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The Personal Story of B-24(H) Liberator 1st LT Navigator 464th BG, 777th Sqdn John C. Baker

Shot Down on a Mission Over Yugoslavia, 29 May 1944 his story of survival with his crew and return to his unit in Italy.

Our target was an aircraft factory at Vienna, the second most heavily defended city in German territory. At 1020 our bombardier yelled, "Bombs away!" and we all breathed a sigh of relief. It is always nicer to have the bombs burst on the ground than in the plane. With knees knocking together like machine gun fire we stood huddled in the tiny nose compartment listening to the terrifying sound of ripping metal as pieces of heavy flak went hurtling, through the ship. At last after about ten minutes, which seemed like a thousand years we seemed to be getting clear of the flak when with a last burst of vengeance a piece severed both our rudder cables. Immediately Buddy, the best darn pilot in the Air Corps, gave us the signal, "Prepare to bail out". It so happened that Lou, the bombardier, and I were prepared even before we reached the target, however minutes passed and nothing happened so our tension was slightly eased. Bud was flying the boxcar in formation with only elevators and ailerons, which is a mighty neat trick if you can do it; however, the slightest wrong move might throw us into a spin that would be impossible to pull out of!

Well everything seemed all right on the way home. We warned the wing ships to stay clear in case she did act up and that proved to be a fatal mistake. Little by little we fell behind our group formation; however, our box of five ships was still more or less intact. At Graz the lead navigator led us over another flak area and when the formation turned sharply to the left to avoid it, we lost out completely. As we struggled along trying to keep up suddenly I saw tracers going by outside the left nose window. They moved in towards me rapidly and then the left half of the nose was filled with red streaks. Lou had climbed in the nose turret to replace Sgt. Freeman, who was attempting to help S/Sgt. Mezzatesta repair the severed cables in the bomb bay. The last of the tracers seemed about hip high and about six inches from me. Luckily I was looking out the right window at the city of Zagreb. Under normal conditions with Sgt. Freeman in the nose turret and Lou and I in the navigator's compartment, one of us would have literally been cut in half. I looked out and saw the sleek fuselage of an ME 109 peel off about a hundred feet from our left wing, then turned and closed the turret doors and yelled to Valente to "Get him!" At that instant Buddy pressed his interphone button and said in a very calm voice, "Pilot to crew, bail out". I turned and opened the turret doors for Lou, then pulled the release handle on the nose wheel doors. No result! I crawled back and released the catch with my hands. Still no result, so I crawled on back to the bomb bay, meanwhile everything seemed to be getting caught on the way.

I opened the bomb bays and looked up and saw Freeman and Mezzatesta standing on the catwalk. Mezz yelled, "Why did Styer bail out?" Without answering, I said, "Bail out". Freeman said in a half panicky voice, "I ain't got no chute!" I reached behind me and grabbed a chute and snapped it on him as he sat down on the catwalk. "Go ahead and jump!" I yelled. He replied, "I ain't got no right arm". "OK, you jump and when you go out, I'll pull your

ripcord". As he slid out into the slipstream, I jerked the cord and the chute opened.

Next I went out and tumbled head over heels as the slipstream hit me. As I slowed up and began to fall, I found myself on my back and decided to try a delayed jump. As I fell, I kept watching the ground over my shoulder. The only sensation was of wind rushing by. I attempted to steer myself with my legs but it didn't work too well. I started spinning slowly and then a little faster, so I decided it was time to open my chute. The first pull did not open it, but the next one, a little harder, did. It blossomed out above me and I felt as though I were pulling out of a dive; however, there was no jerk at all. Evidently I must have fallen about six thousand feet before I opened the chute, and still had seven thousand feet to go. That is the most peaceful place in the world, bar none. No noise, no confusion, no nothing! I turned to watch the ship and as the last chute left it, it made about a fifteen degree bank and made a slow, graceful 360 degree turn, hit, and exploded with a huge flash. Then I turned to count the chutes and saw nine for certain, including my own. I tried to attract Lou's attention, but he was evidently thinking of other things as he floated downward about 300 feet away. It must have taken eight or ten minutes to reach the ground, so I had plenty of time to watch the chutes and also keep an eye on that enemy fighter; however, he followed the ship down then turned and went home evidently quite satisfied with his day's work. Until about 100 feet from the ground there is no sensation of moving at all, but then it really comes up to meet you! I hit on my feet, pretty hard, but picked myself up and found no injuries, so began collecting my chute.

After I had my chute in my arms, I started for a clump of bushes near the edge of the small field in which I landed when I noticed a man about 200 feet away beckoning to me. I walked over to him holding up my hand in a gesture of friendship, since I did not know whether he was an enemy or not. He also held up his hand, his left hand. It so happened that his right was in a sling because of a German bullet which had broken it. He said, "Partizan", so I answered with "American" and he led me back into a thicket where he and his wife had evidently been hiding. She had a large clothesbasket into which I stuffed my chute, harness, and Mae West. We went deeper into the thicket and kept as quiet as possible while people searched all around for me. They fed me a bit of porridge and tried to strike up a conversation in Yugoslavian with me. Results were obviously not good. After the search had somewhat subsided, they led me to a house and made signs for me to go up to the attic. I climbed a ladder and found myself in a tiny room about 3 x 8 feet. My Partisan friend stayed with me and we tried to talk a little by sign language. All this time I was perspiring quite freely, both from my heavy clothes and from the strain. They seemed to know I was coming, for they brought me some warm milk and some delicious fried chicken and noodle soup. Also some black bread that wasn't so good.

Soon I heard the sound of horses coming down the lane, then voices and then the horses went on. My friend told me there were five Germans hunting for us and they had asked the people whether they had seen any Americans around and their prompt and definite answer was "No". We stayed in that tiny room until about four o'clock, when I gathered that they were bringing an old man who could speak a little English to see me. We talked about America a bit - he had been there for seven years and then he said, "I ketch him, I ketch Louie!" That was really news! He told me later he would bring him down where I was and that there was nothing to worry about anymore, that we were safe. I gave my heavy flying boots to my rescuer and my parachute to his wife, and they were immensely pleased with them.

At about five I went to another house and found Lou feeding his face in a most ungentlemanly manner. To look at him one would have thought he was hungry. We were treated royally and were a great curiosity to all. About nine we lay down and took a snooze since we had been up since two o'clock that morning. Around twelve we were awakened to find a room full of men and women loaded down with pistols, rifles, and hand grenades! We began to wonder whether our number was up, or just what the score was, when we were instructed to follow them. They were to take us through the German held territory nearby.

We went out after bidding our newly acquired friends goodbye. There were seven of us - three men, two women, Lou and I, all in single file about ten or fifteen feet apart. We walked with great caution. Every once in a while our leader would stop and listen intently for any unusual sound. It was bright moonlight and we certainly would have made excellent targets. Especially was this impressed on us when every once in a while a flare would shoot across some nearby field followed by the rattle of a machine gun. The caution that was used and the anxiety of our group showed us that it was no picnic. The big black automatics which the girls carried in their hands further impressed us that at any moment we might have to dive headlong into the nearest ditch. As we crossed one open field a rustling was heard on the other side, so advancing a few feet at a time, almost on hands and knees, we crept across without arousing suspicion. As we continued to walk, more and more trees were noticeable and soon the girls began singing softly some song of the Partisans. By and by we built a fire and slept for a couple of hours, then rose and plodded on until about ten o'clock the next morning. We reached a little clearing where there were blankets, an outdoor stove and a rough table. They told us that we would stay here for a while, and so we remained there for two days. We learned a lot from them and they in turn learned a lot from us. We ate a concoction of corn meal and grease which we were very glad to get, even though it was not very good. One of the men did kill a rabbit one morning that helped satisfy our appetites. They gave us some pictures which they wanted us to take back and show the people in the US. They were greatly interested in our clothes

and especially in our shoes. They never ceased to be a topic for discussion. Their own shoes were those they had stripped from dead Germans. In fact, nearly everything they had, from pistols to wrist-watches were German. One fellow told us how he acquired his beautiful watch. A German pilot crash landed his plane and as he jumped out, this fellow shot him then stole his watch. There certainly is no love lost between the Schwab and the Partisans!

Our stay in the woods came to an end about ten o'clock Thursday morning. We again walked - up hill and down - until I was dead on my feet. We had heard various reports of two Americans that had passed through that vicinity on their way to a field hospital, so we were determined to see if it might possibly be anyone from our crew. About three o'clock we stopped at a Partisan command post for a bite of food. We were deep enough in Partisan territory that travel by day was safe. Someone came down and told me that an American had just arrived, and so I went down to see who it was. Instead it turned out to be an English *soldier who had been captured at the first fall of Tobruk and had been held a prisoner for two years in Italy, then had escaped a week before the Italian armistice and was on his way back home. With him was a big, blonde good looking Czech boy of 22. He had been engaged in some underhand work in Germany and was now on his way to London to visit his brother. Because he could speak the Yugoslav lingo as well as Czech and German and a few others, he always made quite a hit with the girls; consequently, we dubbed him Atlas Maidenswoon. When he asked what it meant, we told him that since his Czech name was Joe Freedom in English, in American it was Atlas Maidenswoon! He was really the life of our little party and always helped cheer us up when the going was rough.

The four of us walked on to the hospital and found S/Sgt. Styer there with a few minor holes in him caused by fragments of 20 mm. shells. He had a tiny piece in his right eye, but instead of going on to the general hospital, he decided to try and get out with us. That night we slept in a stable, much against Atlas' wishes. He always put up a very strong protest when given a stable to sleep in. Well, the fleas and bugs were a little too friendly to suit me too but then it was much better than nothing!

Styer had two Italians with him. One had escaped from a German prison camp in Greece, and the other got out of a civilian jail in northern Italy where he had been thrown for aiding people escape from Italy to the Partisans. He wore a checkered knicker suit and had a very red face, a very big nose and a very bald head. He reminded us very much of a 1920 golf enthusiast. He immediately was dubbed Jimmy Duran and although he didn't know it, was the object of many jokes.

The other little Italian was as nice a fellow as you would want to meet, courteous, polite, and always a gentleman. He was quite

fluent with the German language. Whenever we wanted to know something about our next move, we told the Czech, in a rather crude manner, to ask the Yugoslavs, he in turn would tell the little Italian in German, the Ity would tell Nick, the Englishman, in Italian and then Nick would tell us! That was the way we learned what was going on!

Next morning we all started for the next command post, only a few miles away. We were told that there we would get a horse and wagon for the next part of our journey. We arrived around ten o'clock and then waited, the Partisans never seem to be in a hurry about anything, and naturally it got on our nerves when, instead of moving on, we just sat! At noon we told Atlas to "Speak - eat". There were only a very few words of English he could understand. He asked how soon we could eat and they told him that in about an hour dinner would be ready. That hour came and went, along with another or so and Atlas again said something in Yugoslav. Evidently the answer angered him not a little, for he pulled out a hunting knife and flung it at the barn with all his might! His action brought a roar of laughter from the Partisans and eventually food was brought for us.

About five o'clock we were told that the wagon was ready. We all went out and climbed in. It was a little hand-made four wheeler about three by seven feet and was shaped more or less like a bowl. You can imagine how seven of us and a driver crammed ourselves in! Nevertheless, after a couple of hours over those roads we were all fairly well settled in place - so well that we couldn't move if we wanted to. Along the way were evidences of enemy action not so long ago as trees with the leaves still fresh had been felled across the road in an effort to stop the Germans. Those of us who were not asleep spent many an anxious moment wondering what was in store for us around the next turn. Eventually, after every tooth in our heads had been shaken loose, we pulled into a small town of T_____. After routing out the commandant, they led us to a stable which was already well filled with Partisan soldiers, In spite of all Atlas' protests about horses and fleas; we managed to sleep quite comfortably.

The next day we were taken before the commandant for disposition. His disposition evidently was to hold us a couple days until he inquired further down the line about us, for we were given a bed in what used to be a fashionable hotel, and were told that in a few days we would move on. Since we couldn't understand why we were being delayed we became more and more irritable. The food was fair and the bed wasn't bad, so all in all we had no reason to bitch. We met a Hungarian who was doing some underhanded work for the British when things got too hot for him, so he was headed for Italy, too. Although we didn't know he was a British agent at the time, we smelled "a rat" for he claimed he had been walking all over Europe and still he had a good suit, clean white shirt and tie and freshly shined Oxfords. In our few days of travel we had come to be a rather deplorable sight, so naturally our suspicions were aroused.

On the afternoon of the second day we set out for G_____ having acquired the addition of two well-dressed Yugoslavs to our party. They stayed with us only two days but were very helpful in looking after us. It was only a three hour walk and so they decided to send us on to M_____ that night. Our feet were getting mighty beat up, so we asked Atlas to "Speak Mustang" indicating that we preferred riding to walking. In a couple hours they arrived with two wagons and again we were on our way.

It was here that we first saw evidences of German destruction. A bridge had been blown up - evidently in an effort to stop the Germans; innumerable houses had been burned and bombed, and machine guns had played a tune on many of the walls. On the chimney of a large house stood a stork in its nest, quite undisturbed by the devastation which had taken place below.

At M_____ we were given an empty room to sleep in, so with the help of a few armfuls of straw, it was made more or less comfortable. Again we were informed that we should have to wait a few days, and immediately our desire to keep on moving created a tension on our nerves. We did eat well, however, got the first time. The people of the village had a radio over which they listened to the news as broadcast by the BBC in Yugoslavian. Once in a while they would leave on an English commentator for our benefit, and it was during one of these broadcasts that we first learned of the invasion of France. One hot afternoon as we were listening, what should come forth from the loudspeaker, but Harry James playing "When You're a Long, Long Way From Home" believe me, there were some mighty blue boys around there for a while! Never in my life have I heard a song that struck as deep as that one did!

It was here that we met Charlie - a Partisan fellow who could speak fairly good English. He had the names and addresses of five men from our squadron who had gone down the same day we did. We spent part of our time chatting with him; however most of it was spent in sleeping in the sun or cutting tobacco. Styer and Valente had a few rolls of tobacco leaves that they cut up for smokes. Guess the stuff was strong enough to take the hair off the inside of their mouths! Valente rolling a cigarette was like an elephant trying to thread a needle! Usually he ended up with a tiny bulge in the middle of the paper with an inch on each end containing no tobacco whatever. And that timid little lick he gave it with his tongue after he finally did get it rolled made you think he was afraid of hurting it! Then in a weak little voice he would say, "Styer, could I see your lighter a minute?"

On the afternoon of the third day we left for the next post. We rode for about ten hours, passing many houses that had been blown up or burned and a number of churches that were nothing but ruins. The Commandant at this post had a very nice robin's egg blue jacket that had been made from an electric heated flying suit and also a US holster for his German Luger. At a number of the of these posts we saw summer flying suits, belts of the straps on a Mae West, and even GI shoes. This time we graduated from a stable to a hay loft,

and although the fleas were a little too intimate, we survived with only a few chunks missing here and there. Next morning some lady fed us fried eggs and the inevitable unleavened corn bread.

Again we started hoofing it. Eight hours later we climbed the last hill which overlooked the river, road and railroad connecting B_____. We were to cross this German held sector under cover of darkness, since it was very heavily guarded and offered little natural cover. There were numerous pillboxes along the road, and it began to look as though we were in for some excitement. About a half hour after our arrival a runner came from the last post and said we were to return immediately. We were dog tired then and certainly in no mood to have to retrace our steps over the mountains after having come, this far. An old gent who spoke fair English told us that they had received word over the radio that a plane was coming and that we were to return. He said that President Roosevelt, himself, had sent the plane after "his boys". Of course, we all knew he was lying and that he was only trying to make us feel better because we had to go back. What made it even more difficult was that after traveling so long - we had only three more easy days before reaching our jumping Italy. Finally we agreed to go back and decided to start that night and get it over with as soon as soon as possible. Well, this little guy we had for a guide was half deer and the other half machine. He lit out across those mountains like a scared rabbit and it was all we could do to keep up. He even got a little sore when we stopped for a smoke - and rest. He must have realized that we were almost ready to pass out when he hauled up at a town and showed us a place to sleep. We three slept in a farmer's house on a bed of hay they made for us. It must be the custom over there for the women to hang around while you get into bed, for three of them stood and watched us as we strapped off and crawled in.

After breakfast we set out again - this time even more tired than before - if that was possible! We climbed one mountain that I shall never forget. I swear if it had been three feet higher none of us would have ever made it. Things were spinning in front of me as I at last reached the top. Another hour or so brought us back to the guy with the heated suit. In those 24 hours we covered nearly 50 miles with seven hours out for sleep - and the guide looked as though he hadn't even started yet!

There seemed to be a big rush now, for soon we were on our way again - in a wagon. We swore we wouldn't take another step that day come hell or high water! All the while we kept cussing everything and everybody for having to turn back without even a reasonably good excuse when we were so close to our goal.

Again we rode through village after village which had been bombed, strafed, and burned by the retreating Germans. Especially did we notice that the churches had been demolished. We rode for ten hours at a good speed - the driver seemed to have no mercy on the

horses whatever for he kept whipping them until they could scarcely move. As the afternoon wore on, we began to think that there surely must be some reason for all this rush. At last we reached T_____ where we had been several days before. Here we gathered that a few miles from town a plane had landed earlier that morning and that it was still there. We were so amazed and overjoyed that we were nearly hysterical! There seemed to be no doubt about it as we soon left for the airdrome. Quite often we got off and walked now, since the poor horses were nearly dead. At last we caught sight of a number of fires that outlined the field, so Atlas and I left on a run. He was as excited as a little child over the prospect of a new sister! We ran up and down hills for nearly two miles when we heard the roar of a plane taking off. It circled and passed right over our heads while we stood helplessly watching. Atlas was flashing his lighter off and on in a vain attempt to signal them, but to no avail. As the rest of the party caught up to us we explained what had happened and a state of hopeless despair enveloped us all. In the distance, however, we could see the lights of a plane circling around a spot and noticed several flares in that direction. Again our hopes rose as we started to investigate. We became more and more enthused when we learned that an American officer was nearby. Four or five miles further on we found the spot the planes were circling, as well as an American captain! Our worries were almost over! He told us that the planes had dropped a lot of supplies there, and that the plane that had just left was entirely filled anyway. He also told us to go back to the airdrome and wait until another plane came in. They came over every night to drop supplies, and perhaps he could signal one of them to land the next night.

Next night came and the planes brought supplies, but none landed. Down we went into the depths of despair again as the drone of the last plane faded away. We decided to sleep around the fire on the field rather than fight fleas all night. Next morning we were awakened by a plane very near. It turned out to be a German liaison job evidently looking for something to shoot. He passed within 300 yards of us but luckily didn't notice us. There was absolutely no cover around, either!

The next day the captain radioed Italy and they promised a plane that night. In the middle of the night we heard it! He came over the field, circled, and landed. We were almost beside ourselves to think that at last we were on our way home!

All the conglomeration that had accumulated climbed aboard - thirteen Americans, Checks, Englishmen, Italians, Yugoslavs - everything under the sun! The major revved her up - opened the throttles - and with thirteen missions under our belt, we were off for Italy on the thirteenth of June.