

Bittersweet Recollections

by Art Rawlings (778th) — as told to Elise Rawlings

I was drafted on February 26, 1943. This was World War II and had been going on since December 7, 1941. I was granted a deferment from Central High School in Nashville approximately May 1st, having received my diploma early.

I reported to Fort Oglethorpe, Georgia for induction into the Army Air Corps. From there I reported to Miami Beach, Florida for basic training, which took approximately 6-8 weeks, before I reported to radio school at Sioux Falls, South Dakota and on to gunnery school at Laredo, Texas.

From there I was sent to Randolph Field for primary training in aircraft and on to advanced training at Kelly Army Air Field. I spent about 6-8 weeks in each location. Then, from there, I was sent to Davis-Monthan field in Tuscon, Arizona. My purpose there was to familiarize myself with the B-24 and to fly with a full bomb load.

The gunners all operated their gun positions on the aircraft and would shoot at a towed target. Each gunner was assigned a color and that color was inked to match the ammunition and when it came time for that particular airplane for each gunner to fire on the towed target their scores would be calculated for each gunner to the number of color painted bullets that passed through the target. Also, we dropped bombs on the bomb range, each bomb was loaded with white powder to indicate where the hit was.

From Davis Monthan Field I was assigned to Lincoln Nebraska Army Air Field where upon the crews were formed. Each airplane had ten crew members, including the pilot, all trained in different locations. After all of our training and assignments the Army Air Corps gave each member a 30-day delay enroute to go home and see their families, some for the last time.

After the 30 days had elapsed we had orders to report to Topeka, Kansas. That is where I was assigned to a new B-24 airplane, which we flew from Topeka to Hanover, Mass. and from there to Gander, Newfoundland and on to Lagens Field at the Azores. We landed in Marrakech, North Africa. We flew only two missions while in Marrakech.

The landing field at Pantanella, Italy was being built by the U.S. Army engineers and as the steel matting was laid on the ground the squadrons of the 464th Bomb Group 776th, 777th, 778th, and 779th planes began to land and take their respective positions according to squadrons. There was no housing for any of the men and so tents were thrown up that held ten men each. That was to be our quarters for the duration of our stay.

I was a small-town farm boy from Joelton, Tennessee who had never been away from home, had graduated early from high school and couldn't even drive a car...now, after two months training I found myself in a full-fledged war and flying a B-24 called the Liberator.

At Pantanella we were allowed to shower once per week, outdoors, with hoses connected to two water truck tanks, one hot and one cold with a pump on each one. The mess hall was a huge tent. Everything prepared there was dehydrated and mixed with water.

There was no privacy and our toilet consisted of a long narrow trench. But, everyone was issued their own roll of toilet paper. A steel pot with hot water, G.I. soap and a washboard handled our laundry. Most of the time I slept with my clothes and shoes on because the temperatures were unbearably cold.

We built a stove out of iron pipes welded together, heated with 100-octane aviation gas. It afforded a little heat and occasionally we would cook dried beans in our helmet over our homemade stove. Some of the tents went up in flames but we were one of the lucky ones. Indeed, somebody up above was looking over us. The purpose of our stoves was to afford a little heat and warm up a bite to eat.

A typical flying day we were awakened at 5 :00 A.M. by the CQ (Charge of Quarters), we would don our flying suits including our flying boots, go to the mess hall, eat and drink something.

Afterwards we would go to briefing, which was held in a closed area with no lights showing from outside, secured by military police who were armed with live ammunition and allowing no one to enter except the flying crews.

Briefing was simply the target area and the CIA (Central Intelligence) would update the crews on the location of the flak guns in and around the target zone. Intelligence would also give us information as to the immediate target area and

alternate target area if that happened to be smoked over. The Germans set out smoke pots to obscure the targets.

The average flight was between six and eight hours, some more and some less and all at high altitudes 24,500 feet to 26,500 feet, and we would be on oxygen at all times. Getting back to the field at night we were lucky if you could get out of the airplane without help. Some had to have help due to sitting in the same position for so long. After a fashion, I did everything like a robot — without thinking, weary from flying all day long without rest or bladder relief. It became a natural feeling that each time I would fly out that I wouldn't return because so many of us did not return.

Each crew was taken to the briefing room for a debriefing, giving each person in the crew a chance to tell what they saw; flak guns, moving aircraft, objects on the ground, German troop trains, enemy convoys, etc. reporting damaged aircraft of ours and general information that was of vital interest to every phase of this war, including our wellbeing.

After debriefing we would try and scurry up some food and hit the PGA (150 proof Pure Grain Alcohol) mixed with grapefruit juice.

Early in my war career we were flying over Vienna, Austria, the target being the marshalling yard (railroad yard), when we had a direct hit by flak in the #3 engine (destroyed). Over the target our plane lost total control and we bailed out at 26,000 feet.

I picked up a three-minute oxygen bottle, took a last long breath of air and bailed out; held my breath, fell free fall to about 13,000 feet without pulling the parachute cord. When my chute opened, I landed directly in the target zone. I bundled my chute up and climbed into a storm sewer where I stayed until the bombing was over. All of my crew was captured with the exception of my waist gunner, Raymond Taylor, who we believe was killed or went down with the airplane since his family nor anyone else ever heard from him since that fatal day.

Not wanting to be conspicuous in my green flying suit I waited until it was dark and found a railroad worker whose size appeared to be the same as mine. I left him in a prone position, roped and tied sans his outer clothing that I took and donned over my flying suit. I was in enemy territory and evading for my life, all my energy and focus had to be on survival.

Mission information was given each airman for that particular flight, as to ground movement of troops, German fighter planes, the flak, and they would tell us if the Germans had any new aircraft.

On the morning of take-off on this mission we went to a briefing, which was at headquarters, and they had all the newest information from the CIA. We were told in the event that we went down in the vicinity of Vienna that the #23 cable car would take us to the furthest point south from Vienna. The CIA said there would be no money charged for cable car rides. I boarded and a German soldier boarded also and sat down beside me.

Sweat started rolling down my back. I was so nervous and afraid for fear that he would discover that I was an American soldier and that would be adios for me. But, luckily, he left the car before I did.

At the end of the line I got off the cable car, walked until I was out of sight of anyone and opened my escape kit and took out a map that was shaped like a 24x24 handkerchief — along with a compass, whereupon I established a heading and walked until exhaustion overcame me.

The first night I did some soul searching and realized survival at this point was the name of the game. I tried to locate a garden during the day, which I could rob at night. I learned to like raw veggies and when I couldn't find a garden I ate leaves from trees, grasses, a lot of clover and lots of other things too gross to mention. Hunger I had known before, but never like this.

I drank water from streams and slept any place I felt was safe; in ditches, behind trees, etc., trying to blend in with the scenery. At one point, after I had located a large garden during the day, I had plans that night to raid it. I waited around all afternoon until it was dark. I crawled into the garden and was pulling carrots, I also had a small head of cabbage. All of a sudden, a door from a small house opened and a big dog came out. The dog was barking and headed straight toward the garden. He was about 20 feet away from me when he stopped and continued to bark. The old man in the cabin yelled at the dog several times. Finally, the dog turned and heeded his master's call. I got up and ran like hell, carrying my garden loot.

This made me aware that this was the survival of the fittest... it came to either the old man or me...if I couldn't have gotten past the dog. I couldn't take the chance of

being found because I would have been hunted and shot on sight. Needless to say, I was more cautious after that. It awakened me to the harsh realization that I was completely under enemy control and in no position to give myself away.

I began wondering where and how all of my crew was and had they survived. Loneliness sank in, far from the comfort and camaraderie of the base and thousands of miles from my family, at home in Joelton, Tennessee. But I was here; alone in the middle of nowhere and who even knew?

I was very weary and tired from days and days of walking and my feelings bordered between anxiety and sheer terror. Now fully conscious of my survival situation I knew it was of the utmost importance that I travel by night and hide by day. Therefore, if I could keep my wits about me and keep moving in a steady direction, this would perhaps keep me from wandering in a circle in the dark. The night was my protection because the darkness gave me cover.

After many days I was beginning to feel I had it made — becoming almost complacent. After about two months (I later learned) I entered Yugoslavia. I was in a wooded area in farmland and I saw a man harvesting oats, tying bunches together until he had a shock. When he moved over close to the woods I approached him with pistol drawn and ready to fire. I opened the jacket I took from the railroad man, and unzipped my flight jacket — sewn inside was the American Flag and an inscription, which said in three languages, "I am an American."

His first words were "Americana?" I nodded yes. He dropped his sickle and we walked for approximately one hour to a tiny village with 3-4 houses where he told me to wait outside. The other villagers stared at me. He returned within 10 minutes with another fellow with a German burp gun (machine gun) with two bandoliers with bullets harnessed on his body. But he spoke English and told me not to be afraid.

He took me into a house that had an underground room and in that room were three men...mean, rough looking characters. At the same time, I saw a large array of radio equipment.

They fed me a heavenly feast of hominy, a vegetable somewhat like cauliflower; black bread and water to drink. I later learned that this was a group of underground partisans.

The anti-axis were grouped in several areas to rescue allied troops. They contacted the Fifteenth Air Force Headquarters in Foggia, Italy who replied in code to them the date the bomber and fighters would come and pick me up (near Belgrade).

Upon leaving — which was customary to do, I gave my rescuers the contents of my escape kit. The kit consisted of forty-nine \$1.00 bills, my government issued .45 automatic pistol, plus the two clips.

I stayed with these partisans in this village for about 4-5 days. They fed me and I slept in a hayloft until a B-24 rescue mission was accomplished.

What a wonderful sight to see! All of a sudden there was a sky full of P-51 Mustangs escorting the B-24 to rescue me. I was not emotionally upset or scared while at this village with these partisans.

Two weeks of R & R was given to me to spend in Cairo, Egypt. This was heaven sent, but I returned to Pantanella to the 464th to fly 24 more missions.

Of all the missions I flew, one is more memorable than all the rest and one I will never forget as long as I live. I have attempted to relate my own personal story to my wife, Elise, and find myself almost incapable of coping with the memories because of the emotions involved. After all these many years I cry and cry when thinking or talking about this particular mission.

The date was Friday, October 13, 1944 over Blechhammer, Germany's South Oil Refinery. On this mission, I was the engineer top turret gunner with Bernard Eiler as pilot and Edsel Bishop as co-pilot.

The briefing officer had told us what the mission would be and where it would be. He warned us that an excessive amount of flak guns were active on the ground and fighters were on the ground.

On take-off my position as engineer was in a stand-up position directly behind the pilot. The reason for that was to assist the pilot in doing anything needed to get the aircraft off the ground.

The first thing we would do before take-off was to pull the props through. And following that, I would start the motor on the auxiliary power unit and move to the compartment and start engine #3. Then the pilot would start engines #1, 2 and 4. After all engines were fired and running the auxiliary unit was turned off. Thus,

the reason for pulling props through (and we did this 4-5 times) was because the overnight inactivity would cause the oil to become sticky.

With every flight, we were escorted to and from our destination by Muskogee airmen (Checkerboards) P-51 or P-38 fighter planes. They would fly high above our altitude and if they saw any enemy planes they would engage in a dog-fight in hopes to destroy their aircraft and protect us throughout the bomb runs. We would maintain radio silence unless in extreme emergency. We could use the intercom on the aircraft but could not use command radio unless it was an extreme emergency.

The nauseating stench of the interior of the B-24s was almost sickening; the heat, 100 octane gas and neoprene rubber gasoline tank. After the plane got in position and the rest of the crew took their positions within the aircraft we cleared airspace and started into another country. All artillery positions tested their weapons to assure guns would operate properly.

We soon saw warnings given to us at briefing holding true. We had heavy black flak from the ground before we got to the target, over the target and their fighter planes were already engaged in battle with our escort planes.

We made the bomb run and were coming off the target when the flak burst through our plane — above the pilot and co-pilot — leaving a huge hole in our aircraft above their heads. Our plane was riddled by flak and the cockpit and instrument panel were covered with blood.

Bernard Eiler got an enormous piece of shrapnel through his head, peeling his scalp and cracking his skull wide open. His brains were spilled and laying out of his skull and out across his eyes in front. His pain was so intense he lost consciousness and he looked like he was dead.

As quickly as I could, I managed to get Bernard out of his seat and found a heated suit and wrapped it around his head so it would not freeze. I kept talking to him, trying to give him encouraging words and hoping and praying that he could hear me.

Bishop got hit in his left leg tearing his leg open from his thigh to his ankle. It ripped through his heated flying suit, heavy coat and flak suit.

I took over the pilot seat, called for fighter escort, broke formation and with two P-51s escorting got on radio frequency for Bari, Italy. I gave our call letters and asked for landing instructions into their airport.

Bari warned us about their cabled balloons around their runways, which was a defense device to keep enemy planes from landing. Bishop was handicapped but still doing all that he could with the instruments on right-hand side of the plane. Luckily, we missed all the cabled balloons and landed safely on the ground.

As soon as we landed we got Bernard and Bishop off the plane and into the hospital as quickly as possible. The flak had blown a large hole in our plane directly over the top of the pilot's compartment.

The next time I saw Bernard was in Nashville, Tenn., in 1984 at our 464th Bomb Group Reunion. He was totally blind, but glad to be alive. It was a very teary, touching meeting. He greeted me with hugs, kisses and tears. There were a lot of wet eyes at that reunion.

For many years, I was unable to talk about the pain of this wartime memory. My wife seems to know and have patience living with an emotionally traumatized veteran coping with disability. I would like to add that war does not end when the shooting stops, but lives on in the memories of those who survived.

I flew several more missions and had just begun to feel that every mission was just another "milk run" (easy as pie) then all heck happened.

I was shot down again. On this morning, we had a "milk run" or so I thought, to run up to Udine Air Drome in southern Austria. But, after take-off, the intended target was smoked over with smoke pots. We were given an alternate target of Neuburg, Germany.

We turned on the IP (initial point) where the L & L come together for the bomb run over the target. We had our #2 engine feathered because we had an oil leak and over the target we got hit in #3 engine by flak. We had two engines running and both were red lined to maintain altitude but the engines being old, we couldn't maintain altitude and began falling even though the engines were running at maximum rpm's.

We were flying at 26,000 feet and by this time we were down to about 18,000, trying to make it to Brenner Pass. The Alps were 15,000 feet and we were still losing altitude. The navigator informed me that we couldn't make it...five minutes too late!

When the plane was down to 14,000 feet we were flying between the Alps and that is when I pressed the bail out alarm button. I parachuted out and landed in the main street of Villac, Austria. Later I discovered that miraculously all of the crew had survived...every man for himself.

Luckily, I landed in front of some lady's house instead of one of the many church steeples that I could see while falling to the ground. The lady ran to me and took my chute and invited me into her house. She gave me some food that tasted like sweet potatoes and goat's milk to drink. There were two small children in the room, both looking at me wondering how I dropped out of the sky, I suppose. I had chewing gum which I gave to the children and three packets of sugar which I gave to the lady. She said, in broken English, "'suga' I have not seen since 1939."

I am sure some of the villagers saw my chute coming down and the Nazi youth were searching house to house where they found me...in her kitchen.

These Nazi youths were kids between the years of 10-15 but they had guns (25 automatics) and knives and wore uniforms of khaki with swastika arm bands. I managed to escape from them when one stopped to tie his shoe laces, and the kid in back was throwing stones for entertainment. They had not searched me. The shoe lace tying gave me the opportunity to jump them with the butt of my .45 — taking them by surprise. I managed to tie them all up with their own shoestrings. I took off running.

Much later that night, I was hiding in a ditch (a tree had fallen over and left a big hole in the ground) when I heard bloodhounds coming. They treed me. Very shortly the SS men (Nazi Special Services) in half-tracks captured me and took me to an outpost where I was then questioned. The interrogator spoke perfect English, he told me he had been in Chicago and knew very well where Tennessee was located. I had not been searched still.

My Mae West life jacket had a hole in the dye pocket and this stuff was oozing out. One of the guards touched his finger to this and then put it on his tongue. It

foamed up all over his mouth and I laughed. The other guard hit me in the right eye with brass knucks.

At this time, they searched me, took my .45 along with a combat knife. When they requested my gun, I spun it, causing it to come all apart. This caused me more abuse and a trip to solitary confinement for several days. There, they strapped my ankle with a steel bracelet about 4 inches wide and chained me to a post. These men were very hostile. Their weapons were starvation, deliberate cruelty, indignation and mind games to demoralize me, causing my spirit to drop to rock bottom.

From there I was taken on a boxcar ride to a German air base where I was placed in solitary confinement again, for approximately one week. I was sent to Nurenberg on another boxcar. This one was filled with prisoners; Americans, French and English.

On the third day, I discovered two of my aircrew had been captured and boarded the same boxcar I was on; Walter Campen and Karl Becker. The three of us stayed together and were put in a cell together where we remained for 4 weeks. Our only sustenance during that time was one slice of dark bread and water each day.

We left Nurenberg on a forced march to Moosberg Stalag 7A. We were with a long column of other prisoners and were kept under guard. We would walk during the day and bed down on the ground at night. On the march the German troops herded us along, issuing neither food nor water. The sick and wounded, if too weak to walk, were killed and left where they had fallen. The same happened to those who attempted to escape. The POW's existence was largely one of constant hunger and intermittent bouts of illness, disease and pure misery. I don't recall how long the march actually took. All I remember is being hungry and my feet hurting, they had been frostbitten earlier and the toenails were infected and came off leaving my toes in a bloody watery mass.

I was afraid to take my shoes off for fear they would be stolen even though the soles were worn thin as paper. I made up my mind that regardless of my feet hurting I would not give up. There were many men that did not have shoes and their feet were bloody and raw.

One night, on the forced march from Nurenburg to Moosberg, our column stopped at a farm and someone grabbed a chicken. That chicken was passed around from

one person to another to keep the German guard from guessing where the chicken was located. Finally he gave up, the chicken was plucked, and feathers were in everyone's pocket. After a fashion a fire was started and that chicken was roasted. I remember getting a chance to suck on a bone being passed around. Were we ever hungry!!!

At Stalag 7A there was about 30,000 prisoners (the barracks were full) and there was no place for Walter, Karl and myself to sleep. We dug a hole under the barracks where the three of us would sleep. The Germans issued us one blanket each. We huddled together for warmth but Karl would invariably fart and then we had to fan the covers or suffocate. Our menu consisted of watered down potato soup and one slice of black bread and water to drink. There was no water for washing and we did not have a bath or clean clothes. The latrine didn't have any running water. A very large round concrete pipe sticking out of the ground was our commode. Deplorable conditions. Filth was everywhere.

We had been at Stalag 7A awhile before we started receiving parcels from the Red Cross. The Germans refused their soup that we had been getting or anything else to eat when these parcels started arriving. The Germans punctured the cans of tuna and sardines, etc. The reason for this was if an escape was planned there would be nothing stored up to eat. Therefore, we had to eat the punctured cans of food before they could spoil.

During the day, everyone walked around trying to find twigs, or anything else that would burn. It was so very cold, our hands and feet relished the warmth. We had nothing to do except walk around the barbed wire and razor wire complex. Time was spent talking and dreaming of home, family and friends and food. Every day was a sad day, not knowing, crying a lot.

Our bodies were rank with odor and our hair stank. The head lice and skin disease was rampant. Bugs were thick and of every kind. We never knew the day of the week, month, time of day or heard any outside news. We lost track of time. I had no means of recording a journal of happenings of daily activities since we were not allowed pencil or paper.

Feeling sorry for ourselves was a given and most of us were guilty of that. We tried to escape twice. The first time we found a rake and two shovels and walked up to the guard at the gate. He opened it and we walked out, started raking the

rocks and shoveling a little at a time and kept getting farther away until we were out of sight. The farther away we got the faster we walked. Alas, about four hours later the guards with dogs came after us and took us back to camp. They slapped us around and denied us anything to eat for several days.

Our second attempt to escape happened when the three of us found a wheelbarrow and a shovel. Again, we got out of the gate, I was pushing the wheelbarrow. We were free for many hours but the Germans caught us, we were brought back and I was chained, like a hog, with leg irons in the middle of the compound. The Germans asked who was responsible for getting the wheelbarrow. I was. The other two said they just took a walk with me. The Germans strapped me down on the left ankle. I was out there day and night for several days. To this day, I still have the scars on my left ankle from being manacled. The skin is discolored and is still painful.

Many days I still think of the hardships that occurred and I thank God that I kept my trust and prayed that everything would be righted. Sometimes there was momentary loss of hope but never did I think about giving up.

Remembering home and loved ones took its toll. I worried about being shot or beat to death.

The weather was always cold, sometimes raining and snowing. I don't remember any warm days at all. The Germans took my heavy flying pants and jacket and left me with only a thin threadbare jacket and green flying suit, and no hat.

What a glorious day it was when George Patton's Third Army liberated the camp during the middle of May 1945. He drove in on a tank knocking the compound fence down, several other tanks followed. They were there for 3-4 hours. The German guards were given a chance to surrender.

I asked the advance weapons carrier where he was getting supplies and he told me from an airfield some distance away. He gave the three of us a ride to this airfield and we were granted permission from the pilot to fly back to LaHarve, France. On the way, he radioed the MP's and Karl, Walter and myself were taken to Camp Lucky Strike in LaHarve. There we were treated to a complete physical and debriefing.

I normally weighed 185-190 pounds but when I arrived at LaHarve my weight had dropped to 96 pounds. I made a great skeleton with skin! The camp had a large tent set up for bathing and we took off all of our clothes that we had worn for the past months. But, first, we were sprayed all over for lice and other skin defects, then we were allowed to bathe. The camp had personnel in the tent primarily to assist the ex-POW's to clean up. They scrubbed our backs and feet, gave us shaves and haircuts. It was wonderful!

Then we were given new khaki clothes and new shoes. Due to my weight loss, I was put on a diet of strained baby food for 3-4 weeks before my stomach would tolerate food. I slowly gained some weight and strength back and left LaHarve and flew back to the States.

I was given a 60-day delay enroute from Ft. Oglethorpe, Georgia to go home. It was sure a pleasure to see my United States again as I boarded a Greyhound bus from Georgia to Nashville. I took another bus to our lane in my hometown of Joelton.

My parents did not know I was back in the states. They did not have a telephone. When I walked in the house, my mother was overcome with joy. She had received, in the course of my overseas tour of duty, two telegrams saying that I was missing in action.

Dad, mother, sisters, granddad were all crying with happiness. After a while I told my mother that I was hungry and I remember vividly ordering four scrambled eggs, a large slice of country ham with red eye gravy, 4-5 hot homemade biscuits with molasses and butter and a large glass of fresh milk, which I consumed with gusto. What a joy to be home!

I have tried my best to remember these events as they had happened.

Many years have elapsed. Total recall is not easy after all of these years. Many of the former POWs have been motivated to relate their wartime experiences. Their stories are interesting and tragic and extremely valuable. I have been besieged by many asking that I undertake the effort to put my story of the "fascinating" tale of my role in World War II in the European Theatre of War in writing. I find nothing "fascinating" about my experiences in the war, and, still, after 64 years find myself reliving some incidents, mostly the horrors. The scars of the leg iron is still very visible, my frostbitten feet, both my leg and feet pain me still. But, I thank my

God daily for my freedom, at last, from the beatings, starvation, pains of hunger and sickness, mental and physical torture, degradation, monstrous conditions in the Stalag, the cold, solid ground for a bed, intense questioning, solitary confinement, sadness and despair. I wonder now how I endured the inhuman conditions under which I was forced to live.

I never eat a meal without reflecting back on those days when I had no meal. During the early years, I was awakened with nightmares. Now, not a night passes that I don't feel the pain in my leg from the shackles of the iron strap and from the results of frozen feet. How do you wipe away the sad, painful memories of the past? And erasing the emotional trauma would take longer to achieve. Even then, somehow, there will always be some permanent residual emotional scars throughout our lifetimes.

I salute every veteran in America, for without their sacrifices we would not have our freedom. We, all veterans, paid dearly for it and I thank God for that freedom and for every veteran.

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