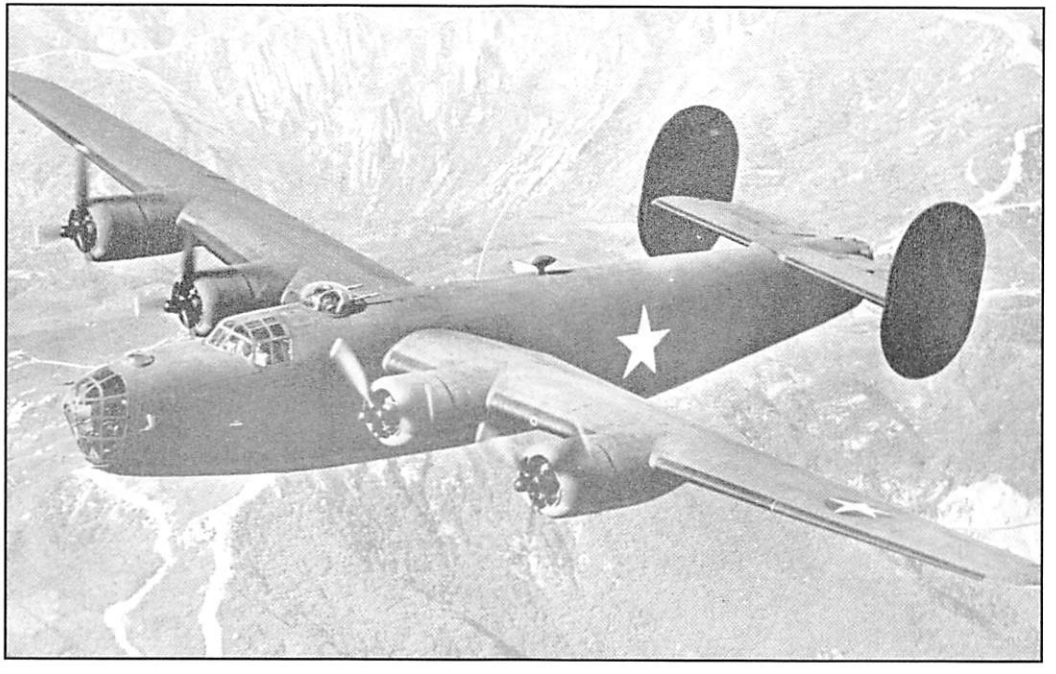
WORLD WAR II

50
Combat Missions over Europe



Experiences of Billy G. Ray

For

Hilda, my dear wife and lifetime partner and
my sons Chris and Steve and their families
who encouraged me to record my war experiences.
And in loving memory of my son, Greg.

Preface

This story is told by Billy G. Ray who was a Captain in the Army Air Corps and a commanding pilot of a B-24 Bomber during World War II. He was credited with 50 missions bombing strategic German military targets in Europe and was shot down over enemy territory on his 50th mission. Thereafter, he was a German prisoner of war until Hitler's army was defeated.

He was awarded the Distinguished Flying Cross, the Air Medal with 4 Oak Leaf Clusters, the Purple Heart and the Prisoner of War medal for his meritorious service.

CHAPTER I

My first encounter with war was a shocking experience that I shall never forget. We had just completed the last leg of our flight overseas and landed at the #736 Squadron of the 454th Bomb Group in Italy to which we had been assigned. This was about 5:00 p.m. We went to the Operations Office to check in. There we found and learned of a tragedy. In Operations there were a number of airmen, some with tears running down their cheeks, some crying outright, and all speechless.

That day their squadron composed of 16 planes manned by 160 airmen embarked on a bombing mission over a target in Europe. On that day all were shot down by enemy flak or enemy planes except for three planes that were shot up badly but did return. To these men in Operations, it was not 13 planes that were shot down; it was 130 of their buddies who were killed or taken prisoner.

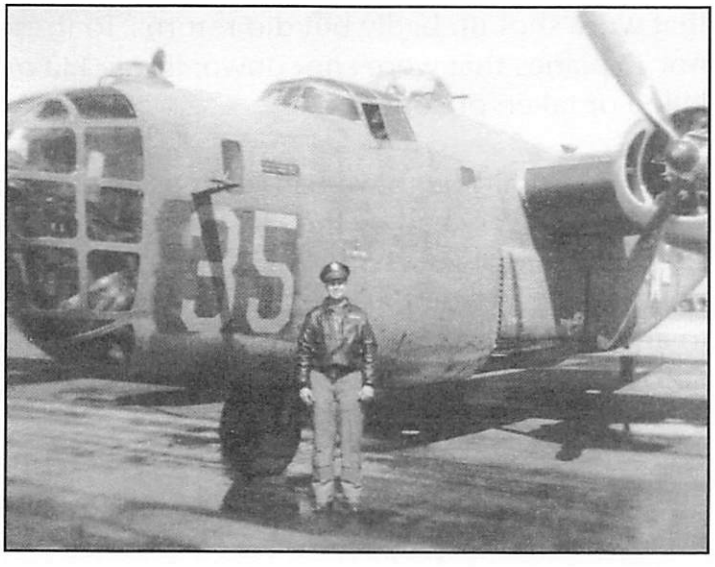
To us, although we had feelings of great sadness and sympathy, we were mostly shocked by the fact that on one mission 13 of 16 planes were shot down. Not good odds when we had 50 missions to fly if we were lucky. We were a very somber crew when we returned to our plane and reported to another squadron (#737). My thought at that time was that war is a dangerous and tragic event and I doubted that I would ever return home.

I soon learned that at that time the German fighter planes and flak guns were shooting down so many of our planes daily that there was a dangerous shortage of American pilots and planes in the European theater of war.

Chapter II

Getting our crew together and flying the plane overseas was an interesting experience. First, I will explain the logistics of getting our crew together. The Army Air Corps had a pool of trained pilots, navigators, bombardiers, engineers, radiomen and gunners. From this pool a crew was selected composed of ten crewmen. Our crew was assigned to March Field near Riverside, California, for training and bomb dropping practice on the Mojave Desert. Then we moved on to Hamilton Field north of San Francisco where we were assigned a new B-24J plane. Of course, we all thought we were headed across the Pacific. Not so, our orders were to fly to West Palm Beach, Florida, and then on to the European Theater of war.

We flew from Hamilton Field to West Palm Beach from which we departed to the Island of Trinidad just off the coast of Venezuela. Before we left Florida, we were given a crate of pigeons, reason being that we had to maintain radio silence to avoid detection by German (Nazi) submarines which were lurking in the water waiting for U.S. planes en route to Europe. If we were shot down or had a problem that required ditching in the ocean, our instructions were for the navigator to determine our position and then place that information in a capsule on the leg of a pigeon which would fly back to West Palm Beach



"Billy and B-24 before departure for Italy"

alerting the U.S. Coast Guard of our position. Sounds primitive but no doubt it saved some flyers' lives.

When we landed at Trinidad we deposited that crate of pigeons, refueled and picked up a new crate of pigeons for our next leg to Belem, Brazil, where we repeated the procedure to Natal, Brazil, then across the Atlantic to Dakar, West Africa. The trip across the Atlantic was a new experience for all of us. All we could see was water, water, water for hours and hours. The navigator's quarters was on the bottom deck just behind the nose gunner and the bombardier. The crew, being concerned about the time we had flown with no sign of land, were having doubts about our navigator's ability and our success of finding land before we ran out of fuel. The navigator assured us that we were on course and he returned to reading a novel really unconcerned. We were losing patience with him. Finally, before we ran out of fuel we saw land and landed safely at Dakar, Africa. We had been flying for more than twelve hours and believe me there was jubilation on the plane when we saw land. We regained confidence in our navigator and later learned that he was a very intelligent young man and a very proficient navigator. I am always grieved about this when I remember that he was killed on our first mission to Ploesti, Romania.

From Dakar, we flew across the desert to Marrakech, Morocco, where we refueled, then on to Tunis, Tunisia and then across the Mediterranean Sea to Cerignola, Italy, on the eastern coast above the Italian "heel."

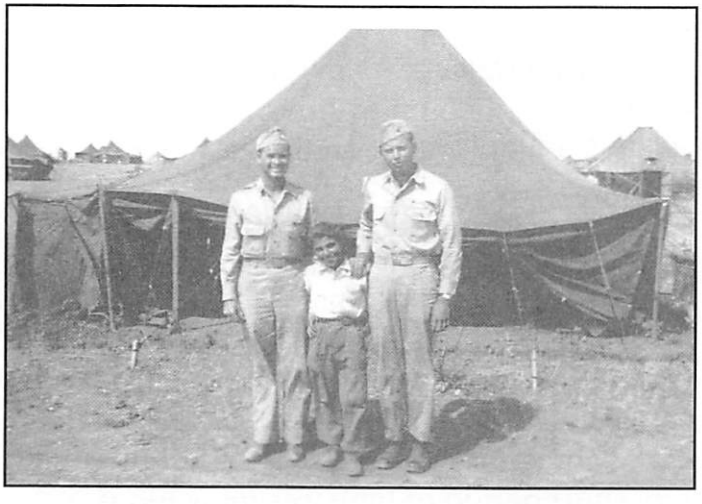
Now if you were on an airliner today traveling from the U.S.A. to Europe, you would sit back, relax and enjoy the trip. But if you were making the trip in a B-24 plane piloted by two young pilots, neither of whom had been in flight training for more than 16 months, and a navigator with about 12 months training, you would have had the right to have many anxieties. Actually, we willingly accepted those anxieties we faced in the flight across the Atlantic. The technical and psychological training by the Air Corps in a very short period of time was miraculous.

Chapter III

Before I describe the events of flying missions, I will share with you a description of the airstrip, our living quarters and our life style at Squadron #737 located near Cerignola, Italy.

The landing strip was dirt with thick metal mesh plates covering the ends where we would touch down for landings. We lived in tents, four officers in one tent and six enlisted men in another tent. All tents had dirt floors, army cots and no heat nor running water. We made our own heaters composed of one-half of a 50 gallon barrel, a salvaged plane gas tank and a copper tube (from a damaged plane) connecting the tank outside the tent to the inverted barrel inside at the middle of the tent. The tank was filled with high octane aviation fuel and at the end of the copper tube, which was placed under the barrel, we installed a clamp which controlled the drips of gas under the barrel. Not EPA approved but then we had nothing better and it was very cold. Often, one of the heaters would explode, blowing the half barrel completely through the top of the tent many feet in the air. This happened to us but fortunately no one of us was hurt. It was exciting and we did replace the barrel and continued to use the explosive heating system.

When we arrived at the 737th Squadron, we were given a large rolled up tent with instructions to erect it but without instructions as to how. As we were pondering about how to proceed, a little Italian boy offered his services. His name was Mario, about



"Billy (left) with Mario and friend"

13 years of age, and from experience he knew exactly how to put the tent up. He took command and with our help the tent was erected.

Not long before, the people of Cerignola, Italy, Mario's home town, were left without food and other necessities by a retreating German army. The native Italian people were faced with an almost impossible task of finding food and clothing. Mario had the responsibility in his family for finding these provisions for his six younger brothers and sisters in a cold, war torn, and unfriendly situation.

On that first day, Mario had no shoes, was cold and hungry. It was very easy to befriend him with a few lire, some food and a little compassion. He was back early the next morning with a big charming smile eager to help in any way possible.

He was a very intelligent little boy who was anxious to learn English and soon was able to communicate. He became our helpful interpreter, procurement officer, tent guard, housekeeper and general manager and was able to give us more than he received in return.

Mario was always on the flight line waiting for our return from each mission. When I was shot down and did not return from my 50th mission, I later learned that in celebration of, hopefully, my final mission Mario had brought flowers and wine to the flight line. Our ground crew chief, who I saw much later, told me that Mario sat there on the flight line all night long with his flowers, wine and tears. He was a true friend indeed.

Thirty years later Mario, Hilda and I had a joyful reunion at the Hilton Hotel in Rome where Mario was the Maitre D'. Since the war days, Mario had learned five different languages and had become a very successful Maitre D' at Rome's famous hotel.

The Operations Office was a tent, mess hall a tent and briefing room an old stone building. It was a tent city. It was crude but I don't recall any

one complaining. In fact, the attitude of all personnel was positive with all working together with the goal to defeat Hitler and get the war over. The operations personnel selected the crews to fly each day, assigned planes to pilots, received and assigned orders from Group Headquarters and handled all administrative duties. The ground crew serviced and repaired the planes and loaded the bombs during the night time for the next day's mission. A ground crew chief and his assistant were assigned to each plane. They all were just great guys and dedicated to perform in an excellent manner. I marveled at how they could repair those damaged planes with the resources they had.

When I think back, I also marvel at the dedication of all the men, all doing their very best, all trusted to do their job and helping each other. There were no complainers nor gold brickers there.

The plans were that an air crew would fly a mission one day and have one day of rest before flying another mission. Sometimes, because of lost planes and a shortage of pilots, we were called to fly consecutive days. Most missions were a total physical drain. I recall many times, after a 10 or 12 hour mission, that I had to be helped out of the plane and I would lie on the ground for a time before I could go for debriefing. It was also a mental and emotional drain. But if we were scheduled to fly the next day we flew. I do not recall any facilities for recreation. We didn't need it for when we didn't fly, we rested.

At the time we arrived for combat flying in April of 1944, the German Air Force, in my opinion, was superior to ours, their flak guns protected every strategic target and we were not winning the war. In fact, we had not landed ground troops on European shores, and it appeared to me that we were in for a long and maybe an impossible task. The only hope was in our Air Force bombing and destroying the German manufacturing plants that produced war materials, planes and tanks, the oil refineries that produced fuel, and the railroad yards and systems that transported German troops and war equipment and materiel. Bombing and destroying these German strate-

gic targets was imperative if we were to win the war. Such success was necessary to make it possible for our ground troops to invade Europe. For that reason, pilots and crewmen were stressed to the maximum and ground crews were pressed to keep the planes flyable.

As I look back upon the crudeness of the facilities, the limited manpower, the limited resources for repairs, the lack of flyable planes from one mission to another, the shortage of airmen and the limited training we all had, I find myself wondering how the operation could have performed as effectively as it did.

CHAPTER IV

As I said before, at the time we arrived in Italy for combat flying in April 1944, it appeared to me that the Germans were winning the war. The German Air Force was superior to ours, and they were shooting down a great number of the American bombers on each mission. Their flak guns protected each strategic target and shot down many of our planes. I thought we were in for a long and maybe impossible task.

It was the importance of the enormous task of defeating Hitler that caused us to willingly fly missions to destroy his strategic military targets. This was the ever present force that kept us going.

We knew the night before the next day's mission if we were to fly. We did not know the target nor route until the briefing early the following morning. An orderly would awaken us, usually at 4:00 a.m., and would not leave until each airman had his feet on the ground. Airmen were not late for a briefing. At the front of the briefing room there was a large covered map. At a specified time the cover was removed. The map revealed our target and mission for the day, our flight position in the Squadron and Group, and other detailed information about the mission.

Then off to the flight line where each airman had preflight responsibilities to diligently perform. Before entering the plane, we gathered for a few moments of silent prayer, then entered the plane where the pilots and engineer preflighted the plane for normal performance and other members prepared for take-off. We would then get in line for take-off as our time came. With a full load of fuel and bombs, it was customary to use the entire runway before lifting off and each time it was a great relief for all when we lifted off. Occasionally, a plane would not get off the runway in time which resulted in another lost plane and ten airmen.

Our first mission was to the oil refineries at Ploesti, Romania,

probably the most feared target by American airmen. I can still clearly see the unbelievable amount of flak bursts and the waiting German fighter planes as we approached the target. Once we started on the bomb run we were required to fly in formation straight and level to give the bombardiers the opportunity to drop the bombs accurately. I did not see how we could fly through that black wall of flak and then survive the German fighters waiting to attack us as we came off the target. Our U.S. fighter planes did not have an adequate range to escort us all the way to Ploesti because of limited fuel so we were sitting ducks for the German fighters without opposition from our fighter planes. It was reported that one-third of our planes were shot down by flak and fighter planes. I do not recall how many planes were shot down by flak that day but it was many. I did see a squadron of about sixteen planes attacked by German fighter planes and all were shot down. Our navigator was killed by flak on that mission. Our plane was damaged by flak but we were able to return to our base.

I realized that the probability of completing fifty missions was likely impossible.

Flak is a term used for the German antiaircraft defense shells that burst into many fragments of jagged metal pieces when the shell reached the altitude of our planes. The pieces were approximately three inches long and one-half inch thick and composed of heavy jagged metal. The Germans had devices to determine our altitude and air speed. When the shell burst, a black cloud of approximately thirty feet in diameter appeared. By the time we could see the cloud, the fragments had already been discharged. Each important city and strategic target was surrounded by flak guns. The more important the target, the more flak guns were installed. The flak guns started shooting when the lead plane approached the target and lasted until the last plane was out of range. A bomb run for each plane lasted about fifteen minutes but to us it seemed like forever. The most holes I had from flak on a mission was 115, the largest hole was twenty inches in diameter. It was awesome to see a wall of those black bursts level with our flight path and knowing that we had to fly straight and level through it.

American fighter pilots in P-47's, P-38's and P-51's accompanied us on each bombing mission. They were courageous young men who engaged the German pilots whenever possible. After the P-51 became available, its performance and successes exceeded that of the Germans.

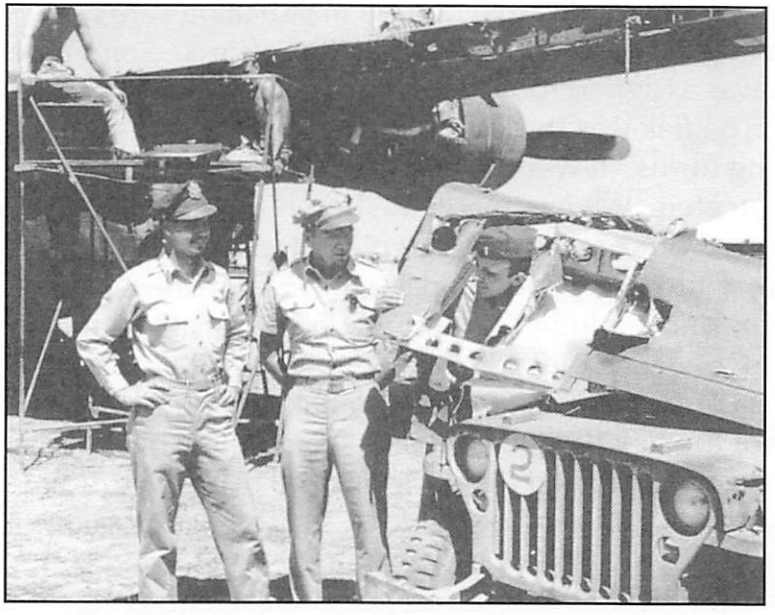
The German fighter pilots were also very good and courageous. Sometimes they would fly right through our formation to get a close range and accurate shot. I recall one German pilot attacking us from above and head on, flying toward and through our formation. Their planes were heavily armed and intermittently they fired a tracer bullet so as to show the enemy pilot where he was shooting. Each one of those tracer bullets appeared to me to be coming at me right between my eyes. He just missed but as he flew by I could see his face clearly at no more than twenty feet away. He didn't appear to be nonchalant either as all six of our gunners were firing at him as rapidly as possible. Another miracle that we survived. When I think of all the flak and the enemy fighters it has some similarities to facing a firing squad.

CHAPTER V

Budapest, Hungary, located on the Danube River, was an important railroad center for the area and also an important manufacturer of war materiel and equipment. The railroad yards, termed marshalling yards on our maps, were strategic targets important to Hitler's war efforts. Sometime in early August of 1944, I was assigned to fly a mission to destroy the Budapest railroad yards. The flak was terrible over the target and German fighter planes were waiting for us. It was beyond the range of our fighter planes, so we were unprotected. We had made the bomb run and just after our bombardier had released our bomb load, our plane took a direct hit on the aileron section of our right wing. Upon impact, the shell made a gapping hole through the wing and exploded, shooting pieces of flak throughout the plane's fuselage. One piece of flak broke out my co-pilot's windshield and then struck his control wheel knocking all bakelite off of it but it missed him. The impact of the flak flipped our plane completely over on its back, upside down. We were in inverted flight. That large plane was difficult to recover under normal circumstances, but in this case I had no aileron controls as the right aileron was destroyed and the left control locked so I had no aileron on either wing. The other crewmen and loose equipment were in disarray. We were still in heavy flak exploding on all sides. I was trying to get the plane turned back upright. By use of the rudders and the aileron trim controls I finally recovered to an upright position. In the process we lost many thousands of feet of altitude. We were far behind our group, a crippled plane alone and a defenseless target for a German fighter plane. It was another miracle that we were not attacked and finished off by fighter planes.

The ailerons are located on the trailing edge of each wing and are the controls used to keep the plane in level flight and also to raise one wing and lower the other to perform a turn. They are a primary control in maneuvering a plane. In this case, the right aileron was destroyed and the left aileron was locked. The aileron trim tabs are used to make a slight adjustment and

were helpful. The best description of that flight was we were wallowing like an injured duck. I tried to get near some squadrons further back in the group formation but those pilots screamed over the radio to stay away because we would likely attract German fighter planes.



"Billy with Navigator and Bombadier viewing the destroyed aileron"

After struggling for hours, we finally reached the Adriatic Sea where we were safe from flak and fighter planes but soon would be confronted with landing the plane without aileron controls. As we approached land and the landing field, I radioed my condition and asked for clearance of traffic to make a long approach to land. The crew was sweating this out as was I. With good fortune, I was able to keep the wings level at point of touchdown without a wing catching the ground. There were many cheers as we rolled down the runway to complete the landing.

Another series of miracles is that the direct hit did not cause a fire or sever the wing off, the recovery from inverted flight without aileron controls, the absence of German fighter planes, and the landing without adequate controls.

Another mission that was considered to be an easy mission but turned out to be a harrowing experience was to bomb strategic targets in southern France to soften the Germans' resistance to our invasion of southern France by U.S. ground troops. It was a short mission so we had our fighter plane escort all the way but when we reached the area of the targets we found heavy cloud cover so we could not locate the targets to drop our bombs. In such cases, we normally would jettison our bombs in the Adriatic or Mediterranean Sea on the return trip. Before the jettison, our group leader decided to drop the bombs on German and enemy ships harbored in the Genoa Harbor, which turned out to be a disastrous mistake. We had descended from 24,000 feet to 10,000 feet by the time we reached Genoa which was clear of clouds. Our bomb run was started over the Mediterranean Sea in an easterly direction toward the Genoa harbor. At 10,000 feet we were very vulnerable to flak as their accuracy was many times more effective at that altitude. Directly over the harbor, I saw bombs dropping past our plane so close that I could see the red letters printed thereon. I looked up and saw another group at a higher altitude that also was dropping its bombs on the harbor. In haste to get out of there, we did not drop our bombs but flew inland to give the higher group an opportunity to drop their bombs. We flew inland, then made a 180° turn back over the harbor to drop our bombs. The German flak became very heavy and accurate at our low altitude and gave the flak gunners ample time to set the explosion of their shells at our exact elevation.

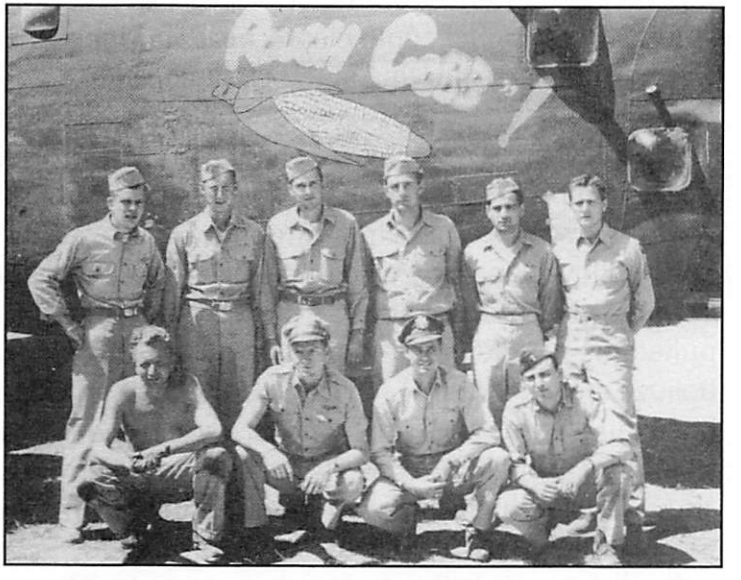
Our planes were being hit and exploding in the air. When a B-24 exploded, bodies and debris shot out in all directions. That day, there were seven planes in our squadron. All but my plane were shot down over the target. We were awestruck, silent and sober on the return trip to our base as we flew alone.

I do not recall ever being afraid to fly a mission. And as I look back today that seems strange. But I slept soundly the night before each mission and was ready to fly when called. I did have fears but not that I would be

killed because after a few missions I did not really believe that I would survive to complete fifty missions and I accepted that premise. I did fear the possibility of a painful death such as being blown out of an exploding plane with clothing on fire, as I had witnessed so many times, or of being maimed. My prayers were not asking that I should live for how could I expect God to save me and not save another airman who wanted life as much as I. We all knew that many of us would die; so, I prayed that if death came please make it sudden and final. My faith in God and the 23rd psalm made it possible for me to cope with the unfortunate situations in which I found myself.

Chapter VI

All missions had their exciting, harrowing and eventful experiences. But I will limit my story to one more. The mission on which we were shot down. I needed only one more mission to complete fifty and return to the good old U.S.A. The privilege was offered to all airmen to pick and choose their last mission. When my next turn came to fly, I knew it was a long trip to the Moravian oil refineries near the Polish border that would be heavily fortified and that we would not have fighter escort. Not being a patient person, I decided to fly and did without regard for it being a tough target. What a change in my life that decision made.



"Billy second from right in front row with crew and plane flown on the day he was shot down"

We arrived at the target to find very heavy flak as expected. While on the bomb run, we took a flak hit on our #2 engine which burst into flames. Procedures we followed to extinguish the flame failed and the fire rapidly worsened. The burning engine was located on the wing which also contained high octane gas. I was able to control the plane and we could maintain altitude. All were hoping and praying the fire would be extinguished. The fire was on my left side and close to my window. We had all witnessed many planes with a similar fire explode giving the crewmen no chance of survival. We all wanted to ride the plane safely back to base. I had ordered the bombay doors and escape door opened in case of possible bailout. The heat was terrible and no one knew

when the plane would explode. To order the crew to bail out was mine to make. Oh, how I wanted to get the crew home safely. But I knew all the men wanted out of that burning plane. The heat was getting unbearable and rivets on the wing and fuselage were popping when I rang the bailout bell. The co-pilot went past me like a flash. The engineer, radio operator, navigator and bombardier quickly followed.

I continued to fly the plane straight and level giving the crew in the back ample time to get out. Then I quickly, with much relief, rushed to the bombay door and jumped out.

Thinking only of escape from that burning plane, it was a wonderful relief to be falling through the air. Never having been in a free fall, it was a strange and unknown experience for me. It was very quiet. I was at about 24,000 feet altitude when I bailed out. I could clearly hear shooting from the ground which was the German soldiers shooting at the crewmen who were falling before I bailed out. I knew I should free fall as far as possible to avoid being a good target. During this free fall I cleaned out my pockets of the mission information and surveyed the area for a good place to land but knew very little about directing the parachute. All I could see was trees and more trees as I was over the Carpathian Mountains on the Poland/Slovakian border, so one place looked as good as another. I intended to open my parachute at about 3,000 feet above the ground. When the time came, I pulled the handle on the rip cord and was shocked when nothing happened. Believe me when I say I really yanked that handle again with much gusto and the parachute opened. By that time all I could see was the tops of trees so I relaxed for a landing through the trees. What I did not know was that those trees were tall, about 100 feet high, and were broad leaf like our big cottonwood tree. When I fell through the leaves and branches, my parachute collapsed and I free fell about the same distance as falling from a three-story building. When I looked down and saw the ground so far below I knew I could not survive. The last thing I remembered was as I hit the ground I heard a sound like a large pumpkin would make when dropped from a three-story building. It was then lights out.

For these and other missions I was awarded the Distinguished Flying Cross and five Air Medals for a high degree of courage and piloting skill.

CHAPTER VII

It was about noon when I bailed out. I don't know how long I lay on that mountain. My guess is it was two or three hours before I regained consciousness. I could not move my legs nor my left arm. I could see my right leg was bleeding badly. Next, I assessed my predicament. I was alone on a mountain not able to move. I was certain the German soldiers were looking for me and if they found me I was equally certain they would kill me. After all, this was war. We were killing them so it just followed that they would kill me.

After a time of realizing my helplessness, I heard voices and was sure it was German soldiers and that my number was up. Much to my surprise, those voices belonged to three small boys who apparently saw me parachute down. They were excited and, of course, I could not understand what they were saying. As quickly as they came they left and I was again alone and helpless. I reached the point in my thoughts that maybe it would be best for the Germans to put me out of my misery when I heard voices again. This time it was three men dressed in working clothes so I knew they were not soldiers. They began to ask questions which I did not understand. They were friendly and I was sure they wanted to help me. As best I could, I let them know I could not move. We always carried a small escape kit which was in my upper breast pocket. One of the contents was a book containing questions and answers in English and various European languages. I was able to get the book with my right hand. One of the questions was "I need help", another "can you get me across the Russian border?" Russia was then our ally and from their airfields the American planes would pick airmen up and return them to American bases.

Most important was that these men were friendly and wanted to help. I could tell that they had decided what to do for me which turned out to be very exciting and risky for them as well as for me. They spread out my parachute and laid me on it and carried me down that mountain. Every

movement was painful but I was glad to make the trip. Little did I know of their plan, but later I understood.

To explain their actions, I need to tell something about the circumstances that prevailed at that time. Czechoslovakia was then divided into three provinces, Czech, Moravia and Slovakia. At the time I was shot down, Czech and Moravia had been invaded by the Germans and were controlled by the German military. Slovakia, the eastern province, signed a peace treaty with Germany. There was no German military in Slovakia at that time. These men who were helping me were Slovakian Partisans who gave their lives to help American airmen and who, with a passion, hated the German soldiers. As I have previously said, this event took place on the border between Poland which was occupied by the German military and Slovakia which was free of German control. Because of the terrain where the Partisans found me in Slovakia, they had to take me back into Poland and cross a river to get me into Slovakia. At the bottom of the mountain they put me in a load of hay which was drawn by a team of horses. I was covered by hay. They followed a road until it came to a bridge across the river. I heard the Partisans arguing with the German guards at the bridge. The Germans searched the hay and, of course, found me on my parachute. I was carried into the back room of a small guardhouse. I could hear the Partisans and German soldiers screaming at each other. While this was happening, two Slovakian soldiers came with a stretcher into the room where I was. In haste they loaded me on the stretcher and carried me out the window and across that river while the Germans were screaming in the front room of the guardhouse. To my surprise, when the Partisans carried me across the river, a Slovakian ambulance was waiting. I was scooted into the ambulance and we were off in the Slovakian province. I wondered why the Germans did not pursue us. Later, learning more about the activities of the Partisans, my guess is that they killed or incapacitated those German guards.

En route to a hospital, we passed through many towns. Each town had a city square at which we stopped. The driver would open the back door and the town people filed by with praises for me as their liberator.

And at each stop I was offered a bottle of schnapps. My pain was excruciating and I did drink schnapps at each of the many stops. I either passed out from consumption of schnapps or pain and the next thing I remembered was awakening on a table surrounded by girls, maybe eight. All had large white hoods. It was quiet—not a sound. I thought I had died and this was heaven. It was a feeling of great relief. Actually, the girls were Catholic Sisters and all began to talk at once. I then realized I was on an operating table and that a doctor was sewing up my ankle and foot. To my surprise, he spoke English fluently.

I later learned that the doctor had lived and practiced medicine in Detroit, Michigan, before World War II. His native land was Austria where he was visiting when Hitler declared war on Austria. He was of Jewish descent and was not allowed to leave Austria. His name was Dr. Milano Padjusek. Fearing for his life, he fled Austria for Slovakia where he was serving as a resident doctor in the Slovakian State Hospital in Trencine, Slovakia, where I was taken to be a patient. I have always had the feeling that were it not for Dr. Padjusek, my legs would be paralyzed today. After taking x-ray pictures of my spine, he came to my hospital room and told me that my 2nd and 3rd lumbars were crushed and that my spinal cord was damaged and almost severed. He also told me that he could not put a cast on my body at that time and I would need to lie perfectly still on my back for many days. He had a rolled up pad placed under the small of my back which I laid on for about thirty days. He warned me that if I did not follow his orders, my spinal cord could easily be severed. I believed him.

During that period of inactivity, I suffered excruciating pain that was controlled only by morphine. I had Catholic Sister nurses who were very caring and kind and did everything they could to make me comfortable, even occasionally giving me extra shots of morphine. I was also treated royally by the Slovakian citizens. My room was filled with flowers and food to the extent that some were placed out in the hall. I was treated as their liberator. Wonderful people.

Also I was frequently visited by Slovakian Partisans. These men appeared to come from all walks of life with a common cause. They hated Hitler and killed every German soldier that they could find to kill. Probably some Partisans were local Slovakians and some migrated from Czechoslovakia which was occupied by Hitler's army. They hated Germany, all their soldiers and Hitler with a passion. They kept in contact with me during my stay in the Trencine hospital. Frequently, they would tell me of crossing the Polish border and killing German soldiers. They also informed me that when Dr. Padjusek placed a body cast on me they would transport me to an airfield across the Russian border where the American pilots flew night trips to pick up airmen like myself. This gave me hopes of getting home before the Germans invaded Slovakia.

Finally, the day came when Dr. Padjusek put on my body cast. Arrangements were made for the Partisans to transport me to Russia and my freedom to return home. But, early the next morning, I was awakened by loud noises in the hall. I was soon to learn that German soldiers had invaded Slovakia and the noise was three heavily armed German soldiers entering my room. They immediately took me as a prisoner of war and all three of them stood guard over me that day and that night as I lay helpless. Believe me when I say I was disappointed as it was that night that I was to have left with my Partisan friends for Russia. I was thankful that I had a body cast which prevented the severance of my spinal cord as from there on I did not receive the gentle care that I had in the Trencine hospital.

Because of a series of miracles, I lived to get that body cast which I wore for the remainder of my imprisonment. It was a miracle that I was found on the mountain by friendly people, that they were able to outmaneuver the German guards and get me in the friendly province of Slovakia, that I was taken to a very good hospital in Trencine, that I had such good care by the Catholic Sisters and that I found myself in the hands of a good doctor who spoke English and gave me very good care and who was able to get a body cast on me before I was taken as a German prisoner of war. I thanked God.

CHAPTER VIII

After being taken as a German POW, I was transported from the Trencine hospital in Slovakia to a hospital in Vienna, Austria. This trip by train presented many anxieties. First, I had on a full body cast and a cast on my right leg so I did not fit the train seats. So the guards laid me crosswise on the enclosed space between the passenger rail cars. It happened that this was a German troop train transporting elite Storm Troopers (SS) to a point unknown to me but they were on the train all the way to Vienna. The SS soldiers were a select group of soldiers, all large with blonde hair and with large hob-nailed boots. They had to step over me when they moved from one car to another. And each of them would raise a big hob-nailed boot as if to stomp me in my mid section. I was on my back looking up at each one of them and saw their snarling faces and heard their unkind remarks. While their opinion of me never changed, they did not stomp me as I expected they would. It was a long trip and I did not have any idea of where they were taking me.

After many hours we arrived at Vienna, Austria, where I was unloaded and taken to what appeared to be a police station manned by Germans dressed in brown uniforms who I later learned were Gestapo members. These men were Hitler's elite Gestapo henchmen. They were hateful, mean spirited, ruthless, unconscionable beings with unlimited power and control over all German soldiers and civilians. I knew they hated me. After tossing me around and screaming at me for some time, one, in broken English, said "Take off your watch and ring. I didn't care about the watch which was government issue but the ring had been given to me by my fellow employees at the Department of Agriculture Office before I left the U.S.A. I refused which brought on more screaming and a hard poke on my back cast by a rifle barrel.

I reconsidered and gave them my watch and ring which I never expected to see again. Then they re-loaded me on the back of a truck and hauled me to a hospital in the central part of Vienna.

My arrival at the hospital was the only pleasant surprise that I had during my tenure as a POW. The hospital was a four story structure made of large stone walls. At that time, I had no feeling in my legs nor could I move them. German guards carried me to the top floor through a door into a large room. To my surprise, there were about thirty disabled American airmen as patients in that room. It was a wonderful feeling to see and hear fellow flyers speaking English. All were in good spirits with different disabilities. Some with amputations, some with severe body and face burns, some with broken bones and a few with other infirmities. I learned that I was in a hospital with a German doctor and Catholic Sisters. The doctor was a young Austrian M.D. who worked very hard to help all of us. He spoke English fluently. He also had a young girl living with him. As he put it, he was trying her out as a prospective bride, a custom common in Europe that now is common in the U.S. Each morning he would give us a report on how the trial was going. We all looked forward to his daily report. Nice guy.

Two Sisters were assigned to our ward and they were real angels. An example of their loving care and courage was shown in their providing food for our needs. Food was short throughout Germany at this stage of the war. Very little food was available to the citizens and institutions such as hospitals. Especially, American POW's received little food. The Sisters had a folding screen in the corner of the ward. Each morning upon arrival, they would go behind the screen and produce precious food from under their large, full skirts. They never revealed where they obtained the food. They got it with extreme personal risk for had they been caught by the ever present Gestapo, they would have been executed. What courage and dedication to help us.

At the time of my arrival I could not move either leg because of my spinal injury. These Sisters worked each day with my legs. They had two crock jars large enough to put a foot and part of my leg in each. Then with electrotherapy they would cause my leg muscles to flex. I had not heard of such a treatment in America. By the time I left that hospital I had limited

movement with each leg. To me, a miracle by two angels.

This tale has a very sad ending. I do not recall how many days I was in this hospital, but frequently the air raid sirens would come on loud and clear. Vienna had many strategic military targets bombed often by American bombers. The network of railroad yards and manufacturing plants producing Hitler's war machines were prime targets and it was imperative that they be destroyed. Bombing was the only method of this destruction. Each time the siren came on, all ambulatory American patients were escorted to the basement. Those of us not ambulatory were carried on stretchers to the basement and those that could not be moved stayed in the ward. Our two Sisters stayed in the ward with those patients.

The hospital was made with large stones and huge wood girders to support the floors. The basement ceiling had huge girders supporting the ceiling and floor above. As we entered the basement those of us who could not walk were placed on small cots. The other patients stood or sat on the floor during the air raid. Always there was a German armed guard overseeing us. He could speak some English and was a congenial person. We pilots and airmen always had many anxieties for we knew there were many missed targets and we were especially concerned when a raid occurred on cloudy days. If American bombers arrived over a target that was cloud covered, the bombs were dropped at random across the city.

On one cloudy day after the air raid sirens and after we were in place in the basement room, one of the airmen mentioned the possibility of random bombing. The guard said "Don't worry, the American pilots know you are in this hospital and they will not bomb here." He had just gotten the words out when ker-wham, the hospital was struck directly by one or more bombs. The large stones of that hospital became rubble, the noise, the falling stones and lumber, and the thick dust was horrendous. We were buried under a stone hospital that had been leveled on us.

When I heard the strike, I flipped off my cot frantically seeking any

kind of protection. Just as quickly, something fell across my body cast pinning me to the floor. When the debris stopped falling it was pitch dark and quiet. I thought all were killed but me. Shortly, one of the airmen yelled and then bedlam prevailed. What I thought was a timber across my back turned out to be a fellow airman who had rolled from his cot to the floor a bit slower than I.

The dust made breathing difficult. Some water pipes were broken and by soaking parts of our clothing and breathing through damp cloth we were able to breathe. Some of the more able airmen tried to move the timbers and stones in an effort to get out but found the timbers wedged in stones were immovable.

We knew we were buried under the debris without tools or strength to escape. We also were certain that the Germans would not dig us out as the American bombers had, no doubt, killed many patients and civilians in the area of the hospital. All was pretty bleak and it appeared to me that we were buried with no way out.

I don't know how long we were trapped before we heard a faint peck, peck, peck. Unbelievably, someone was attempting to dig us out. It turned out that German soldiers did dig us out. Finally, we saw light and when an opening was large enough I was pushed through the hole to daylight. When I looked up, I saw a cordon of German soldiers with guns forming an alley to the back opening of a truck. A multitude of very angry German civilians were confronting the German soldiers and were screaming, wanting to get their hands on us to kill us as our American bombers had killed their loved ones. Believe me when I say we were all very glad for the protection of the German soldiers and pleased when that truck moved through and beyond those mad Germans. My thoughts, then, were for those two loving Sisters who were probably killed.

As we looked back, we saw the four story stone hospital leveled into a pile of rubble. We all thanked God for our escape.

CHAPTER IX

Next, I was taken by train to Frankfurt, Germany. Traveling on a German troop train was dangerous as American fighter planes strafed them upon every opportunity. One memory on that trip was seeing an American plane half submerged in a lake with the arm of the dead American pilot hanging out of the cockpit. War was hell.

When we arrived at the railroad station in Frankfurt, we were loaded on a wood-burning bus that took us to the German Interrogation Center for American airmen. This was a strange experience. Of course, the intent was to get as much military information as possible that would be helpful to Hitler's cause.

First, they shoved me into a solitary confinement cell. This cell was about four feet wide by eight feet long and just high enough to stand. It was pitch dark and soundproof. The door was closed the entire time that I was in there. There was a small, probably one foot square trap door at floor level that was opened occasionally to pass in food and take out refuse. The food was a cup of ersatz coffee and a thin one-quarter inch thick slice of bread. We were on a starvation diet. Since it was dark, I had no idea of time. I have no idea of how long I was in that cell. It was a strange feeling wondering if I had been there for a week or a month or even longer. I began to doubt if I would ever get out. I was surprised that my thinking process became so impaired and mixed up.

But finally the door was opened. The light was blinding. I was led down a long hallway and into an office. Behind the desk was a middle aged German officer who spoke English fluently. In a pleasant mood he began asking questions about my personal life, then my military experience. To each question, my answer was "name, rank and serial number." Then the questions were about military strategies and techniques to which I gave only my name, rank and serial number. The interrogator became irritated and angered and was then shouting at

me because of my refusal to answer his questions. He then ordered a cup of coffee and a steaming hot steak that was placed in front of me. He then said if I would cooperate and answer his questions I could have the meal. The aroma of that steak was great and I had not had a meal like that for months. I was hungry and I would surely liked to have had it, but I continued to give him name, rank and serial number only. He became furious and opened a door to an adjoining room from which I heard a fellow airman being mercilessly beaten by a shouting German. The airman was screaming from the torture. The interrogator said, "If you will not answer my questions you will be taken to the torture room." Although I felt the threat was real, I continued to give him my name, rank and serial number.

He stopped shouting and told me that if I continued to refuse answering his questions he would turn me over to his firing squad and then opened a window from which I heard the firing squad routine and the shots being made. It sounded real to me but, in accordance with U.S. Army Regulations, I gave him name, rank and serial number. I actually thought I would be next before the firing squad. Why not—this was war.

After a long pause the interrogator calmed himself and said that since I would not answer his questions, he would tell me about myself and pulled out a folder with my name on it. He had my home town address and phone number, the college I attended, my work before service, all about my military training, bases and locations, time and route of my flight overseas to Italy, squadron and group I was assigned to, missions and dates I had flown and, yes, he told me the mess hall building was completed which was under construction when I was shot down. And, yes, he knew I was on my 50th mission. I could hardly believe it.

Remember the event where the Gestapo took my watch and ring, which was not a great loss in my situation, but I never expected to see them again. Well, when I was released from solitary confinement and

interrogation a German guard handed me an envelope. When opened, there were my watch and ring. Strange things happen in war.

Soon I was released and taken to Obermasfeld, a prison hospital, manned by British medical doctors who were all prisoners. Some had been prisoners for up to five years. Many amputations were performed there. The doctors did their best but had little equipment and the stench of gangrene was terrible.

Because I already had surgery and casts, I was soon moved on to a prison hospital at Meiningen, Germany, where I remained until liberated. The prison hospital was originally an opera house, converted into a hospital. British doctors who were earlier taken as prisoners were in charge. As I entered the ward to which I was assigned, the first bunk to my right contained a young American officer who had both legs and one arm amputated. A bar had been fashioned on his bed so he could maneuver some. The ward was occupied by about thirty American officers. When I arrived, I was told to tell my war story and, thereafter, never to mention it again. Some, including me, did not care to relate a war story, but those who cared to had the chance. Thereafter, no one talked about the war. It did much to get everyone's mind off their war experiences and helped morale. The morale was unbelievably good. Even the young man who had lost both legs and an arm remained in good spirits.

In Germany, there was very little food at that time, so we received very little food. For breakfast we got a cup of ersatz coffee and a very thin slice of brown bread that contained a good deal of sawdust. Occasionally, a wood splinter would appear. Not great, but we were all hungry so we ate it. For noon, a cup of potato soup, no potatoes, just the broth. For supper, a slice of bread and a bowl of cabbage soup, no cabbage. Of course, we all lost weight but survived. American bombers had dropped bombs near the building, no direct hit but the percussions broke out many of the windows. It was a cold

winter for us. We slept in all our clothing and wore a wool cap to help keep warm.

It was important that everyone kept busy. Many of us had jobs. I was the librarian responsible for checking out and gathering up what books and athletic equipment we had. The Bible was the most popular book. Much auction bridge was played and there were weekly tournaments. Some produced plays, the men acting the characters of both males and females. The productions were quite good and well attended. The American Red Cross provided what books and equipment we had as well as a few food packages at some prison camps. We all appreciated the American Red Cross and their efforts during World War II.

Of course, German guards controlled our lives and actions. On nice days we were permitted to go outside within the confines of the barbed wire and electric fences.

The most difficult time was the early part of my prisoner of war experience when I really doubted that we could defeat Hitler, and that I could possible remain a prisoner for life and never see my wife, Hilda, family, relatives and friends again or return to the wonderful free U.S.A.

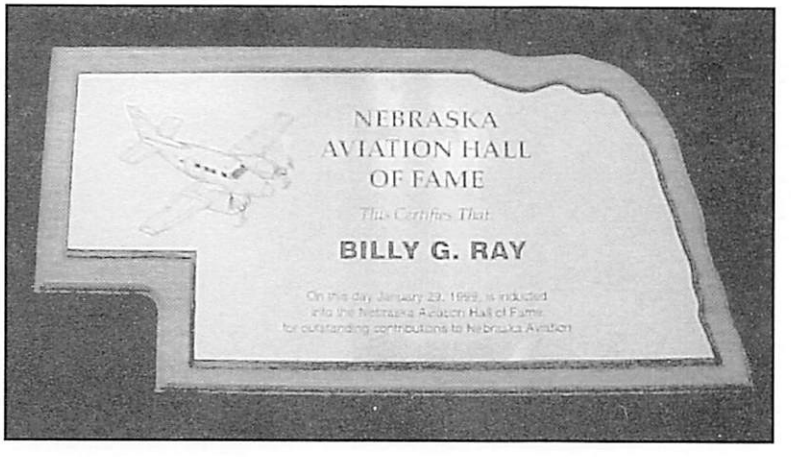
But our allied soldiers did land on European soil at great personal suffering and supreme sacrifice and later we could hear ground battles as our troops advanced toward our prison camp. And then, one of Patton's tank units rolled into Meiningen, Germany, and we were liberated. I cannot describe the true feelings we prisoners had on being liberated nor our appreciation for the soldiers who had gone through hell and who came to rescue us. There were hugs and tears and total jubilation. I will never forget that wonderful experience.

Freedom is a very special and precious condition that I treasure very much and it should be appreciated and treasured by all free people. But freedom does come at a price. It was and always will be worth it.

I was extremely fortunate to have survived my war experiences, to return to the good old U.S.A., to be reunited with my dear wife, Hilda, and family and friends, and to have the privilege of becoming a useful parent and citizen.

God has been very good to me.

Medals &
Memorabilia



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