigzag but you'd go from one place to another to avoid areas of known flak guns. Because if the Germans could see you, they could hit you. They were that good. Even at 22,000 feet, they could come damn close, if they could see you clearly, with the great optics they had.

We did our usual deal till we came to what they called the initial point. The initial point in a bomb run is where control of the bomber is turned over to the bombardier. And from the initial point to the point of impact, which could be anywhere from 10 to 30 miles, the pilot has no control whatsoever. You're on a straight heading, no matter what comes through the formation, what kind of flak you get, you've just got to rough it out, straight ahead. As all the planes in back of you do.

This day we had to make a little left turn to hit the initial point. As we made the left turn, we went further left than we were supposed to. I immediately called the pilot, Reg Miner, and said, "Hey! We're going the wrong way! We're going too far left. Call the lead plane and find out what's going on."

And he came back and said, "They said, 'Hold it in. Hold it in.'" We kept turning farther left, and I thought, "We're going to miss

the target completely."
The target was not visible from the air, but with the radar scope we had the target picked up, and with the little that we did see from the air to the ground, and the paperwork I was doing, we knew where we were exactly.
We were not the only one that caught the mistake. I think almost every plane in the formation that had a halfway good navigator called immediately and saw what was going on. You could actually look out the pilot's window and see the flak off to the right, which we were supposed to be going through. Why we kept going to the left we'll never know. We never did find out.
We released the bombs near the town of Goettingen. As it happened it was in an open field; probably killed a couple of cows. Then we followed our regular method to come out of the bomb run and head for home. That was a left turn off the target; a right turn, which took us on a southeast heading; another right turn, which took us on a southwest heading; then another turn to the right, which took us on a northwest heading.
While we were just getting back together after the fourth turn, someone in our plane called out, "There's a dogfight!" And all the time I'm thinking, "Oh boy, are we gonna catch it from headquarters when we get home," because we dropped the bombs uselessly.
Then our radio operator, Joe Gilfoil – who was mortally wounded that day – said, "There's a fire in the bomb bay!"
Right after he said that, all hell broke loose. I'm looking out my little window – I sat in back of the pilot and had a window about one foot square – and here's this flak, maybe three feet around when it explodes, a sort of a grayish black. And I'm thinking, "What the hell is this? We're at 22,000 feet, and these guys are shooting through the clouds and hitting us like this?" I couldn't believe the accuracy. And then someone called out, "Here comes our fighter escort!" I looked out my little window, and there's a hell of a lot of commotion, and I saw these radial engine planes. I thought, "Those are our P-47s." All of a sudden they peeled off and there was the Swastika. And about that instant, they start flying through the ships. There were shells, explosions and guns chattering, you puckered up immediately and the lead hit the stomach, words just cannot describe your feeling. It's absolute sheer terror for a while, panic for a while, and then anger.
At that point, all I saw was four planes. Apparently they were ten abreast, but I just saw the right side of our plane, and these planes shooting at us. And all of a sudden a big explosion hit the ship and the top turret gunner, who was right opposite me, came crashing to the ground. The turret got a direct hit from one of these planes, and it blew the Plexiglas out and smashed it right in this guy's face and he fell down right at my feet. His name was Mac Thornton. I looked down and I knew he was dead. His face was just frozen; the blood was solid. At that point in September it was very cold, I think it was 20 or 30 below zero at that altitude, so everything freezes instantly. And I panicked at that point. I could see explosions going through the ship into the bomb bay. The interphone was out. We knew we were going to have to bail out. So I went to the bomb bay door and I almost fell over poor Thornton; got my foot caught in his arm and almost panicked to get out of his way. Then I couldn't open the bomb bay; it was stuck. There were holes, and there was gasoline pouring in the bomb bay. To this day I swear the fact that the Germans blew that turret off saved us from exploding, because I think that sucked all the gasoline fumes from the bomb bay right out through the top. Otherwise I'm sure we'd have blown up, as many of our ships did that day.
I was wearing a chest pack chute. I crawled up to the nose wheel to check that and see how the guys up there were doing. The nose turret gunner was firing at the planes as they went by, because the attacks were from the rear. As they'd go by, the gunners up front would shoot at them.
I tried to open the nose wheel door and it was frozen shut. I thought, "Now we're doomed. We're trapped." So I thought, "I'll see if can kick it open."
All this time I'm nervous, I'm scared. I expect the ship to explode at any moment.
I kicked and kicked, and I got the nose wheel doors open. I damn near fell out because I kicked so hard. I pull myself back up and one leg is dangling. Now I'm sitting on the edge of the nose wheel looking down at nothing but clouds and once in a while they would clear a little bit but the clouds were pretty dense. I'm looking down, dangling in space, and the plane is starting to yaw – that is, going from side to side, and up and down a little bit. As I learned later the engine was on fire, and there were all kinds of things I didn't see because I'm inside the plane. I back up to get back in the plane, and I look behind me – all the guys are lined up with their parachutes ready and they're pointing to me to go out.
I went out feet first. I didn't free fall, like you're supposed to do – I probably counted to 10 or 15 and pulled the chute. The chest pack has a little pilot parachute which comes out first and grabs the air, and then that pulls the main chute out. There's always the possibility that wouldn't work and you'd have to claw your way through getting the main chute open, so the more time you've got the better it is. As it happened, mine took off and popped, and boy, it was a jolt. I thought my legs would fly off. We were lucky – we had brand new parachutes, brand new harnesses, brand new electric flying suits that day – it was the first time we wore them. A beautiful gabardine flying suit. And I went out with just my electric boots. I didn't have my shoes with me. Other fellows jumped out with shoes, they were luckier. I had grabbed my good luck charm, which was a little baseball mitt that my wife had given me, and I put that in my pocket. I had my prayer book, which I kept in my shirt pocket all the time. And we had an escape kit which I grabbed, and shoved that in one of my pockets before I went out. And I had a gun, too. We had .45s and we weren't supposed to take them, but some guys took them. I had taken the clip out, but I had the gun with me for some reason, which I got rid of on the ground.
After my chute popped open I looked around. Our plane was gone. I didn't see anybody else. I couldn't spot any other chutes in the area, but they all went out right after me; as a matter of fact, those in the waist undoubtedly went out first.
The pilot came through okay. He took the plane as far as he could, then bailed out. The co-pilot, we didn't know what happened to him but we presume he got killed. And it turned out that he was not found until the middle of November, which was almost two months later. Up on a hill in a big beech forest they found his body, what was left of him. So we never knew truly what happened.
The bombardier went out and broke his leg when he landed. Our radar operator, Branch Henard, went out and landed okay. I thought Mac Thornton was dead. As it turns out he was right in back of me going out, which I couldn't see; you had goggles on, you had an oxygen mask. I couldn't tell who was in back of me.
Our plane had three navigators because it was leading the squadron. One them was a fellow named Jackson, he was the pilot's navigator. He went out okay. He landed okay and walked around for a couple of days before he got captured. Our engineer got out okay, and he didn't get injured. He was actually free for ten days, and he was probably the most nervous man on the ship. He was a very nervous individual; his name is Bob Ault, from Texas.
The radio operator, Joe Gilfoil, lost his leg – a shell just about ripped it off when it hit the ship. The two waist gunners threw him out, hoping that the blood would coagulate, but I understand that his leg just about snapped off, and when they found him on

the ground he was dead.
Of the men in the waist, Alvis Kitchens – Cotton was his nickname – had a good section of his rear end taken off with some flak; not flak but the 35-millimeter. He got hit in the butt, and so did Larry Bowers, although not as bad as Kitchens.
The tail gunner, J.G. Weddle, broke his ankle when he bailed out.
We really received no training for parachuting that I can recall. I tried to manipulate the chute when I was coming down; on the way down I saw a fighter plane in the distance coming closer. It turns out it was an FW-190 and he went by me – I couldn't judge the distance, but maybe a couple of hundred yards – and he waved to me. I could see his hand waving. I presume it was a wave. Maybe he was out of ammunition. But he didn't circle me; he just kept right on going east.
I was going east too, because the wind was very strong, west to east. I probably drifted four or five miles farther than if I'd held my pull string another five or six minutes, as some of the guys did.
As I came down I could see there was a lot of beautiful green and I saw some little villages, and I could see these woods. I thought, "I'm going to hit those trees just sure as hell." And I did. I tried to manipulate into a little meadow nearby, but I couldn't budge that chute. And I hit the trees. I would say they were 60 to 80 feet high. I tumbled straight down, right through the trees. And right now I can hear those branches snapping as I hit them. I hit the ground with such force that it knocked me out. I broke my wristwatch. And when I came to I couldn't move my legs or my back. Now I'm panicked again; here I am and there's branches all around me, the chute's around me, my feet are killing me, and then all of a sudden the feeling is starting to come back. I start moving and pretty soon I could feel everything and I thought, "I'll see if I can roll over and get up," which I did, and oh, my feet are sore. My knees are sore. My back hurts. But particularly the ankles and feet.
Fortunately, all the branches and stuff on the ground had probably saved me from bad damage.
I gathered up the chute as best I could; it was a struggle. I could hardly move my feet. I threw branches over the chute and I took off for the west. I hadn't gone 150 yards when I heard the damnedest noise. It sounded like a V-1 rocket, putt-putt-putt-putt, or a motorcycle. I could hear German voices real loud. I was walking down a forest road, and I ducked off the road and all of a sudden this old truck came by and it was blowing smoke; I think they had a coal burner running it. I dove behind something where they couldn't see me. There were a bunch of German soldiers and civilians in the truck. After they passed, I resumed marching, and I was just dragging. One time I heard a very guttural sound, like a sergeant directing troops, and I picked my way over through some trees and down in a little valley I saw an airplane. I couldn't tell if it was a Messerschmitt or a Focke-Wulf, and then further away there was a guy with horses plowing the ground, and he was yelling at the horses. I ignored that and went my merry way through the woods.
I came to a point where there was a big, broad autobahn. It was getting dark so it was probably around 4 or 4:30 in the evening. I had walked about three and a half hours at that point. Our combat was about 11 o'clock.
Now I'm really hurting. I don't know what I'm doing. I'm scared. I'm tired. In Germany they have these towers where hunters go up and they sit up there and they shoot the deer. I slept under one of those towers that night. I put a lot of branches over me and damn near froze to death.
I got up the next morning and started hiking. I found some pieces of our airplanes that I recognized. I found a motor embedded in the ground, the propeller all bent up. I wondered what happened to all the guys who were in that plane. And I'm going from forest to forest – some were birch, some were beech and some were aspen; they're beautiful forests over there – and I'm thirsty. All of a sudden I come across a pool of water and it's dirty, but I had this escape kit that had this little deal with the pills you mix with the water to make it drinkable. So I'm down there on my knees, and all of a sudden I hear a noise. At this point that I still have my gun, and I think, "Oh, Jesus Christ, I'm caught with this," so I threw it away. It wouldn't have done any good anyway, since I had no bullets. I'm frozen. And I hear this noise getting closer and closer, and I'd just gotten the water in this little tube where you put the pills in – all of a sudden out of the woods comes the biggest stag I've ever seen. He had a big rack on him. He took one look at me and he split and I split. We both got out of each other's way!
I kept on walking. Some of the trees were so big and close together I had to go sideways to get through them. They weren't big in circumference, but they were close together. I'm going along, and as it turns out, I'm headed toward the Werra River.
As I go there, first I hear an airplane, then I hear an explosion. The whole ground shook, and I thought, "My God, what happened?" I figured that a B-17 got its bombs hung up after a mission and came by and just dropped them on the other side of the river. I thought, "My God, this is the most terrifying thing," although it was a mile away from me. I could have been over there. How can these people even survive a thing like this?
I'm near the river so I'm staying in the woods, still being able to look out and see the river. I continue to follow this river to see where it goes. I'm going through the woods and here's a field; a farmer had just plowed and it's full of potatoes, so I go out when nobody's looking and I grab a whole bunch of potatoes. I must have had between 15 and 20 potatoes in my pants pockets. Then I'm going along a little further, and I see what looks like men with pickaxes hitting something and my first thought is, "My God, they've got one of our men up there and they're beating him to death." It was actually our lead ship that went down right in that area, that blew up; this is the plane that led us to this debacle. I walked right by them. I presume that motor I found was off their ship. And I guess they were just chopping up the pieces that were left there. I went by the area and I went a little further and then I came to a beautiful valley. I'm looking down this valley and the river's over to my right, but a little creek comes off the river and goes to the left and there's a railroad track up there, and up the hill there's more woods. So I thought I'll lay low and go up through those woods, because I knew there was a town nearby.
While I'm looking out at this valley, I hear another airplane and I hear explosions, and I look up in the air and see all these pieces flying down. I thought, "My God, a bomber blew up!" And as these pieces floated down, I noticed they're a funny shape. It turned out they were propaganda letters sent in German. And counterfeit money. Great Britain and the United States decided if they couldn't ruin Germany with bombs they'd ruin their economy with phony money. So I laid low for a while before I went across this little meadow, and then I decided, well, I'd better do it. I went across. And I couldn't move very fast. Then out of the corner of my eye – I'm about two-thirds of the way across – I see a movement. All of a sudden here's a bunch of kids. There was a little bridge across the creek I was headed for and I knew I couldn't make that because I'd be out in the open, so I turned and went straight to the creek. And I got down behind a tree. Because of the injury to my leg, I had to have one leg straightened out, and it was hanging in the water.
I'm laying there the best I can behind this tree, and all of a sudden I look up and I see this one little kid. As it turns out it's Walter Hassenpflug. He looks down at me, and he doesn't know that I see him because I've got my eyes half-closed. He jumps up and ru
ns back and he comes back with another kid, who turns out to be Willie Schmidt, who worked with Walter years later. Then

they both split and they came back and there was a bunch of them; there were a couple of real cute girls. As a matter of fact, years later I met one of them; her name was Rose Marie Neuman. The girls were 15 and 16 at the time and most of the boys were younger. And there was a tall, thin fellow who came over and looked at me and said, "Sir, are you hurt?"
I didn't answer. I thought, "This is it. I'm dead."
He kept repeating, "Sir, are you hurt? May I help you?" In broken English. And I finally said "Yes. I'm hurt."
He said, "Let me help you up." He came down, stuck out his hand and I grabbed it and he helped me up.
Now all this time, all these kids are running around there, and they're oohing and aahing because they've probably never seen a guy with a four-day beard and hair standing straight up, beat up like I was. I hadn't shaved in a couple of days at that time. And all this time, I learned years later that up on the hill a little further on, I looked at and saw an SS man who was in charge of all these Hitler Youths, who were out picking up the pamphlets and the phony money. Apparently this SS man could have caused a lot of trouble, but he just let them go on and do what they did and kept his nose out of it. Fortunately for me.
This young gentleman that had helped me said, "I'll have to take you to the authorities."
I said, "I understand that."
We walked across this little bridge and onto the railroad track, and maybe after 15 minutes walking, two fellows came toward us, and they had uniforms on that looked like major domos. I thought, "Holy mackerel! Is that Heinrich Himmler or Hitler himself coming to see me?" So I asked this guy, "What is this, Gestapo?" And he laughed.
He said, "No, no. Police." And these two, as they got there I could see they were older gentlemen, not quite my age today, but they were in their late sixties or early seventies. And very nice. They didn't speak any English. But they took me to a two-story house, and the lady of the house had a little baby and she fled, because the propaganda had it that Americans beat little children, or something to that effect. I met that guy 40 years later, the little baby. He's not little any more, believe me. Bigger than I was. But they took me in and they interrogated me, and right across the street there was a house, and I heard them say a Dr. Blom is over there.
Pretty soon this fellow comes over, well-dressed, wearing a vest. He had been eating; he had a napkin tucked under his chin, and he was still chewing a sandwich he had finished. He introduced himself. He spoke English perfectly, and he explained the situation, that he'd have to question me.
I gave him my name, rank and serial number, and that was it. Then we talked for a while. It was very pleasant. Up to that point, it was more of a party, really, with these kids and everything. But they left, and these two policemen then said, "We have to take you into town." And I don't remember how I even got into the town of Bad Hersfeld. This was two or three miles down the road, near Friedlos. So they took me into this little town. I remember going into this jail, and there was a woman there, probably in her late twenties.
They shoved me in a solitary cell with just a board with some straw on it. My back was killing me. They stripped me and took all my stuff away, emptied all my pockets, my shoes, everything. Down to my underwear. Then they let me put my things back on and dress up. I had a prayer book. And as we had intended that night to go out, I still had my navigator wings on, and my first lieutenant bars. I had my nice green shirt on. I was hot to trot once we got back. So if they had any brains at all they knew I was a navigator.
After 10 or 15 minutes in this cell I hear, "Pssst. Hey, Yank."
Up above my bed is a little window, and I hear a voice coming through: "Hey, Yank. Come up to the window."
I thought, "They're not gonna get anything out of me; they're just trying to give me this phony stuff."
Earlier, two civilians came and interviewed me, and they were downright nasty. Those are the guys that made me strip – of course the girl was out of the room – and they kept telling me that I was a sergeant, not a lieutenant. I would say, "Nein. Nein, Oberleutnant, Oberleutnant." They were very solemn-faced, not at all like the two police officers, who were very nice. These guys were strictly business. I called one Mr. Moto. He looked like Peter Lorre. And the other one I called Sidney Greenstreet. One was big and fat and the other was short and thin. Finally they left after getting all the information they could from me, which was nothing. That's when I heard these voices, and it was these two Englishmen. One said, "Hey, Yank, wait till those two civilians go. We'll cook you up some hot cocoa and cookies."
I thought, "What the hell is this?"
By God, about a half-hour later the door flies open and here's one of these police officers and these two other guys. It turns out they were two British officers who had escaped from their prison camp. One of them had been captured at Dunkirk. That means he was in his fourth year as a POW already, and the other one, as I recall, was captured in Norway, which is about the same time. And they were jolly fellows even though they were a little as we say around the bend.
They said that they had been free for three or four days and got captured and were just waiting for their guards to come get them and bring them back to their camp. Everything was done on the up and up in those days. The Germans had a certain system and that was it.
Sure enough, they hold out cocoa and start to make hot cocoa, and we ate some cookies that they had. They had all kinds of food which they had saved up for their escape, which was confiscated but given back to them, and they in turn gave it to me. They said, "Our guards will be here tomorrow, they'll take this stuff away anyhow, so you take it." In the meantime, everybody laughed because when they had examined me, I had all those potatoes in my pockets, and they took my potatoes away from me.
The two British guys gave me their names and addresses, but when they wrote them down they said, "Don't let anybody see it. If anyone comes in, they'll confiscate it." And I ended up chewing on it and swallowing the paper when that young lady came into my cell. I woke up in the middle of the night, and the door flew open and she threw something on my chest, and here was my little baseball mitt. This young girl must have known it was a good luck charm and wanted to see that I got it back, probably with the approval of the police officers. But they had it turned inside out. All the stuffing was hanging loose and I had to shove it back together. I still have it, hanging on the wall.
A few hours later, in the wee hours of the morning, the door opened and a sergeant from the Luftwaffe came in. Tall, thin guy. He talked to the British officers because they could speak German. And they explained to me that I would be taken to another place, and from there I'd go to a camp.
I remember walking down this cobblestone street with this sergeant, across an old stone bridge over the Werra River. There was a full moon and I can still see it reflecting off the water. On the other side, we hopped into a car or a truck and drove off, and he took me to a Luftwaffe camp. Guys were Heil Hitlering all over the place; everybody's saluting everybody. He took me down to a barracks and I came into like a dungeon, and as I walked in and went down this hallway, lo and behold, coming

toward me and being led by a guard was the navigator who was in Jim Schaen's ship, Corman Bean. We just looked at each other, never said a word. Didn't even blink an eye, like we had never seen each other before. And here we had breakfasted that morning together. He got shoved in a cell and I got shoved in a cell. I have no recollection of how long it was before they came and they got me out, but pretty soon they took me outside and Corman Bean's there along with ten or fifteen others from the group.

We all were taken from there to a railroad station, and when we were standing at the railroad station we heard these guys talking-marching, in German, eins, zvei, drei, vier, and here comes a whole bunch, maybe 35 guys, American, assorted sizes and shapes and guys beat up. I recognized some right away. George Collar was right in front. His face was swollen. His nose was broken. He had black eyes. They had beaten him up.

Now we sat down and we were taken from this railroad station and put in railroad cars. I remember one fellow, [Jerry Cathol] – he had been a football player; we thought he had a broken back, but I guess he just had some broken bones, and he was in such misery. We're in this railroad car and it was moving, and boy, were these guys surprised – they were all pretty hungry – when I opened up my pockets and pulled out this food. It didn't last very long, but the little bit that there was was most welcome. There was some cheese, butter, powdered cocoa, crackers, probably Spam too; I never could remember the names of those British boys.

The train took us to an interrogation center for all airmen in Oberrussel. It was called Dulag Luft. You would go in one at a time to these inquisitors and they would ask you, "What group are you with?" I just gave them my name, rank and serial number, and then they said to me – and probably to every other one – "Until you give us some more information you're just going to stay here in solitary." And you just shrug your shoulders and think, "They're not going to keep us in solitary too long; there's too many of us because a lot of planes went down." Twenty-five planes over the target. Also, at the same time the Kassel mission was taking place, the battle for the bridge at Arnhem was going on. A complete Polish parachute regiment had been captured by the Germans and they were in Dulag Luft with us, but they were on the other side of the fence, and the Germans were meaner than hell with them. They didn't bother us too much, but they were using bayonets on these guys' fannies if they didn't double time. I'd hate to have been a German when those Poles got loose because they were the toughest looking guys I've ever seen.

After about a day there, we were sent to Stalag Luft 1. We were shoved into a train that had compartments, six seats on each side and a luggage rack, so they put ten of us in each compartment and they gave us a Red Cross parcel each, which contained a week's rations.

It took six days to go 350 miles to our camp. We went through air raids. We'd pull off at sidings. They were strafing and bombing ahead and had the heck scared out of us in Frankfurt. When we went through Frankfurt an air raid was coming on and they abandoned us and let us sit there at the siding.

We had a German guard on each end on the railroad car. I don't know how many cars we had but we did have a commanding officer. He was Lieutenant Colonel McArdle, a British paratrooper, who was in charge of the operation at Arnhem. He had finally surrendered, because they were running out of ammunition and out of men. So consequently, there were a lot of paratroopers, and these were all officers – we were all officers headed for Stalag Luft 1 – so there's quite a few British officers from the paratroop regiments. And then us, plus others who had been shot down. One of the fellows in my compartment was from the 15th Air Force; he was shot down in Italy on a B-25. His name was Richardson. He had been burned; the top half of one ear was burned and his hair was burned off, but he was jolly. He had a big bandage wrapped around his head. He had a few cuts and scabs from when he bailed out. Talk about walking wounded, we looked like a fife and drum corps. Everybody in different clothes, some with shoes, some without shoes.

On the train, three guys would sleep sitting, two guys on the floor, and then the next night we would switch off. It was very uncomfortable. You didn't get much sleep. It's very demeaning. You're a prisoner of war. You've got two guys with guns at each end of the car glaring at you. You can't describe it unless you're there. And you never think about this when you're home until suddenly, Bingo! You think of what happened. And the hard part is worrying about what happened to the other fellows. We didn't know what happened to Virgil Chima, the co-pilot, or Omick, or the enlisted men at that point other than Joe Gilfoil. We knew he was hit; they announced that when they threw him out of the plane, hoping his parachute would open and he would be treated on the ground. And we were misinformed by someone that he was okay. One of the enlisted men came up to us right after we were captured and said they managed to get a doctor which they didn't. George Collar ended up picking up his body.

On our way from Oberrussel up to Stalag Luft 1, we were scared to death because of the bombings and things that were taking place, and then some guy came along and said, "Hey, we're safe, you don't have to worry, they're not gonna strafe us. It's all marked on top of each car, POW."

And some wise guy said, "Yeah, but suppose they come in from the other side?" And everybody just howled.

One night, we pulled over from the main railroad to a little siding, and it's probably 10 or 11 at night. Jackson and myself couldn't sleep. We were up shooting the breeze and all of a sudden we heard THUD! You could just feel the stuff hit the ground. I think we had been dozing, and that woke us up. And we wanted to know what was going on. We went and looked out the window, and we could see in the distance searchlights, explosions, you could feel them. The RAF was raiding this town. And the town was Berlin. We were on our way to Barth, which was 100 miles north of Berlin, and we're probably right now 25 or 50 miles south of Berlin. And we're sitting there watching them bomb Berlin. And we see explosions, we know an RAF plane's been hit, and these big blockbusters kept hitting, and all of a sudden the German guard comes up to Jackson and me and says something, and Jackson says, "He said something about an apple for some cigarettes."

I said, "An apple? Wow! Let's do it!"

We had cigarettes; they gave us five packs of cigarettes on that Red Cross parcel. We gave this German guard three or four American cigarettes, and the guard gave us each an apple. Holy mackerel! Next thing we know he comes back again and Jackson says, "He said he can get us some beer."

About 100 yards from the train were a couple of very dim lights, and I presume it was a gasthaus, because the German guard pointed to it. We gave him the cigarettes, and he came back with a German canteen full of beer. A German canteen was about twice the size of an American canteen. It must have been a liter. And we're sitting there chewing apples, drinking German beer, and watching them bomb Berlin.

I had to remind Jackson about that the last time I saw him. He completely forgot about it.

A day and a half later we ended up in our camp. When we got to Barth they dropped us off at the station and we started

marching. It was in the evening. We had these guards with these monstrous German shepherds and Doberman pinschers. They were big and they were mean. Three or four hundred of us marched about three and a half miles, and some of us were in bad shape.
I had received a little medical attention at Oberrussel; I got to see a German doctor there in this hospital. There were a lot of German men there who were going into the service, and I felt sorry for those guys because they were in their fifties and they were being taken in the service. Some of them were in worse shape than I am now. When I got into this room, this German doctor took one look at my back, and he said, "Not much we can do," and then he just bandaged my feet. He said, "Your back is pretty bad. Do you want to see what it looks like?"
I said, "What do you mean?"
He said, "Take a look." And he had two mirrors there. That's the closest I came to fainting up to that point. My back was just the color of tar, all the way across the lower back, where I had been injured. The doctor had his aides give me a heat treatment which made me feel a lot better. I thanked him very much. At that same time, I remember them saying an American nurse was in the hospital there. She wasn't actually injured but she was taken there with some of the injured; she was flying in a plane that was shot down outside of Aachen. It was a hospital plane carrying troops out, and she was captured as a POW. About three years ago there was an article in the paper about this nurse up in Sacramento who had just passed away, and it was her. The only Army nurse that was ever captured over there. And I thought, "My God, here I am 40 miles away!" I never saw her over there but just the thought of all that was going on, what very brave young ladies they were.
Now I get to Stalag Luft 1. We were there for eight or nine months and it was hell. You're feeling just rotten, and when you're injured you feel worse. And your mental condition isn't the greatest. The winter was miserable. The food was poor. We lost a lot of weight. I lost 30 or 35 pounds. All of us were pretty skinny. And one thing about it: When you're hungry you don't think about anything else. It's always food, food, food. You dream day and night of food. And escape was not advisable. They said, "You know, it's not a game anymore, you're going to get shot if you get caught." And at one point, Hitler issued orders to take the American Jewish boys and separate them, and there actually was an order out to shoot them. Common sense at least prevailed and they realized that if anything like that took place there would be an interaction in the United States and we were holding a lot more of their prisoners than they were of ours. That's the general thought, anyway.
We had this one Jewish guy, his name was Gerber, and he was very swarthy, almost Arabic looking. He said, "They're not gonna get me, because I just changed my religion."
And we said, "What did you change to?"
He said, "I'm gonna say Hindu."
Everybody just howled. But they got him; they put him in the other barracks.
Our commanding officer in Barth was a Colonel Von Mueller. He had come from the States, from Long Beach, Long Island. He was what was called a Long Beach Nazi.
Colonel Von Mueller interviewed me when I first went into the camp. When I walked in there he said, "Ahh, Frank Bertram. You're married. Your wife's name is Mary. And you went to Commerce High School in San Francisco, graduated in 1938."
He's telling me this and I'm sitting there thinking, "What is this?" They knew all about me, as they did most everybody else. And he said, "You have no children."
I said, "We didn't have time."
He said, "Aahh, that's the trouble. In America, not enough children. In Russia, too many children. But in Germany just right."
Then he said, "You know, I could have you shot as a spy."
I said, "What?"
He said, "You write down your name as Bertram. But the dogtags you gave me said Burtram."
I said, "What?"
He said, "Take a look."
And sure enough, they had misspelled my name on my dogtags and I never knew it.
Then he said, "Of course, we wouldn't do that. We know who you are."
I knew nothing about the Second Air Division Association until about 20 years after the war, when a friend of mine who lived right around the corner from me in Stockton told me he belonged to it. I thought, "That sounds interesting." So I joined this organization and they're sending letters and newsletters; you'd come across names you knew, or people looking for information about someone you knew. But every once in a while I'd think, "Gee, what happened to me? I'd like to go back there and find the area where I was shot down." My wife, Mary, and I took several trips to Germany, but I could never find the location - and me, a good navigator, I didn't know where the hell I was. I knew the approximate area but I couldn't pin it down. We came within maybe 10 or 15 miles of the town; we probably passed through the edge of Bad Hersfeld, and we were in the town of Schlitz, where the original Schlitz Brewery was.
As I went through life, I kept in contact with a few of the fellows who were on my plane, but never anything personal. Until one time, in February of 1986, I come home from work and my wife doesn't say hello, she doesn't give me a kiss, and she says, "What was the number of your plane?"
I looked at her - now this is 40 years later - and I said, "What plane? I drove home."
She said, "No, the plane you flew in the war."
I said, "You want to know the number? All I remember is it was a B-24. I don't know what the number was."
She said, "Wait till you see this package."
Well, this packet was from Walter Hassenpflug. It had letters from the 8th Air Force Historical Society and from the 19th Armored Division, which was in the town of Bad Hersfeld. And it said that Walter was researching what happened on this particular day over the town of Bad Hersfeld.
Walter's letter stated that as a boy of 12, he witnessed an airplane explosion in the air, and then he witnessed some parachutes coming down, and he said two days later they were walking through the forest and they came across this man lying by a creek. And I thought, "My God, that's me!"
His letter stated, "All I remember is that he was a first lieutenant from San Francisco."
Well, when you give your name, rank and serial number, how they ever found out about San Francisco, all I can think of is I had a little prayer book in my pocket that my mother gave me, and it had my address, 118 Delores Street, S.F., California.

I immediately wrote to Walter. Then we got to writing back and forth, and I told him I'd be there in April or May, but due to an injury - I fell through a trap door and pulled some ligaments or tendons in my leg, and had to put a cast on, so that postponed it till August. We met Walter, and much to my surprise he did not speak a word of English, other than "Hello." But he had a fellow named Carl Lepper who interpreted for him.
The Kassel mission has been sort of a mystery. When we came out of prison camp we got interviewed by Colonel Stewart, Jimmy Stewart. Colonel - I guess he was a general by that time, Brigadier General Terrill, who was the commanding officer when I was there, and Colonel Jones. And whatever you told them, they just let it go in one ear, wrote it down, and out the other, and they just passed on through the line. There were something like 22 of us in the line. The doctor would say, "How do you feel?" And you'd say "Fine." He'd say "Okay, pass." And that was it. They were just as anxious to get home as we were. Something on this mission was screwy. If you talk to 20 guys you're going to get 20 different stories. The group in back of us, the 453rd, was supposed to follow us. They very wisely went to the target after their commanding officer called our commanding officer to tell him he was going the wrong way. And our man told their man to follow us, that we were on the right course, and I understand really cussed him out when he wouldn't do it. The 453rd did the right thing by going to the target. You couldn't see the target on the ground but you could see the group ahead of you going in, and you could see all the flak and the explosions.
I have maintained all through the years, mouthed off about it a few times - other people have said no, but I have people other than me that agree with me - that there was a deliberate turnoff to avoid going through that heavy flak. This is my personal opinion and that of several others that I know of. Too many things just don't add up on that mission. The one lead plane, of course, blew up, and the pilot was killed. The command pilot, Major McKoy, was killed. The lead navigator on that plane did get out before the explosion. He ended up in Stalag Luft 1 months after we did; whether he was injured or held prisoner somewhere I don't know. But I went up to talk to him about it and he insisted that they went in to the target. And I just don't understand it, because it was so obvious. But he insisted we hit the target. So I just gave up. The navigator was killed in an automobile crash shortly after he arrived home. So the one guy that really knew is dead.
The Luftwaffe were not aiming for us as a target. They were headed for the main body, the other three hundred and some planes that were going into Kassel, and they were a little late, as far as hitting them before the bombs dropped. These particular FW-190s were not made to do battle with the American fighters. They were heavily armored, and the pilots were heavily protected but did not have the maneuverability or speed of the regular FW-190. They were there for one purpose and that was to shoot down bombers. And they were ordered that when they came under attack by American fighters to get the hell out of there, no combat, just go. Which discouraged Ernst Schroeder, who I befriended and I still consider a good friend, if he's still alive. He said when he shot his second plane down, "In all honesty, Frank, I'll get the credit, but the damage had already been done" on the wave of planes that went in ahead of him and set these planes on fire. He said, "I put the finishing touches on them."
And he said, "I followed these planes down, and watched to see where they crashed, for confirmation." He said he was flying over some railroad tracks when he heard thump-thump-thump and he looked behind and there's a P-51 Mustang right on his tail. He said, "I turned around and came around at him, but I had no ammunition left and I just got the hell out of there."
Some of these German boys that were in those planes that day that were killed were on their first or second mission. Others were oldtimers. And I personally met them: Schroeder, Ossi Rahm, Werner Vorburg, who actually flew in World War I. Werner Vorburg is gone. Ossie Rahm is gone. And the last I heard of Ernst two years ago he was quite ill.
At its best, flying combat was nerve-racking. Even in training it was nerve-racking. We'd sweat out every takeoff and every landing and in between we'd pray. Without the fighter escort, we didn't have a chance. When I think of those poor boys on that Ploesti mission, because 160-some planes went in there and they lost 60 or 62. One of the boys in my room in the first place I stayed at Stalag Luft 1 was on the Ploesti mission. He was a bombardier in Killer Kane's crew. Which group was that? I think the 93rd. He crash-landed in Turkey and they escaped from Turkey, and then he got shot down a second time and captured.
Now that must have been scary, flying 50 feet above the ground going into a monumental flak area. Ploesti probably was one of the most heavily defended targets in all of Europe, because of the value of the oil fields there and the refineries. If you got hit there, you're dead, there's nothing you could do. At least when we're up there at 25,000 feet you could jump out or get blown out, but I've seen pictures of these guys at Ploesti, they didn't have the chance of a snowball in hell once they got hit.
You know, that generation - of course I was involved - really did save the world, because Hitler, that German army was something else. They came so close, so very close. If we hadn't gone in there with all this bombing, we'd all be speaking German. They actually had rockets that could hit the United States, but they never used them because of lack of petrol. They almost took the British to their knees with those V-2s, after what those poor people in Britain went through in the blitz and then the V-1, which was going on when I was there. They were terrifying enough but these V-2s, there was no answer to them. You didn't know you were dead until 30 seconds after you died.
We wouldn't have that memorial if Walter Hassenpflug hadn't found me. I tried to tell him in English - and he didn't understand me - that he owes me a lot of money because since he found me, it's cost me all this money going back and forth to Germany. And Walter being real German doesn't have a great sense of humor; it takes him a little while to catch on. The second year we went there, I had brought my pilot, Reg Miner, and his wife, and with Walter we were going to go around to all the sites where these planes crashed and Walter couldn't show us because he had his hand all wrapped up in a cast.
I said, "What happened?"
He said he was out hunting and shot himself in the hand and severed some nerves.
I said, "You know, Walter" - he had an interpreter - "that's why you guys lost the war. You couldn't shoot straight." And for about 30 seconds he just looked at me and then he burst out laughing.
I talked myself into attending a Luftwaffe reunion with Ernst Schroeder. I got invited to this reunion of the Wild Boar Squadron, which was one of the ones that attacked us that day. I was the only one there that wasn't a fighter pilot. My wife and I went there. We had a great time. The only thing bad there was every one of them smoked up a storm up and almost choked us to death. But they were nice people. The wives were so nice and so pleasant, and very few of them could speak English, so the communication problem was there, too. There was no chance of getting too friendly because of the lack of communication.
When they started their meeting, they had as a gavel at the podium the joystick of an FW-190. They had it all fancied up there with the trigger guard like they used in combat. Of course I didn't know what they were talking about, and Ernst would tell me once in a while what they said. He was in charge. And I asked, "Could I see that FW-190 joystick?"
"Sure." He gave it to me, and all these guys were looking at me. And I turned it over, and I said, "Oh, made in Japan!"

You could have heard a pin drop. It took another thirty seconds before they realized it was a joke. "Nein! Nein! Deutschland! Deutschland!" We had a big laugh on that.
I've always been a joker. It's kept me alive, even through prison camp. I won't tell you what they called me in camp but it was like megaphone mouth or something. But you had to do that or you'd go crazy.
Throughout the years I've kept in close contact with my pilot, Reg Miner. He's probably one of the best pilots the Air Force ever had. Man, he could handle that bomber like it was a kite. And he was over there for one reason: that was to win the damn war and get home.
I don't want you to think that I'm pissed off at these dead guys who were in that lead ship. I had a fellow who thought we should court-martial those people. I said, "Hey, they died that day. How are you gonna court-martial them?"
"Well, posthumously."
I said, "Aw, come on. That will do no good." It's just the idea; you'd like to find out if someone really knew why this happened. It's too late to do anything about it; once it's done it's done. We could have gone in to the target and gotten killed there just as easily, although there wouldn't have been that heavy a loss.
On a previous mission to the Kassel mission - six missions before - we had flown one that was scarier than the Kassel mission, but with not quite the same results. We were shot up very badly over the city of Saarbrucken in Germany; that's just on the border with France. Our plane took a thumping that you wouldn't believe from flak; we must have taken five or six damn near direct hits. You could see the red interior of the shell. Our radio operator, J.G. Weddle, had a piece of his foot blown off.
We lost one engine over the target, and another one was windmilling. We couldn't feather it, and we dropped like a wounded bird. The group had us going down in France. They had us down in the English Channel. They had us down in England. They gave up on us. We were badly wounded and we were all by ourself, and we fired off some flares, and within thirty seconds we had an escort of P-51s. They would circle us and talk to us, and no German plane would go near us. We went all the way across the Channel. We ended up throwing stuff out of the plane into the Channel; we even threw our parachutes out to lighten the plane because we were down too low to jump. We threw everything out except the bombardier, he was next. And for one reason or another, we didn't make it, and we crashed. The pilot again did an inspirational job; how he did it I'll never know. But we crashed and it was quite an experience; we bounced around, very traumatic. The next day I was so stiff and sore I could hardly move.
On that particular mission, George Collar had been taken off our plane, and we had this guy Omick as our bombardier. And in the nose turret we had a first lieutenant, Richard Aylers, and he'd only flown on two missions. Now let me explain what happens; sometimes men get sick and they can't fly a mission, or the train was late coming from London or they slept in with some babe overnight and forgot to get up or some excuse, and most of them were tolerated, but they may miss a mission or two; whereas the rest of their comrades finished or got shot down or something, and there they sit. That's what happened to this guy. He had two missions to go, and actually he outranked all of us. He was a first lieutenant. We were still second lieutenants, although our promotion was in but we didn't know it.
He was in the nose turret. And the pilot said to me, "Give me a heading for the closest airport, quick!" I looked out right in front of us and there was a runway, and I said, "Straight ahead!"
He said, "Clear the nose and get out of there!"
I opened the nose turret door and tapped that guy on the shoulder and tried to pull him out. He got mad at me; he didn't hear the conversation. He was gonna take a swing at me because I jolted him. I got him out and got him in back, and I didn't quite make the bomb bay when we hit the ground. I was still in the bomb bay and got thrown out of the bomb bay into the waist. I kept bouncing around like a rubber ball; all the other guys were braced for a crash-landing. And Miner brought us to a safe, healthy conclusion.
Years later, the third navigator we picked up - the pilot's navigator, Jackson - claimed that he was on that mission with us. And I sure couldn't place him, because he was a pilot's navigator, and that's what this Lieutenant Aylers was. But Jackson insisted he was on the mission. He sure knew enough about it, because it was quite a thrill that day. So I found out where you could write to get some records. I wrote to the U.S. Air Force archives and asked if it was possible that on Lieutenant Miner's crew, flying a certain date which was Aug. 15th, I think, that you could get the crew members. Lo and behold, about three weeks later here it comes with the date, all the crew members - and this is the funny part: They did not have Jackson in there. So I knew I wasn't losing my mind. Aylers was flying that day, and Jackson wasn't there at all. But they did not have our tail gunner listed, and now they had me wondering if our tail gunner flew that day or maybe Jackson flew in the tail.
I thought, God, these guys are sharp after all these years, that they would have these records, so I wrote them back and asked for the disposition on the Kassel Mission of Sept. 27, 1944, and I never heard a word. Not a word. And someone else, I believe it was Lieutenant Ira Weinstein, had once before tried to find out, and I did too, and they stated that the files have been missing since 1950. Someone took them out. They don't know who, but there's not a thing regarding that mission back in their archives. So there's another reason that this thing should be down in some history book somewhere. Plus it was really a bad day, the worst day our group ever had. Every day was a bad day for some groups, but not like this one. It's funny how the mind works. I know in my case a lot of these things I don't even think about but once I get into it, it just keeps coming back and you're living it over and over.
I'm paying for it now. The knees in particular gave me a bad time for years, and the back, the last three years, it's just been getting worse every day, and all they can find is fused vertebrae at the base. But for many other guys it happened a lot worse. It was a good 40 years before I learned what happened to our co-pilot, Virgil Chima, and he was my best friend at the time. His body was not found until November 15th. Walter Hassenpflug dug this up, and what he found was that some women were looking for beech nuts up in the forest and ran across him, so he must have been laying there for six weeks, and yet, the mystery is, his parachute was missing. The shroud lines were cut. He was laying in the fetal position. But his body had decomposed so much by the time they got to him, I don't imagine that they ever figured out just what happened to him. But obviously, someone got the parachute, which was silk and was very valuable over there at the time. All you can do is surmise. I know what it was like coming through those trees. He could have made a worse landing than me and maybe broke his back and couldn't move and just died there. It's very doubtful that someone had beaten him because it was so far up in the hills where nobody would go for any reason, and no one had gone up there prior to these ladies going hunting for beech nuts for food. So I'm inclined to think he badly injured himself, although why would he be in the fetal position? Of course he could have just drawn into that, knowing he was dying, trying to keep warm. Poor little guy. Nineteen years old. And the most meticulous guy on the crew; man, he checked everything to make sure his parachute and harness and instruments were perfect. He had two

brothers. One of them was a major in the 91st, which was the one with the Triangle A, the group that was in "12 O'Clock High." And then he had another brother who was a bombardier with the Third Group over there. There were four boys and three of them were in the Air Force and Virgil was the only one who didn't make it. And his mother never did get over it. He was the baby of the family. The same thing happened with our radio operator, Joe Gilfoil, who lost his leg and bled to death. He was the only child of an Irish family right outside of Boston. I guess his mother and father were at that time in their late forties or early fifties when he got shot down. Joe was 19. Joe and I had gone to communion that morning, as we did before each mission.
He was a good Catholic boy. I was a Catholic boy. And we had one other man in our crew, Alvis Kitchens - Cotton was his nickname - a very quiet kid, never said boo. Did his job. He'd go with the guys but he never smoked, he never drank, he was very religious. Very soft-spoken, just a good Christian lad, and do you know, 54 years later, he's still the same. All these other guys, including me, would go out and just raise all kinds of ruckus, drink and chase women, do all kinds of crazy things. Not him. Never.
When I went over and met Walter Hassenpflug in 1986, he introduced me to Ernst Schroeder. The guy shot down two of our planes that day, and I don't know how many he shot down during the war. He was the father of seven boys. He didn't speak a word of English, but he's very well-known in German circles as an expert on military fighters at that time. He was an expert on the FW-190 and the Messerschmitts. He had nothing but the greatest admiration for the Mustang. He said if it wasn't for the Mustang we'd still be fighting over there. He said that airplane changed the war; after they developed the drop tanks and they could protect the bombers going in. That changed the complete air battle situation. Actually the German production of aircraft was greater in September 1944 than at any point up to that time. The big problem was the lack of manpower and the shortage of petrol. But as far as planes, they had them. And they were good. The Germans were very, very brave people. And what I noticed, they just could not believe how friendly I was, and others were towards them. They acted like we should hate them because of what happened 40 years ago, which I didn't even think about. I mean, you were just people; they just did their job and we did our job.
Walter Hassenpflug is one in a million; the hard work he's put in and what he's done. Not just this particular mission but primarily this one and other air battles that took place near his hometown, because he was orphaned by some bombs that dropped on his parents' home, and raised by his aunts.
The first time we were over there, I thought, Jeez, Walter has been investigating this for maybe five or six years now, which would take you back to about 1980, and I thought, why, after all these years, is he all of a sudden looking into this particular mission? This is a personal opinion - and I saw it over there when the newspaper came out on the anniversary of this particular air raid - this had nothing to do with our mission, but I think it's the one that took place in November 1944 in which his folks were killed, I think that is what set him off on this quest. And when you think of what it took to go back 35 or 40 years and to go to where all these planes had crashed, get all the information on those that survived, those that didn't. Walter did all this on every plane that went down. He could tell you exactly where it landed, who got out, who didn't get out, and generally what happened to them. Carl Lepper, his interpreter, told me he'd go back dozens of times, the least bit of a lead he had of anything, he would go there and photograph and talk to people, look it up, and go through records, and he did this for eight or ten years. I can't think of anything else. I probably got a few things mixed up. You'll have to dig deep on this one. I don't know how long you were over there when you met Walter, but didn't you find that a nice little area? I thought it was great. I really enjoyed Bad Hersfeld, the little park they had there, and that old church, that old ruin there. I just found that area fascinating. The only thing bad about Germany was the driving. Probably if I was younger I wouldn't mind a bit, but boy, now it's scary.