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453rd Bomber Group

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This was to be our ninth mission and an important target where the Germans were firing some of their V-2 missiles. These were the most destructive weapons in the European Theater, causing a great deal of havoc in Britain, and impossible to defend against, except through these attempts which we were hoping to accomplish. Joined our 453rd group and proceeded to our target. The usual deadly flak met us most of the way, and we were determined to do our job. We were just 9 crew instead of 10 because we had left our Navigator in Iceland to recover from pneumonia. Lou, our Navigator never did catch up with us but joined another group and survived The War. He is now retired in the state of Washington after working for many years for Boeing Aircraft.

We successfully dropped our load of bombs and headed back to the coast. Our target was near Laon, France, NE of Paris, France. We were the lead ship in the "purple heart" formation. The lowest of the group as it was arranged for the best defense against German fighters.

We reached the North Sea at Holland when my wing-man called and related they were having oxygen trouble since flak had hit them. We had been at 22000 feet, and I O.K.'d our flight to drop to 17,500 until we were out over the North Sea. Just then I felt a heavy concussion and realized that we had been hit. I had no way of knowing how badly and knew that something was wrong with my right arm, because I couldn't get it back on the throttles. I realized that we were spinning because the centrifugal force didn't allow us to move. Many thoughts went through my mind about family, friends, and crew, but nothing I could do changed anything until after a few thousand feet. Suddenly the plane exploded. There was armor plate on my left under the window, and that became the area that blew out. Signaled to Johnny and then crawled through the opening knowing that shortly I could be like hamburger, since the #3 engines propeller was supposed to be right there.

My boots got caught in the jagged metal and before thinking, and with my right hand, I pulled the rip cord... immediately remembering pictures I had seen with men caught in the twin tail section with their chutes and falling to their deaths. But my Guardian Angel was riding with me. The Flak had blown off the left wing, so no propeller was there, and the explosion broke the ship in half, and since we had 2 engines on the right side we fell away from the tail section. Pulling the rip cord with my right arm was the last thing I could do with it. It hung limp at my side.

My boots were gone. I looked up and saw that an entire section of my chute was torn away from the force of pulling me loose, but apparently my legs were O.K. I saw Johnny through my chute above me and I looked frantically and prayerfully for others. Later I realized that the left wing contained the hydraulic system, so the men in the turrets could not get out of them in time. (3 men) They rode them into the ground. My radio man and

engineer, located just behind the armor plated pilots seats must have been cut down by the flak that blew off the wing. I lost 6 great men in the effort to “save the world” as we knew it.

Looking down I finally spotted another chute over Holland and found out that it was Art, my Bombardier. I also realized that I was over the North Sea and I needed to do something about getting the parachute harness off since we had been taught that coming down in water with a harness on, the chute would likely come down on top of you and you would probably drown. I also noticed that we were being fired upon. I could see machine gun tracers coming our way, however as I was falling particularly fast due to the condition of my chute, I was not hit. I started to unbuckle as best I could with my left arm and got one buckle undone when I hit the water like a ton of bricks. No idea how far I went under and I was out of breath when I popped back up again. An offshore wind was blowing and my chute was half open pulling me out to sea!! We were shot down over the Isle of Vlissingen, known as Flushing, at the entrance to the harbor. As I was towed out, I discovered an anti-submarine net which I clung onto, since I knew the chute wasn't going to tow me all the way back to England.

I got rid of my escape kit and my 45 revolver since intelligence told us that if you were captured with it they may use it to kill you, so it sank into the sea. Got the rest of the harness off and realized that I was in the coldest water I had ever been in. My watch stopped at 3 minutes to nine, which is still very much daylight at that latitude and time of year. I was about a mile off shore when I noticed some of the enemy inflating a rubber boat. I was hoping to get away into the Dutch underground, but finally the Kriegsmarines arrived, pulled me into their dinghy and said, “Für you de Krieg is fertig” Finally we got to shore after transferring to a motor launch and one of their medics slit my sleeve up to my shoulder.

Then I realized where I had been hit... I could look through my arm, saw the bone which had miraculously had not been broken, and after my return to the states I found that I had lost most of my triceps. The freezing salt water probably also saved my life since it retarded the bleeding, and the salt may have cauterized the wound. We were taken to a revetment, stripped, saw some white powder poured into the wound, which I hoped was penicillin, got a shot, which I hoped was morphine, after which the uncontrollable shivering receded. Assuming Johnny and Art were also there, we redressed and marched through the streets of Rotterdam where men showed the ‘V’ sign even when they were threatened by the German guards armed with their “grease guns,” they still stood there to bolster our feelings. At the hospital I found that 6 of my men were “totd,” and my great crew were in the Lord's hands. After having the wound redressed we were taken to a 4 story building where we were confined in solitary.

After a few days we were marched to a train station whence I found that Johnny had received a piece of flak in his left buttock, and then I saw Art. His entire head was bandaged to his neck at shoulder level, and all I could see of his face was the end of his nose and his lips, both of which appeared to be black. I was afraid he was blind. He was thirsty so I led him to a fountain at the station. A lady was ahead of us, and when she

turned and saw Art, she fainted. He was still lucid at the time and told me, "Skipper, after the plane blew up, it blew over the nose wheel section and I could not get Sgt. Neely out of his turret, so I had to leave. I opened the chute and smelled something burning, put my hand up to my hair and realized... it was me.

We were placed into a train compartment, under guard, with the curtains pulled down so we could not see out to see the damage that our bombs had done along the Rhine. We railed down to Frankfort on the Main.

Solitary again and then interrogation. We had been taught not to tell the enemy anything but the name, rank, and serial number under threat of courts-martial. I was marched to an officer's office. Initially he was very polite, even offered me a cigarette (American) which I refused. I wish I had taken it to give to another P.O.W. but too late. "We know your Group, 453rd, your Colonel Potts, that you have a movie star there, Stewart." (He even knew where I had trained!!!) "All we want to know is your bomb load and your target." There was a map on the wall that had a string almost exactly to where we had been. Name, Rank, Serial Number. He got ugly, called a guard in and had him place his rifle to my head and the Major said, "We can easily add your name to your dead crew, for the Red Cross has not yet been notified about any survivors."

I prayed a bit, and then figured, hopefully, that he was not going to have my brains all over his office, gave name, rank, and serial number once again. Intelligence had taught us that if we didn't reveal anything, the next day we'd be headed for a P.O.W. camp. If you did, they would pump you dry under threat of courts-martial. They were right, the next day I boarded a train and headed for Stalag Luft III in Sagan. (Poland) That begins another whole story.

Johnny wound up in the same camp, but we didn't see Art again 'til 9 months later in the 2nd camp in Mossberg, Germany where we had been moved in January, 45. He had spent most of his time in German hospitals for plastic surgery!!! (He was Jewish) After 10 months, 2 P.O.W. camps, Patton liberated us. We got back 6/45 to the states.