

Account written by J. Brunson Wille
of being shot down over Germany,
captured, and transported to POW camp

DESCENT INTO GERMANY

Monday March 6, 1944 started much like any other combat day in England. A three o'clock awakening, and notification by Lt. Smyrl that breakfast was at 3:30, briefing at 5:00. Our hopes were high for fresh eggs for breakfast, but we were confronted with powdered eggs and sausage. Had I not been hungrier than usual I would have passed them up, but the catsup bottle was the saving factor, so they were smothered in catsup, past the point of recognition, and hastily consumed.

Croc and I waited for slow Coop, and pokey Pinski, just barely catching the last transportation for the Briefing Room. There were some quite ominous mumblings concerning Big B (Berlin), but not until we hit the briefing room would we let ourselves believe the worst. I didn't realize until then just how far that piece of red yarn could stretch! There was the usual and customary moaning among the boys, but this morning we all listened when the S-2 Officer gave out with the facts of the mission. The Weather Officer assured us that we were probably in for bad weather, so our spirits fell, for he was never right; our hopes for a cancelled mission went flying out the window.

Our station time was set at 7:00 A.M., take off at 7:45, and target time at 12:01, so we should be back in time for the Liberty Run this evening. Our position was #3 in the second element, which wasn't bad, and take-off and assembly went very well. Cooper and Pinski are trying the heated suits out today, so they should be a bit more comfortable than they have been in the past. Our bomb load today is something new,-- 8,500# clusters of a new type of incendiary, with a special pin wrinkle, so I'll take the responsibility of pulling the pins today.

Leavy aborted at the coast, so we pull up into his position,--a move which we have cause to regret on the return trip. The weather is beautiful,--bright and clear, contact weather with unlimited visibility. We run into a heavy concentration of Flak at Rheine, and a burst under Upson knocks out his number three engine, forcing him to pull out of the high squadron, and turn for home. (We later saw him at Stalag, and learned that he was frustrated in his homeward attempt, being forced down by fighters.)

Past Rheine we encounter only scattered bits of flak, thrown up by mobile unit the Germans use, not too accurate, but disconcerting. About twenty minutes off target a group of German fighters sweep over us, and we think they are going to turn and come in, but they hit the Wing ahead of us, and there's one hellova scramble. They got two Forts on the first pass, and then our P-51's swarm in from above and pick off five, as near as we can tell. The attacks last only seconds, but they seem like they're moving in slow motion. The activity makes the whole Wing take on the appearance of a swarm of angry bees. Our escorts' promptness in appearing certainly gives us confidence.

We're about 30 miles off the target and can see a solid cloud layer coming in on the east boundry of Berlin, all targets are open, however, so we should get in and out just in time. We turn on target and start in on our run. The smoke from the flak is so dense that it is impossible to see the Wing ahead of us,--and then we're in it! I've never seen such big puffs of flak, and though most of it's low now, I know it'll rise when the Krauts see their range is off. After a seeming eternity our bombs are away, and my rack panel shows my bomb bay is clear,--so doors closed and a lot of breath holding until we get out of this damned holocaust.

A burst of flak hit a cluster from the ship in front of us, and a stream of fire cuts loose, the whole formation is being rocked by the concussion. I finally look around enough to make some observations, and note that the target west of us has received a good plastering, and is burning violently. I finally screw up enough courage, and look out of the nose; I'm rewarded by the sight of seeing our target hit.

At 14,000 feet you can see too much; buildings are gutted in Berlin, no place seems untouched, the RAF has hit Berlin and hurt it plenty. After a period seeming like eternity, we're out of the flak and already are beginning to let down to a lower altitude. Our oxygen for this lengthy a trip is insufficient unless we're at lower altitudes. It's at this stage that our lead man Jones, starts the snafu that later makes this our last mission. He overshoots, then under-shoots on the letdown, necessitating our s-ing out and back, leaving us very vulnerable to any roving fighter. I've never before or since heaped such invective upon a man's head, nor been sorrier that he couldn't hear it!

On one of these wide sweeps out it happens; before we can fire a shot in cracks a FW-190 from 1 o'clock level, and we're clobbered from nose to tail! I can't really say what my first thoughts were, but I well knew that something was amiss. I couldn't figure what was wrong until I suddenly became aware that I was sitting a bit low in my seat;--and small wonder, for I most certainly was sitting knee deep in chin turret! A 20 MM had taken away the turret, and only the frame remained,--I was sitting in that! I wasn't excited as yet, for I noticed that we still had all four of our engines. So after getting my chute from Crock, I tried to call the back of the ship to see how they fared back there. It was dead though, so I turned to inquire of Crock his state of being, and was confronted with the sight of Trask sitting in the escape hatch with his chute in his arms. He was preparing to jump, and Crock pulled him back and buckled on his chute. Pinzke left the ship during that time, so Crock pushes Trask out and readies himself to go. I frantically grabbed him and asked him where in the hell my chute was, and was politely informed that I had it on.

Upon looking through the catwalk and into the cockpit, I can understand why we're having to leave the ship, it's a mass of yellow-red flames, out of control. Coop has set the automatic pilot and is kneeling on the catwalk, as I kneel and prepare to roll out. I can see the belly of the ship as I fall away, and she's turning a bit now,--back into Germany. I keep watching but don't see Coop come out. I've been slowly rolling over and over, and finally figure the delay is long enough, as a small skiff of clouds is coming up, and I'd better try this chute I've been wearing. A sharp tug on the handle, a billow of white in my face and I'm swinging. I look in my left hand and find it full of shoe strings,--all that remains of the shoes I so hastily grabbed.

My ears feel tight so I cleared them,--and until that time, I had never imagined that any place, on or above the earth, could be so deathly quiet, it was so quiet it was deafening! I was still gripping the rip cord handle, so threw it away. I then slid through the shallow skiff of clouds and began to think about my landing. I managed to stop my swinging by climbing the shroud lines, and then started looking over the ground. There was a woods dead ahead, so I start

slipping my chute in that direction. I can see the other boys floating above me yet, so I must have delayed quite a bit longer. I can begin to make out people on the ground, and can see that I'm either going to hit on a barn roof or in the barn yard: I have little time to think about it when Whammo, I'm down and rolling into my chute.

Within ten yards of me is a farmer, rusty gun and all, and from all appearances more scared than I am. Upon lifting my hands he comes forward and helps me remove my harness, and indicates that I'm to pick up my chute and follow him to the farm house. As we approach the house a young fellow of about 12 years runs out, and around the door are six more towheads, right on down the ladder, grouped around their mother. Another fellow comes up to us as we approach and greets me with, "American friend, I am Polish, you are in safe hands." My mind begins to turn at once to the possibility of getting out of this, so I ask him if I'm with friends, and he replies that "You are safe, do not worry."

I'm taken into the house through the joining dairy barn, and saw them tuck my chute away under the hay. The barn is actually as clean as the spotless kitchen into which I am led. The mother, the seven children, the two men and myself, stand for a moment just looking each other over, when the woman breaks the spell by moving to the stove to pour me some ersatz coffee. Beside this she places a generous slice of home made bread with butter and sugar on it. My limited German allows me to make inquiry about the ages of all the kids. They at once want to know my age, whether I'm married and the number of children I have, and I learn that they can all smile.

I still have my bar of Cadmans Chocolate in my knee pocket, so proceed to break it open and give a square to the children. They make no move to eat it, and I suddenly realize they are a bit suspicious, so I proceed to eat my piece. They look to their mother she nods okay, and all hands immediately pop chocolate into their respective mouths. I put out my arms to the youngest, and she comes right to me and climbs up onto my knee, with mama and papa smiling fit to burst.

The Polish boy, who had left in the meantime, came back with another man who gave me a friendly smile. The Pole told me everything was okay, and that they were taking me to a friend's house as soon as my comrade came. I wondered which one of the boys it could be, and soon learned that it was Trask. He had landed about one half mile East of me, so this would indicate that I had delayed my fall until I was about 4000 feet from the ground. Trask still seemed a bit dazed, but brightened considerably when I told him that there seemed to be a possibility that we'd get out of this jam.

The five of us then started out; the Pole and his friend, the farmer who had taken me, Trask and myself. They were careful to avoid prying eyes by preceding us, and motioning for us to duck down in ditches when strangers were sighted. I began to wonder if these stops were for security, or to avail themselves of the cigarette that was forthcoming each time we stopped. I was beginning to run low on my Phillip Morris. In their limited English they point out friendly houses in the neighborhood, distinguishing them by calling them Roosevelt Houses; other houses as Hitler Houses. These "borderline Germans" seemed a bit confused in their loyalty, throatline motions being made at every mention of Hitler's name.

After about an hour of this kind of travel, we approach a farmhouse, which is indicated as the place we are supposed to stay. Our approach is stopped by a lady who is standing in the doorway. She makes motions which indicate that we are to come no closer. One of the men goes up to the house, comes back to the group and holds a conversation in rapid German,-- the only word I can catch is Gestapo. The Polish boy then turns to me and informs me in broken English, that the house has been visited by a Lande Werker, and that it is no longer considered safe to try to harbor us. It's quite a letdown, but their disappointment is so evident that I almost feel sorry for them. The Pole shakes our hands, and leaves us. The other two start us walking toward the village.

In the course of our walk, little groups gather along the road to watch us go by. The absence of any men of age is quite noticeable. The girls are quite comely and attractive in their native dress, and openly friendly in their manner. These people show no outward sign of animosity.

We finally arrive at a community center and are directed to a building which seems to be a Party Headquarters. Quite a crowd had gathered here, and we most certainly are the center of curiosity. I tossed my flying helmet in the direction of a group of boys, and there was quite a scramble to get it. We are taken into a combination office and living room and find Baldwin and Ryno seated there. They give us no sign of recognition, so we sit and smoke our few remaining cigarettes, until an under-officer arrives.

He asks for our dog-tags, and proceeds to search us, taking everything we have on us. Watches, pencils, papers, cigarettes, escape kits, in fact anything we have loose on our person. I refused to give him my ring, and we had a few tense moments, but he let me keep it when he was reminded of my Officer status. About 5:00 o'clock we get moving toward the town of New hausen, which, according to the markers, is 5 Kilos. It is during this little walk that I became aware of a slight soreness in my right leg, but it's more of an aggravation than a pain. The German rides his little bicycle, and we trudge along side of him, four utterly dejected men.

As we get in the limits of the town, doors pop open and the adults stare us by. One chap chopping wood in a woodlot, who is apparently a forced laborer, gives us a smile and a sly "V" sign. The kids follow along hurling verbal taunts, which most certainly reflects their education of hate. We finally come up to a city building, are taken inside and down some dark stairs to a cell, which is about 8' by 8' and very cold and dark. I must confess that by this time we're beginning to feel pretty low. A small opening in the wall, about 8 by 12 inches allowed us to see that the day was about spent. We should be home in England getting ready to catch the Liberty Run!

We asked for water and got it, and then the four of us promptly interlaced ourselves on the floor to sleep. With the tension gone, we suddenly realize that we're very tired.

Our sleep is interrupted a little later when another man is thrust in the cell with us. We view him with suspicion, and no words are exchanged. In about another hour we are roused and ordered to leave the cell, and are taken outside to a waiting truck.

It's a quiet, eerie, blacked-out, moonlight night that greets us as we step out of the building. We are prodded into a truck that is already packed tight with men and chutes. Many of them are wounded, and we have to be very careful that we don't jostle them as we crawl in. Someone calls my name, and I find it's Crock, who reports that all are accounted for with the exception of Coop. It's a sad reunion, but we all feel fortunate to be alive. This is one helluva vehicle for wounded men to have to ride in, for it's difficult, as crowded as we are to keep from jostling against each other. It's sickening to hear a man cry with pain, and have no power to help him. There's morphine in some of the First Aid packs on the chute harnesses, but the Germans won't let us use it.

It seems like an endless ride, and from time to time we can hear the Air Alerts sounding in the villages, so the RAF is evidently following up our daylight raid. There are several stops to renew the fuel in this charcoal burner, before we finally reach our destination. We finally get out, and help the boys who are wounded, into a barren room. It is evident that we are to spend the rest of the night here. There seems to be no sleep left in us. The badly wounded are in mortal pain, and our request for medical aid is answered by a sneering retort from a Jerry Sgt., "we did not invite you to bomb Germany!"

The night finally drags into morning, and the sounds of outside activity filter into us. This seems to be a Hitler Youth Camp from what glimpses we can get of the troops outside. They finally come in and take the boys away who are badly wounded. My leg upon examination reveals two bruised places with little blue centers, so I've evidently caught a little 20 MM shrapnel. We're taken over to an office building, given a short interrogation and searched again. After three sittings in the Mess Hall, we're herded into the dining hall and have our first food, which consisted of Buttermilk Soup, Potatoes, and Barley Stew. Believe me though, it didn't taste too bad, and was exactly what their own troops were served.

We were loaded into buses shortly after eating, and taken about 10 kilometers into the town of Lingen. This town had been a target of opportunity for a Group not too long ago, and the factory building,

directly across the tracks from the railroad station had been totally destroyed. The residential section is relatively unhurt. There is a lot of animosity shown here though, and a crowd begins to gather around us, and quite a few of them edge in and spit at us. The train pulls in just in time for us, for we can tell the guards are getting just a little nervous. We're relieved to get on the trains and off the station platform. From this place on the ride is uneventful, third class coaches, and though we don't realize it, it's the best accommodations we'll have on the entire trip. We're traveling North by way of Meppen, Lathan, Dorpen and Aschendorf and on to Leer where we make a train change. This is at 8:00 O'clock, the evening of March 7th, 1944.

With a minimum of confusion we are directed to another train, and find the accommodations just a bit different. They are box cars with seats along the side, so we crowd in and get settled down as well as we can. We've left five of the boys behind us, those that were badly wounded, so they're evidently going to get some medical attention. We learned later that the one uncomplaining kid, whose arm was badly shattered, didn't pull through. It's no wonder though, for he'd received no medical attention other than the original dressing, for three days, and it was becoming quite fetid. He was in deeper pain than most of the others, but gave no indication of his suffering. Another, an officer, called Rock, had his eyes flash burned and his arm broken, and did more complaining than any of the other boys. Another, an engineer, whose whole face had been burned, and had a complete head dressing, never uttered a peep. Another was a Pilot, a big fellow, who was completely paralyzed, was the most cheerful of the lot, until you caught him off guard, he, we learned later, died.

Our change here at Leer started us on our way, and during the evening we passed through Apen and on into the station at Oldenburg. Here we were herded into the station proper with a guard thrown around us. The people didn't seem to take much notice of us, though a few stopped and questioned the guards. The station was a very modern one, much the same type as some of the better ones at home. We were taken downstairs and crowded into an alcove close to the baggage room, there the guard tried to learn if it were true, that we were paid \$400. a mission for raids over Berlin. It was truly laughable the propaganda these people have had concerning the American Terror Fliegers.

About three o'clock in the morning we're on the move again. There's a change in our guard personnel and they're old fellows who should be back on the farms. Our conveyance this time is the old 40 and 8 boxcar, with a bale of straw thrown in for bedding. One of the Krauts spots Gates' fur-lined pants and under our protest confiscates them. We are then shoved into the boxcars, 30 men to 5 guards. An incident occurred, which later proved quite amusing,--we were in the lead car with the under-officer in charge, and never having had a close look at a Nazi officer, we mistook him for a Captain at least. So our references to him during the trip, were as "Captain", his ego must have been greatly inflated by this constant reference, for we later learned that he was a Master-Sgt!

We finally get started again, and by this time we're beginning to feel the lack of food and water, not having had any since noon of the 7th. Just before dawn we move into a large marshalling yard, which we learn upon moving out is Bremen. The destruction is simply appalling; nothing but rubble on both sides of the tracks, few quarters are livable, but there are evidences that people are existing under very straitened circumstances. Factories have been leveled, and the close residences have necessarily been destroyed with them. The next town is Rotenburg, and finally we pull into Hamburg about 10 o'clock. Hamburg shows some signs of rebuilding, but all in all has the same desolate appearance as Bremen. There are no conscience twinges at all, for the German bombed England just as indiscriminately in the not too far distant past.

After a slight delay we turn south and the train comes to a halt just north of Hannover. From all indications it's time for the 8th AF to come over, and we're soon obliged by the sound of sirens, and the throbbing beat of motors. The heart swells just a bit to glimpse the force going over. The German troops who are in the cars behind us have dispersed to the fields beside the train. On both sides of us are single Flak batteries firing for all they're worth, when suddenly down on the deck, coming north toward us, are two P-47's. It's over before we have a chance to be frightened, and they've clobbered the hell out of the flak tower just west of us. From that time on the Goons are very unfriendly, and we get very few looks outside.

We spend most of the day and night in the railroad yards of Hannover, and go haltingly on all the next day. The thing that bothers us most is no food and no water. The food a person can do without, but the water question is different. When your mouth gets so damned dry that your tongue feels like a piece of flannel, your sense of reasoning starts to go. All of us start motions toward the guards in a manner that makes them realize their mistake, and when they recognize that there's danger of being rushed, they get us some water. So we finally get water on the afternoon of the 9th, while in the yards north of Frankfort. After an afternoon in the yards, we move off, and by a circuitous route move into Oberusel at about 8 O'clock in the evening. We're informed that our trip is temporarily at a halt.

We are herded through the skeleton structure of what has been a beautiful railroad station, and crowded onto streetcars. Most of the civilians who are on the streetcars are asked to get off, and we are taken to the interrogation center. We are assembled in an area outside the main building, and after a time our crew is called out by name, and we're taken inside the U-shaped building and put into the 7 by 12 foot cell, which is to be our home by necessity. Not until we are in the cell does it occur to me that they have assembled us as a crew! Where has this information come from? And Cooper's name was not called!

We're all dog-tired, so array ourselves on the floor and make an effort to get some sleep. After a while they rattle the door, and throw in nine thin pieces of black bread, and upon request, a can of water. I have never eaten a piece of bread more slowly, or relished it more fully, than I did that one! Thus the night is spent, no talk for fear of the walls being wired. We are wakened in the morning by some activity in the corridor, and after a while Pinski is called out. That's the last we see of Pink, until he turns up at Stalag Luft two weeks later. Croci is called shortly after, and then I get the word.

I went with trepidation, but my fears were short lived. My interrogation was short, and I was in no way coerced. My interrogator, speaking in faultless English, and with American slang, requested me to fill out a full page form. I filled in my name, rank, serial number and gave mother's home address, but skipped the rest. He became quite indignant at my refusal to give more information, and assured me he was there to help me, but didn't push me further.

He then proceeded to show me a folder on our Group, that was astonishing in its completeness. It contained a page on our ships crew, the number, our positions on the ship, and the section of the field in which our ship was parked. He was quite anxious to impress you with the fact that they had all the information they wanted, and then he very slyly try to get confirmation on a few facts. He finally gave me a cigarette with the brand name of "West Point", which I think I enjoyed more than any cigarette I'd ever smoked. I was then taken outside, and was soon joined by the enlisted men of the crew.

Groups of us were then taken to another building and searched again, then crowded into a small room to wait. A German enlisted man saw my ring and made motions for me to remove it and give it to him. I had no intention of giving it up, after having been searched by an officer, so I made it plain that I wanted to see an officer which seemed to be enough to call his bluff. We were then given the first real nourishment we'd had in three days; thick soup, heavy on potatoes, carrots and barley. It couldn't have tasted better if Charles of the Ritz had prepared it!

Later in the afternoon we were taken into the city by bus, to a Dulag Luft, which was known to us from previous briefing, as "the Hotel." As we got off the buses outside the barbed wire enclosure we were greeted by calls from within of friends of ours who had gone down several days before.

Our first stop inside the enclosure was at a warehouse, where the issue of Red Cross items was begun. We received a shirt, a coat, heavy and light underwear, soap, cigarettes, a razor and blades, towel, and I a pair of shoes that were tremendous! I slid around so much in them that I felt as if I were taking two steps forward and one backward! They were shoes though and a definite improvement over the electric liners I'd been wearing.

We were then taken over for a shower, and what a luxury that everyday thing turned out to be. I had never realized before that water could possibly have a caressing feeling, I couldn't get enough of it, but had to, for we were limited on time. It certainly felt good to get clean and put on clean clothing.

We were then taken to barracks in which we were to spend the night or longer, dependent on when transportation could be arranged for to take us to a permanent camp.

That evening we had our first meal of Red Cross food. Spam and potatoes, black bread, oleo and jam, very tightly rationed but very good. The night of the 10th was a night of sound dreamless sleep. The next morning the most important thing seemed to be breakfast, and we all lined up early. We were counted, and so many allowed to go in the mess hall at a time. There was a place for each man, and an equal portion of bread, oleo and honey at each man's place. One cup of tea from the pitcher, and the remaining portion equally divided. Little did we know, but we were to be made very aware of this precise division of food for many subsequent months.

The rest of the day was spent in walking around the compound, gossiping, and checking up on friends who were missing. Pinski hadn't shown up yet, and we learned through the American in command of the Camp, that Cooper was reported by the Germans to have been found dead in the ship. We wanted to disbelieve, but found it hard to do under the circumstances. We kept checking the list all day, but had to spend another night in camp before our names were posted for shipment. It is evident that our enlisted men are to go on a separate shipment to a different camp, for all on our list are officers.

Later in the morning we gather together our belongings, and are loaded in trucks and taken to the station. Frankfort is a heap of rubble, and a very quiet city. There are very few people on the streets, and it has a desolate deserted look about it. The paradoxical thing is the I. G. Farben building which we could see from the camp, apparently undamaged, as if it had been avoided with intent.

We were finally settled in railroad cars, 20 men to 5 guards, our shoes and belts taken from us, and issued a Red Cross food parcel apiece. Thus started our four day trip to Barth on the Baltic, where we were to sojourn for the next fifteen months.

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