

## THE JOURNEY DOWN

by: Marshall T. (Tex) Windham

The 8th A.F. , 457 B.G.H., 750 Sqdn., which I was part of, was stationed in Glatton, England. On October 17, 1944, the crew of the B17 Flying Fortress B.T.O. (Big Time Operator), was to fly our third mission in 4 days. The 457th was to hit Cologne, the 2nd largest city in Germany.

We knew the flack would be heavy, but I was always one to believe nothing was going to happen to me... it was always going to happen to somebody else.

It was our last mission before we were to get our flack leave, a small vacation from war.

It was an ordinary day , everything went as usual... getting up, breakfast, briefing, except for three changes.

We had a new bombardier, Lt. Oliver Wicks. He was to fly his first mission with us, replacing Lt. Jerold Hoelzel, who had been removed from our crew to fly on lead plane, and had already been shot down on a raid to Peenemunde. They had made it to Sweden and were interned there. He would later return to the base, but only after we had already been shot down.

Sgt. Stephen Lupo was on our original crew, and had flown a number of missions with us, but had been grounded with ear trouble. He was our waist gunner, and was replaced by S/Sgt. Joseph M. Budich.

I, T/Sgt. Marshall T. Tex Windham, was moved from the bombardiers position in the nose of the plane, to the engineers position behind the pilot - 1st Lt. Norman M. Chapman, and the co-pilot - Lt. Raymond K. Mills, in the top turret, which I was trained to do. I was to replace T/Sgt. Joseph Schambri, who had been killed in an accident on the base. How little I knew at the time that fate had just taken a turn as to whether I would live or die in this great war.

Everything went routinely. Take off and forming over the wash went well. We had a little engine trouble with #3, but nothing to stop us from continuing the mission. We crossed the English Channel, gained altitude to about 29,000 ft., went on oxygen, and loaded and tested the guns. Everything had to be ready for when we reached enemy territory. We watched for fighters, dodged flack, and watched for our "little friends", our own fighter escort, the P51s, P47s, and P38s. Then came the target, Cologne Marshalling Yards, and that great wall of black flack shot up at groups that came before us. On the I.P., the point in the bomb run when there is no turning back, no maneuvering out of fire, there is 3 to 5 minutes when the plane is in the hands of the bombardier, who is getting a fix on the target, and about to drop the bombs, the plane was virtually a sitting duck.

That black wall was getting blacker and more intense. Then it happened! Two direct hits under the ship. One right under the cockpit, and the other in the #3 engine.

It seemed to lift the whole plane 20 or 30 ft. Two or three engines were knocked out. We had to drop out of formation to salvo, or dump, our bombs. Just about all instruments were knocked out, as well as communications to the nose compartment. Chapman was doing a great job of keeping the old bird straight. He checked on everybody's condition in the back of the plane, and everybody back there was shaken, but OK.

We were losing altitude fast, and Chapman, not knowing when the plane might blow up, or catch fire, ordered the crew to bail out. He said he was going to try to put the plane into a gradual glide, and try to make it out of enemy territory, which was only about 60 or 70 miles near Belgium, or Aachen, Germany.

The crew, having no desire to bail out, especially over Germany, all expressed their desire to go with him. We had lost enough altitude to go off oxygen, and Chapman agreed for us to go with him. He told us to throw everything out that we could to lighten the ship.

I came down out of the top turret and stood behind Chapman and Mills to ask what I should do. Before Chapman answered, I noticed Lt. Mills hadn't moved, and his head was slumped over. I put my hand on his shoulder to check on him. I think I already knew he was dead. At the same time, Chapman looked at me and said that Mills was dead. He then told me to go down in the nose and see how things were down there.

I noticed Chapman was having a hard time keeping the plane flying. When we broke away from the group, it wasn't long before we were in heavy cloud cover. The instruments gone, he was flying by the seat of his pants. I could tell when he was diving a little too steep, I would get light on my feet. He would pull up a little, and I would get heavy on my feet. He did a great job though. I had great faith in him. We had a good crew. The boys in back were busy throwing things out to lighten the ship, and were already trying to drop the ball turret.

When I reached the nose section, I think the full impact of our situation really hit me. There were so many holes in the plane, and some of them so big, I really wondered if it was possible to go further! F.O. Kenneth Johnson, our navigator, was still sitting at the navigators table. His head was almost completely gone! Scattered with everything else all over the nose compartment! I can still see him, his nose laying flat on his work table in front of him! I think some of the prop from #3 engine went through the fuselage and hit him.

Lt. Wicks was still at his position in the nose. I made my way to him, past the large holes in the ship, and asked him how he was. He said he was hit in the knee and side, and showed me, but it was hard to tell just how bad it was through his flying suit.

This is when I realized that except for the events before this mission, this would be me! This was my position! I had been sitting here every mission before this!

I went back up and told Chapman the situation, and that Wicks also wanted to ride the ship down.

Chapman thought it would be safer for Wicks to bail out, and told me to go back down and throw him out. I went back down in the nose, but couldn't find a way to make Wicks bail out. I couldn't throw him out either, because his chute was full of holes from the flack. Again I reported to Chapman, and he said if I could get Wicks out of the nose and back to a safer position, it would be OK for him to ride it down also.

Back down in the nose I had to go again. And each time I crawled over all those holes in the plane, with all the wind coming through, I had the feeling I might fall through, or the whole nose would fall off!

I reached Wicks again, and explained that we had to find a safer place to secure him for a crash landing. As we struggled, me pulling, and he trying to crawl and slide along, I could tell he was in a great deal of pain. But he never said so, or complained. We finally reached the small area behind the upper turret, and this is where I secured him as best I could.

All the while, Jimmy Dixon, Carl Weibel, Joe Budich, and Robert Brady were working desperately to drop the ball turret to lighten the load in hopes we might get a little more distance out of the old B.T.O. But in vain...there just wasn't enough time.

I had just gotten back to my position, and asked Chapman if there was anything else I should do, when we broke out of the clouds in a pretty steep dive. The ground was really coming up fast it seemed, even though it was raining and foggy, and the visibility was poor.

Chapman said I was to get back to the radio room and get everybody in ditching or crashing position.

As fast as the ground was coming up, he didn't have to tell me twice! I took off, and wasn't sure I would have time to get everybody in place before we crashed! The terrain I saw looked pretty bad for any kind of landing!

We all got in position and didn't have long to wait. But they were very tense moments! I remember after Chapman cut what engine we had, there was an eery quiet. Then a small noise and a couple of small bounces. Nothing serious at all! Then the longest slide I ever hope to remember! It seemed to me we would never quit sliding! I guess I was expecting a crash. Subconsciously, I knew that at any time during a belly slide, a crash might be at the end. But finally the plane came to a stop! Chappy, as we sometimes called him, had done a great job!!! As far as I am concerned, he rates the D.F.C. (Distinguished Flying Cross). We stopped just feet from a hedgerow and trees.

I shouted for the crew to hurry and get out, for fear there might be a fire, or explosion. They did, and I checked the plane, and everything seemed to be O.K. I went back in and met Chapman helping Wicks get out.

It was so quiet and peaceful. We were sure we had made it out of enemy territory.

Chapman got the first aid kit, and was dressing Wicks wounds. He had a lot of pain, but would not have a shot.

Lt. Chapman said for two of us to try to find out where we were, so Carl Weibel and I started out toward a hill and a line of trees. We had no idea which direction we were going. It was drizzling and hazey, and there was very bad visibility. We had gone some 3 or 4 hundred yards up the side of a hill and to the edge of the timber, but we could still see the crash site. We looked back, and could see some soldiers at the plane. They seemed to us to be helping our crew.

There were some fox holes on the side of the hill, and we got in one, and watched. The fox holes hadn't seemed to be used for some time, indicating that the war had already passed by here. The soldiers seemed friendly. By this time, some of them had left the crash site, and were coming closer to where we were. They were about 250 yards away, but it was still raining and hazy, and we couldn't tell what kind of soldiers they were. Scared, still shaken, and not wanting to be separated from our crew, Carl and I talked it over, trying to decide whether they were allies or enemy. Wanting to believe we had made it across the lines, and wanting to believe they were friendly, we decided to join them. How wrong we were!!

For us the war was over!.....

They had taken us about 100 yards when the allies must have gotten a fix on us and tried to save us by shooting artillery over our heads to cut the Germans off. But it was too late.

I will never forget the scream of those shells! The first shell or two, the Germans laid flat on the ground, and we just stood there while the shells went right over our heads and exploded 30 or 40 yards beyond. It didn't take us long to learn though, the next couple of shots we ate dirt just like the Germans. Then they quit firing. We had landed between allied and enemy lines. Just a few hundred yards further, and we would have made it!

They took us across the field, and into the woods to a barn about a mile from where we crashed. Lt. Wicks walked with the help of one of us on each side all the way. We could tell he was hurting real bad. Then they took him away, we assumed to a hospital. This was the last time we saw him. Evidently he didn't make it out, because later, Lt. Chapman and Sgt. Weibel got letters of inquiry as to his condition when last seen. The rest of the crew who survived don't really know.

They took us to Frankfurt from there. That was the interrogation center, and where we officially got to be prisoners of war. This was a big relief, because up till then, they could have just shot us, and we would have been "killed in action", or "shot trying to escape"! Or just any reason they wanted to suit them. As prisoners of war, by the Geneva Convention, we had to be accounted for.

Frankfurt is where we last saw Chapman. He was sent to Stalag Luft 17B, and we were sent to Stalag Luft IV, northeast of Berlin, on the Baltic.

There we stayed for 3 months. We hoped we might be liberated by the Russians. We could hear the war going on east of us for about 2 weeks, but no luck.

They moved us out in 8X40 boxcars, some 3,000 of us. And we were the lucky ones. Some 6,000 others walked endlessly until the war was over.

We were locked in the boxcars for 8 days and nights, with very little food, mostly Red Cross food we had brought with us, and hardly any water at all. We had to drink melted snow.

But the P.O.W. story is quite another story in itself! The lives of Sgts. Marshall T. Windham, Carl M. Weibel, James R. Dixon, Joseph M. Budich, and Robert T. Brady parallel that of Sgt. Forrest W. Howell, in his book Whisper of Death, almost completely. We reached Stalag Luft IV almost at the same time, rode the same train to Barth, Stalag Luft I, and were liberated by the Russians at wars end.

The Air Force flew us out to Camp Lucky Strike, in France. From there we were put on the U.S.S. Hermitage, and taken back to New York.

We had flown over New York, and the Statue of Liberty on our way over, but she never looked more beautiful than when we returned. I remember thinking of all the boys, especially my friends, who had paid the supreme price, and would never see her again.

I reached San Antonio, Texas June 23, 1945. My birthday! A 22 year old veteran! I had made bets with some of the guys that we would be home by my birthday! I also met my wife to be, Mary Rosalie Zavesky.

Then it was on to my home and family in Center, Texas. I spent 60 days there, on convalescent leave, to recuperate from my prisoner of war ordeal.

Was I glad it was over!!!

I now live in Columbus, Texas, with my wife Mary. We have five children, Donna, Marshall T. Jr., Rhonda, Polly, and Amy, and eight grandchildren.

We're still looking for Brady and Lupo, but the rest of our crew get together every year, to reminisce, and have a great time.