

The Last Flight of Crew #14, Part II

It was time to leave. There had been rumors, but we didn't really know for sure until one particular morning. Only two of us were going. A pilot who had been shot in the back and myself, with my burns. We were, obviously, well enough to travel; however, to look, at us you'd think we were just arriving instead of leaving. We were on our way to interrogation in Germany, far from where we were in Czechoslovakia ... all the way across Germany to Frankfurt On the Main ... three days by train.

They brought our clothes. Keerist! What a sight I presented ... my flight jacket had been on fire at one time; it was charred and blackened and had numerous holes. My flight boots were missing so they gave me a pair of black shoes (good shoes, but they didn't quite match my olive drab uniform) which made my whole appearance just a bit more ludicrous ... I was quite a sight!

It was the first part of January, the 3rd or 4th, of 1945. I can't remember for sure which. It was a typical winter day, cold, gray, ice and snow everywhere. I didn't realize how cold it actually would be outside, as it was nice and warm in the hospital. I said goodbye to Tom Noesges and the others, and we left. The two of us, and two guards. They would be our "companions" for the rest of trip. They were sixty years old, or older, an in Wehrmacht uniforms ... the "Last of the Old Guard", so to speak.

We left the warm hospital lobby and were immediately struck by the cold icy air. I didn't have an overcoat or heavy jacket, just what was left of the outer portion of my electrically heated flight suit. We walked; the two guards behind us so we wouldn't take up too much room on the sidewalk. It wasn't too far to the streetcar. I couldn't get over the appearance of the people, compared to the people of Italy ... the southern part of Italy, anyway. The people of Italy were poor. The houses, the clothes, the roads, everything reflected poverty; and now, here in Brunn (BRNO) Czechoslovakia ... it was like home; like walking down Market Street in San Francisco. Men wore suits, the women had on fur coats, and the whole atmosphere was one of relative prosperity. I just couldn't get over the sudden change. My impression of Europe, based on Southern Italy, was quite wrong ... I soon found out. The rest of Europe which I saw, was prosperous as opposed to the poverty of Southern Italy.

We rode the streetcar to the train station. The Czech people were friendly, smiled, spoke to the guards, querying them about us I presume. On the train we had a compartment to ourselves ... nothing fancy, no pullman, no berths ... we sat up or slouched the whole trip. The guards were quite considerate. It was a shame we didn't speak enough of each other's language to really converse. One of the guards shared left over cookies his family

had sent him for Christmas and, at several of the train stops they would bring us pastry of some sort. I often felt they thought of us as they would their sons, or at least, had compassion for us because of the discrepancy in our ages. With the exception of two incidents, the trip was uneventful. We were still far enough north and east to escape the bombings and strafing that was to come later. One day I had a fever ... don't know what caused it ... reaction to the soft time in the warm hospital I suppose. Anyway, I was out of it for a day. I was so thirsty ... all I could think of was ice cold beer, and kept visualizing pitchers upon pitchers of ice cold beer at the end of the trip.

I know exactly what it is to hallucinate: that night the fever broke and I was fine. No sickness, no cold, nothing but a fever; never had it since. We stopped one night at a restaurant (a train stop, like the old Fred Harvey train stops the Santa Fe used to have; like the Greyhound Bus still has). If you want to eat, you get off and go inside ... well, we did ... this one night. It was a beer hall right out of a Peter Lorry and Humphrey Bogart spy movie. One expected Marlene Dietrich to come on stage and sing "Lile Marlene". The place was full of soldiers, a scattering of civilians and two POWs. (Guess who?) Jesus! It was noisy ... singing, yelling, beer drinking ... lots of sausage, cheese, etc. I didn't know about "Octoberfests" then, but it was just like an "Octoberfest" ... in miniature, as the restaurant wasn't very big. I felt quite conspicuous with my bandaged head and ratty uniform, not to mention being a POW; but no one paid any attention. I presume they had seen POWs before. We didn't have much time; ate our meal and left. It must have been a favorite spot for soldiers to congregate (or there were other trains) as only a few left when we did ... to get back on our train. The next day, we arrived at the interrogation center where I bid farewell to the guards and to my pilot friend, as he was an officer and went elsewhere. At this point in my story, I would like to mention once again the fact that I am writing this narrative some thirty six years after it happened. I realize now that I should have done this years ago. Most of my experiences are quite vivid, some are vague, and "by jove", sometimes I can't seem to recollect at all exactly what took place as to where and when. This is one of those places now. I remember a small room. It was my first meeting with a working POW. It must have been my initial approach to interrogation. I say this because there were only the two of us. It was quite early in the morning, say about 2 or 3:00 a.m. upon arriving. We were served a cup of hot chocolate and two slices of bread, with strawberry jam. "Holy Mackerel" I'll never forget how good that tasted. We were then issued a Red Cross suitcase. A small black suitcase containing: (and here, again, I should

remember everything, but can't quite) a paperback book, a razor, soap, toothbrush, a pair of warm mittens and a black wool) sweater that had been hand knit by a Red Cross worker somewhere in the New England states. It had a tag on it ... that's how I knew. I put that sweater on right then and there; didn't take it off until months later. I wanted to bring it home, but by then it was infested with little friends that looked like grains of rice, but were by no means as dormant. Cooties they are called, or, for the uninitiated ... Lice!

I was then escorted to a large barracks similar to the one I was familiar with. It would appear, at this point, that I was becoming a part of a group ... a number ... the start of order and routine. As soon as there were enough POWs to make up a "group", we began processing. I will use the word "group" instead of platoon, company, squadron, etc., as there would be, later on, mixed POWs, i.e.; Air Force, Artillery, Infantry ... all would end up together; whereas in the early part of the war, the Air Force had their own POW camps. Anyway, after a certain number had arrived, a few each day, we began the "routine"

Interrogation consisted of a very informal type of questioning. It was done in a very small cubicle, just enough room for the interrogator on one side of a small table and myself on the other. I was seated in a chair and left alone for quite awhile. Anyone suffering from claustrophobia would have found these cubicles quite exciting, to say the least ... all part of the plan I must say. The interrogator came in, after what seemed like hours ... (probably only 15 minutes) ... We both played the game; I said, "I can only give you my name, rank, and serial number, ... you know that." He said, (incidentally, he spoke perfect English) .. "OK, you and I both know that, so let's do it this way". He brought out several thick books, about the size of a San Francisco Phone Directory, and said, "Look, I know you aren't supposed to tell me anything, so don't, just point to the tail markings on your plane." Jesus! ... you wouldn't believe what he had! He knew more about the 15th Air Force than I'll ever know. There were photos of all the groups (planes, that is), squadrons, names of squadron commanders, locations — on and on it went. I was astounded! Needless to say, it was quite a shock, and I almost succumbed to the attitude of saying, "Hell, he knows more about the 15th AAF than I do; what little I would tell him won't make any difference", but, I didn't. I did, however, stray a bit and, in light of what he knew already, divulge the names of the rest of the crew as I was very concerned with their locations and outcome. The only one I had seen or heard of was Tom Noesges.

Well, that was the so called "dreaded interrogation", and I was out within the