

It was a cold, dank, early morning of February 27th, 1945, in East Anglia when I met the crew I was to fly a B-24 mission with as an experienced pilot flying co-pilot. It was to be their first mission and my twenty- eighth. This was one of the ways new crews in the Second Division of the Eighth Air Force were introduced to combat with the enemy.

The main target that day was Leipzig, all the way across Germany. The mission was probably to support the Russians. Forming was without incident and the trip across Deutschland was uneventful until our group was diverted to a secondary target at Halle. Immediately after bombs away, we were hit on the starboard side.

One engine was out and the second was in big trouble. We were losing altitude rapidly. By the time we were able to stabilize conditions we were isolated ten thousand feet below our formation. We leveled off and entered cloud cover on a nominal heading that would hopefully take us back to England.

Looking down through the rudder pedal slots, I saw gore. Repeated attempts to contact our Bombardier-Navigator failed. Fearing the worst, I went below to check. My worst fears were realized. He had been killed instantly with his left shoulder and head completely severed. I vomited violently.

The nose gunner, a very young buck sergeant, was unhurt but on the verge of shock. Together we crept back to the flight deck to deliver the bad news. We were leveled off at fifteen thousand feet, barely above stalling, and having trouble maintaining aircraft stability. The aircraft commander, with one-half mission under his belt, reacted magnificently. He turned the controls over to me and assembled his seven other crewmembers around the flight deck. Tail gunner, two waist gunners, nose gunner, top turret gunner and radio operator were unharmed. He immediately instituted emergency procedures to light the aircraft. We had a long way back. All moveable was jettisoned, including our Lieutenant.

The crewmembers recovered their composure extremely well and I fancied I could see the light at the end of the tunnel. I also knew we were an extremely poor risk for making it back unscathed. If we ran out of clouds we would run out of luck.

During our slow but steady westward progress we discussed in great detail the procedures to be followed in the event we encounter loss of cloud cover, attack by enemy fighters, flak, deterioration of power, eventual fuel shortage, ad infinitum.

If forced to bail out over enemy territory there were things to remember. We had turned in our side- arms a prior to the mission. Bombing of the Fatherland had been extremely severe for weeks. It was thought the side-arms would only provide an excuse for the incensed civilian populace to take their pleasure the captured "Americanischer Luft-gangsters." With existing conditions in mind we were admonished to hold our ripcords until we were able to notice the earth coming up to meet us. This would indicate an altitude of twenty-five hundred to three

thousand feet. This, in turn, would expose us to ground fire for a shorter time while helplessly suspended from our parachutes. In addition, we would have more time to organize our escape if we reached the ground well in advance of the arrival, at the point of landing, of our assured pursuers. I reminded every member of the crew to make best possible use of the escape kits we all had in our flight suits. In case of capture, the order was name, rank and serial number—nothing more. This was not to be construed as despair but was merely the preparedness required in such a situation.

When all efforts were made to prepare the men for any foreseeable situation, time seemed to pass like a slow-motion nightmare. Our airspeed was extremely low and the aircraft attitude was nose high. Thankfully, we still enjoyed full cloud cover, but this didn't help my slight tendency toward claustrophobia. In addition, both the pilot and I had some trouble with vertigo. It required every effort I could muster to sit upright.

We had been on our way back for well over an hour and it began to dawn on me that we might make it. I prayed silently and fervently as my companions most certainly must have. I recalled receiving Viaticum that morning and felt relief and security in that memory.

Looking around at my fellow crewmembers I realized I didn't know enough about them to judge what comforts they might or might not have in a situation such as this. Their behavior during the past two hours gave indication of excellent moral fiber with some source of inner strength, regardless of the source. I had seen in the past, and would see in the future, soldiers with much less aplomb. Occasions like these remain surprisingly clear, even after twenty-eight years.

Things were progressing. Number two engine had been stabilized and was still of some help to three and four. Number three and number four were miracles. The pilot ventured a shy guess that we might at least make it to Allied occupied France. Although that seemed a complete physical impossibility only half an hour ago, I had to agree with strong reservations. The rest of the crew became hopeful and I knew it was time to review procedures once more: check your chutes, don't pull the rip-cord until you notice the earth coming toward you, use your escape kits, conceal your chutes promptly after landing. We may be within walking distance of our lines. Travel at night. Name, rank and serial number—that is all. Then it happened.

We broke out into dazzling sunlight over open country. Disaster. We discussed a slow, gentle turn back into the lovely protection of the clouds, but decided against this course of action. Fuel had become a prime factor and East was no the direction for us.

We limped along for a few minutes when I noticed clouds to the North, ahead and slightly below. We proceeded in a slow, cautious turn and headed for cover.

We reached cover and felt we had made it, unobserved from the ground. I was exhilarated and could literally feel the elation of my companions. Right about then I realized with shame

I had not made a thorough check of the terrain while it was visible for definite location. We still had no idea where we were.

At this point, a check revealed the number three and number four engines were showing the strain. They were running rough. Would that was 19:00 hours rather than 14:00 hours.

Presume one hundred miles to go at one hundred fifty miles an hour. Forty minute to go.

Altitude fourteen thousand feet. Rate of descent one hundred feet a minute...

We came out of the clouds again in clear, breathtaking sunlight. We were directly over a town that we later found out was named Freiburg-am-Main. We were sitting ducks. Luft-waffe flak opened up with a vengeance. We were below fourteen thousand feet and unable to take any real evasive action. We caught several hits and the pilot gave the order to bail out. We did.

What a feeling...I swear I took only three steps from the co-pilot's seat, around the bottom of the top turret, onto the bomb-bay catwalk and out. A blast of air...grab the ripcord handle...don't pull...almost did. I felt as if I was stationary. A great gust of air was rushing past me. I positioned myself as if in a swan dive and actually had the sensation of soaring. I tried a few things we were taught in pre-flight and pilot training. I tucked into a ball and tumbled, spread out and stopped the tumble. I stuck one arm out, holding the other in and it turned me over. Finally, after a very long time that probably lasted less than a minute, I decided I had better stop experimenting and get oriented.

Sure as hell, I was hovering over a large town. It was painfully evident there was no way I could miss it without wings. I began to concentrate on the position of the earth relative to me. Sure enough, there was no perceivable change—I felt like a ball supported by a spout of water. Finally, I noticed the ground approaching. I pulled the ripcord. The jar I was expecting turned out to be all but imperceptible. I looked up at my thirty-two foot backpack chute. The canopy was open and symmetrical. All was good in that regard. Then I checked below—to my horror.

After all my lecturing I did for the benefit of my fledgling companions to ensure they held their ripcords until they were sure they were no more than three thousand feet up, I was as about six thousand feet. Of all the stupid things to do...I would have sworn the ground was approaching.

I looked below, expecting their chutes to open momentarily. Nothing. I began to feel real panic. Suppose my exhortations had caused them to freefall too far. I looked above. To my delight, there, all seven in descending echelon, were my companions who apparently pulled their ripcords as soon as they were clear of the ship. It was a great relief to the veteran of twenty-seven and three quarter's missions.

I floated down for an interminable period until I heard an occasional "zing" go past. I eventually realized those zings were bullets. This was the most helpless feeling thus far. I let myself go limp in the harness. The zings stopped. I was almost down.

I landed in a tree in what I would call a plaza. My dazed brain finally perceived shouts of “Schell!...Raus!...Kommen!” I was suspended about fifteen feet in the air and there was a small army gathered below. Their upturned faces looked unreal. They continued the guttural shouting. Slowly I came to realize that what they were saying was the equivalent of “get down here you bum!” My thinking accelerated when I heard another zing. I didn’t hear the gun discharge, but I did know I heard a passing bullet—close by. Cognition was quicker but not lucid. I unsnapped my left thigh strap and my belly strap, but was unable to release the other thigh strap. It was a push and turn mechanism and I was unable to overcome the force of the dead weight of my two hundred twenty-pounds plus equipment. My dilemma was solved in a hurry. One more bullet was the solution. When I heard it, I tumbled forward and out. I landed on my feet in a crouch and caught the hardest blow I can ever recall, full on the chin, struck by my right knee. The knee was tender long after the chin was fully recovered. I was grabbed and pushed back and forth amongst my captors, much in the way of schoolyard bullies getting even with the teacher’s pet. Eventually I realized I was much larger than my captors and quickly became more difficult to propel. They were young teenagers. They were Jugend. Hitler Youth. They were extremely nasty and vehement. They caused me considerable alarm, to say the least.

When they finally tired of pushing me around, they freed my chute from the tree. They used the shrouds to bind the canopy and the harness into a loose, bulky bundle. They forced me to carry it in a mocking parade around the square in which I had landed. I was beginning to fear some sort of atrocious finale when I was rescued by two Luft-waffe officers.

One of them spoke excellent English and explained he was from the flak battery that had brought us down. He advised me not to be fearful, that for me the war was over—that the Luft-waffe abided by the Geneva Convention. I thanked him. I asked him where we were. He told me...Frieburg, five kilometers from the stationary front at Colmar. The injustice...within three miles of freedom and we bailed out. I actually began to cry. He subdued me succinctly. “Do not feel badly Lieutenant. Your Liberator (the aircraft) exploded before your parachute opened.”

I became a prisoner of war for the next three months. I do not speak, and try not to think about the horrors I endured there. I would like to say my comrades on that last mission are, to this day, my close friends but unfortunately, I cannot. I can only say that all eight of us who survived the initial impact over Halle returned to the United States uninjured.

James P.
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