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The Personal Story of B-24(H) Liberator 'Little Gismo II' | Navigator 1st LT Robert Weinberg

The Air Battle over the Jindřichův Hradec Czechoslovakia region resulted in the crash landing of four B-24(H) Liberators from the 15th AAF 464th Bomb Squadron – this is the story of one of the eight-men that survived a Liberator crash near Cimer, Czechoslovakia.

The Personal Story of B-24(H) Liberator Little Gismo II Navigator 1st LT Robert Weinberg

By Robert L. Weinberg

It started with the same routine as any other mission — up early for breakfast, then briefing, and take off and rendezvous for the mission. This would be a special one, a maximum effort, because of the target, a new synthetic oil refinery for the Axis powers, at Pardubice, Czechoslovakia.

At briefing we were informed there would be little or no flak over the target, but to expect heavy fighter opposition during the entire mission. We would be in the vicinity of Linz and Styer in Austria, which had many Luftwaffe fighter bases. Our P-51 fighters would cover us all the way to the target, with P-38s standing by to take off if the P-51s were engaged.

It was our B-24 group's turn to be last over the target. Flak came up from Styer, so we took evasive action. We dropped our bombs on target at 12:20, and no flak was encountered, so it began to look like a milk run!

At 12:32, two ME-109s attacked our plane on our port side, which had a feathered engine. I looked out to see the P-51s in a tremendous dogfight above us.

The tail gunner called over the intercom that FW-190s were coming in at us. I looked again, and as I did, they cut loose with everything they had. A second wave of planes came in and all hell broke loose.

The first burst of their guns got us. I felt a terrific explosion in the bomb bay and looked down the catwalk to see a roaring inferno. The intercom was dead. Then the alarm bell rang and I got ready to bail out. I opened the door to the nose turret so the gunner could get out, and then made for the nose wheel door to jump. A 20mm burst in the turret, and out I went.

We were at about 19,000 feet, so I delayed opening the chute as long as possible, then pulled the rip cord. Of course, it came out in my hand, and I thought the chute had failed, but suddenly, I felt a terrific jolt and I was floating through the air. I saw seven other chutes and an FW-190 circling all of us. My watch said 12:41. I was heading for a small lake, so I spilled my chute to avoid it. The swaying on my harness scared me, but then I hit the ground hard.

A "reception committee" awaited me — a number of people, three of them armed with shotguns. I tried to get up and walk, but I had sprained my ankle badly in landing. I also had pieces of 20mm in my left leg. I was searched and everything was taken from me — escape kit, cigarettes, lighter and chocolate. They wanted my .45 revolver, but I was not wearing it. The soldiers marched me to a small town and held me there until mid-afternoon.

A truck containing about 30 Hitler Youths with rifles came to pick me up. They had been searching for "luftgangsters." When they let down the tailgate of the wood-burning truck, I saw a dead German pilot on the floor. He was wearing an Iron Cross, and from the waist down he was badly mangled. I was put on the floor next to his body, and we drove off.

After riding for two hours, we stopped at a town. The Hitler Youths jumped out, opened the tailgate and ordered me out of the truck. They stood me up against a wall. The town civilians looked in the truck and then looked at me. The youths pointed their rifles at me and I was

plenty scared. I was saying my prayers and hoping they would not shoot me. The civilians spit on me, threw rocks at me and called me names.

I was pretty well beaten up when the youths put me back in the truck, and we rode to another town an hour away, where the same performance was repeated. I thought maybe the dead pilot was a local boy, and they had stopped in the wrong town earlier. I hurt all over and was a mess from the beatings. I was scared, hungry and tired when they put me back in the truck. About 18:00, we arrived in the town of Neuhause.

I was locked in a small cell and got hold of myself, although I felt that I hadn't shown my fear outwardly. I was lucky to be alive! About midnight, I was put in a truck with five other wounded Americans, and the Germans took us to a hospital two hours away. There I had the 20mm fragments removed from my leg. I was given a cup of ersatz coffee and a slice of black bread and put in another cell. I learned from a prison orderly that Romania had given up and Germany had lost the Ploesti oil fields.

Eventually, I was put on a train, survived two air raids, taken to an interrogation center where I remained for 10 days, and finally ended up at Stalag Luft III.

It was near the end of World War II, and Kerrville resident Bob Weinberg was a prisoner of war in Stalag Luft III, a German prison camp for allied airmen.

Weinberg's POW file was marked with a green triangle, a symbol used to identify Jewish prisoners. One day, guards lined up the more than 3,000 captives held in the center compound and asked those who were Jewish to take one step forward.

All 3,000 prisoners took a step forward.

"They certainly weren't all Jewish," said Weinberg, president of the Stalag Luft III former prisoners of war organization. "I cried like a baby, right there."

Weinberg and his wife, Nina, will get on a plane today and head for Kansas City, where they'll meet up with dozens of other "Kriegies," a nickname for POWs held in German camps.

The gathering — 62nd annual reunion of Stalag Luft III survivors — will be met with hugs, exaggerated stories and a heart-felt good-bye. It will be the last formal reunion.

"Sad, but necessary," said Weinberg, 85. "We're getting older. Our ranks are getting thin. We don't know where our members are. It's pretty hard to get them, and so many have passed away."

The reunion will coincide with the anniversary of the POWs' liberation by Gen. George S. Patton and the 14th Armored Division.

Weinberg enlisted in April 1942 as an aviation cadet, and he was put on reserve until March 1943. He graduated from navigation school a few months later and in March 1944 went overseas.

On Aug. 24, 1944, he was with the 464th Bomb Group, 15th Air Force, on a B-24 headed for

Pardubice, Czechoslovakia, to bomb a synthetic oil successfully dropped the bombs and turned to go home, when enemy fighter planes attacked and shot them down.

Hitler youth captured the first lieutenant and dragged him through several towns, where people spit and threw rocks at him. He ended up at Stalag Luft III in early September 1944 and stayed there until late January 1945, when the POWs were cleared out and marched for 16 days to Spremberg, a German army installation.

Then, they traveled in cramped box cars to the southern German town of Moosburg, where he was held in a prisoner camp built for 10,000 men. It was cold and primitive and there was little food to share among more than 85,000 POWs.

POWs often are called the “forgotten heroes of WWII,” Weinberg noted.

“It’s hard to tell,” Weinberg said. “You went through an experience that no one else has. It’s that, that makes the comraderie. That we shared those hardships and survived.”

Once a month, Weinberg and his wife meet with other area POWs and their spouses. They have lunch, exchange information about veteran benefits and catch up on the lives of other area survivors.

They compare time spent in German or Japanese prison camps and support members during difficult times.

“We’re like a family,” said Isabel Gerhart, 75, spouse of a late POW. “I help with some of their prescriptions, do paperwork. I’m there if they’re sick.”

While the local WWII prison survivors definitely share a friendship, respect and some sense of comraderie, the connection is stronger for the Kriegies who shared the barracks at Stalag Luft III, a camp made famous by an escape of dozens of air officers.

“That’s the biggest thing that happened in my life,” Weinberg said. “I’m not going to let it go.”

When the B-24 Bomber that Kerr-ville veteran Bob Weinberg navigated was hit during World War II, he jumped out of the plane at 19,000 feet. Then he held his breath and monitored his watch until he estimated he had reached 12,000 feet, where there might be oxygen available.

After landing safely, a gang of Hitler youth found him. Weinberg, 85, considers himself lucky that a German officer was with them, otherwise he may have been beaten to death with a pitchfork or sledgehammer.

Still, the group took him to several area towns where he was beaten and spit on by residents.

His war-time experience was captured on videotape Tuesday when U.S. Rep. Lamar Smith, R-Texas, interviewed him for the ongoing Veterans History Project. The videotape will be sent to the Library of Congress and archived with other interviews with veterans.

Without Weinberg's interview, details of his journey across the Atlantic Ocean to the European Theater, the 47 missions he took part in and the eight months he spent as a prisoner of war in Stalag Luft II might be lost after he's gone.

Several other area veterans have been interviewed by local students and their stories have been archived with the project that chronicles several wars involving Americans. Those who haven't shared memorabilia or war stories can contact the Kerrville veterans hospital's voluntary services department at 792-2580.

The "Veterans' Oral History Project Act" launched the project in 2000. At that time, the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs estimated there were 19 million living veterans of wars involving Americans.

The purpose of the project is to document personal and heart-felt narratives from veterans and civilians who experienced wars. Many of the tales have made listeners or viewers laugh, cry and remember, according to the project's Web site, www.loc.gov/vet.

So far, the Library of Congress has archived and posted online information, documents, photos, newspaper clippings and personal letters from thousands of veterans.

After the nearly hour-long interview, Weinberg showed Smith two elaborate scrapbooks that document Weinberg's service in World War II. Smith said he enjoyed hearing all of Weinberg's tales, but especially was impressed with his sacrifices.

"All of the hardships he endured and here we are over an hour later and not a single complaint or regret," Smith said. "I appreciate his willingness to share his story with other Americans. It's just phenomenal."