

A Bomber Pilot's Story

by Terry Plowman

Memories of the day he was shot down during World War II haunted Warren MacDonald — until a surprising visit from a young man from Slovakia.

The B-24 was ablaze. Two crewmembers were already dead. Seven others rushed to bail out of the bomber as it fell in a flat spin toward the town of Malzenice in Czechoslovakia. U.S. Air Force pilot Warren MacDonald tried to hold the plane stable while the crew parachuted away, then he climbed out the trap door above the flight deck. He crawled to the front of the fuselage, and, in the first parachute jump of his life, he leaped off the burning plane.

As he floated down, MacDonald noticed what many in that situation have mentioned: intense silence.

Details of that afternoon of December 6, 1944, are etched in MacDonald's memory — the bombing run over enemy territory, the inferno in the bomb bay, the concussion as his plane smashed into the ground not far from where he landed — and, of course, his subsequent capture by German soldiers.

But little did MacDonald — today a resident of Rehoboth Beach, Del. — realize that memories of that day were also part of the lore of residents of the little town, who told and retold stories about the day burning warplanes fell from the sky.

Those stories so intrigued Roman Kruty, of Malzenice (born in 1966, many years after the events), that he committed himself to finding out what happened to the airmen who drifted down on his town — and that commitment led to a new chapter in MacDonald's memories of that day in 1944.

In his daydreams, 5-year-old Roman Kruty struggled to guide his crippled bomber away from the town below. He would stay with the falling plane until he was sure it would not come down into the populated area, then he would jump clear and land on the soft earth just before the plane crashed. He would become a hero for sparing the village.

Today Kruty, 35, jokes about his childhood fantasy, but he acknowledges that the World War II stories he heard as a child carved an indelible picture into his

memory — a vision so real, that it became a subtle motivation for many of the things he did in his adult life.

The stories remain so clear that Kruty can recount details some 30 years after hearing them: his father, then age 4, saying to Roman's grandfather, "Look at the plane, how nicely it is shining," just before they saw the airmen bailing out; the rescued pilot (MacDonald), giving a piece of rubber oxygen hose to the boy, saying, "Someday you will be a pilot"; the captured American, tall and handsome, striding down the streets of the town in front of his captors' rifles.

Some of the details may have been embellishments, but they magnified the legendary status of the day the planes came crashing down near Malzenice. The pictures in Kruty's mind were like "the best movie I have ever seen. But this was a real movie from real life," he says. "I wanted to talk to the actors and even meet them — the men from my childhood fantasy."

December 6, 1944 — 22,000 feet above Nazi-occupied Czechoslovakia: Warren MacDonald, a 23-year-old pilot on his 15th bombing run, had turned from his target to make the return flight to southern Italy when he heard a frantic cry over the intercom: "Sixteen 109s coming in waves of four!" Within seconds 20-mm bullets from the German Messerschmitt-109 fighters tore through the plane's fuselage, killing the gunners in the ball turret and the tail turret and severely wounding the radio operator.

With one engine on fire, the bomb bay ablaze and the tail elevators shot up, all MacDonald and his co-pilot could do was wrestle the wheel forward to keep the plane somewhat stable until the crew could bail out. Three crewmembers quickly exited through the nose turret while the only uninjured man in the back struggled to get a parachute on the wounded radioman. After they successfully bailed out, MacDonald told the engineer and co-pilot to abandon the plane through the flight deck top hatch.

Without a co-pilot to help hold the wheel, MacDonald suddenly found himself pinned to his seat. The action of the wheel coming back caused the plane to do a complete wingover — not the kind of maneuver common for a craft with a 110-foot wingspan. When the plane came out of the flip, it went into a flat spin. The co-pilot and engineer got out. MacDonald remained trapped in the seat.

"I put my fate in God's hands," MacDonald says. He somehow found the strength to pry himself out of the seat and rushed to free himself from the cords and hoses that connected him to the plane, then he climbed out through the top hatch. "I had my fingers crossed that the plane wouldn't blow up before I could get off it." He guesses that the plane was no more than 2,500 feet from the ground when he jumped off the nose turret.

In the town below, Jozef Kruty (Roman's grandfather) was celebrating his 38th birthday with his wife, Paulina, and son, Felix, age 4. About midday they noticed the roar of airplanes overhead — so loud it shook the windows of their house. They went outside to look. Jozef, Felix and other villagers saw tiny figures bail out of two bombers that had been hit by fighters. Residents of Malzenice and nearby towns watched as the burning planes plummeted to the ground.

A few villagers ventured out to the wooded area where MacDonald had landed. One of them was postman Jan Jakabovic, who was on his routine journey from the post office in a neighboring town. He beckoned for MacDonald to follow him, and they trudged across a muddy field covered with a couple of inches of melting snow before arriving at Jakabovic's house in Malzenice. MacDonald dragged his parachute the whole way.

They communicated by gestures. MacDonald admired a large clock on the wall. Jakabovic offered a drink of borovicka, an herb-flavored liqueur. His wife, Paulina, gave him some barley soup and helped him clean the blood from his face and hands.

Soon other townspeople — Jozef and Felix among them — arrived to take a look at the tall uniformed stranger. MacDonald doesn't remember this, but Felix said MacDonald gave him a piece of rubber hose. MacDonald's comment to the 4-year-old that someday he would become a pilot is probably the result of storyteller's license — in fact, no one in the room understood English.

Because MacDonald had not seen any German soldiers, he hoped that he'd find a way to safety through the "underground" network of Allied sympathizers. But within an hour, German soldiers who occupied the town entered the house, rifles leveled at MacDonald. One of them said the phrase prisoners of war commonly heard: "The war is over for you."

The soldiers took MacDonald to their local headquarters, where there were two other airmen — one severely wounded, bleeding from the head and limbs. As MacDonald and the other uninjured man were taken away to be sent to a prison camp in Germany, he thought they were leaving the wounded man to die.

It wasn't until 50 years after the war, when he received a telephone call out of the blue, that he found out the wounded man had lived — one of the many remarkable facts MacDonald learned because of Kruty's search for him.

"The events of that day were the most stressful and trying of my life," MacDonald says. "From the physical dangers of the bullets and the flames, my responsibilities as the plane's leader, with counteractions to try and decisions to be made quickly, the reality that the plane must be abandoned — while knowing that two friends, fine young men, both 19, were dead and must be left behind — the struggle to free myself, the trepidation that comes with parachuting for the first time and under difficult circumstances, the uncertainties to be faced on the ground, in enemy territory — all of this, from the aerial attack to my capture, took place in the span of about two hours. And in that time the only island of calm and comfort, among friendly, caring faces, was my hour's visit in the Jakabovics' home — the last good meal and the last calm and comfort I would know for the next six months."

"But through all these years, there have been so many unanswered questions about these obviously very nice people. Who were they? Why did they risk taking me in? How did they fare later on, especially the dear little child on the floor? I didn't know their names. I didn't even know the name of their village. After I returned home a picture came to me of the graves in which the good townspeople had placed my two crewmembers, heaped with flowers. I forget the circumstances of my receiving this, but no address was attached, so I couldn't express my gratitude. (I just had) more unanswered questions."

Roman Kruty began his search in earnest in 1992, when he was 26. But by then he had realized how the stories he'd heard about December 6, 1944, had subtly influenced his adult interests.

When he was assigned to the air force during his mandatory military service in 1986, he had his first opportunity to see parachuting up close, and to fly as a passenger. He enthusiastically studied the history of World War II air battles over Czechoslovakia, and after he completed his military service he continued his aerial

adventures through skydiving and glider flying. Later, he learned to fly powered planes in a Z-226 military trainer.

These experiences rekindled his fascination with the stories he'd heard as a child, prompting him to visit the older residents of his hometown to hear them again. Kruty dug into his village's historical archives, and he studied English to improve his ability to find out more about the airmen in his boyhood dreams.

In 1994, Kruty placed a notice in a POW newsletter, which resulted in a letter from James Cavallo, the seriously wounded airman who had been left for dead in Malzenice. Cavallo's contact with Kruty piqued his interest in the events of that day, so he looked up MacDonald's phone number and called him. MacDonald was stunned, of course, for as far as he knew, Cavallo had been dead for 50 years.

This phone call did not connect MacDonald and Kruty, however — Cavallo never mentioned the young man's search, and, in a sad twist, he died before giving MacDonald's address to Kruty.

Finally, three years later, Kruty tracked down MacDonald by writing to the 464th Bomb Group Association — and began to shed some light on the mysteries that had long lingered in MacDonald's mind.

Through letters and phone conversations, Kruty and MacDonald explored the details of December 6, 1944. They discussed the idea of a visit to Slovakia, where MacDonald would stay at the very house that had provided his "hour of calm and comfort." But a heart attack and a pacemaker operation precluded the trip, so the two made plans for Kruty to visit Rehoboth Beach.

In December 1998, almost 54 years to the day since he'd been shot down over Malzenice, MacDonald opened his door to Roman Kruty — and to some long-lost details about his past.

They spread out their papers and photos, and tried to sort out the facts. Was this MacDonald's bomber in an aerial photo of the mission? Where did the other crewmembers come down? What became of the wreckage?

Through Kruty's letters, MacDonald had learned that the Jakabovics had made good use of his parachute, after arguing with local police who tried to confiscate it. Paulina made several items of clothing, most notably a shirt that her son wore on

his wedding day. As a belated thank-you for the valuable Nylon, Kruty brought a gift from the family: a hand-embroidered linen tablecloth. He also brought a few charred bits of the wreckage he had dug up, including a spent 50-caliber cartridge and a small piece of Plexiglas from one of the plane's windows.

Kruty also visited several other veterans while he was in the United States. He says the experience was "unforgettable." Yet he still ponders the tale of December 6, 1944.

"It's a story about young men thrown into war, one of many similar stories," he says. "I admired their bravery and their skills, but I think that many times it was a lottery to survive, not a matter of skill. I think war is a tragedy — young people who would have had common dreams had they met one another under different circumstances, had to kill one another in order to not be killed themselves."

The reality of that tragedy continues to haunt MacDonald, who feels in some way responsible for the deaths of his two crewmen. What if he had made other decisions? What if he had aborted the flight because of mechanical difficulties the plane was having? "I haven't lived a day since then that I haven't thought about those boys that were killed," he says.

Despite his remorse, MacDonald says the information he has learned from Kruty has brought some closure to the events. "For this sense of closure — this tying up of nagging loose ends — I am deeply indebted and grateful to Roman," MacDonald says. "I have come by closure concerning other events of my life, but December 6, 1944, was more than just another incident in my life. In retrospect, that day marked the end of my youth. From there on I was into adulthood, like it or not."

Epilogue: Warren MacDonald was liberated from a prisoner-of-war camp in Barth, Germany, on April 30, 1945. After the war, he went to work for the American Legion's National Headquarters in Washington, D.C., where he worked for 24 years. He then worked for the Administrator of Veterans Affairs for seven years before retiring to Rehoboth Beach in 1977. Although his jobs as director of research and director of foreign relations for the American Legion took him all around the world, he never revisited the war zone, and he never again piloted a plane.

Roman Kruty continues his historical research, as well as his flying. He has about 150 hours flying time, is qualified to fly seven types of aircraft, and holds a glider-towing license and an aerobatics license. Throughout his career in aviation, Kruty has made 204 parachute jumps — which MacDonald told him were 203 too many.

[Web Editor's Note: The 464th's MIA booklet, page 13, lists the following — Target: Nova, Czechoslovakia Squadron: 779th A/C # 42-52504 Nick Name: "Green Hornet" Loss to: Enemy Aircraft. McDonalds crew: Co-Pilot Anderson, Elmer H.; Navigator Timmerman, Kenneth W.; Bombardier Lacoss, Billy H.; Engineer/Gunner Vieira, Manuel J.; Radio Operator Griffith, Harold R.; Gunner Koster, Joe W.; Gunner Kubik, Walter T.; Gunner Garrow, Matthew J.; Gunner Miller, James C.]

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