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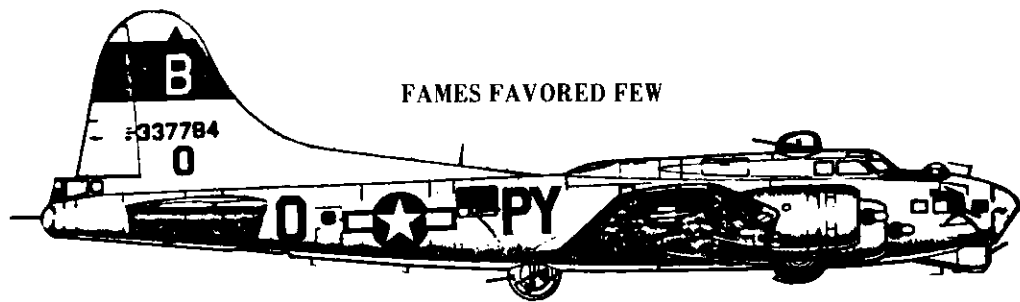
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"OUR TRIP TO STALAG LUFT III"

Part II

Continued from March Issue

The bus station where we finally halted was located directly across the street from the world famous cathedral of the city. We had heard through jerry propaganda that this had been destroyed but it was certainly still standing on August 14, 1943. It had been hit but was far from demolished and the remarkable fact was that it was the least damaged of any building in that area. While we were looking up at the cathedral a young German officer who was slightly in his cups took it upon himself to express in no uncertain terms his opinion of nations that went about bombing churches. Of course, we could not understand his words but his arm waving and excitement left little to our imaginations. WE will never know for sure, but strongly suspect, that it was under his order that we were marched for the next two hours through the areas of total destruction. During this tour we saw only a very few buildings standing. There was a light drizzle in the air and this gave a very sinister atmosphere to the unreal scene that presented itself to us as we walked through the ruins. It seemed as if our guards were lost for each time we passed a civilian they asked some question. This area was almost deserted which was probably a fortunate situation for us for in light of what we know now it seems possible that the guards may have been purposely subjecting us to civilian violence. Similar acts were taking place in Hamburg at this time. The German people were just having the war brought to their cities and they were unhappy about the whole thing. But for some reason these thoughts did not enter our minds and we more or less enjoyed this personally conducted tour of the ruins that so few Americans had, up to this time, the privilege of making. The tour ended after we had completed a wide circle and arrived at a railway station not far from our departure point. I, for one, boarded that train possessing a new respect for heavy bombardment.

Our train was very crowded so all eleven of us, plus our guards, plus their guns and brief cases, were placed in a compartment designed for six. We put Lee and Groff up in the baggage hammock and the rest of us doubled up like sardines in a can. Naturally, we were uncomfortable as hell, but at least we had the dubious pleasure of knowing that the jeries were in the same boat and they too had bear up under Wiley's habits and

he was in rare form on this occasion. But cramped as we were, we managed to get unconscious in short order. The rest of the night we spent shifting about and joining the guards in cussing Wiley.

We arrived in Frankfurt at 9:30 the next morning and were told by the guards that this was our destination. We were certainly glad to leave that train for among other things we were thirsty, not having had any water for 15 hours. But there was no convincing those squareheads that we would do better after consuming a little water and they told us by signs that we would have to wait until we reached our camp. We learned further that the camp was some distance from town so we must sweat out another train ride. In order to remove us from the crowd they took us into an abandoned office room next to the station, for we had an hour's wait for the other train. Outside of the window there was a large beer advertisement which certainly did not help my mental condition. So I went to sleep until train time.

The local train took us to an outlying village about 15 kilometers from Frankfurt. From town out to the camp was another 4 kilometers and we could have ridden a trolley but our guards decided we should walk. Just as we left town we passed a Shell Oil Company filling station which looked like a place to get our long delayed drink of water. We halted and proceeded to help ourselves but just as Wells finished drinking a woman came out in a big huff and cut the tap off. "To hell with it", we said and marched off. It began to rain so by the time we arrived at the camp we were all in a very low mood. Our guards saw us safely behind wire and bade us goodbye.

Because of the small size we knew this first enclosure was only for temporary confinement so we did not begin to form any conclusions. We were registered, searched and put in cells. Each cell held three men. I was placed with a co-pilot and engineer from another crew. This was our first contact with any other Americans.

Maybe it was because we had Colonel Spivey with us or maybe

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we were just lucky, for our whole crew except the Colonel, were taken right on through the process of interrogation without being placed in "the cooler". We were taken individually from our cells and marched across the road to an old office building. Here we were each interrogated by a young Oberlieutenant (1st Lt.) who claimed to have been schooled in the States. Like the rest of the jerries we had talked to, he started off on the old song and dance that the United States is a wonderful country and what a big shame it was that we were allied with the British. He beat around the bush for ten minutes before he asked me any questions. He had a long printed questionnaire for me to fill out but I only recorded my name, rank and serial number, home address and next of kin. How he knew our group and squadron number I will never know, but he had before him a file with a great deal of dope in it. He did not know what outfit I came overseas with and of course, I did not tell him for if he had that information I would have sweated out many days in the cooler. He asked about the Colonel's duty and I told him nothing. For obvious reasons he was interested in the ages of the crew members and if we were volunteers or draftees. He asked specific questions about the guns in the nose and how the navigator found time to operate them. I suggested that he try it himself sometime for it was still a mystery to me, too. I kept saying, "I don't know", so many times that he must have concluded that I was none too bright. He ended the interview by escorting me to the door with many gestures of good will. This all seemed stupid as hell but then jerry's mind is a very confusing thing. I was very glad that the interrogation was over and was satisfied that I had made no breach of security.

Just after dark all of our crew except Colonel Spivey were taken from their cells and marched a half mile down the road to a larger enclosure. Here we were registered again and more cards were filled out. Barracks assignments were made for the sergeants and officers. This assignment meant that we had skipped our "cooler term" and were to be put right into the regular camp routine. The Colonel was taken directly to the cooler and spent a week there.

Upon reporting to our barracks we were told that since it was Saturday night the rest of the men were gathered in the mess hall for a little brew and close harmony. After our experiences during the past three days such news sounded too good to be true. Naturally we wasted no time debating the next move. The race to the mess hall was a dead heat between Wells and myself, both of us setting somewhat of a record for that particular distance. Within five minutes I was on my fourth glass of suds and Wells was carrying the lead in sundry verses of "Sing Us Another One, Too". The beer we had was very mild but our spirits need no stimulant after so fine an introduction into prison life. (We did not know this was the last suds we would see, except at Christmas, for well over a year.) In this mess hall we found several men we had known in England and in the States but a majority of the fellows were from the RAF. The AAF was just beginning its large scale operations into the Reich and we were the first "big class". The singing and suds soaking continued until eleven o'clock which was time for a lockup so we adjourned to the barracks. By this time Wells had established quite a reputation for his possession of such a large repertoire of miscellaneous ditties, the term, "miscellaneous", being used in its broadest sense. During the course of the evening we learned quite a bit about what our prison life would probably be like, so we went to sleep that night with our minds much more at ease than before.

The German name for our camp was Dulag Luft. It corresponded to what our Army would call a prisoner's pool or reception center. It was into this fold that jerry collected all the Allied aircrews whose odds had run out. Fortunate for us this Luftwaffe takes care of all airmen. From Dulag on we were given as good treatment as any class of prisoners and better than many. Regardless of this fact, it is to the work of the International Red

Cross, and not to jerry's generosity that all of us owe our health and present state of well being.

At Dulag the individual food parcels that the Red Cross issues to each prisoner each week were all pooled. The mess then was handled by a permanent camp staff made up of British officers and men who had been there since the first part of the war. They did an excellent job. Since our food was all prepared for us we had very little to do during our stay there. We learned that we would only be there for a few days so we made no attempt to form permanent habits. We read, played chess, exercised on the playing field and talked with the other crews. I read "The Memoirs of Madame De Barry", which was hardly the proper brain food for one just entering so cloistered a life.

From the Dulag journal we found that almost all of our friends that had gone down before us and whom we thought were dead, were still alive and had passed through this camp enroute to the big clink. The fact that "The Moose", "The Nose" and many others were still around and available for future reference was very heartening news.

On our third day in camp we witnessed a sight that made us very happy and yet caused each man there to experience a strong feeling of loneliness and of being out of the picture. We had all wondered at some time or other how a combat formation of forts looked from the ground, but few of us ever entertained any thought of seeing a jerry's eye view of one. About mid-afternoon we heard the air raid signal. A few minutes later the flak batteries in Frankfurt went into action. This was the first time I had ever seen flak from the ground and I might add that it affords a much different picture than when it is playing tic-tac-toe on the plexi-glas. At first we could not discern their target but soon we saw a lone fort in the east headed north. Jerry was tossing red flak in his direction as a guide to the fighters. We all crossed our fingers for the B-17 but his number was up. The co-pilot of this same ship showed up in our midst a few days later.

About twenty minutes after this first alarm the flak began again. This time their target was evident, for out of the east came the largest formation of forts we had ever seen assembled in the air. They were flying a beautiful formation. A jerry fighter heading into that bunch was facing a terrific concentration of fire power. It was clear that their course would take them out of range of the Frankfurt flak but jerry continued his fighter directing fire. It would be hard to describe our feelings as the boys flew past, but I for one would have sweated out any number of lead plane rides to have been in one of those ships and when I have said that I have said it all. The Germans around camp looked at the formation in wonder for even though they had been getting the hell bombed out of themselves at night, they were not used to seeing the raiders by broad daylight and in such numbers. We knew the target that they had just visited and were certainly sweating out the success of that mission.

By now a sufficient number of men had passed through the cooler to fill up the officers' quarters at Dulag, so we were told that the officers would be transferred that same evening to the permanent camp. We packed up the few belongings the Red Cross had issued us and prepared to move. The enlisted men were being sent to a different camp so we had a last talk with them. When we left the camp there were seventy officers in the outfit, about half of whom were English and Canadians.

We were all marched from Dulag back to the railway station we had left a few days before. The "hurry up and wait" process worked here just as if the American army were running things. But then we were not in the slightest hurry. Jerry picked out six men to clean out our "coaches" which turned out to be cattle cars from which the cattle had just been removed. They were old 40/8 cars which had been taken from France. I am not sure how eight horses would have felt about the situation, but I

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Headquarters Sq. Captain Ed Weizer. Pictures courtesy of Chandler Bowsky

"OUR TRIP TO STALAG LUFT III, Continued from page 2.

Speak with assurance when I say that 40 men fill such a car to capacity. There were no benches nor blankets, so each of us made ourselves as comfortable as possible on our barracks bags and settled down for a long ride. For rations we were issued one Red Cross parcel for three days. This plus some hot concoction that Jerry dished out made the food situation not bad at all. But getting rid of the food once it was eaten was another matter. Needless to say, very few cattle cars are equipped with latrines and this one was no exception. We had no relief on this score for the first 24 hours. The second day Jerry finally saw his way clear to let us out for a few minutes while the cars were in a marshalling yard. The reason for letting us out then was that all of the guards had to get out also.

The actual distance from Frankfurt to our destination was only three hundred miles but our route took us in an arc to the south so we must have travelled about four hundred miles during the 38 hours we spent on the train. This added up to a very poor ground speed. This slow rate was caused for the most part by

the fact that we were attached to a freight train and were held up many hours in various switching yards. The train made excellent time when it was in motion. Because of our crowded conditions the trip was anything but pleasant but in spite of this, most of the boys were in very good spirits even after 38 hours of it. I was in a car with most of the RAF men. They afforded a lot of entertainment by hours of singing. I slept next to a Polish pilot who had flown one whole tour with a fighter group and was almost finishing with his second round when a mid-air collision brought him down in France. He had been through both the battle of Poland and the London blitz. He had once been shot down over London and thrown in the clink as a Jerry because he could not speak English. His hatred for Jerry was very intense.

Due to the limited view one gets from a box car I saw very little of the country in our trip across Germany. As we passed to the east we saw less and less damage from bombing. (Since then this situation has been greatly improved, however.) We reached our destination on Friday morning, August 19. We were certainly glad to climb out of that box car. We found that we were in Sagan, about 90 miles southeast of Berlin.

Without delay we were marched to our camp which is located less than a mile out of town. Here we again went through the process of being searched, photographed, fingerprinted and registered. Our flying suits and whatever equipment we had managed to hold on to this far were taken from us and receipts were handed out with the same old story that it would be returned to us when the war was over. Some stuff, and in the meantime I must tell time by the sun. One by one we were questioned by a Jerry officer about our work in civilian life, supposedly for the purpose of seeing if we had any qualifications that would be of use here. We had learned by now that the less we told the Jerries the better, so we all had a wise answer for them. Wells told them that he had been a travelling man of no mean proportion and would gladly tackle any product with a route to the west. I said that I had dabbled in public relations work and would be glad to help out on any complaints that might arise. They informed me that hardly any complaints were coming up these days so I would be unemployed for the duration. These interviews took only a very short time so we were soon marched into the enclosure that was to be our home for many months.

What has happened since our arrival at Stalag Luft III belongs to another story which as yet has no end. Through the courtesy of the Red Cross and the existence of the Geneva Convention we are leading fairly normal lives. Our future rests with the fortunes of war.

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