

# Chivalry in Adversity

*By General Andy Low*

Graduates of Service Academies have, for more than one hundred and fifty years, worn finger rings to commemorate their Alma Mater. In earlier years, before the advent of the gummed envelope, these commemorative rings served the useful purpose of imprinting the sealing wax on letters – even serving as an exterior identifier of the author. Many collegians of other institutions did a similar rite of passage. However, many of these collegians owed a closer allegiance to Greek-letter fraternities to which they belonged. Often their rings reflected this latter allegiance.

Since 1897, rings of West Point have reflected on the motto, “Duty, Honor, Country” and the Academy Crest, on one side of the ring, and a class adopted crest on the other. During the third year, great activity by each class member marks the arrival of class rings. Because of the closeness of the Academy experience – living in barracks, meals in a common mess, formations for all phases of daily life – the class ring is a ready manifestation of this closeness. Most graduates wear their rings much of the time – and certainly at activities associated with the Academy experience.

And thus, I was one who wore my class ring most of the time. In combat, in Europe, in early 1944, we were required to wear our issue name plates (“dog tags”) at all times, but we were discouraged from carrying other identification which might be “of aid and/or comfort to the enemy.”

On 31 July 1944, There was some confusion on the assignment from our Group for the Combat Air Commander. He would command the Second Combat Wing, and the Second Air Division, which the Wing would lead. As Group Operations Officer, I had been up all night during mission preparations, and thus was most familiar with targeting, routes, communications, and the myriad of details to get over four hundred Liberator bombers to the target – Ludwigshaven, and the IG Farben Chemical Works. So, I took the assignment. In a last minute rush, I changed into my flying gear and proceeded by jeep to Wing Headquarters, some ten miles down the road.

Briefing, take-off, form-up, coast-out, tight formation – all went well until we began our bombing run. We were at 24,000 feet, the highest I had ever flown on an attack. We encountered heavy flak at our altitude, and took random hits with no personnel injuries up to “Bomb Doors Open.” Just as the bombardier announced “Bombs Away” we took a burst just under our bomb-bay which set our hydraulic lines and reservoir on fire – a raging fire. The crew fought the fire but warned we were in serious condition, with a chance of an explosion of the gasoline tanks above the bomb-bay.

Quickly, the aircraft commander and I decided we had to leave the formation, dive to attempt to blow out the fire – and to clear the target area. I told the Deputy to take over the formation and we dove sharply in a sweeping arc away from the target. The Flight Engineer in the bomb-bay reported that the structure was catching fire. WE knew we had to jump, and the aircraft commander sounded the “Stand-by to bail” on the alarm, and “Jump” almost immediately.

We were three on the flight deck, the Pathfinder Navigator, the Aircraft Commander, and me. The Navigator attempted to open our normal egress through the bomb-bay the fire was just too much of a blazing inferno. I had shed my harness, and stood up as he was reclosing the door. Over my head was a hatch used on the ground during taxiing, but was not an authorized egress in the air. It was forward of the top turret, and could be blocked by guns. It was forward of the propellers – but both number two and number three engines had been feathered. There were two vertical stabilizers on the B-24J, but we found out we had already lost one in the dive. I bent down, grabbed the Navigator around the legs, and shoved him through the hatch. I followed quickly, and the Aircraft Commander was right behind me. We cleared the aircraft, pulled our ripcords – and the plane blew up.

I was alone as I floated out of the clouds close to the ground, and could see I was headed for farmland outside a village. As I neared the ground and prepared to land, I realized I was headed right at two military figures with rifles – and the longest fixed bayonets I had ever seen. I touched down, collapsed my chute, and the German soldiers were not twenty yards from me, rifles at ready.

“Haben sie pistole?” I did not understand what they said, but guessed. I shook my head and raised my arms, and then I realized I was really hurt. My flying suit was still smouldering. The Germans put down their guns and helped me beat out the embers. That done, they picked up their rifles, and began to search me. I was told to take off my watch by their motions. Then they emptied my pockets, found my dog tags but did not take them, and then helped me pull off my burned gloves.

And there it was – my West Point 1942 Class Ring. They motioned me to take it off, and it was dropped into a pack one soldier carried. As they motioned me to march, I suddenly realized how scared I really was – and fearful of what was going to happen next.

We were taken to the village jail – all nine of us who made the jump. Two crewmen in the rear of the aircraft did not get out. We had all been quickly rounded up by the militia-type soldiers who had been turned out to look for downed men. From the civilian jail, we were taken to a German Air Force airfield. We were given some medical treatment, wrapped with paper bandages, and readied for a trip to the Interrogation Center. At the Interrogation Center, I was put in a plain, small solitary cell. I had told them my name, rank and my serial number. I was bandaged so that I had to have someone feed me, and help with trips to the personal facilities.

My first session with the Interrogator was brief. I repeated my name, rank, and serial number. He called me major, but said he needed to know more. As he remarked, they did not give medical treatment to spies. I hurt terribly, and was not sure what was happening under the bandages. But, I had endured West Point, and I knew they were not going to be any tougher. The second morning was a repeat, giving only name, rank and serial number, and back I was sent to my cell, still hurting.

As I thought over my situation, and what was happening to the others whom I had not seen, I realized I had been riding with a 458th Bomb Group aircrew, transferred to the 389th as a lead crew. The aircraft wreckage would have 389<sup>th</sup> insignia. I deduced therefore that they were not too sure who I was. The third day session was another repeat. But the interrogator said I was foolish, as they would find me out. No medical treatment until they did. Back to my cell.

It was a warm August evening, but from my cell I could see nothing, and hear very little. Time dragged. Suddenly, the guard was opening my cell, and in came a German flying officer. His left arm was mangled, and heavily bandaged. The guard locked him in, and went away. In excellent English, with a British accent, he asked if I wanted a cigarette. I told him I did not smoke, so that ended that entrée. I really hurt and the bandage reeked, so I was angry enough to be rude. He asked if I would like something to read – *Life*, maybe. I replied I could not handle a book with my bandages.

He said he was sorry for me as an airplane pilot, for me the war was over. But he added, he would never fly again either. We warmed to each other – a little. He asked about my family. I told him I had a daughter I had never seen. He told me about his family. There some more small talk, and then he arose to leave. He walked to the door, and then came back to me. His good hand was in his pocket. He pulled it out and dropped my Class Ring inside my clothes.

Simply he said, “I am sure this means something to you, and it means nothing to them. Hide it, and do not wear it until you are free!” With that he turned quickly and left me with my alone – with my thoughts.

Can there be such chivalry among such obvious adversity? For me, there was.