

The Story of a Combat Mission And a POW Experience

Narrated by Richard T Witton, Wallace Croxford, Walter Conneely, and Edward Wilen. Written by R. Mitchell Steen, former editor of the Valley Independent of Monessen, Pennsylvania.

“Sweet are the uses of adversity; which, like toad, and venomous, means yet a precious jewel in his head.”

William Shakespeare was not even aware of an event known as World War II when he penned those words for the second act of “As You Like It,” but his thoughts were as applicable in the 1940’s as they were in the 1600s.

So many thousands of U.S. fighting men – at sea, on the ground and in the air – came face to face with adversity often and were the better for it.

It has been said that “when the going gets tough, the tough get going.” That was also true of American fighting men, some of them just boys when they left American soil, but wise beyond their years upon their return.

Many of those valuable lessons were learned the hard way, but in such a way that they became etched in their minds in vivid fashion, never to be forgotten as they lay dormant only to surface during other adversities to be faced in post-war years.

Those lessons provided most with fundamentals to lead into productive and meaningful careers. They became one of the few pluses of war.

Looking back is not the easiest thing to do. Add 43 or 44 more years and the task becomes even more formidable.

But that’s what survivors of a fated U.S. bombing mission over Germany did recently. Comparing notes of that day – March 8, 1944 – four members of that ten-man crew jogged each other’s memories of just exactly happened the day they were shot down just prior to a bombing run on a complex of airplane factories near Brunswick, Germany.

The four, -- Richard T Witton (pilot); Wallace Croxford (co-pilot); Walter Conneely (bombardier) and A.E. (Abe) Wilen (navigator) – discovered some interesting facts of that day while attending a reunion in Dayton, Ohio.

“At the time you didn’t have time to reflect on what was going on,” Witton says. “You just had to do what you had to do. Thinking about it had to come later.”

Much of the thinking took place in prisoner-of-war camps during the final year of that war, even though further reflection shows that individual survival also occupied their minds.

“We had been trained for such an eventuality,” Wilen recalls, “but we never thought we would have to put that training to use. Thank God we had the training because that saved our lives.”

Not all crew members were as fortunate. Two of the planes engineers – Roy Pryor and Manual Ramirez – were killed while manning waist guns, while Walter Spencer, manning the tail guns, was blasted from his turret. Wade Prince was in the belly turret; Joe LeBouef was in the top turret, while Donald Halloway was radio operator.

It was the spring of 1944. The people of occupied countries of Europe were waiting for D-day. American plane crews were expendable because there were replacements – the Germans had few. Bomber crews were told at briefings to knock out as many German fighters as possible. “We want to blast the Luftwaffe out of the sky before D-day,” the briefings went.

There was little to suspect of what was to take place the next day when the crew of Consolidated Mess gathered for a briefing the night before on May 7, 1944. That briefing, as usual, was conducted by Major Jimmy Stewart, the group’s operations officer, the same Jimmy Stewart who went on to become a general as well as one of the most respected movie stars of all time.

“It was a warm, slightly overcast day when we all scrambled to our planes about 6 a.m. on the morning of the 8th,” Witton recalls. “We were all disappointed when we had to switch bombers because our plane (654) was out of service, but we attached little significance to that. “That switch forced us to be late on takeoff, also compelling us to catch us with our group and take our place in formation,” Witton says.

Twenty-seven aircraft of the 453rd Bomb Group participated in that day’s raid – this crew’s 17th such mission. It left the English coast at Great Yarmouth about 8 a.m. at 15,000 feet, then proceeded to climb to 27,000 feet. Bombs were to be dropped at about 10:30 a.m. Just before passing the initial point, the formation was attacked by waves of Focke Wolfe 190s and Messerschmitt 109s, firing machine gun bullets and 20 millimeter shells.

Not only was it a fateful day for those 10 crew members, it was a fateful day for the entire 453rd, which before that day and that bombing raid was over, would go down in history as the day the 453rd had its greatest losses. Some 110 airmen went down that day along with 11 planes.

More interestingly, that day, (May 8, 1944) was exactly one month prior to the most massive land attack ever to have begun in Europe – another step, which led to the defeat of the once mighty German war machine.

All crew members had their own thoughts of what took place that day, but it wasn't until 40 years later at a reunion at the Air Force Museum, that the real "facts" surfaced. And they surfaced from one who wasn't even a member of their crew.

"We were badly shot up during the ongoing passes by the Luftwaffe fighters," Witton says. "German fighters coming from everywhere, attacked our 25 bombers that day. Two of our own bombers had previously aborted the mission."

Despite heavy damage and fires, we were able to maintain position until being rammed by a German fighter as witnessed by then Capt. Andy Low (later to become a Major General) who was flying lead on this mission and who believed the German pilot was dead at the controls as he came through the formation. "None of us knew what really happened that day," Wilen recalls.

This crew had been together for a long time. It started out in Boise, Idaho, then to March Field and Hamilton Field, both in California. It was together through 16 previous bombing missions. Eight of the 10-man crew ended up in POW camps until they were liberated one year later. The two other crew members were killed during this attack.

The flight was relatively normal, despite the switch in planes, until just before reaching the initial point and then all hell seemed to break loose. Almost from nowhere those German fighters swooped in for the kill. Tail gunner Spencer was blown out of his turret and badly shot up, eventually to die in the Veterans Administration Hospital from those wounds. Nose guns were frozen, one of the two popping off sporadically. By this time only the top turret was operating at full capacity.

"We lost two engines on the first pass, during which Pryor and Ramirez, both manning waist guns were killed," Witton remembers. "One of our engines was on fire, the other disabled, forcing us to drift left as our formation turned right, all the while decelerating and loosing power." "I looked around, trying to hold control, to assess damage," Witton continued. "There was some damage in the waist area and the armor plate was gone on Croxford's (co-pilot) side. This stripped us of oxygen." "At this point, Wilen (navigator) looked up at the co-pilot and saw his side of the plane shot out," Witton said. "Our instrument panel was shot out, our bombs had already been salvaged when we were first hit and I sounded the alarm."

"I ordered everyone to bail out," Witton added. "I also pushed the button to destroy the Sperry bombsight and noticed Croxford was groggy from shell shock. I put my foot in Croxford's back and shoved him out the bomb bay, then followed him after seeing that everyone else was out of the plane."

"I had difficulty getting out," Conneely recalled. "I couldn't find the chest chute. After seeing fire and smelling smoke, I dove out the nose wheel door, not taking time to disconnect oxygen, electric heat line and radio cord."

Croxford does not recall leaving the plane, but awakened from his shock upon feeling the rushing air as he plummeted toward the ground. "I recall passing through the cloud cover and then pulling the cord on my chute. I landed in a small pine tree, buried my chute, and then started walking down a lane. I was taken into custody by a local civilian with a gun – he later turned me over to Luftwaffe officers," Croxford recalls.

Witton's first attempt to pull his chute cord was not successful, but he clawed at it until the chute billowed out above him. "I was attacked by two German fighters, but they both missed, all the while trying to slip the chute, but it was out of control. I made it down without being hit by those flying bullets, landing in a pine tree, breaking a branch and tumbling to the ground. I scooped up my chute and was immediately taken into custody by three or four Luftwaffe soldiers on bicycles, along with several civilians. Everyone was shouting at each other but finally the soldiers took me into custody and forced me to ride the handle bars to a nearby air base," Witton said.

"My first reaction in leaving the plane was how cold it was," Conneely recalls. "Because of our altitude it was 30 degrees below zero. My chest pack would not open because I was leaning on it, but finally I got it open. I too was strafed by a fighter plane, so I tried to climb up the chute, the chute was swinging wildly. When I got straightened out, I landed in a high tree. It took some time for me to get out of the tree and when I got to the ground, several German soldiers were waiting, taking me to a barn where other captured Americans were located."

Wilen remembers well his experiences that day. "When I saw the smoke and part of the cockpit blown away, I knew we were in trouble. When the word came to bail out, I hurriedly buckled on a chest chute. I turned to see what Conneely was doing; saw he could get out and then dove headfirst out the nose wheel door. I counted to 10 twice going down. I knew the jump altitude was about 21,000 feet, well above oxygen altitude. My chute opened, and looking down, I saw civilians with guns in hand zeroing in on me. I landed in a plowed field, hid my chute and kept low in a ditch until the armed civilians came close, then stood up with my hands raised in the air. They asked me where my chute was and they dug it up. One of the civilians, pointing a gun at me, demanded my fur lined boots covering my heated felt boots. I was marched into a small town and turned over to the town's mayor (burgomeister) who was wearing a uniform and a spiked helmet of World War I vintage."

What followed is still another story, but what were the feelings of those four crew members?

Witton recalls being concerned about keeping the plane in the air, as well as the welfare of his crew. He also wondered about whether the men would get out if the ship had to be abandoned. Croxford recalls an apprehension of the unknown. What would happen next? Conneely said he didn't have time to think. He was too busy firing the nose gun and sensed fear while looking for a chute, all the while seeing flames and smelling gas. Wilen admits to the same fear, noting the destroyed cockpit, the flames, and the smoke. It wasn't changed until he heard the command to bail out that his reactions changed and he knew what had to be done.

Some 43 years later, with a year of POW experience behind him, Witton says one thing stands out in his memory. That was when he saw American soldiers hanging from lamp posts while he was being led through German villages.

Luckily, one of those crew members – Wilen – did not have to depend on memory for some of those experiences. He chanced on a “paper” he had written in longhand as part of an English class assignment while seeking a degree from the University of Pittsburgh in 1946. Wilen's experience that morning when his plane was shot down, in addition to days spent in that POW camp, were still fresh when he put them on paper. Let's share some of that “report.”

“Moving so swiftly, the pace of events that morning left me completely dazed. This excitement was the result of an attack on our bomb group. Several minutes before the attack, I had seen our own escort planes protecting the formation. When our pilot called out, ‘planes ahead,’ I casually remarked ‘friendly aircraft.’ The bursts from our guns and the bursting of shells around us told me they were not ‘friendly,’ but German. I became flustered trying to work my charts and instruments, while watching the enemy planes diving into our formation. With a computer and a pencil as my only defensive weapons, I felt helpless and afraid as I waited. For what, I did not know, but I had a premonition that something would happen soon.”

“Above the tumult in the air and in the plane, I heard the pilot cry, ‘We're hit, salvo the bombs!’ I pushed aside my maps and equipment to open the bomb-bay doors. The doors would not budge. I screamed into the microphone for the engineer to help. As I struggled with the lever, a cold sweat broke out on my hands and forehead. Finally the radioman came to my assistance and pried open the doors, shouting that the engineer had been killed. I pulled the salvo lever, dropped the bombs and called out ‘Bombs Away!’ By this time my heart was beating wildly and my mind was in a whirl. My eyes were roving from the engines to the instruments, then to my parachute. I was listening intently for the slightest sound over my earphones. Never before had I been so afraid, quivering and shaking like a naked child in the cold. Two of our engines were on fire and we were rapidly losing altitude. As I waited, images of my loved ones at home came to mind. Then came the order: ‘Start bailing out!’ With my thoughts far away I buckled on my chute, pulled off my earphones and oxygen mask and instinctively dove out of the plane. As I drifted toward the earth I silently prayed to once again see those loved ones that had passed through my mind.”

“That first night in captivity I spent in solitary confinement in the dungeon of an old German castle. A prisoner's life as I found it to be was miserable. From all I had read, war prisoners were to get plenty of food – but the vegetables we received, we grew ourselves in gardens we had planted. We were permitted to keep a small part of the crop. The ground was sandy and dry, the few scallions we did grow were tasteless and not worth planting. To vary the diet and provide warmth in winter, the Germans fed the prisoners hot soup made from nourishing meat and vegetables. (So said the POW bulletins) My barley and bean soup had meat of a sort in it – not ‘nourishing’ meat, but long white worms and round black beetles which sickened my stomach. I ate the soup to satisfy the gnawing hunger pains in my already shrunken stomach.”

“Living from day to day, we avidly followed the news and progress of the allied armies. Americans moving toward us from the west were our hope during the summer and early fall. After the snows of winter came, we turned to the Russians for salvation. In the middle of January they started moving from the east. As they drew closer to our camp in Silesia, rumors of a forced march to escape the advancing Russians spread throughout the camp. Then with Russian tanks within 50 miles of us, the order came to march.”

“It was a bitter cold night with the moon faintly glimmering over the ankle-deep snow through which I fearfully trudged. I dared not think of faltering as I recalled the warning: ‘Anyone who falls out will be shot!’ I did not know what lay ahead but I was determined to keep pace. Marching alongside the column of ragged Americans were armed German guards, many with large police dogs on leashes. Those ferocious looking wolf dogs were enough to terrify my already frightened mind. Every hour we halted. These rest periods, instead of helping, were our most dangerous obstacles. Losing sight of everything but our weariness, we dropped our heavy packs and stretched out on the cold, uninviting snow. As we rested, our thin-blooded bodies chilled rapidly and fewer and fewer got up to continue the march.”

“We weren't suffering alone. Guards dropped out from frozen feet or numbed bodies, chilled by temperatures of 18 below. Even the dogs suffered. Soon, I was no longer on a forced march in Germany. Guards were no longer formidable or frightening with their dogs and bayonets. I was no longer afraid.”

“Rapidly falling snow covered the marching column in a misty blanket of white. I was moving along in a nightmare, a horrible unrealistic dream. My tired, aching legs moved forward, instinctively following blurred forms ahead. Time was boundless and the road seemed without end. The pack I carried began to feel like the weight of the world. Yet I no longer had fear. I trudged along wearily, unable to think or feel. My arms and hands I could see as I passed them between my eyes and the slowly moving dark figures ahead. When would this end? I did not care and yet I did. I did not expect to drop out, but I was curious about what we would find at our destination. Would there be another sleepless day of misery in the cold snow or would there be shelter and warmth? No, I was no longer afraid, as I began to feel drowsy and warm and oh so tired, so tired and sleepy. I had to keep moving, keep moving now. Sleep, I hoped, would come later. I dimly recalled fighting to stay awake, to stave off drowsiness that I knew would lead to eternal sleep.”

“Then in the distance there was a vague impression of a town and a brick factory building, of rains and thawing weather. I spent two days in that warm factory where a hard concrete floor felt like a feather bed. The rest of the trip was made in good weather and uneventfully. After two months at Nuremberg, the Nazi shrine, we marched south in April to avoid advancing American forces. Our final destination and confinement was in Moosburg, just a few short miles from the infamous concentration camp at Dachau. It was there I awaited ‘liberation,’ a day that for 12 long months I had hoped and prayed for, a day that I thought would never be a reality. But that day did come – April 29, 1945 – the most eventful day of my life.”

“Our first indication that Americans were near was the whizzing of their bullets. Instinctively we ran for the slit trenches and as I did, I heard screams of agony from prisoners too slow in reaching shelter. Another fear arose, a fear of being killed with freedom so near. Following the pause in the small gun fire, came the screeching of cannon shells, whose explosions among the wooden barracks further terrified me. As I crouched low to avoid the flying debris and the waves of air they generated, I began quivering and shaking once again. My heart again beat rapidly.”

“I begged for help, anything to stop this agony. All at once, as if in answer to my prayers, I heard cheers and shouting. I looked up slowly, puzzled by this sudden change, and as I did, I saw a band of German storm troopers attempting to bar the advance of eight brown tanks coming over a ridge close by. When I saw the white stars on the sides of those tanks, I cried without shame. Forgetting my previous fears, I joined the jumping and screaming men.”

“When the fighting ended, we were overwhelmed by emotions that had been pent up during that long imprisonment. The first sign was given by an old Frenchman who trembled in his anger and desire for revenge. He shook his fist at the Germans and moved his other hand across his throat in a knife-like motion, shrieking ‘couteau, couteau.’ After calming down, some dashed for food and began greedily devouring as much as their shrunken stomachs would hold. Others, hunting for souvenirs, tore out the boards from the sides of the barracks, cut up the bedding and even tried to tear the clothing off backs. In the middle of this turmoil, another cheer was raised, much louder than the first. When I saw the cause of it, I joined the roaring crowd with all the fervor I possessed. Over the church steeple in nearby Moosburg flew ‘Old Glory.’ It’s a moment I will carry vividly to my grave.”

“After the initial effect wore off, the full realization that I was once again free settled in. This was ‘Liberation Day,’ the prospect of which had given me the hope and courage to survive. Every stirring moment of my liberation and every dark moment of my imprisonment lives with me as vividly today as it did during that unforgettable year from May 8, 1944 to April 29, 1945.”

This is the story of survival – an original crew of the 453rd Bomb Group – who survived 16 combat missions over Germany, survived being shot down and parachuting to safety, survived a year of prisoner of war camps, forced marches, hunger, bombings and strafings by our own American and allied planes – who survived over 40 years since then and to be able to come together, reminisce and relive those experiences and memories that had faded with time.