
American Ex Prisoner of War Speaks Out

by Bob Leavenworth 826 Sq.

The following is a telling of my experiences during WWII. 1) My enlisting in the air corps, 2) Combat experiences, 3) Bailing out over enemy territory, 4) Being captured, 5) Put in solitary confinement, 6) Life in prison camp. 7) The black hunger march, and 7) liberation.

Please keep in mind that each POW has his or her story and each camp differed. Keep in mind that those who don't learn from history are doomed to repeat it. I was in my teens in 1938 when Hitler took over Austria. Remember the movie "Sound of Music" the Vontrap family escaped and eventually came to the US.

Within three years Hitler and the axis powers had occupied most of Western Europe as well as France and North Africa. During this time France and England were doing their darndest to hold on to their democracies while we in the US stuck our heads in the sand. We hoped that the whole mess would go away.

On Dec. 8, 1941 the day after Pearl Harbor was bombed, the US declared war on Japan, and on the 11th of December 1941 Germany and Italy declared war on the United States. We were not prepared for one war, to say nothing about two. A neighbor of mine a few of years older, was the role model of the neighborhood, he was killed and received the Congressional Medal of Honor. That hit me petty hard.

On my 18th birthday I enlisted in the air corps. Within two weeks I was on my way to basic training in Greensboro, NC. Then on to Mississippi for Engineers school, then on to gunnery school in Panama City, Florida. There we lived in tents and very often when I returned from a training flight, I would find a cute little "deadly coral snake" curled up on my cot. Our gunnery exercises were all combined with looking for enemy subs yes, enemy subs had been sighted not only off the Florida coast, but all the way north to New Jersey and New York.

On a lighter note, we used to save a few rounds of ammunition and shoot up stingrays (flying fish with a whip like tail). After which they would float up on the Navy's beach (great fun).

At Mitchell Field, NY, I was assigned to a B-24 Liberator Bomber with a 110 ft. wingspan, powered by 4 ea. 1000 hp engines with a top speed of 300 mph. It was operated by a 10 man crew: four flight crew officers and six enlisted gunners who manned the 50 caliber machine guns. The crew consisted of: pilot, copilot, navigator, bombardier, nose turret, top turret, ball turret, tail turret, and two waist guns. It could carry a 8800 bomb load.

Some called the "Liberator" a flying coffin and others called it a flying boxcar. All in all she was a tough competitor.

Just prior to heading overseas a crew member's dad who owned one of the best night clubs in NYC, put on a real show for the whole crew. We got to dance with the chorus girls.

We flew our own airplane to Italy where we were to be based. First stop was Presque, Maine, then Newfoundland, the Azores, an island in the middle of the Atlantic, Tunis, North Africa and finally my permanent base, Torretta, near Foggia in southern Italy.

I was assigned to the 49th wing, 484 bomb group 826 squadron, 15th Air Force. I was assigned a bunk in a tent and was told to

get ready to go on a mission the next day as a replacement.

At this point I was convinced that I would win the war single handed my first mission proved otherwise. I quickly found out that the enemy fighters, bunches of them, shoot back and their anti aircraft guns with their "flak" also make things miserable. We dropped our bombs on an oil refinery and limped back to the base full of holes with two dead, and three wounded aboard. This was quite an indoctrination into the real world. Many of the historians and "Monday Morning Quarterbacks," would lead you to believe we had the war won from the beginning. That is a plain lie! We were the underdogs on the land, on the sea and in the air. Further, the media was responsible, in my experience for the loss of many lives and injuries through their leaks. Very few missions went by that the Germans didn't know our targets and told us as soon as we were air borne. The next day I was transferred back to my original crew. We named our bomber "Salvo Sally" and I flew the remainder of my missions in her. Yes, there were missions after which she had to be patched back together again.

The 15th Airforce in a five month period dropped 13,469 tons of bombs on one target (Ploesti) with a loss of 223 aircraft and 2300 airman. With the exception of the invasion of Southern France, my missions were bombing railheads, refineries, marshaling yards, manufacturing plants and bridges.

On August 28, 1944, we thought we had an easy target, Budapest, Hungary. Wrong again, they were waiting for us. After dropping our bombs and clearing the target we headed home with

