

The Slovakian Miles

by Neal T. Cobb (778th)

Here is my story as best I can remember after 56 years. Our original crew was the first replacement crew to join the 464th bomb group and the 778th squadron. We did not have a tent and slept under the stars for a few nights. This crew was piloted by Tom Mills. On June 6, 1944 Winberg and I were sick and were replaced by the bombardier and navigator from Lt. Earcel Green's crew. They were shot down over Ploesti. Winberg and I then joined Green's crew. * (Ref. MIA p.17)

On July 7, 1944, our target was Blechhammer and I believe that this was the first of many raids by the Fifteenth on this target. We were hit quite badly by flack over the target. Every one of the crew was hit and we lost the number three engine. John Schianca was wounded seriously and since I was also a qualified gunner, I went to the waist and took over his tail turret.

As soon as we pulled out of formation the fighters jumped us and knocked out numbers one and four engines. We were falling rapidly and were given orders to bailout. We threw Johnnie out of the escape hatch in the waist of the plane. Others went out and I told Parker to go ahead and jump. He refused so I didn't hesitate. I took three steps and went out feet first. If I had counted to ten I would not be writing this story. People who saw this happening said that I bailed out at 500 feet and that my chute opened about 50 feet off the ground. Only six of us got out. Green, Gulledge, Elliot, and Parker went down with the plane. For a while they were buried in a common grave in Slovakia. Since then they were moved to a cemetery in France and Andy Parker is buried at his church in North Carolina.

The civilians took us to a military installation in Trencin, Slovakia. John Schianca was put in a hospital there and his leg was operated on. The rest of us were taken to the capitol of Slovakia, which was Bratislava on the Danube River. We were transferred to a prison camp out in the country after about three weeks.

We were the first prisoners that the Slovaks kept instead of handing us over to the German authorities. The camp ended up having 26 Americans, a New Zealander, and a Scotsman.

On Aug. 29, 1944, there was a Slovak National Uprising and all the guards deserted and we prisoners took off in different directions. George Winberg, Frank

Soltesz [P-51 pilot] , and I traveled together. Frank's parents were from Slovakia so he spoke the language like a native. I don't think that we would have made it, if it had not been for him.

We would walk all day and sleep at night. The Germans were after us and had a reward posted for us. We had several close calls and had shots fired at us several times. We stayed in the foothills and when we saw the patrols heading our way, we would run up into the mountains. The Germans would not go into the mountains unless they had a large force. The partisans pretty much controlled the mountainous areas.

To get food we would find an isolated farm house and Frank would go up to the door while George and I would stay in the woods. Frank would tell them who we were and usually we would get a piece of bread and a glass of milk. Sometimes we had doors closed in our face. The Germans killed any civilians who were caught aiding American flyers.

At night, we would usually sleep on the ground under a bush with leaves as our mattress. We had no blankets so most nights we froze. When it was raining it was miserable, but you kept walking and walking and getting wetter and wetter. Fortunately, we only had rain a few days.

One night we found a haystack to sleep in. We burrowed in and were warm that night. Unfortunately, spiders also were there. They bit my legs above my GI shoes and my hands. The bites became infected so one day we walked into this little village and into the local hostinec [bar]. We wanted to get some whiskey to put on my sores. The bartender tried to talk Frank into us surrendering to the Germans. Frank told him what he could do with that suggestion and we took off into the hills. As we were going up we saw this flatcar with 12 German soldiers coming into this village. Apparently, the bartender had notified them somehow.

We had several experiences during our walk, but I won't go into any of them. We walked north and east and crossed the Polish border. This was in the Tatra mountains and getting quite cold so we turned south and back into Slovakia. Shortly after that we ran into some other Americans and learned about this town where we could get some help. The town was Banska Bystricia and was the headquarters for the Slovak National Uprising. We made it to this town on the 28th

of September. We had been on the run for a month and figured that we had walked between 350 and 400 miles. Our bodies made it feel like at least 400.

We did not know it, but a six man OSS group had landed at this town on Sept. 17th in 2 B-17s. I found out that my tail gunner, John Schianca, had made it to this town just in time and was flown back to Italy on that day.

The OSS was commanded by a Navy Lt. Holt Green. He was there to help the Uprising and to help flyers like myself. We were given new uniforms and some local currency to use. We were there about a week and more and more Americans kept coming into town. There were finally 30 of us there in Banska Bystrcia.

In the meantime, the Germans were putting on a big drive to shut down the uprising. The commanding general told Lt. Green that they could not hold the airport too much longer. Lt. Green contacted Bari, Italy and gave them our situation. They instructed him to have all 30 of us out to this little airport [Tri Duby] the following morning.

The weather was quite cloudy on this October 7, 1944. There was a lot of activity at Tri Duby that day. You could hear the fighting taking place south of the airport where the Germans were driving toward Banska Bystrcia. All of a sudden six B-17s broke out of the clouds escorted by 32 P-51s. What a beautiful sight that was. These planes brought in 12 more OSS personnel and an A.P. correspondent by the name of Joe Morton. We helped unload all the equipment that was brought in by the B-17s. We then got in the plane that we helped unload and we took off for Italy. We were sent back to the 464th for processing to go home.

Most of the OSS guys and Morton were captured on Dec. 26th. They were taken to a concentration camp near Vienna. There they were tortured and executed on January 25, 1945. I will always remember them because without their help I would not be here today.

*From the December 2001 issue of the 464th Bomb Group Newsletter.
Published with the permission of Tony Schneider, Sec./NL Ed. (464th, 776th)*