

Bill,

Here goes,

March 23, 1945, was a clear day and we had a visual bomb run on Munster, Germany. The German artillery had an excellent chance to zero in on the bombers hitting their freight yards. The command ship in which Ralph was a machine gunner was hit and caught fire. My plane was just behind his in the formation. We were flying at 26,000 feet altitude. The lead bombardier had programmed the Norden bomb sight and it couldn't be changed if we were to hit the target. I had just closed the bomb bay doors when we got a solid hit. I saw the red explosion ~~break~~ the plane. The co-pilot was at the controls when he yelled "There goes the left rudder." The pilot seemed to be calm when he said over the intercom "Crew from pilot, prepare to bail out." Within a few seconds, realizing that the plane was going out of control, gave the order to bail out. I found myself fighting the hideous centrifugal "g" force. I tried to get the engineer out of the top turret, all to no avail. Then I was tossed about on the top of the plane to the wheel well below the main deck. Somehow I found myself outside the plane. I pulled the rip cord and looked down. There were two parachutes below me. We were interviewed at Stalag VIIIF. That's when I met Ralph Cochran - That was the beginning of our association.

He was burned on his back, neck, and shoulders. Unfortunately, the Germans had no first aid and that was the beginning of some serious concerns. We were confined in a semi-subterranean cell for about a week. Prisoners had all kinds of rank - from colonel to wing commander to sergeant. There were ~~Commercial~~ pilot - to navigator - to radio operator - to machine gunner - from many countries.

We left Stalag VIIIF in a 40 X 8 cattle car and after several days we arrived at Stalag XII B at Fallenbastei - next to Bergen Belsen - one of several extermination camps. ~~See~~ The Russians were moving westward and the British and Americans were moving eastward. We were in a ~~GERMAN~~ concentration camp. Before long a ~~general~~ came in and asked if anyone could speak German or French. We had one in our barracks and went with the ~~general~~, only to return with the message "Nous partons de suite." We picked up whatever we had and moved toward the barbed wire gate. We moved down the road in a ~~new~~ military column of three. We found ourselves sleeping in barns and under farm equipment. That was when my lungs gave out and Ralph still had no medication for his burns. Every morning he would strip down his flight suit and bare his back and ask how the burns looked. He had carbunkles so large that one could spoon corruption out of them. Each morning he did the same and asked if I saw any improvement over the previous day. I stated that I did, knowing that I was lying. I fully expected to see red streaks coming out of the infected area. They did not and I knew that we could not give up.

Meanwhile, we were on the march and hungry, without food, still without medicine. ~~See~~ Whatever we could find in the barns was our sustenance. Neither Ralph nor I could keep up with the column. It stopped every hour to rest. But Ralph and I were some distance behind and before we could reach the other prisoners, they were ready to "hit the road." We were told that if we got too far behind, we would likely be shot and left on the side of the road. Once the guard stopped us at the end of the column and ordered us to move to the edge of the woods without explanation. We thought this might be the end of it all. We always had the fear of execution. However, we were detained to help push the horse-drawn wagon up the hill because the horse didn't have any traction to pull the wagon without bruising his knees on the pavement. Another time while at Stalag XII B we were headed outside the barracks to take a shower. When we arrived we went into a metal building with aluminum walls. There were openings at the top of the walls. Sure they must have had plans for us. Cyanide pellets would have ended it all. But it didn't happen.

On May 1st we were told that we would be marched westward into British and American lines. We had our doubts, but I had a tiny magnetic compass hidden in my belt buckle that the Germans didn't find when they searched me. All day long I was asked

to give a status report. It was the same all day - west. We had no news about the Russians advancing from the east nor the British and Americans forces doing the same from the west. We were sandwiched between the two fronts. After it was over, we knew we should have known that the Germans would never have permitted the Russians to overtake them - after Stalingrad and Poland. On May 2nd we awoke to learn that all the guards were gone - and the German shepherd dogs, Only the lieutenant in charge remained. Soon an armored column came down the road following an M.P. They stopped and we went to the road to greet them. They didn't know who we were and why we were there. They began to throw rations, for we were asking for food.

After they moved ahead we somehow appropriated a truck, and as many as possible climbed aboard and headed west. We crossed the Elbe on a pontoon bridge into the British sector. I don't remember but I'm sure that Ralph was with me. After ~~delousing~~ delousing, we were given clean clothing and our flight suits <sup>which</sup> was infested with lice and burned. Somewhere along the way, I was given a British uniform. We eventually boarded a train to go to a <sup>loading</sup> ~~loading~~ runway and were flown by the British to Brussels. And then to a tent city named for American cigarettes. There was a <sup>new</sup> ~~loading~~ runway where airplanes frequently landed. I guess Ralph hiked a ride to London looking for Olive. I think she was in the British military, and he had difficulty finding her. He had no funds and that made it worse. The Red Cross offered no help, and I think he swore eternal vengeance against that organization.

No apologies for the errors - after all, I am almost 92 years old. I hope this will help in your endeavor.

Frank H. Sykes

Keep the photos - I have my own.