

A Thesis

In Search Of Stephen
The Wartime Death of An American Airman In World War II

By

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Submitted as partial fulfillment of the requirements for
The Masters of Liberal Studies

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A thesis presented on the manner and cause of the wartime death of Staff Sergeant Stephen Toth and the members of his crew August 19th 1943, in the skies of occupied Holland. The aim of the thesis is to reconstruct, and investigate from secondary sources and primary records: the deaths of an American aircrew, the manner and treatment of the survivors held captive as POWs in war time Germany, and the cause and manner of the return of the dead, and the repatriation of the living.

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Chapter One

Hanging Portrait

Childhood memories like most memories are often clouded by the passage of time. Yet since they are our first memories they often hold more of significance than many others. In my own case, many of my memories revolve around my family and in particular a portrait of a young man who dominated the living room of my grandparents home on Toledo's East Side for almost fifty years. The handsome young man with the haunting eyes was my uncle Steve. The portrait was painted by Stephen's brother William, my father. After the war was over, my father returned to painting as a pastime and as a way to honor those he loved. One of his first projects was to paint a portrait of his brother. The painting sat on the southern wall of my grandparents living room always placed over the middle of the sofa. Over time I would learn in dribs and drabs about the young man and who and what he stood for. Information about my uncle Steve was parceled out over the years in rare moments when the pain of his demise was overcome by the love and pride of those who survived him. The family, however, never truly learned of the circumstances of his

wartime death. Many different scenarios played out over the years, including that he still might be alive. Was he on a secret mission? Why was his aircraft alone?

Fifty years later a conversation with my father would begin a search that would lead us to the National Archives, correspondence with historians, veterans around the world, and a trip that allowed a grandson to bond with his grandfather and a son to fulfill his father's wishes. In 1997, at the National Archives with thousands of boxes of forgotten memories, some but not all of these questions were finally answered, garnered from still classified materials in the National Archives. Other questions found other answers from sources, as far away as Holland and from eyewitnesses in the United States.

One of the deadliest, longest and perhaps the most costly campaigns in both manpower and machinery in World War II was England's and America's air war against Germany. The campaign generally mentioned as an afterthought in many histories of the war involved about 1.5 million Allied troops and 69,000 aircraft versus 2.2 million German troops (plus 2 million civilians repairing the damage) and 61,000 Nazi aircraft. England started the air war against Germany in 1939; the campaign did not escalate until the United States joined the "Strategic Bomber Offensive" in 1943. The

heavy bombers dropped 1 .5 million tons of bombs, while single and two engine aircraft dropped another 1.1 million tons.¹

The Allied strategic bombing campaign was really two campaigns in one. The English attacked at night and the Americans, against the advice of their English cousins, attacked mostly during daylight hours. At the peak of the bombing offensive,² Great Britain had about 718,628 pilots and ground crew who dropped 1.2 million tons of bombs.³ The American Army Air Force used 619,020 troops to support the dropping of 1.5 million tons of bombs, mostly in daylight. Europe received about 75 per-cent of total bomb tonnage dropped by U.S. Army Air Force worldwide through the entire war. Losses on both sides were heavy. Almost 160,000 Allied airmen became casualties. Aircraft losses were enormous, with 21,914 bombers lost (11,965 British) and 18,465

¹ Dunnigan, James F. And Nofi, Albert A. *Dirty Little Secrets Of World War II* (New York: William and Morrow Company, 1994),195-200.

² *ibid.*

fighters (10,045 British).⁴ It was actually worse than it appears for the bombers and their crews, as many planes that survived their missions would be shot up and have dead and wounded crew on board, Most of these missions were flown out of Great Britain. Half the bomb tonnage was dropped on Germany, with another 22 percent landing on France. Aircraft based in Italy accounted for most of the bombs delivered to Italy (14 percent), Austria, Hungary, the Balkans and others the rest. ⁵

The major reason the bombing campaign does not get much attention in history books is because the action was widely spread out. Except for the Battle of Britain, combat generally took place in enemy territory, and in many cases really did not affect the targets it attacked. Air power advocates thought that strategic bombing would win the war, or at the least would be major factor in winning the war. However strategic bombing in Europe did not end the war. As in most conflicts, combat soldiers taking and occupying real estate won the war. Nonetheless the bombing did make a major contribution to the Allied victory and hurt the Germans quite a bit, particularly in destroying enemy aircraft and transportation infrastructure.

⁴ *ibid.*

⁵ *ibid.*

A major concern for the commanders of the Allied bomber forces was what targets to attack. Unfortunately for the men who flew the bombers, their commanders, never having done this on such a large scale, used a trial and error method in selecting targets.⁶

The Allied combined strategic bomber campaign began in 1943 with the initial targets what were thought to be key component factories for the German war machine. The Germans just shifted production elsewhere in Europe and even to underground factories. In June of 1943 the joints chiefs issued the "Pointblank" directive attacking the German Aircraft industry. This forced the Germans to disperse their industrial facilities. The next selection of targets was the Axis transportation system. This change came about in 1944 as part of Operation Overlord (better known as D-Day). Wrecking the German transportation system kept the Germans in part from being able to use roadways and railroads to move units against Allied troops in Normandy.⁷

Another side effect of the bombing campaign was the degradation of the Luftwaffe, which, to the U.S. Army Air Force, was the principal objective of the bombing. Allied

⁶ *ibid.*

⁷ Dear, I. C. B., and Foot, M. R. D., Eds. *The Oxford Companion to World War II* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), 1066-74.

troops had less and less to fear from German air attacks as the war went on. This was because a larger percentage of Luftwaffe aircraft had to be reassigned to air defense over Germany. The percentage steadily increased as the war went on.

Losses against bomber formations were higher than those against ground units. There were other subtle effects of the bombing. Because the bombing campaign was both a night and day offensive the British did most of their bombing at night (they didn't believe daylight bombing would work). Technology at the time being what it was, bombing accuracy in general was low. Bombing accuracy at night was even less accurate, so the British carpet-bombed large areas (like cities) rather than specific targets on the order of factories or airfields. A campaign of around the clock bombing was carried out against a German industrial area which would be hit during the day by American bombers and then again at night by English bombers. It was hoped that this around the clock bombing would leave the Germans without sleep and with low morale affecting their productivity, but production continued anyway.

If the bombing campaign had a failure besides the obvious loss of life, it was a failure to explain its accomplishments. During the war real time intelligence

failed the commanders of the bombing forces so it was understandable that during the war the effects of the campaign were not as well understood when compared to the immediate and better documented effects of land and sea campaigns. One either occupied land or sank the other guy's ships. ⁸

⁸ Dunnigan, and Nofi, 189.

Chapter Two

Every Mother's Son

The United States was not prepared for the Second World War on any front. The First World War and the Great Depression had sapped the wealth and willpower of the nation. Our nation's Army, Navy and fledgling Air Corps were undermanned and ill supplied. While research and development did continue between the wars, funds for military modernization were limited. Germany and Japan rearmed in secret and the United States Army practiced with wooden guns and empty beer cans to simulate grenades and artillery shells. Between the wars newsreel footage showed the canvas sides of Army trucks painted with the word tank to simulate non-existent tank units. By and large the United States air forces both Navy and Army, had but only a handful of modern fighters and less than that of bombers. In fact, at the time of the attack on Pearl Harbor, the Army's 8th Air Force did not exist on paper.⁹

⁹ Gerald Astor, *The Mighty Eighth: The Air War in Europe as Told by the Men Who Fought It* (New York: Dell Publishing, 1997), 1.

Such was the state of military readiness when President Roosevelt issued his call to arms on December 8th, but Americans responded to the nation's call. They came from nearly every town, city, and state in America. They were the sons of the elite, the impoverished, and everyone in between in 1940s America.¹⁰ While their backgrounds varied, they shared common threads. These young men were someone's loved one, someone's family and they were every mother's son. The average American soldier in World War II was about 5 feet 8 inches tall and weighed around 144 lbs. He had a 33 ½ inch chest and a 31 inch waist.¹¹ The war touched almost everyone whether it was a friend, husband, son, brother, or cousin everyone knew someone in harms way.

Stephen Toth and his crewmates were a cross section of those young Americans who fought and died in the skies of Europe, and in the far away Pacific Islands with almost unpronounceable names. S/Sgt. Stephen Anthony Toth was the third child of seven children born to Hungarian immigrants Helen and John Toth. Steve was born August 28th, 1921 in the family's home on Esther street. He attended St. Stephen

¹⁰ McManus, John C. *Deadly Sky: The American Combat Airman In World War II* (California: Presidio Press, 2000), 11.

¹¹ Wright, Mike. *What They Didn't Teach You About World War II* (California: Presidio Press, 1998), 14.

elementary school and Toledo Macomber High School - graduating in 1938 (majoring in auto mechanics). Prior to his induction into the Army Air Corps in 1942, Steve worked for an automotive plating firm¹². Steve was closest to his brother William. The two brothers, only a year apart, did everything together. They attended grade school and high school together, worked on a farm as stoop laborers and even attended Miss Beatrice Garden's school of Dance in an attempt to meet girls.

After basic training, Steve was assigned to radio school and then gunnery school at Harlingen AFB, Texas, graduating in April 1943.¹³ Eventually, he would meet and join the rest of his crew in Boise Idaho. Like many young men, deployment meant making commitments, some to engagements, others to marriage. Three weeks prior to shipping out to England, Steve married Addie Mae Dirsch. Addie was from Toledo's north end and worked at the Willys Overland Jeep Plant.¹⁴

Ben Howe, the crew's pilot, was from Reading Massachusetts and attended Columbia University. He was

¹² Toth, William (brother of Stephen Toth). Interview by author 8/10/05

¹³ *ibid.*

¹⁴ "Toledo Blade" (Toledo, Ohio) 21st August 1943.

married to the former Jean Merton and had a two-month-old son Peter Anthony Howe. ¹⁵ Paul Gruhn, the crew's co-pilot was from Wisconsin and joined the Air Corps in March of 1942.¹⁶ He had a high school diploma and worked as a linotype operator in civilian life. Joel Tutt, the crew's bombardier was born in Tennessee, but eventually his family moved to Monticello, Georgia. Joel enlisted in the Air Cadet program in March of 1942; he was married with one year of college.¹⁷ Arthur Pilley, the crew's Navigator, was from New Jersey. Pilley was originally a Cavalryman in the New Jersey National Guard before joining the Air Cadet program.¹⁸ The top turret gunner and crew chief was George Connelly, who entered the Air corps in Chicago January 23rd, 1942. In civilian life Connelly was a postal clerk.¹⁹ William Ryan, the right waist gunner, was from New York and enlisted at Fort Jay on Governor's Island on September 23rd, 1942.²⁰ The left waist gunner, Sgt. James E. Hillier, was from Providence, Rhode Island and transferred from an

¹⁵ "The Reading Chronicle" (Reading, Massachusetts) 3rd Dec. 1943.

¹⁶ National Archive And Record Administration textual Record Group 64 Electroic Army Merged File, ca. 1938-1946.

¹⁷ *ibid.*

¹⁸ *ibid.*

¹⁹ *ibid.*

²⁰ *ibid.*

Artillery Unit of the Rhode Island National Guard to the Air Corps.²¹ Hillier was born in 1920 and had graduated from Providence Central High School and like Stephen Toth had four brothers in service. William J. Stamp, was the crew's tail gunner, had a year of high school, was single with dependants and enlisted in Army Air Corps at Buffalo, New York on September 21st, 1942.²² The smallest man in the crew, with perhaps the loneliest job was Sgt. Dale Theodore Butt. Butt was born in Nebraska and moved with his family to Rock County Wisconsin. Sgt. Butt joined the Air Corps on August 8th, 1942.²³

A high school education in 1940 America, while not a rare thing was a major accomplishment for many families. A 1940's graduate in rural America, or from a family of immigrants, might be the first in the family to obtain a high school diploma. Because of the initial high standards of the Air Corps, most of the young men who served in the Army Air Corps had at least a high school education; many attended college.²⁴ For a nation working itself out of the

²¹ *ibid.*

²² *ibid.*

²³ *ibid.*

²⁴ McManus, 13.

throes of the Depression, most recruits were highly motivated and reasonably well educated for the time.

In terms of social class and status, the young men of the Air Corps generally had more advantages than their ground-combat counterparts but still cannot be thought of in any way as strictly products of America's elite classes²⁵. The Army Air Corps personnel were, judging from the results of the military's A General Classification Test, usually referred to as the AGCT, some of America's best and brightest. The AGCT was 150 multiple-choice questions given to all recruits designed to measure intelligence and general aptitude. The Army scored recruits in five categories according to raw scores. Class I had a score of more than 130; Class II, between 110 and 129; Class III, 90 to 109; Class IV, 70 to 89; and Class V, 69 or lower. ²⁶ Throughout the war, the Army Air Force received a high proportion of men who scored in Class I, or Class II (those the Army evaluated as high-quality manpower). The pattern of top scorers ending up in the Air Force was especially true in 1942 and 1943. For example, 44 percent of the Air Corp's replacements in 1942 had tested in Class I or II and another 35 percent came from Class III. The

²⁵ *ibid.* , 14.

²⁶ *ibid.*

numbers were roughly the same for 1943. High combat losses and general manpower needs of the nation created a large demand for large numbers of intelligent and skilled men.

The Army only allowed men between the ages of eighteen and twenty-seven to apply for pilot, bombardier, and navigator training. Only those with perfect physical condition and excellent eyesight were accepted.²⁷

Since the Air Corps was a volunteer branch of the service, the requirements were higher and recruits had to work hard to apply themselves just to qualify. Seeing combat on a regular basis in the Army Air Corps meant that you were either a crewmember of a bomber or a fighter pilot.

No one was drafted and forced into the role of combat airman. Many of those who ended up in air combat volunteered because they thought that flying was romantic, the cutting edge of technology and better than sleeping in a water filled foxhole. Some, like Stephen Toth and his brother William who attended Macomber High School in Toledo, and spent endless hours in aviation classes where they learned how to build and repair fabric wings and studied the likes of Charles "Lucky" Lindbergh and World War I Ace Captain Eddie Rickenbacker. If they had to fight,

¹⁸ *ibid.* , 16.

they wanted to join the "glamorous" branch of the service, where they would be treated like gentlemen.

Initially, most of these combat airmen were white because the U.S. military mirrored the rest of the segregated 1940's society. William Toth, while training near the Southern town of Biloxi, Mississippi remarked while on a pass into town that he noticed whites and colored drinking fountains only and a sign in a diner that read no soldiers, no sailors, no coloreds. Inside the diner sitting at the counter eating were German POW's". Such was the south. ²⁸

Because of political pressure, much applied by First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt, the Army Air Force became exception to the rule. Small groups of black men began to receive segregated pilot training in Tuskegee, Alabama early in the war. These men who had high AGCT scores and had passed all of the other rigorous Air Force tests became the 332d Fighter Group. The Air Force created and trained one black bomb group, the 477th Bomb Group, but never allowed it to go overseas.

There was in the first two years of American involvement in World War II a deliberate policy of U.S. Army leaders to channel the men it considered as bright,

²⁸ *ibid.*, 14.

capable, and motivated into the Army Air Force²⁹. Later in the war, when the Air Force had far more pilot candidates than it could ever hope to train, and the Army brass realized it would need large numbers of bright, well-trained soldiers to win the war on the ground, such men were then channeled into Army Ground Forces. The Army experienced its greatest growth during the first couple of years of the war and, even late in the war, the Air Force continued to receive more than its fair share of men deemed to be intelligent and motivated and thus essential to the war effort.

Before Pearl Harbor, anyone entering the air cadet program had to have at least two years of college, but this requirement was waived in January 1942.³⁰ This paved the way for expansion of the Air Force and opened doors for many bright eighteen-to-twenty-one-year-olds who simply did not have the social and economic advantages necessary for a college education. After passing the minimum requirements (AGCT, age, good health), young men were immediately put through the extensive evaluation process known in the service as the "classification battery."

²⁹ Victor Cohen, *Classification And Assignment Of Enlisted Men In The Army Air Arm*, (Air Force Historical Research Agency: Maxwell, Alabama, 1953), 44.

For potential air cadets, testing meant being subjected to a series of psychological and motor tests known as "stanines". The test name comes from the method of ranking a cadet called a standard nine. A number one rating was the lowest and a number nine the highest.³¹ Stanines were designed to determine proficiency in one of three jobs: pilot, bombardier, or navigator. Each of the tests had a scale of one through nine. The stanine tests measured a cadet's abilities of speed and accuracy of perception, ability to read and understand technical information, resourcefulness and judgment in problem solving, as well as knowledge of math and mechanical principles. Other tests measured motor skills, coordination, finger dexterity, and reflexes.³² Scoring high in the physical tests might slate a cadet for pilot training, while high scores on math and problem solving tests might point the applicant toward navigator school.

The two weeks required for this process also included a battery of medical and psychological examinations, all designed to determine mental and physical fitness for air combat. If a volunteer managed to make it through this process without being rejected for some physical or

³¹ *ibid.*

³² *ibid.*, 16.

psychological defect, they were then approved for entry into the air cadet program and assigned as a pilot, navigator, or bombardier trainee. Some of those who washed out during the "classification battery" did end up in air combat, but as gunners on heavy bomber crews. For those who did make it, the Air Force determined whether they would be pilots, bombardiers, or navigators on three qualities: job preference, test results, and the needs of the Air Force. Early in the war, servicemen were likely to be assigned an aircrew job on the basis of test scores and preference. In 1944, the determining factor would change to the need of the service. Late in the war, the Air Force found itself with plenty of pilots, and a cadet's chance of becoming a pilot decreased. The needs of the nation and the service dictated a recruit's assignment.³³

When Benjamin Howe was selected for pilot training, the first step was preflight instruction. After preflight, Howe attended primary flight school learning to fly a small, simple aircraft. Cadets negotiated four phases during primary flight school. In Phase one a pilot learned how to handle the airplane, recover from stalls and spins, and how to land. In the second phase, the cadet learned to fly

³³ *ibid.*, 17-18.

patterns. Phase three taught a pilot precision approaches and landing techniques. The fourth phase, usually known as the acrobatic phase, required students to perform difficult defensive and offensive maneuvers such as loops or snap rolls. Near the middle of the ten-week primary school the student had to solo, or fly without an instructor onboard. By the end of the training the average cadet would have made at least 175 landings.³⁴

During primary flight school any weakness from airsickness to rough landings to poor stick-and-rudder techniques, could cause a cadet to wash out or fail.³⁵ The next step was basic flight training. In the next ten weeks cadet Howe would be molded into military pilots, transitioning from single engine light planes to the heavier two and four engine aircraft. The basic flight curriculum would include instrument, night, formation, and cross-country flying. Instructors emphasized precision and smoothness and repeatedly drilled students so that flying techniques became instinctive. After basic flight training the successful graduate began an intensive twelve-week advanced flight school either in single engine or multi

³⁴ *ibid.*, 20-25.

³⁵ *ibid.*

engined aircraft. Training in single engine aircraft generally led to being assigned as a fighter pilot. Two-engine aircraft training usually led to bombers, or transport aircraft. Assignments were based on a number of contributing factors: a cadet's preference, aptitude, physical size and, after 1943, the current needs of the Air Force.

Those air cadets who failed pilot training usually ended up as bombardiers, or navigators. Joel Tutt's Bombardier training probably lasted twelve weeks (very common early in the war). Later on, it would have been about twenty-four weeks (common late in the war). Much of the training centered on learning to use the Norden bombsight, considered one of the most secret and technologically advanced American weapons. Joel Tutt, upon completion of the Bombardier program, was commissioned as a Second lieutenant and then sent to six-weeks of gunnery school. The overall failure rate for bombardier schools during the war was 12 percent³⁶.

When Arthur Pilley was selected for navigation school he was taught a variety of navigation types over a fifteen-

³⁶ W. Eugene Hollon, *The Preflight School In World War II*, (Air Force Historical Research Agency: July, 1953), 11.

week term. Navigator trainees needed to master three main techniques: dead reckoning (navigating by ground features), celestial (navigating by the stars), and radio (navigating by radio signals received from ground stations). This program was so important that the 388th commanders insisted new navigators go through more schooling when they were deployed and arrived at their base at Knettishall, England. A good navigator needed excellent mathematical skills, an ability to comprehend what they read, and good powers of observation. Pilley as a Navigator would become the eyes and ears of a bomber crew. One mistake in fixing a plot could spell disaster for their aircraft. Duties of the navigator on a B-17 crew not only included setting the proper course for the aircraft, keeping a log on any observed activity outside the aircraft, but also manning a cheek or nose gun, depending on the model of the aircraft. High test scores were a deciding factor for those selected for navigation school. Like new bombardiers, graduates of navigation school were commissioned as a 2nd Lieutenant and sent to a gunnery course.

Enlisted crewmen performed one of three duties: gunner, radio operator, or aircraft engineer. Enlisted personnel sent to gunnery school would learn to shoot moving targets by firing at targets towed behind another aircraft. In

addition to gunnery training, future radiomen and aircraft engineers attended specialist schools learning the ins and outs of their jobs.³⁷

By the time a combat airman flew his first mission, he had usually received a great deal of training at his job, no matter what it happened to be. While each crewman received thousands of hours training in each of his specialties, much of the training in the air occurred as they flew their aircraft across America and overseas to England.

The B-17 is a majestic aircraft; anyone who has ever seen one in flight or heard the growl of its four engines will never forget the experience. The aircraft based on late 1920's technology and design, was a wonderful strong durable aircraft. For many of the veterans of the Second World War the amount of abuse and damage a B-17 could take and still bring its crew home bordered on the magical. B-17 tail number 068 was assigned to the Howe crew when they arrived in England. The plane they had flown to England and had spent most of their time in was taken from them and given to another bomb group. 068, originally named *Phartzac* was a veteran B17-F from the 100th Bomb group that had

³⁷ Hollon, 22.

undergone repair and modifications. The Howe crew's new aircraft would undergo inspection and modification before being sent into action. In May of 1943 a list of 59 modifications was drawn up for incoming replacement aircraft. Of the 59 modifications, 19 were for armament, nine for armor, three for electrical problems, and two for engine modifications. The rest concerned the radios, structural defects, and oxygen system and rescue equipment. The enormous loss of aircraft and the flood of arriving replacement aircraft overwhelmed the repair depot. The plane could wait, but the crew could not. Losses were so high that every available crew was needed. ³⁸

The B-17F was a refined version of the B-17E. The major external change was the use of wide-blade propellers to obtain more air bite and better performance, but there were also many internal changes on the F model, mostly to improve combat ability. The F model was built in three different factories in two different states. Though a product of mass production, each factory made different changes. To identify what plant made what aircraft, a suffix (manufacturers initials) was introduced after the

³⁸ Freeman Roger. *The Mighty Eighth War Manual* (London: MacDonald & Co., 1970), 148-54.

aircraft designation and block number: BO – Boeing, VE – Lockheed Vega and DL – Douglas. Block numbers identified production aircraft incorporating the same detail changes or modifications.³⁹

B-17Fs for 8th Air Force began to arrive in England during the first week of August 1942, making their combat debut on the 27th with 97th Group. 800 F models were in service with the 8th in early September 1943. In all, 1200 would fly with the 8th, and most were lost or retired when better models were available. By the summer of 1944 few B-17Fs remained in operational units, being withdrawn as soon as replacements were available because of troublesome hydraulic supercharger controls. The last known B-17F used in normal daylight missions was the 388th Group's 42-30195 *Blind Date*, destroyed in a forced landing on October 7th 1944.

The B-17 was the primary aircraft of the 8th Air Force in the daylight bombing campaign against Germany and was subject to more modifications than any other aircraft in the Army Air Corp⁴⁰. Field modifications on B-17s were common, changes made to an aircraft when the plane as manufactured needs to be changed for safety or combat

³⁹ *ibid.*

⁴⁰ *ibid.*

effectiveness. The wartime environment in which the Fortress operated had a bearing on many of these changes. High humidity and very low temperature encountered on the many missions executed by the 8th affected equipment and systems that had been trouble free in warmer, drier climates. Many of these problems were highlighted in the first missions flown in Europe. The electrical generators had faulty brushes, the ball turret was beset with troubles, ice and excess oil caused guns to jam, and the Luftwaffe would soon learned the weaknesses of the heavy bombers. One problem that became readily apparent was the lack of forward firepower. The Luftwaffe, ever the professional killing machine, soon concentrated on frontal attacks as early as November 1942.⁴¹ Each member of the crew faced difficult challenges at their station. The B-17, while certainly large on the outside, has very small passageways and limited room inside the aircraft's fuselage. Most B-17Fs were armed at first in the nose with 30. caliber machine guns. The 30. caliber machine gun proved deficient and most groups retrofitted the larger 50 caliber weapon.

⁴¹ *ibid.*

The ball turret that Dale Butt would have to squeeze himself into also had major deficiencies. The oxygen line, head set, throat microphone and heated suit cords, each plugged in different locations and could become tangled when the turret operator tried to charge his guns, clear them or any other function the turret gunner might face. On most mission crew's would find that there was insufficient oxygen for the turret gunner. It became a necessity to watch for failing supply.

The turret gunner's oxygen supply could be recharged by one of the waist gunners above. Not only did this remove the waist gunner from his station, the recharging valve would freeze open and the oxygen supply would begin to escape. In the event that the ball turret gunner had to bail out, he would have to hand crank the turret into the plane, climb out, find his parachute and exit out an escape hatch, all while the plane might be in a spin or a dive.

The top turret that George Connelly manned also needed revisions because sometimes the gun sight was covered by turret bracing. Other times metal side panels obstructed the view. Meanwhile replacement clear panels were made in the United Kingdom. ⁴²Additionally, use of the gun charging

⁴² *ibid.*

handles was proving difficult for the top turret operator. Another early problem was the lack of bulletproof glass. British manufacturers supplied sections for fixing to cockpit windshields, side windows and for the ball and tail gunners face panels for installation as required during the early months of 1943. The radio room that Stephen Toth would occupy and man needed extensive modifications of its VHF radio sets and antennas.

With the large numbers of new B-17 replacement crews and additional bombing groups arriving in Europe, the War Departments modification program was beyond depot resources. ⁴³

In the first half of 1943 there were some documented incidents of self-inflicted damage from waist gunners running their fire into wing and tail surfaces. Some aircraft were damaged seriously enough to jeopardize the safe return of the aircraft. Heavy bombers generally flew at high altitudes. The time a crew was aloft might be as long as ten hours. At any time in the air the crew of a B-17 was continuously exposed to loud noise, vibration, glare and extreme fatigue even without the stress of combat. Because a B-17 was unpressurized and actually quite small

⁴³ *ibid.*

inside the aircraft was cramped, often bitterly cold and the crew needed to wear oxygen masks to breath. Flying at such heights of thirty thousand feet required heavy flying clothing and equipment. When involved in intensive periods of operations, most bomber crewmen wanted to do little else but eat and sleep between missions.⁴⁴ Temperatures of between 30 and 50 degrees below zero Fahrenheit were often the norm over northern Europe at 25,000 feet. The danger from frostbite in such extreme cold made making heavy protective clothing imperative. The Air Corps did develop Heated flying suits in the early 1940s. These suits were available in the winter of 1942 -43 for gunners to use. Unfortunately they were considered unreliable when used operationally. The undersuit supplied to the Air Corps by General Electric for B- 17 crews had a major flaw. The suits heating wires were wired in series so that any break in a wire would cause the entire suit to fail. The crews thought the risk for suit failure while flying in subzero temperatures so great that they chose other options in clothing instead.

The heated flying suits also had accessories of heated boots and gloves to be worn with the F-I suit; both were in

⁴⁴ *ibid.*

short supply. During the first winter of operations the 8th Air Force devised electrically heated muffs for warming hands and feet if gloves or boots failed. Electric blankets were acquired to protect wounded crewmen. There was Cockpit heat in the B-17 ; the gunners, however, were exposed to the blasting cold air from open hatches. In the spring of 1943, a typical combat dress for a B-17 crew consisted of heavy woolen underwear, two pairs of wool socks, a modified F- 1 electric suit, electrically heated gloves and socks, standard A-6 boots and A-4 coveralls with a shearling flying helmet. The average crewman would also wear a leather A-2 jacket over the coveralls.⁴⁵

After training in their various specialties the crew would come together and join the 388th Bombardment Group. The 388th was activated at Gowen Field, Boise Idaho on December 24, 1942. In February 1943, the Group was transferred to Wendover Field, Utah. Colonel William B. David of Calhoun, Georgia assumed Command of the 388th Bombardment Group on February 1, 1943 and would remain in Command until October 7, 1944.⁴⁶

⁴⁵ *ibid.*

⁴⁶ The Unit History of The 388th Bombardment Group August 1943- 1945 (Maxwell Air Force Base, Alabama), 1949.

Upon their arrival in England the first planes of the 388th bomb group stayed with the 96th Bombardment Group at Snetterton Heath airbase⁴⁷ until June 23, 1943, when the Knettishall airbase was officially turned over to the 388th Bombardment Group⁴⁸. Seventeen Crews landed on that day, with others continuing until July 1943.

Generally, aircrews would either fly from Gander Field, Newfoundland or by way of Greenland and Iceland. Most planes landed at the Royal Air Force Base at Prestwick, Scotland. On July 8, 1943, the Ground Echelon arrived early in the morning. As living quarters had not been completed, the entire Ground Echelon lived in tents for several months. 388th Unit histories claim that unit Personnel took this hardship in stride because they were so busy they had little time to worry about living conditions.⁴⁹

Seemingly almost overnight a village of 2,500 to 3,000 people starting from almost nothing and ending with a small town appeared. Knettishall went from a partially finished

⁴⁷ United States Army Air Force, Station 138 at Snetterton Heath, was situated 6 miles SW of Attleborough, England.

³⁹ Knettishall airfield or Station 136 is located south of London, England between the hamlets of Knettishall and Coney Weston.

⁴⁹ *The Unit History of The 388th Bombardment Group August 1943- 1945* (Maxwell Air Force Base, Alabama), 1949.

Royal Air force field to a small town of roads, remodeled houses, heating, lighting, telephones, government, repair shops for planes, cars and equipment, highly technical propeller shops, sheet metal shops with the finest equipment, training facilities, schools, hospitals, recreation facilities, Operation facilities, fire fighting facilities, military police facilities, post office and post exchange buildings, supply facilities and all other complex centers that support such a Group Operation during an Air War. The daily operations of the 388th bomb group were 24 hours per day, and 7 days a week until the War was over in 1945.⁵⁰

The Howe Crew joined the 388th during "Blitz week" the last week of July 1943. Blitz week was a subset of the Pointblank directive that combined both British and American assets to attack a wide number of targets including Kiel, Hamburg and Bonn at a time when the entire eighth air force was suffering heavy losses from flak and fighters. ⁵¹The 388th had yet to fly a dozen missions when Stephen and the rest of the crew finished their in theater orientation and were placed on an active flight status, but because of the severe losses to the group they were already

⁵⁰ *ibid.*

⁵¹ Perret, 262-63.

being deemed "replacement crews". In the first 100 missions flown by the 388th they would lose 89 aircraft.⁵²

The disdain shown for replacement crews grew both from the high loss rate in the experienced crews and what the veterans saw as poor training of the replacement crews. One of the biggest complaints the veteran crews had was that the new guys had a severe deficiency when it came to formation flying. Many bomber-crew replacements were simply not prepared for combat. They made rookie mistakes because they were inexperienced and sometimes they paid for their mistakes with their lives. Even with their extensive stateside training, replacement crews were not always up to the challenge. In spite of this shortcoming, though, most of those who survived their initial encounter with the enemy became effective fliers. With the kinds of casualties suffered by operational combat air groups in World War II, units had little choice but to throw new men into battle quickly.⁵³

⁵² Records of the 388th Bombardment Group National Archives And Record Administration (College Park Maryland), Textual Record Group 18.

⁵³ McManus, John C. *Deadly Sky: The American Combat Airman In World War II* (California: Presidio Press, 2000), 60.

The 388th group stood down for 13 days from August 1st, till August 13th, 1943 to regroup and refit after the disastrous Blitz week. The group was then tasked to attack *Bonn* in western Germany. This would be the first mission for the new crew that would join 23 other crews from the 388th that day. Takeoff was set for 0548 hours. Six of the twenty four aircraft tasked for the mission aborted for the following reasons: Lt. Eccleston in a/c #421, turned back at 0730 hours when the intercom was out and his number two engine was failing; Lt. Beeby in a/c #899, turned back near Ipswich at 0755 hours when his ball-gunner passed out due to oxygen failure; Lt. Howe in a/c #068, turned back at 0800 from 22,000 feet because he could not maintain formation due to loss of power in #1 engine; Lt. Porter in a/c #362, turned back at 0808 hours just eight minutes short of the enemy Coast when his left waist-gunner, S/Sgt. Miller became sick and an oxygen leak in the ball-turret. At this time, the pilots compass was frozen and the plane passed over the French Coast near Dunkirk and proceeded inland about 20 miles when flak appeared. Lt. Cunningham in a/c # 595, turned back at 0830 hours when the oxygen line to the ball-turret had broken. They were over the Belgian

Coast. Lt. Roe and his crew returned their aircraft no longer needed as a spare aircraft. ⁵⁴

The formation was now down to eighteen aircraft still proceeding on course to the Insertion Point. At the IP it was impossible to identify the target because of the sun, which was directly ahead of the formation obscuring the target. As a consequence, the primary target of Wesseling was abandoned and the group then proceeded to the secondary target of Bonn. Strike photos showed that the bombs were dropped in the center of the city.

Flak was encountered both on the route in and out but was meager. An intense barrage was sent up *at Cologne*, just north of *Bonn*, but was off to the left of the formation. 25 enemy fighters were spotted but did not engage the group. All of the 388th bomb group aircraft returned safely to base by 1121 hours. Two B-17's from the 95th bomb group were the only 4th wing aircraft lost. ⁵⁵

The Howe crew's second mission would be on August 15th 1943 to attack an airfield near Lille, France. Twenty-five aircraft took off at 1655 hours and joined up with the rest

⁵⁴ National Archives and Record Administration, Textural Records Group 18, 388th Bomb Group 13, August, 1943.

⁵⁵ *ibid.*

of the wing. The 388th would be the lead element for this mission. One ship aborted with a run away engine. Lt. Cox and his crew filled in. The group flew the mission as planned encountering six enemy fighters with no damage.⁵⁶ The very next day, on August the 16th, the crew was tasked with another mission to attack an airfield in Poix, Belgium and Abbeville, France. The group attacked Poix at 0911 hours and Abbeville-Ducat at 0923 hours. Results for the raid were given as good. Lt. Howe would write in the after action interrogation form that twelve enemy fighters were seen near Abbeville, then again as they approached the coast. Howe and the crew would witness the fate of a straggler as they watched the German fighters attack and force the aircraft down only three minutes after the group attacked the second target.⁵⁷

⁵⁶ National Archives and Record Administration, Textual Records Group 18, 388th Bomb Group 15, August, 1943.

⁵⁷ *ibid.*, 16, August, 1943.

Chapter Three

Last Dance

On Thursday August 19, 1943 two days after a disastrous mission to *Regensburg*, an order came down from staff for the 388th to furnish aircraft for a composite strike against German Three Luftwaffe Airfields and repair centers in the Netherlands. Bomber command felt an all out effort must be made to show the Germans that the losses suffered on August 17th would not slow down the Allied bombing campaign.

One hundred twenty-five B-17's would be dispatched to Gilze-Rijen and Flushing Airfields; 38 B-17's hit Gilze-Rijen at 1802-1814 hours and 55 hit Flushing at 1756 hours. A second wave of 45 B-17's are dispatched to Woensdrecht Airfield but weather prevents them hitting the target.

It was Thursday August 19th 1943, 8:44 pm Double English Summer Time.⁵⁸The place and time was wartime England.

"Casablanca" starring Humphrey Bogart and Ingrid Bergman was the wartime movie and Glen Miller had helped form the Army Air Force band, whose new single was "Moonlight Serenade". In a little factory town of Auschwitz on the

⁵⁸ National Archives and Record Administration, Textural Records Group 18, 388th Bomb Group 19, August, 1943.

German Frontier the crematoriums were now finished and the ovens stoked to implement the "Final Solution".

At Station 136 near the village of Knettishall along the Peddars Way in southern England a solemn vigil had begun. Everyone who could lined the airfield's runways looking for the return of the 388th's B-17's. One by one the aircraft returned circling, the field. The time was 2019 hours, and the group was minus one bomber. One of the crew members on that missing bomber was Stephen Toth, the son of Hungarian immigrants who had settled on the east side of Toledo under the shadow of St. Stephen's Catholic Church.

No flares were fired today to alert the ground crews that wounded were on board. When all the planes were at 2000 feet, the group formation turned to fly down wind. The whole group then made a 180-degree turn and the planes came in for landing. ⁵⁹ Each of the bombers taxied to their dispersal points, shutting down both the two inboard engines to allow easier control. On reaching the dispersal areas, the ground crew gave their signals for parking the aircraft in the required position. Care had to be exercised in turning the bomber so as not to run off the concrete and damage the landing gear.⁶⁰

⁵⁹ *ibid.*

⁶⁰ Freeman, 29-31.

Each of the crews disembarked from the most convenient exits, bringing out their personal equipment. After exiting the bomber, the crews started removing their electrically heated flying suits and other flight clothing, putting them into carrying bags. Gunners removed and cleaned their guns and placed them for collection by an ammunition crew truck.

The flight engineer and pilot completed the Form 1A on which the pilot reported any mechanical problems or known damage. Both air and ground crews inspected their bomber for battle damage while the bomber crews waited for their ride back to the base.⁶¹

A truck collected combat crews and took them to the bases briefing room complex. A squadron clerk checked the men's personal equipment—parachutes, flying suits, Mae Wests, escape kits, oxygen masks. At the end of the room awaited refreshments served by Red Cross girls at tables placed at one end of the room. Sometimes it was coffee and doughnuts other times powdered egg and corned beef sandwiches with grapefruit juice. There were also two shots of whisky for each crew member.⁶²

At another table an operations officer collected news of enemy convoys, shipping or activity that might affect

⁶¹ *ibid.*

⁶² *ibid.*

other operations, aircraft seen in distress, crashes and ditchings. Meanwhile, command pilots reported to the operations officer in the briefing room, giving a brief rundown on the Group's performance during the mission that would form the basis of a "flash" report telephoned to the 4th Wing command center.

After dropping off their equipment, getting something to eat and attending to personal needs, the crews went to the briefing room for after mission debriefing. Each crew sat at a table with an intelligence officer. The intelligence officer used a standard set of questions covering target observations, flak and fighter opposition where encountered, tactics, fighter claims, weather, fighter support, aircraft in distress, plus other pertinent observations and suggestions.

The aircraft gunners' claims of enemy aircraft shot down were then reviewed and compared against the other crews for substantiation and to avoid duplication. Each of the groups navigators and bombardiers were required to give separate reports on their part, navigators handing in their logs and bombardiers filling out bombing forms. Interrogation of lead crew was more in depth, especially as in this case a tactical error had been made. Debriefings in

general might take up to an hour and a half before all crews were processed.⁶³

The men had just returned from a daylight-bombing raid over Belgium and Holland, and now they huddled around the table. They all wore their leather flight jackets; some wore officers' caps, some the fur-lined caps of enlisted men. In their late teens and early 20s, they were serious beyond their age, having been matured by the Great Depression and now the War.

Lt. Pearlman was trying to piece together the fate of the crew of B-17 number 068, the missing bomber. The men told Pearlman that the last time they saw 68, it was flying low near the coast of Holland, silhouetted against the clouds. The plane had been hit earlier by flak and could not keep up with the flight. Some of the men grumbled about the lack of fighter support.⁶⁴

For over fifty years, the fate of plane 068 has remained a mystery. Eventually, it was reported that my uncle had died. But exactly how did he die? Where did he die? Under what circumstances did he die? Had he suffered? Had he been brave? None of this was known.

⁶³ *ibid.*

⁶⁴ National Archives and Record Administration, Textural Records Group 18, 388th Bomb Group 19, August, 1943.

One day, Stephen Toth wrote a letter back home to Toledo, Ohio to his sister in law Ruth Toth describing how the bombs looked like feathers floating in the wind as they fell to the earth. The next, he was gone.⁶⁵

The mission was part of the *Pointblank* strategy. *Pointblank* was a directive from the Joint Chiefs of Staff that placed the German aircraft industry as a primary target for the 8th Air Force and for the 8th to win air superiority over the Europe. The goals of this particular mission were to weaken the German Luftwaffe by bombing airfields in Holland and Belgium and to show the Germans that B- 17s would continue to bomb, no matter what casualties the Germans inflicted upon the Allies. But the mission was doomed. Even before the 402nd Wing droned over the coast and into the English Channel, one of the bombers "Blackheart Junior" had crashed. Taking their place on the mission would be the crew of 068.

The crew signing on to board plane 068 that day was Pilot Lt. Benjamin Howe Jr., co-Pilot 2nd Lt. Paul R. Gruhn, Navigator 2nd Lt. Arthur G. Pilley, Bombardier 2nd Lt. Joel Tutt, Radio Operator Staff Sgt. Stephen A. Toth, Top-Turret Gunner Staff Sgt. George E. Connelly, Ball-

⁶⁵ Rahm- Toth, Ruth Interview by author 10/06/06.

Turret Gunner Staff Sgt. Dale T Butt, Waist Gunner Staff Sgt. William G. Ryan, Left-Waist Gunner Staff Sgt. James E. Hillier, and Tail Gunner Staff Sgt. William J. Stamp.⁶⁶

Normally, the combat wing was made up of three groups a high, a low, and a lead group. But today, the 402nd Combat Wing only had two groups due to heavy losses during the August 17th raid on Regensburg and Schweinfurt Germany. The group's weather section reported a beautiful day for flying, but with only a few scattered, fleecy clouds.⁶⁷

That morning's briefing material had warned that the target areas would be well defended by "a great number of fighters based within a 130-mile radius." Seven ships of the 388th took off from Knettishall at 1631 hours, circled the field to gain formation and then joined up with the 96th bomb groups aircraft over Snetterton Heath to form the low squadron of the lead group. As the group approached Norwich, England one B-17 from the 96th bomb group "*Black Heart Jr.*" suffered an oxygen malfunction and caught on fire. Its crew bailing out, and the plane crashing into the English Channel.⁶⁸

⁶⁶ National Archives and Record Administration, Textual Records Group 18, 388th Bomb Group 19, August, 1943.

⁶⁷ *ibid.*

⁶⁸ *ibid.*

Lt. Howe and his crew were flying the abort element (spare aircraft) of the group that day and filled the vacancy caused by the crash of "*Blackheart Jr.*". Ahead of the Wing, the Dutch coast was a flat, peaceful haze.

The bomb wing made landfall near the Dutch city of Ostend around 1900 hours, considerably south of the planned route. The bomber formation then swung northeast toward the primary target of the Woensdrecht airport. Everything seemed quiet as they neared the initial point of the bombing run. However, in the group's lead aircraft piloted by Lt. Bowen the lead navigator made a fatal error while setting the course for the entire group. Though the error was a minor miscalculation, it brought the group 21 miles off course directly over coastal flak batteries.⁶⁹

Every crew of an Allied bomber approaching their target knew they would eventually come under fire from flak and enemy fighters. The word flak comes from a German word meaning "antiaircraft fire". Since early in the war, most antiaircraft units followed the practice of firing "barrages" or walls of heavy (75 mm and larger) shells with timed fuses set to explode at a preset altitude. A network of observers sent reports to a command post. The command

⁶⁹ *ibid.*

post would calculate speed direction and the altitude of the bombers. This information would tell the gun crews what angle, when and how long the flak emplacements should fire for. It generally took several thousand shells to bring down one bomber. The Germans claimed to have shot down over 1200 heavy bombers with flak guns.⁷⁰

Until 068 approached the flak batteries the cloud cover had been thick. But as they neared the Woensdrecht airfield, the clouds broke. Everyone opened their bomb bay doors, a common practice because the cold at high altitude would cause moisture to sometimes freeze the doors shut. Light, inaccurate flak fire began from the German batteries below.

As they arrived on the coast, crews observed very heavy ground haze. On earlier missions that year, bad weather had caused missed targets and civilian casualties 900 civilians on one raid, 400 on another. As a result, the bombers were under strict orders not to bomb unless the targets were "visible and identifiable." Col. Olds chose not to bomb.⁷¹ Instead, he made a slow turn left and flew - bomb bay doors still open - northeasterly to the secondary target, the Gilze-Rijen airfield.

⁷⁰ Perret, 330.

⁷¹ National Archives and Record Administration, Textual Records Group 18, 388th Bomb group S-2 report, 9, August, 1943.

Gilze-Rijen had a more strategic value to the Germans than the Woensdrecht airfield and, as a result, was more heavily defended. Only an hour before, the 103rd had bombed Gilze-Rijen and had lost two B-17s to a combination of flak and enemy fighters.

In the air at 20,000 feet, where it was 40 below zero in the plane and everyone was wearing oxygen masks, Lt. Howe fought for his life and the lives of his nine-crew members. A burst of flak had just exploded beneath their left wing and one of the shards had pierced plane 68s' number four engine. First it smoked, and then it burst into flames.

As the formation approached it was fired upon by the 2nd and 3rd battery of the *Gemischter Flak Abteilung* (mixed Flak unit) 665, which had its positions close to the Gilze-Rijen airfield. The 3rd battery's Commanding Officer, *Oberleutnant* Schutte (First Lieutenant), wrote in his daily report:

"On August 19, 1943 we were at battle stations since 1847 hours. At 1955 hours, after we had already fired on two other formations, a new formation of American bombers, approaching the airfield from 4 o'clock, was picked up. At 1959 hours fire was opened on the formation, which flew at 6,500 meters height, at extreme range of almost 9.5 kilometers. Lt. Schutte claimed that his battery's salvos were well aimed. According to observers, evasive action and unrest in the formation could be noticed. At the end of our firing a definite smoke trail, gradually increasing,

could be seen coming from one of the airplanes. At 2001 hours we stopped firing, after using 76 rounds of 88 mm gun ammunition. The formation continued on course from 4 to 10 o'clock. However, the stricken bomber with the smoke trail had left the formation shortly after being hit, and turned to the left, in the direction of 9 o'clock."⁷²

The bomber they had hit and which had left the formation was 068 of the 388th Bomb Group, 561st Bomb Squadron. Acting quickly, Howe pushed the plane into a sideward dive, extinguishing the fire. He then feathered the number four-engine props to minimize the power loss. The danger had been handled. Nevertheless, they now only had three engines, had lost speed, and were sitting ducks for the German fighters. Meanwhile the rest of the Wing continued on their bomb run. Colonel Olds again decided that they did not have a "visible and identifiable" target. No bombs were dropped.⁷³

In a desperate attempt to regain the safety of the group and avoid being left behind, Howe turned the plane sharply to the left to meet other bombers at the rally point. Not being able to meet the first group, Howe met the second and last group. Although now the tail end Charlie, or last man in the formation, the crew was relatively safe

⁷² Captured German Documents RG 242 and AVO 230 NARA

⁷³ National Archives and Record Administration, Textual Records Group 18, 388th Bomb Group 388th S2 Report, 19, August, 1943.

for the time being. The leader of the 96th saw that Howe's aircraft was on fire as Howe pulled ahead of the group. The German fighters then turned and to make a pass at Howe's plane and the 96th lead pilot throttled down to 150 MPH to try to protect him.⁷⁴

The wing was now on their way back to England, heading toward channel and the Dutch coast. After a pair of fighter attacks, Col. Olds ordered the second group to speed up and to close with the first group. This left plane 68 behind. Howe with only three engines would have his air speed cut back to around 150 miles an hour and would not be able to keep pace with the group. If there had been a third group, Howe and crew would have been protected longer all the way to coast and home to England.

Moving southwest, Howe's crew fought their way toward the town of *Haamstede* at 19:20 hours *Haamstede Burgomaster* P.C. Boot looked up and saw Howe's plane approaching the villages at about 3,000 feet, battling against two German fighters.⁷⁵

Of the many hazards faced by fighter pilots and bomber crews, accidents, ranked a distant third behind enemy fighter planes and antiaircraft fire. All these hazards

⁷⁴ *ibid.*

⁷⁵ Captured German Documents RG 242 AVO 230 NARA

would overcome the crew of 068. The vast majority of the 121,867 casualties, including 40,061 killed, the Army Air Force suffered in World War II were fighter pilots and bomber crews. ⁷⁶

The 388th ⁷⁷ S2 Group's Intelligence section reported that evening:

"Howe's ship was the only ship lost over enemy territory by the 4th wing on this mission. Apparently his ship was struck by flak either over Ostend or more probably over the primary target. His number four engine caught fire and he dropped out of formation. According to reports, his ship was able to extinguish the fire and to feather the number four propeller. When the Wing formation swung inland to go to the vicinity of the secondary target and then came back to the Rally Point, Howe was able to get back into formation by cutting the turn short, and is reported to have fallen in with the second Group. About the vicinity of the Rally Point, the second Group speeded up a bit to close the gap between the first and second Groups and apparently the pace here was too much for Howe. He then dropped out of formation and hit for the deck. The ship is reported to have jettisoned its bombs."⁷⁸ He was last seen at a very low, altitude silhouetted against some clouds just off the Dutch coast at *Haamstede*.

At this point Lt. Howe's plane was completely under control but two crews reported seeing several fighters

⁷⁶ Dunigan and Nofi, 209.

⁷⁷ National Archives and Record Administration, Textural Records Group 18, 388th Bomb group S-2 report, 19, August, 1943.

⁷⁸ *ibid.*

attack him. They apparently went down in the Channel somewhere between *Haamstede* and *Felixstowe*".

"On 9 19, 1943 Air Sea Rescue sent out a distress signal on the international Frequency, so both English and Germans instituted searches. If he was able to ditch successfully there was a considerable chance that he was picked up by the enemy."⁷⁹

As the other 388th Bomb Group crews already had noticed, the bomber was intercepted by FW-190's between the target and the coast. These belonged to both *Jagdgeschwer* 1 and 26, also known as the *Abbeville Kids*. The pilots of *Jagdgeschwer* 1 and 26 were some of the Luftwaffe's veteran pilots.

Howe then dove down to make approach for the enemy fighters more difficult. He managed to evade the fighters during a couple of their passes. The coast and North Sea were near when bad luck struck the crew again as their course led him, at low altitude, over two German light flak batteries at the western edge of Schouwen Island, north west of the village Haamstede. These flak batteries were part of the German coastal defense system along the North Sea.

⁷⁹ NARA RG 92 Missing Air Crew Report 0068 Office of the Quarter Master General.

The battery Commanding Officer of the 3rd Battery of *Leichte Flak Abteilung* (Light Flak Unit) 847 reported:

"On August 19, 1943 at 2010 hours, after foregoing warnings ⁸⁰of returning bombers, we heard engine noises coming from 3 o'clock. A single four engined plane, of the Fortress II type, was seen, coming out of the clouds at 1,600 meters. It slowly lost altitude, and was fired upon by my 5th and 4th platoons, at a distance of respectively 1,200 and 1,400 meters and a height of 1,000 meters.

All available guns were firing. Shortly after opening fire eyewitnesses reported strikes on the target. The plane then started smoking, and a few seconds later flames were seen. After our fire, a number of crewmembers jumped out. Two parachutes opened and could be seen for some time. In all, we fired 210 shots High C Explosive-tracer and 45 shots High Explosive/Incendiary tracer ammunition, Both the members of the battery and other eyewitnesses noticed hits in the fuselage, which first caused smoke and then fire. The plane then lost more height, losing several smaller parts, then went down over its left wing, which broke off, and went straight into the ground, 1 kilometer east of the airfield."

One of the German eyewitnesses was *Unteroffizier*, *Gunter Hanke* (Sergeant), who reported:

"Yesterday evening at around 2000 hours I was near the administrative building on Haamstede airfield. A few minutes past eight o'clock I saw a big four engined bomber approaching the airfield from the northeast. Its left wing was clearly damaged. Then the flak opened fire on the plane. I could clearly see how the first burst closely went past the plane, while the second burst hit the bomber, in the middle and a little to the front. Immediately I noticed that the plane started smoking and a dark smoke trail appeared." Hanke continued "A few seconds later I also noticed flame. The burning plane lost a lot of height,

⁸⁰ Records of German Flak Units 8/19/1943 Deutsche National Archives, trans. Ivo de Jong.

then crashed. Thick black smoke rose from the ground. Shortly after the opening of fire by the flak, I noticed that a man left the plane with a parachute." Hanke had the impression that fighters damaged the bomber, but that the flak hits gave the final blow. "I could clearly see the hits, because they fired tracer ammunition."⁸¹

Aboard the bomber, the deadly slugs created havoc.

Somehow, Benjamin Howe managed to ring the bail-out bell for those of his crew still alive after the hail of German fire. Navigator 2/Lt Arthur G. Pilley, who was first out, recalled: "Five minutes before I bailed out Lt. Howe said he would try to stay in the clouds and get home that way. I believe Lt. Howe may have been wounded by machine gun fire from the FW-190's. Even, before we went overseas he said he would never bail out. He may have tried to crash land the ship, however, when I bailed out the plane was in a steep bank to the right and diving earthward."⁸²

"I met Lt. Gruhn in the nose hatchway, ready to bail out. Gruhn was not wounded, but his face was very flushed. Why he did not get out is a mystery to me. He may have gone back to the pilot's compartment and tried to get control of the plane so as to crash-land it. When the plane went into

⁸¹ Ivo de Jong, *Mission 85, a milk run that turned sour*. The Netherlands: The Liberation Museum 1944, 1998.

⁸² NARA RG 92 Missing Air Crew Report 0068 Office of the Quarter Master General.

a steep bank the force may have glued him to the floor, making it impossible to get out the hatch. The plane crashed approximately 20 seconds after my chute opened."⁸³

Bombardier 2/Lt Joel H. Tutt recalled:⁸⁴"Last contact with most crewmembers was on interphone on last oxygen check, just before the fighters hit us. The bail-out alarm sounded as we were flying over Schouwen Island, Holland." The planes erratic defensive movements and the flak explosions made for tough going inside the doomed aircraft. Joel Tutt met the co-pilot Lt. Gruhn as he was making his way to the hatchway about the same time the plane went into the steep bank. Tutt recalls "I don't remember exactly how I got out as the force of the plane made it practically impossible to move. The next thing I remember I was in the air and on the ground about 1500 yards from the plane". The plane landed near German quarters and German Soldiers quickly gathered up the downed aviators. Tutt remembers, "I wanted to go to the plane and see about the ones that were still in, but the guards that had me, would not let me". Tutt believed that Lt. Gruhn helped him out and the

⁸³ *ibid.*

⁸⁴ *ibid.*

increasing force of the plane and the lack of time prevented him from getting out.⁸⁵

There is a discrepancy as to who or what actually shot down the damaged bomber. The German fighter pilots being fighter pilots claimed the kill for themselves. The flak crews on the ground also claimed the victory for themselves. Both groups have a case, and both groups were awarded credit for the kill. It was actually a series of events that combined the efforts of German flak crews and fighters that were the physical cause for the plane's and crew's demise.

Only Tutt and Pilley in the nose of the ship survived. The eight other crewmembers, all further back in the plane, perished in or near the wreck of their bomber. The Co-pilot Paul Gruhn, was found about 300 yards from the plane. Gruhn either got out too late or his chute malfunctioned and never opened.⁸⁶

All eight killed crewmembers were buried in the military Cemetery at *Haamstede*. Meanwhile, the German flak and Fighter units were arguing who had shot the bomber down. Eventually, the German credit board awarded the kill

⁸⁵ *ibid.*

⁸⁶ NARA RG 92 Missing Air Crew Report 0068 Office of the Quarter Master General.

to the 2nd and 3rd battery of flak unit 665 near *Gilze-Rijen* along with the 3rd battery of flak unit 847 near *Haamstede*⁸⁷.

Why wasn't this crew afforded better fighter protection? After all, this was just a milk run, a short hop in and out. Two groups of fighters were supposed to escort the bombers that day. One group would escort the group to the Insertion Point at the start of the bomb run; the other group would meet the bombers as they exited the target. If an escort might have been available, Lt. Howe would not have had to alter course and seek a lower altitude to try and escape the German fighters. Even though he had lost one engine the other three engines could have at least got the plane and the crew to the coast and perhaps home to *Knettishall*.

The 4th and 78th Fighter Groups provided the fighter escort for the bombers. The 4th Fighter Group furnished forty-nine P-47 Thunderbolts led by Lt. Col Donald Blakeslee. Three of them aborted and returned early. Blakeslee's fighters met the B-17's at mid-Channel. Taking position slightly above the Bomber formation, the fighters remained with the bombers until halfway between the primary

⁸⁷ Ivo de Jong Letter to author Thomas Toth, July 9, 1997

and secondary target. The escort left the bomber formation and set course for home "with no positive identification of enemy aircraft made".⁸⁸

The 78th Fighter Group led by Major Harry J. Dayhuff added forty-eight Thunderbolts, four of which aborted and returned early. The 78th Group also met the bombers at mid-Channel and remained above them until past the Dutch town of *Woensdrecht*. Unlike the pilots in the 4th group, pilots in the 78th Group engaged enemy aircraft over *Tholen* Island. 1st Lt. Kenneth W. Dougherty of the 83rd Fighter was flying Trumpcard White 3 that day. Dougherty at an altitude of 26,000 feet over *Woensdrecht* made a turn to port and saw four Me 109's below at 8 o'clock flying in widely separated elements of two. They were at 6 o'clock on the B-17's. Dougherty called Trumpcard lead Capt Davis and called out "bandits below" Davis replied "Let's go get em". Dougherty started after the last two coming down out of the sun, the bandits at this time were at 3 o'clock low.⁸⁹ Dougherty was well into his bounce when four Me 109's flew directly across the nose of his fighter about 50 yards ahead.⁹⁰ Firing a two second burst at them, Dougherty pulled up to

⁸⁸ NARA RG 18 S-2 report 9/19/43

⁸⁹ de Jong, Ivo M. *Mission 85, a milk run that turned sour*. (The Netherlands: The Liberation Museum 1944, 1998),118-119.

⁹⁰ *ibid.*

avoid a collision skidding his aircraft upwards into a climbing turn and then diving back down onto the enemy aircrafts tail. Seeing one about 800 yards away trying to evade and making a diving turn to port, Dougherty closed to about 500 yards and fired a two second burst hitting the starboard wing. Dougherty kept closing and firing at his opponent but observed no hits. Continuing to chase after the 109's as they started a climbing turn to port, Dougherty closed rapidly to about 200 yards and fired a three second burst and observed incendiary flashes on both wings and on the fuselage, immediately aft of the cockpit. "Smoke poured out of his starboard oil cooler. He mushed forward and then dropped like a stone out of my sight under my nose. I then broke sharply away, cleared my tail, and rolled over to look for him, but didn't see him, so I started for home". The combat took place over *Woensdrecht* at 1900 hours. Flight leader, Capt Jesse C. Davis, did fire a burst at one of the Me 109's, but he missed. Don Bodenhamer Jr. leading Trumpcard Red flight recalled "When White flight went in to its bounce on four Me 109's I observed two Me 109's coming in behind them and at the same time and level, flying in the same direction as the enemy aircraft that White flight was bouncing". Bodenhamer pulled over and went down on the last two ships and began firing

at about 650 yards and continued from astern until he broke away at about 350 or 400 yards. Bodenhamer would fire over 500 rounds in a series of several bursts getting hits on the enemy aircrafts right wing.⁹¹

Until now the fighter escorts were available for the bombers protection. While the fighter post action mission reports indicate they engaged the enemy, the bomber crews had a different take on their efforts.

Casualties for the entire mission were nine Wounded in Action, and forty-one Missing in Action. Colonel Russell Wilson of the 4th bomb Wing, who conducted the post-mission critique, felt that "while the fighter cover was there it didn't interfere with a reasonable number of enemy planes that attacked the bomber formation."⁹²

The after action report of the 4th Wing that day was more critical of the fighter coverage. The report states that "while the fighter rendezvous was made on time, the opinion of our crews is that the fighters flew too high to be of assistance to our bombers during the few attacks that developed."⁹³ Colonel Wilson noted "One bomber (the Howe crew) which was damaged by fighters was forced to fall

⁹¹ *ibid.*

⁹² *ibid.*

⁹³ *ibid.*, 120.

below the formation where it was immediately attacked by six or eight FW 190's. However, the P-47's in our fighter cover made no effort to dive down to assist the distressed aircraft."

The Wings Commander Colonel Old, added: "Six fighters came in to our left as we were coming out and made one pass at us I could see. The P-47's were circling above and the only thing they accomplished was to get a grandstand seat to watch the fight." The bomber crews were not very satisfied with the efforts of the escorts because they saw Howe and his crew being pounded by the FW 190's after he dropped from the formation without the P-47's coming to their rescue. ⁹⁴

The Fighter Command narrative of the days concerning the 4th Fighter Group makes note that "A red flare was seen from a B-17 as the Group left them but they were not being attacked. No positive identification of enemy aircraft was made." ⁹⁵The 78th Fighter group reported, "One straggler, with one engine smoking was seen leaving formation."

It may be that the fighter escort did not spot the German fighters or the German fighters were waiting until

⁹⁴ NARA RG 18 388th Bomb Group Mission Report 8-19-43

⁹⁵ Fry, Garry L. and Ethell, Jeffery L. *Escort To Berlin the 4th Fighter Group In World War II* (New York: Arco Publishing Co., 1980), 24.

the American escorts left the area to attack. The fighter escorts may have been low on fuel at this point. Whatever the reasons Howe and his crew were left alone with a damaged aircraft forced to run the gauntlet of German fighters and flak batteries as they struggled homeward.

The next day a post-mission critique took place. The 388th group's officers received a critical evaluation from Colonel Russell A. Wilson. Wilson was extremely chagrined about the groups' formation flying. Wilson thought that "the best formation all day was when a ship caught fire and dove down, and his two wingmen went with him." The 96th was strung out, even the leader's element. The leader of the second element dropped back a quarter of a mile. The 388th were to one side and strung well back.⁹⁶ The squadron furnished by the 401st Combat Wing was strung back out of sight. No one was worse than any other - you were all bad." Wilson continued "I thought it was a good idea to run new crews on these missions, but if they have this idea about spreading all over the sky because of friendly fighter support, we had better start them on a raid to Bremen or Berlin. Today was the poorest defensive formation I ever saw."⁹⁷

⁹⁶ NARA RG 18 388th Bomb Group Mission Report 8-20-43

⁹⁷ *ibid.*, 8-19-43.

Colonel Wilson further stressed, "The fact that we were flying Composite Groups is no excuse for the fact that the six plane squadrons did not stay together. Group and Combat Wing Commanders must indoctrinate crews, including new crews to stay in defensive formation at all times on a combat mission."

In his report about the mission to the Eighth Air Force Headquarters, which was submitted four days after the meeting, Wilson stated: "The formation flown by the Lead Group on this mission was not satisfactory, especially on the route back. The aircraft were too spread out to be considered as proper defensive formation. This might have been disastrous had many enemy aircraft been encountered."⁹⁸

Wilson also pointed out some of the major problems that plagued the Allied bomber groups: "(1) There are two explanations for the unsatisfactory formation flown on this mission. Each Group was, of necessity, a composite of aircraft of three or more Bombardment Groups of this command, and as such demonstrated the inherent disadvantages of Composite Groups for formation flying. In addition, the majority of crews were made up of unseasoned

⁹⁸ *ibid.*, 8-23-1943.

replacements, many of whom were participating in their first mission.

(2) To help improve our defensive tactics, Combat Wing and Group Commanders have been directed to intensify the training of new crews in formation flying.

(3) Again it is gratifying to note the lack of abortives resulting from engineering, armament or equipment failures. This splendid accomplishment reflects the highest credit on the combat and ground crews of all Groups of this command."⁹⁹

The Germans allowed the Dutch to throw sand on the fires of the burning wreckage of the Howe crews aircraft. Later the bodies of the eight crewmembers were collected and buried with military honors in the Haamstede churchyard. For the two survivors a new trials and tribulations awaited.

⁹⁹ RG 18 NARA 388th Bombardment Group records 8 -19-23rd-1943.

Chapter Four

For You The War Is Over

While the seven surviving aircraft crews from the August 19th raid gave a collected sigh of relief that they had survived another day, Stephen's two surviving crewmates sat in a German cell, some what the worse for wear and certainly apprehensive of what fate had in store for them. After their capture, Pilley and Tutt would spend the night in a Dutch Jail cell in German occupied Holland. Most American Prisoners of wars were amazed by the amount of information the Germans had collected on them prior to their individual interrogations. Generally, the Germans knew their name, hometowns, and other personal information.

1st Lt. Dwight M. Curo was a navigator in the 303rd Bomb Group. Curo was shot down and captured on the 19th of August 1943, and spent the night locked up in the same jail as Pilley and Tutt. Curo relates that¹⁰⁰: "It was by now nearly dark, and at a word from our guards as we started back toward the small town. We were well covered by the six weapons of our captors. After about half an hour, we reached the little hamlet and were taken to the local jail. "The closer Curo got to the hamlet he noticed soldiers removing parachutes and flying equipment from a truck before the door, and as we entered the building I caught a glimpse of a couple of our crew under guard in an adjoining building. Curo felt that escape had been impossible. The nature of the country coupled by the fact that we had been very visible in our

¹⁰⁰ Ivo, de Jong *Mission 85, a milk run that turned sour* (The Netherlands: The Liberation Museum 1944, 1998), 122-25.

parachutes for quite some time precluded any such thing as evasion".¹⁰¹ Later Curo would learn from some of his fellow prisoners that the Germans had been waiting for them as they hit the ground. The next ten days were to be nightmares of hunger and discomfort. We were held in the jail office three about two hours. During that time we were not allowed to smoke or to have water. Sgt. Gross' burned face gave him considerable pain and Sgt. Buck was in a state of collapse. Most of the boys looked pretty forlorn. At length one of the Dutch civil police officers acceded to my repeated requests and got us a little water, although the German soldiers present did not seem to like the idea. Eventually there was a commotion in the hallway outside and we heard a motor outside."¹⁰²

A German officer came in with a couple of noncoms. Curo felt that the German officer was some body of importance, because all the Nazi's "popped to" and the Sgt. who was in charge of our guard came through with a very snappy salute and a big "Heil Hitler". The display of the movie like caricature amused Curo, lightening his spirits. The Luftwaffe rarely made such displays and were generally content with the regular military salute. The prisoners were taken from the jail and put into a truck; the guards lined themselves around the open outer rails and sat with drawn pistols watching closely. A half an hour later the truck ride would take the captured airmen through several small towns finally stopping at a guarded gate, outside

¹⁰¹ *ibid.*

¹⁰² *ibid.*

camouflaged low brick building in a sparse growth of trees.¹⁰³ According to Curo this was part of a military garrison or airfield.¹⁰⁴ Curo, Pilley , Tutt and the others were herded inside into their first German prison. The interior was dim and poorly lighted. Bars and barred gates seemed to blocked the POWs passage. Eventually they were led single file down the narrow dim passage way. Dwight Curo remembers:

"It was a gruesome place. The guards seemed to be dirty, ill uniformed and ignorant, though they did not threaten or mistreat us. The doors lining either side appeared to be very thick and sturdy with metal hasps securing them and small peep- holes about an inch in diameter bored through them at eye-level. It was all in all, a real dungeon and my heart sank at the thought of incarceration, but tried to put on a brave face for the benefit of my comrades and to deny any possible satisfaction to our captors. Up to this time we had not been allowed to talk, but we had been together. Lt. Moffatt, his head bandaged, a severe laceration in his scalp, Sgts. Gross, Perez, Boyd had all joined up at the little Dutch jail where we were first taken. They, like Sgt. Buck and myself, had been captured immediately.¹⁰⁵

Curo and the others were put into individual cells, made of brick and with heavy doors. The POWs were only afforded a sturdy wooden bench with no mattress, nor blankets. Curo and the others once isolated were then left

¹⁰³ *ibid.*

¹⁰⁴ *ibid.*

¹⁰⁵ *ibid.*, 122-125.

in the darkness. Curo relates that, "From high up in the corner a little light was visible through an aperture about six Inches Square. This seemed to be the only window. By this time, my nerves were beginning to untwine themselves somewhat, and I dazedly grouped my way to the bench and sat down. It was quite cold and my only clothing was a thin flying suit over my Olive Drab uniform." Unable to sleep Curo explained that, " My thoughts at this time were pretty black. I lay on the bench and tried to sleep, but it was impossible. My mind was in a whirl of despair. Little noises in the darkness identified themselves as mice or rats. I lay and shivered. From a nearby cell came the sound of whimpering and crying. I think it was Sgt Buck, but am not sure. Sure as hell didn't blame him much - felt just like that myself; but I did call out to him to buck up and he ceased. That was one hell of a night." From time to time the lights would be switched on from outside and the guards would peek through the little hole in the door.¹⁰⁶

In the early morning hours of August 20th, Dwight Curo relates that some of the boys who requested it were given a cup of water and a piece of German bread. I, for my part, was not hungry so did not ask for anything to eat. As

¹⁰⁶ *ibid.*

daylight entered the little grated "air hole" up in the corner of the cell I was able to discover writing and pictures drawn on the painted door and on the bench on which I sat. There were many of them, mostly French; evidently my "apartment" was a popular place. In several spots the in-mates had marked off the length of their stay by a dash for each day. Some of the records were for as much as thirty days, which gave me a real cause to worry. I felt that a man would go mad if cooped up in such a hole for so long. It must have been the state of my nerves, which made me feel that way. I have learned since from experience and from the stories of others, that a man can stand conditions like that for longer than he thinks if he can control himself. Nonetheless, solitary confinement is a horrible experience the worst punishment that I know. Fortunately for Curo his stay in the little medieval dungeon was to end that morning.¹⁰⁷

So on the 20th of August the group of POWs would first travel to Amsterdam by rail and then all of them would be taken to the German interrogation center in *Frankfurt*. The Germans called their interrogation center *Durchgangslager der Luftwaffe*. The Americans shortened the name to *Dulag*

¹⁰⁷ *ibid.*, 125-126.

Luft. Almost all Allied Air Force personnel captured in German occupied Europe passed through this center. The Dulag Luft was really three installations: the interrogation center at Oberusal, a hospital at Hohemark, and the transit camp at Wetzlar.¹⁰⁸

The main part of the camp was made up four large wooden barracks, two of which were connected by a passage and known to POWs as the "cooler". These contained some 200 cells. These cells, eight feet high, five feet wide and ten feet long, held a bed, a table, a stool and two blankets. The third barrack contained administrative headquarters. The fourth building, a large L-shaped structure, housed the interrogating offices, files and records. Senior officers lived on the post, junior officers outside in a hotel. The commandant lived on nearby farm. The entire camp was surrounded by a barbed-wire fence.¹⁰⁹

The camp's chief function was to obtain information of an operational character relating to Allied Air Forces through the interrogation of captured crews of Allied planes. Information thus acquired was of course supplemented by the evaluation of documents sometimes recovered from crashed

¹⁰⁸ Arthur Durand *Stalag Luft III The Secret Story* (Louisiana: Louisiana State University Press, 1988), 56-58.

¹⁰⁹ *ibid.*

aircraft. An estimate of Eighty per cent of all the information obtained by German authorities about Allied prisoners came from the document section of *Dulag Luft*.¹¹⁰

Treatment of Allied POWs by *Auswertestelle West* personnel was "korrekt" as far as physical violence was concerned. On occasion, an interrogator became exasperated by the polite refusals of Allied servicemen when they followed the Geneva Convention and merely gave no more than name, rank, and serial number, and may have lost his temper and struck a POW. Normally, physical violence was not employed although the SS and Gestapo as well as civilians murdered Allied personnel.

On the other hand, no amount of calculated mental depression, privation and psychological blackmail was considered excessive. Upon arrival, POWs were stripped, searched and sometimes issued German coveralls. At other times, they retained the clothing in which they were shot down. Some were shut up in solitary confinement cells and denied cigarettes, toilet articles and Red Cross food. Usually, the period of confinement lasted four or five days, but sometimes to make an example of a POW the

¹¹⁰ *ibid.*, 68.

Germans would confine the prisoner in the "cooler" for the full 30 days permitted by the Geneva Convention.¹¹¹

The use of threats and violent language were employed and POWS were threatened with execution as spies unless they revealed technical information on some subject such as radar or air combat tactics. Prisoner confinement in overheated cell and mock shootings of "buddies" was resorted to in the early days. Intimidation yielded inferior results and the Germans usually switched to a "friendly approach" style of interrogation.¹¹²

For the average POW rations were generally two slices of black bread and jam with ersatz coffee in the morning, watery soup at midday, and two slices of bread at night. No Red Cross parcels were issued. POWs could obtain drinking water from the guards. Men seriously needing medical treatment were sent to Hohemark hospital.

Eventually the small group of prisoners would be split up. The officers went to camps designated for officers and the enlisted men went to enlisted camps. Most German prisoner of war camps, both Army and Luftwaffe, were

¹¹¹ *ibid.*, 61-62.

¹¹² *ibid.*

located in eastern Germany. A few were in the border areas of Poland that had been part of Prussia before 1918 and were annexed by the Nazis in 1939. This area of Europe is similar to large parts of North America, hot in the summer and very cold in the winter.

Dwight Curo and the other captured officers would become alumni of Stalag Luft three, Stalag III for short. Stalag Luft three was located near *Sagan*, Poland; it was a camp especially for air force officers. Stalag III was supposedly escape proof, and the largest mass escape known as the "Great Escape" of Allied Prisoners of war would take place at this camp. Sgt. Buck and the other enlisted men would be sent to Stalag XVIIIIB near *Krems* in Austria. For now the war was placed on hold for these men and the main emphasis for them would be to survive until they could be liberated.¹¹³

Through the Y.M.C.A. and the Red Cross most of the prisoners received "a wartime log", to be used for stories, poems, and drawings. Joel Tutt, the bombardier of Lt. Howe's B-17 of the 388th Bomb Group wrote his wartime log as sort of a diary that he later published, telling the story to his wife Ruth, who was waiting for him in

¹¹³ de Jong.,123-131.

Monticello, Georgia. Throughout the diary Tutt constantly talks about food and mail the cold and the boredom of captivity.

Tutt begins his diary on December 21, 1943 and it is his happiest day since being shot down. Tutt receives two letters - one written from Monticello, Georgia, on October 5 and the other one from St. Petersburg, Florida, on October 17. His wife Ruth writes to him about life back home and he replies, "You were speaking of chicken pie and lamb chops. I'm glad that you can have the good meals and all that you need. I have three blankets and could use ten, but knowing that it is me and not you makes the three blankets do the work."¹¹⁴

Nine days later, on December 30, 1943, Tutt mentions fellow crewmember Arthur Pilley. "Today Pilley and I have been busy getting crackers ground, potatoes washed and various jobs done as tomorrow we start our week of cooking. The Germans gave us some beer for New Year. I saw a show tonight that was as good as any I've ever seen. It was on the order of 'Hell's-a-poppin'. The boys at the theater surely work hard to give us entertainment. Life while not pleasant for a '*Kriegie*' the POW's word for themselves did

¹¹⁴ *ibid.*

have it's diversions; many of them were a testimony to their individual ingenuity."¹¹⁵

A new year has begun and Joel makes an entry for January 15, 1944: "Just finished a few rubbers of bridge. Been raining all day so we have been inside. There are some old copies of McCall's magazine here and we have been looking them over. They help us to remember how people live on the outside of the fence. Life gets pretty monotonous inside the fence especially in this kind of weather".¹¹⁶

A week or so later on January 23, 1944 Joel Tutt was sick and could not write in diary. His crewmate Arthur Pilley writes for Joel: "Tutt has had it. He has a touch of the flu that is sweeping the barracks. Four guys are in the hospital and about eight in bed. Joe is staying in bed fighting it off. Getting a bit colder out". Tutt was feeling better on February 3, 1944. He writes "Pilley and I finished our week of cooking tonight. I can truly sympathize with a housewife with a large family. Received a letter from you this morning."¹¹⁷

By the middle of February, 1944 Tutt has settled into camp life finding solace in the mundane as well as the

¹¹⁵ *ibid.* , 127.

¹¹⁶ *ibid.*

¹¹⁷ *ibid.* ,128.

cultural and perhaps the small hope of satisfaction offered by an air raid. "This day has found me rather busy. I took a shower this morning, shaved, made me a clipboard out of some Red Cross boxes and sorted the potatoes. I put another verse or two in the log tonight. We have the phonograph in our barracks tonight. There are some good records like 'There will never be another you' which is playing now. Each record brings back a memory. The mailman missed me again today. There was Air raid tonight. I imagine it was Berlin".¹¹⁸

Time passes for the Kriegie and mail from home becomes an issue on April 18, 1944. "A rainy afternoon in Germany, it has been a dark gloomy day, which is very disagreeable. We have been very lucky for the past few days because we really had some good weather. I have been in for most of the day except for some time which Hasson and I walked around the perimeter. Sure enjoy having Hasson to talk to because we have something in common. Dick Loveless received thirteen letters today. Forney received his first mail. The mailman missed me again today. My thoughts as usual have been of you and home. How glad I'll be when we get out of this barbed wire hell. It could be much worse but it gets

¹¹⁸ *ibid.*

mighty tiresome the same thing day after day. No one can ever know what it is like until one experiences it. If it were not for the many pleasant memories made possible by you this place would really be hell. We had another air raid this afternoon."¹¹⁹

On June 6, 1944 through several clandestine radio sets the prisoners heard at 01:30 PM of the Allied landings on the coast of Normandy. Tutt writes, " So far the news has been slow and not much in detail. I hope and pray that it is a success and we do not lose too many men. Maybe it won't be long before this war is over. Chuck Forney, a combine mate, starts cooking for Schaefer, another combine mate, for the duration. The wager was: Schaefer was to cook until the invasion; Forney was to cook from the invasion to the end of the war. The funny part was that the wager was made only two-and-a-half days ago."¹²⁰

On August 20, 1944 one year and a day after being shot down Joel Tutt reminisces about the after affects of being shot down and his captivity:

"We fixed a super meal yesterday for two occasions: first, our anniversary, and second, it was the first year as 'Kriegies' for Miller, Pilley and me. A year ago last night I could have certainly used that meal as I was weary, hungry, aching and sore. A lot has

¹¹⁹ *ibid.*, 127.

¹²⁰ *ibid.*, 129.

happened since then. A few days in the 'jug' at Amsterdam and Frankfurt and then my entry into Center Camp Stalag Luft III, Sagan. I have seen the seasons, removal of the British from this camp and the growth from a few hundred to 1,500. The place has taught me tolerance, appreciation of the little things of life and countless other things. In closing, I am hoping and praying that this war will soon cease and the world can once more know the word Peace."¹²¹

The Russian Army was making rapid advances on the Eastern front and closing in on the German Army. The Germans decided to close Stalag Luft III on Saturday night, January 27, 1945. All the prisoners at Stalag Luft III were ordered to be ready to march in just two hours. Because of the rapid advance of the Russian army the prisoners would be moved south, to Stalag 7A, near Moosburg. This was the camp where most of the en-listed men shot down on August 19, 1943 had been held the first two months. Tutt did not write in his diary in this period, but he recorded the events on little scraps of paper:

"On the night of January 27 at 9:00 PM we were told that we would evacuate in two hours. By 11:45 we had our stuff ready to move in the form of blanket rolls, crude knapsacks and some even had sleds. Everyone was plenty excited and full of uncertain anticipation. After being counted and much waiting we pulled out at 4:45 AM on January 28 on foot. On leaving, our senior Allied officer gave us a word of cheer. We were given all the Red Cross food we could carry. We made 17 km to a town *Halbau*, our first day. At *Halbau* we slept in a beautiful church. I must say we were crowded though,

¹²¹ *ibid.*, 129.

1,700 men in a building. The march that day was in had weather, snow storms and temperature about 13 degrees below zero.¹²²

Pilley writes in Joel Tutt's war time log that on January 29, 1945 the internees left *Halbau* at 9:00 AM, and marched 8 km to *Freiwaldau* where they stayed in an old barn about the size of our warehouse. However, only 480 slept in this barn, the others moved on to another barn down the road. The roads were cluttered with evacuees. The POWs stay at the barn till the 31st of January 1945 resting and trying regain strength, but they are cold and if they are lucky they have a blanket for warmth. Here they begin to take inventory of their meager possessions and find that they have only about a two weeks supply of close rations. Tutt writes that POWs from the East Camp passed by the barn today.

On the morning of January 31st the group awakens at 5:00 AM, and their captors tell them they need to do 30 kilometers that day. The prisoners make a sled to carry their food and leave the barn at 7:00 am. On February 1, 1945 the weary prisoners march to *Muskau*, where they find refuge in pottery factory. Tutt calls it "the best place we have stayed in yet". Here they have heat and dry themselves

¹²² *ibid.*,130-131.

from the pouring rain in which they have had to march. Tutt trades a German civilian for a quarter loaf of bread, the first he has seen since leaving camp. Turning once again to his diary Joel Tutt writes, "It is 10:00 AM and looks like we will be here for another day. Hope so, anyway. So far our guards have treated us well and the civilians have even given us drinks along the road. If we can do as well in the future as we have been in the past we will make it okay, otherwise I'm afraid to say what the outcome will be."¹²³

The group leaves the confines of the pottery factory on February 3, 1945 at 8:20 in the morning. The day turns a little warmer and the prisoners and their guards seek shelter in a muddy and sloppy barn in *Graustein*. It seems as if it is going to be a warm day. The next day, on February 4, 1945, the group once more marches away hoping to make it to *Spremburg* to catch a train. At *Spremburg* they receive a little soup and are forced into boxcars to be shipped to *Moosburg* and a new Stalag.

A weeklong train journey had now taken them to the south of Germany. Life was miserable in *Moosburg* for the prisoners. The camp was very crowded, hundreds of men to a

¹²³ *ibid.*

tent or barrack. The first concern was food. Tutt wrote on March 3, 1945, "We talk, think and dream of food".¹²⁴

On April 29 elements of the 14th Armored Division of General Patton's Third Army liberated the camp after a brief firefight. POW Harold Gunn wrote in his wartime log of his rescue by the third Army as it happened: Sunday - April 29, 1945 10:04 "The time we have been waiting so long for has finally come. I am trying to record the events while sitting it-I'm in rather cramped quarters in our barracks kitchen, the only place with brick walls. Bullets are flying; the chatter of machine gun fire and spasmodic rifle reports, punctuated by the heavy explosions of large guns makes a filling background for our long anticipated liberation. The "Goons" are making a last stand at our gates".¹²⁵

Gunn writes that rumors were flying as thick as the bullets. Inside the camp prisoners have become casualties two men became victims of stray bullets. Gunn said, "The whole camp has been taken in by the rumors. Inadequate causes and long stored up feelings makes the moment a

¹²⁴ *ibid.*, 131.

¹²⁵ Harold W. Gunn, *War time Log Of Harold W. Gunn* (<http://www.303rdbg.com/pow-halgunn.html>).

dramatic one. Low flying Mustangs and Thunderbolts have been doing their bit to make it a "good show." Tanks have been sighted on the hill close by and are believed to be ours. Many "Kriegies" are eating what we hope to be our last "Kriegies" meal behind barbed wires. A heavy explosion just brought down a spray of plaster from the ceiling and walls. Air Force officers are receiving a lasting impression of a ground battle and feeling very much out of place".¹²⁶

Gunn continues "I am now crouched in the abort (privy) where many Kriegies have taken shelter. The steady hum of excited conversation reflects the pitch of the moment. We are all nervous, but our morale is very high. There is no sign of panic. Smiles are worn by all, and in spite of the apparent danger, we all agree that it is a "good show." A direct hit in *Moosburg*, the nearest town, sent up a cloud of smoke".

The heavy traffic from barracks to abort shows that nature will have her way, even under these conditions. Even Kriegie burners are going full blast. Food is still an important item. We are all determined to eat. A Kriegie has tasted hunger and does not find it to his liking. I am now

¹²⁶ *ibid.*

standing in the sunshine at the corner of our block many are now outside watching the show. Our camp guards have made us go to the slit trenches. Too many have been injured. Those in the tents are very vulnerable to flying bullets.¹²⁷

"The "Goons" ¹²⁸are firing from a visible church steeple in Moosburg, a good reason for damaged cathedrals that we read so much about in German propaganda. We Kriegies have been under the German heel too long to be fooled by their propaganda and feel much sympathy for them at this time. Most of the fire has been moved south into the town, but this slit trench is still a comfortable place to be. We jump up occasionally for a quick look, then back into the trench when dose fire increases. Until additional excitement arises, I will close this erratic account and enjoy the show.¹²⁹

" The American flag went up over Moosburg at 12:15. At 1:45 two jeeps and a tank rolled into camp, barely recognizable because of the men clustered upon them. They received a deafening ovation. Harold Gunn ,no longer a

¹²⁷ *ibid.*

¹²⁸ The term Goons is a derogatory term that Allied POWS used to describe their German captors.

¹²⁹ *ibid.*

prisoner of war, concludes his story, "This account was begun by POW. 1613, but is being finished by Lt. Harold W. Gunn, U.S.A.A.F".¹³⁰

Gunn, Pilley, Tutt and the others spent another week in Moosburg being fed, medically checked and deloused. A convoy of trucks then took the POWS to the airfield in nearby Strauhing. After boarding C-47 transports, the POWS were then flown to Camp Lucky Strike near Le Havre in France on May 9th, 1945. Five days later Joel Tutt boarded the USS Lejeune and sailed home to the United States to rejoin his Wife Ruth in Monticello, Georgia safely again in the United States. The twenty-one others that were captured on August 19, 1943 also survived their captivity and returned home to their loved ones. For the families of the crewmembers who were killed on August 19,1943 the wait for their loved ones return would be quite a bit longer.¹³¹

¹³⁰ *ibid.*

¹³¹ de Jong, 187.

Chapter Five

Tell me about my Boy

Later on the night of August 19, 1943, via the Red Cross the Germans would cable the United States Government regarding the fate of the crew. There was some delay in processing the notification of next of kin, but when it came it came as a telegram from Western Union. The government being ever so efficient had stock form messages for almost all occasions. [Paragraph 62-1 from the office of the Quartermaster General of the Army states, "We regret to inform you that your"... "Is missing in action". Other form paragraphs were used for other occasions: death, missing remains, misidentification, and notification of Prisoner of War status. The casualty rate was high, prompting an organized response to next of kin.

More than 300,000 Americans were killed while serving overseas in World War II. About 100,000 of those who flew as bomber crewman died. For every thirty missions flown, 71 percent died. In the first 100 missions flown by the 388th bomb group, 89 B-17s were lost. At 10 men per crew, 89 aircraft lost meant 890 men wounded, killed or captured.

Usually for every man wounded or captured in a bomber crew, six were killed.¹³² Statistically, it was safer to be a marine fighting in the Pacific than it was to be a bomber crewman in the air war over Europe.

When a plane went down the family or next of kin was generally notified by a Western Union telegram; the sight of a Western Union delivery person in a factory or a front door was omen enough. The words "I regret to inform you" became a common and well-known phrase to wives and parents left behind as the casualties of war affected almost everyone.

The Office of the Quarter Master General was the arm of the War Department responsible for the care and reparation of the nation's honored dead. While the conflict raged on, most of the dead were interred in temporary military cemeteries. Some unfortunately were buried in isolated graves; some were buried at sea while others just disappeared due to the violent nature of war, never to be recovered. In 1946 Congress passed a bill that authorized the War Department to take steps to provide a reverent

¹³² Dunnigan & Nofi, 209.

final burial for members of the military and civilians who gave the last full measure of devotion.¹³³

The Government, under considerable pressure from the nearly half million bereaved families gave the next of kin the option of deciding the disposition of their loved ones. Attempts were made from government records to determine and notify the next of kin. Once the next of kin was determined a questionnaire, was sent to the family to determine the next of kin's wishes. Congress gave the War Department five years to complete the task. World War II ended on August 15, 1945.

Nearly 300,000 of the 16 million Americans who served in the war died. At the end of the war, the United States Government was unable to recover, identify, and bury approximately 79,000 as known persons. They include those buried with honor as unknowns, those lost at sea, and those missing in action. That number also includes the 1,100 sailors entombed in the USS Arizona Memorial in Pearl

¹³³ This included all Army, Navy, Marine and Coast Guard personnel who died overseas, as well as civilians who were in the service of the United States from 9/1/1939.

Harbor. Today, more than 78,000 Americans remain unaccounted for from WW II.¹³⁴

In the days immediately after the war, the Government had full access to most of the former battle areas. This access greatly enhanced the retrieval of the war dead. The Army created two identification laboratories, one each in Japan and in Germany. Those laboratories worked only on World War II cases and made recoveries on both sides of the globe from 1945 to 1951, working until all known leads were exhausted.¹³⁵

An involved and complicated chain of survivorship was established and the families were given four options for the internment of their loved one:

1. Remains could be returned to the United States or one of its possessions for internment in a private ceremony.
2. The remains of a deceased could be returned to a foreign country, either the deceased's homeland or the next of kin's homeland.

¹³⁴ Michael Sledge, *Soldier Dead [How We Recover, Identify, Bury, and Honor Our Military Fallen]*. (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), 268.

¹³⁵ In 1947, the Department of Defense established the U.S. Army Central Identification Laboratory, Hawaii. This lab now handles the recovery and identification all U.S. Service members killed in past wars. Sledge., 101-113.

3. The remains of the deceased could be sent to a US military cemetery for burial.

4. The deceased's remains could be sent to a United States National Cemetery, such as Arlington National cemetery.¹³⁶

The Nation provided a flag for the deceased coffin as a keepsake and would pay for transportation and related costs for burial. Should the family decide that a hometown or private cemetery was desired the Government developed a complicated and involved process that not only established a method for burial, but also a method to defer the cost of up to \$50.00 for private burial to the family. Any additional other expenses over the cost of transport of the remains of the honored dead would be borne by the next of kin.

A long honored tradition for members of the armed forces at the time and place of their burial was for the government to provide them with an honor guard, a squad to render a final salute, and a bugler to render the honor of playing taps. This was fine as long as the next of kin

¹³⁶ Quarter Master General Technical Information Branch, Under The Supervision of the War Department Public Relations Division *Tell Me About My Boy...* , December, 1946., http://www.qmfound.com/about_my_boy.html

buried their loved one in a national cemetery. However should the next of kin decide that they wished to bury their loved in a local cemetery, then the government passed the duty of rendering honors off to a local veterans group.¹³⁷

Despite the obvious debt owed to the men and women of the American Armed forces who paid the ultimate sacrifice, there were those in public office and private industry who objected to the projected cost of 200 million dollars to identify and bring home the war dead. Senator Heinrich Shipstead of Minnesota demanded that the War Department explain the government's position of according veterans free burial in national cemeteries.¹³⁸ Apparently Senator Shipstead had received a letter from one of his constituents, Russell Egner. Mr. Egner was the Sales Manager of Acacia Memorial Park, a privately run cemetery. Mr. Egner's letter "expressed concern that the government's policy of paying for the interment of its service personnel interferes with organized business free enterprise."¹³⁹ Furthermore, Mr. Egner suggested that the government

¹³⁷ *ibid.*

¹³⁸ Sledge, 224.

¹³⁹ *ibid.*

provide a cash bonus to the deceased's family, which could then be spent at Mr. Egner's or one the other private cemeteries throughout the United States.

Eventually Egner's thoughts, were passed on to R. P. Harbold of the Memorial Division of the Quartermaster Corps by Senator Shipstead. Harbold responded, that "the veterans who died constituted less than 3.5 percent of the total deaths a year in the United States, and that this should in no way be considered as menacing, impairing or restricting trade possibilities of any industry or enterprise associated with burial of the dead."¹⁴⁰ Harbold then explained that the economic desires of the funeral industry could not compare with the United States Government's responsibility to the honored dead "to be committed to a final resting place under the care and maintenance their Government, and as long as that Government survives, they will sleep amidst thousands of their comrades."¹⁴¹

The *Saturday Evening Post* in its May 31st 1946, edition asked the question " *Shall We Bring The Home The Dead Of World War II?*". The author of the article, Blake Ehrlich, intended the piece to serve as a forum for discussing the pros and cons of this emotional issue. Ehrlich described

¹⁴⁰ *ibid.*

¹⁴¹ *ibid.*

the hard work, and dedication of those who tended the cemeteries, as well as the beauty of the cemeteries and the agonizing decisions made by many families to bring their loved one home or let them lie where they had fallen.

Once Congress allocated the money, identification and retrieval of the war dead began. *The New York Times* on April 13, 1946 wrote that "Preparations were declared complete today for the task of bring home 200,000 or more or the country's war dead."¹⁴² War department officials expected the program to take two to five years to complete. There were at war's end 359 known temporary and permanent cemeteries throughout Europe, Asia and the Pacific.

The *Times* declared the War Department's task " one of history's greatest manhunts".¹⁴³ The task was certainly monumental, Not only did the War department have to deal with governmental opposition and some opposition from the funeral industry, graves registration crews had to deal with inhospitable terrain, poor weather ,and the initial lack of trained personnel in reclaiming and identifying remains.

¹⁴² New York Times 1946 April 13,7.

¹⁴³ *ibid.*

Stephen and those of his crewmates who died on August 19, 1943 were buried on the next day. The Germans did not conduct extensive autopsies of the eight bodies. No record so far has been found of the involvement of local Dutch authorities or doctors. Included in the Air Forces Missing Air Crew Report are translations of German Army records detailing the burial of the eight-crewmates.

Initially the Germans could only identify four bodies on August 20th 1943: the bodies of Lts. Howe and Gruhn, and Sgts. Connelly and Stamp. The four other bodies were also interred in single graves, but as "unknown" dead. The Germans interred bodies in the cemetery in this order: Grave 52 Unknown (completely burned), 54 Stamp, 56 Gruhn, 58 Unknown (completely burned), 60 Howe (burned, but identified by dog tag), 62 Unknown (completely burned), 64 Unknown ("body has been destroyed over a large place by the crash of the aircraft"), 66 Connelly.

On March 20, 1946 , well after the war's end, the bodies of the eight-crew members were exhumed and brought to the temporary cemetery at Ardennes. A hand written notation on the MACR identifies the four unknowns as Sgts. Toth, Hillier, Ryan and Butt.

When the bodies were reinterred the bodies at the Ardennes temporary cemetery; the crewmembers were laid out in the following order: Plot G Row 3 Grave 51 Gruhn, Grave 52 possibly Toth (collective), Grave 54 possibly Hillier (collective), Grave 55 possibly Ryan (collective), Grave 57 Butt; Plot I Row 10 Grave 244 Stamp, Grave 245 possibly Howe, Grave 249 Connelly. With today's science the remains would have been easier to identify using DNA. Science in the 1940's was limited to mainly fingerprints and dental charts for identification purposes of battlefield dead. It wasn't until the end of the War that the Quarter Master Corp responsible for Graves registration units began to bring in outside experts to instruct in the arts of forensic science and help in the Identification process.

All eight families requested the return of their loved ones for burial in the United States. Initially, in the case of Lt. Howe his body was identified. For some reason the Graves Registration unit misidentified him and the process started over again. In Stephen's case, the records in his personnel and casualty file show that he was identified three different times.¹⁴⁴

¹⁴⁴ Department Of The Army PERSCOM - Individual Deceased Personnel File #293 Toth, Stephen A. (335333545)

On Aug. 15 1947, the War Department reported that only two ships bringing home America's war dead would reach the United States that year. The first ship, the USS *Honda Key* with about 3,500 bodies docked at San Francisco on Oct 10. The second ship, the *USS Joseph V. Connolly* with 6,248, dead mainly from the *Henri Chapelle* Cemetery in Belgium, reached New York Oct. 26 1947. The *Connolly's* return has been described as a parade of sorts that began shortly after she sailed past Ambrose Light, through the Narrows, into the docks of New York harbor¹⁴⁵. If this was a parade, then perhaps it was the most resolute and melancholy parade of all times for it measured the loss of a nation.

The *USS Bristol* and the *USS Beatty*, as well as the Coast Guard cutter *Spencer*, escorted the Liberty Ship into port. When the *Connolly* approached New York City, the battleship *USS Missouri* fired a salvo from her 16-inch guns in salute. Soon after the *Missouri's* salute, a flight of fighter planes passed overhead in tribute. On the *Bristol's* fantail, a Marine Bugler played "Church Call." The *Connolly* finally docked at pier 61. Generally, it took the War Department thirty days from the time the caskets made port before they reached their destinations.

¹⁴⁵ "New York Times" (New York,) 14th April 1946.

Around seventy percent of the families asked for the remains of their loved ones to be returned home. The War Department initially returned only the identified dead, of which there were 252,000. Around 178,000 were brought home. Not all the dead were returned to U.S. soil. According to Department of Defense records 93,242 men are buried in overseas American cemeteries because of family preference. When the remains arrived in the United States, the next of kin was notified.

Today the number of missing has been reduced to seventy-eight thousand. Among those missing are about eight thousand whose bodies had been recovered but whose identities are unknown. Their remains are buried in American cemeteries overseas. Efforts to identify them are continuing through the Army's Central Identification lab in Hawaii.

On January 15, 1944 the Army sent a telegram notifying Addie that Stephen was dead. That day a baby shower was being thrown in honor of Ruth Toth. Stephen's mother Helen would not tell anyone of Stephen's death until after the baby shower.¹⁴⁶ Benjamin Howe's Wife, Jeanne, as well as his Mother and Father, also received notification that same day

¹⁴⁶ Rahm- Toth, Ruth Interview by author 10/06/06.

by telegram. Benjamin's last letter home was dated August 18th 1943. Howe's parents had also received a letter from another pilot that claimed the crew had landed without crashing. The letter was perhaps the first of many mistakes made in the reporting of the crew's loss.¹⁴⁷

In July of 1944, Addie received a letter from the Kansas City Quarter Master depot asking about the disposition of Stephen's effects. The Army had, as they did with all enlisted dead, held a court martial on their belongings in the effort to settle any of the deceased's outstanding debts or financial obligations. William Toth began asking questions and writing the Office of the Quartermaster General while in the service, and after the war as well, trying to find out at first if his brother was alive and then what happened to cause his death. Eventually the Army wrote to William with a reply that no further information was known. Addie finally received notice that Stephen had been identified and would be returned home, as were her wishes.

Stephen was finally coming home. The Army picked the site of burial, though Addie, Stephen's widow and the rest of the family had requested burial at Calvary Cemetery in Toledo, Ohio. The official response was that it was closer

¹⁴⁷ The Reading Chronicle (Reading Mass.), 12/3/1943

and more central location for all the families. The Army never bothered to tell the family that what remained of Stephen's body was very little, or that the Germans had identified his remains and that the Army's Grave registration unit took several tries to do so. ¹⁴⁸

Traveling to a national cemetery for many families became something of expedition in itself. In post world war II America, while there were many automobiles, the highways were not the super interstates of today. Travelers rest stops were primitive and gas stations were sometimes few and far between. In 1949, Stephens parents, brothers, sisters, and nephew Stephen packed into two cars for a journey to the City the of New York and a inexpensive hotel off Times Square. The family boarded the Long Island Railroad for the ride to the Long Island National Cemetery in Farmingdale, New York. At the railroad station, the Army had a bus waiting for the families.

The Army had returned the body of my uncle to the United States in 1949. On December 8th 1949, a clear winter's day, Stephen was buried in a mass grave with a single white headstone marked: Howe, Ryan, Toth, and Hillier. Taps were played and my father was handed the

¹⁴⁸ Department Of The Army PERSCOM - Individual Deceased Personnel File #293 Toth, Stephen A. (335333545)

flag, which he passed on to my older brother Steve who was Stephen's namesake.

My grandfather was of the old school, where men generally kept their emotions inside and were meant to be an example of stability and dignity and confidence about the value of living –no matter how terrible the situation. To many, this was a civic and cultural virtue: for most, it was just the way it was. On this day, however, his emotions were too great to be contained. My mother Ruth Toth was standing next to both my grandmother and grandfather, said that, " Pa just bawled and bawled, Ma and I hugged him and tried to console him".¹⁴⁹ His lovely son was gone.

My father was standing behind the little group. My mother said of him, " Your father was in a world of his own, I had to tell him to come forward and stand with us". As my mother looked at him, she could see all the hurt of the world was in his eyes for the two brothers had been inseparable.¹⁵⁰

Today Stephen Toth lies with three of his crewmates, pilot Lt. Benjamin Howe, flight engineer S/Sgt. James E. Hillier, radio operator S/Sgt. Stephen A. Toth, and tail gunner S/Sgt. William G. Ryan. They remain in death as they

¹⁴⁹ Interview Ruth Rahm Toth, 10/01/06

¹⁵⁰ *ibid.*

did in life together as they served. Waist gunner S/Sgt. William J. Stamp is also buried in New York. The other waist gunner S/Sgt. George E. Connelly rests in a cemetery in Pennsylvania. Co-pilot 2/Lt. Paul Gruhn is buried in Brookfield Wisconsin, and S/Sgt. Dale T. Butt in Janesville, Wisconsin.

I am sure that my uncle and his crewmembers were not enamored with the idea of dying for their country. They wanted to live. They were barely out of their teens with all their tomorrows ahead. But they were given the duty to fight evil at its basic level, in a war against tyrants. And like good men everywhere, living life at its deepest level, they did that to the very end.

Chapter Six Honors

On September 11, 1997, the year of the 50th anniversary of the United States Air Force, the family of Stephen Toth was asked to join a number of forgotten heroes and their families at Wright Patterson Field Dayton, Ohio as Air Force General Bon Jovi explained, because " for a variety of administrative and logistical reasons, some of these heroes have not received the decorations they earned for their courageous and faithful service to the nation. This anniversary year provides a good opportunity to correct those oversights and give our veterans the recognition and appreciation they deserve."¹⁵¹

General Bon Jovi presented that day a Distinguished Flying Cross and four Purple Hearts. Neil Clover, a B-24 bombardier stationed near Kettering, England, was awarded the Distinguished Flying Cross. Neil volunteered to fly with another crew on a night bombing raid of the heavily armed German city, Duisberg. Soon after reaching the target, the bomber was attacked by machine gun fire from German fighters. With the bomb bays on fire and the aircraft in a flat spin, the crew bailed out. Neil was

¹⁵¹ Toth , Thomas G. *Notes of Air Force Medal Award Ceremony.* 9/11/1997.

captured by German soldiers the next morning and held prisoner of war two months.¹⁵²

Mr. William Scheil was a B-17 pilot assigned to the 306th Bomb Group in Thurleigh, England. On April 17, 1943 over Bremen, Germany, flack hit Lt. Scheil's aircraft shortly after dropping its payload. Lt. Scheil and the six other members of the crew were able to bail out over heavily occupied territory. Upon landing, Lt. Scheil sustained a broken ankle and other injuries and was captured immediately. He spent the next two years as a German POW. Today Mr. Scheil will receive the Purple Heart.¹⁵³

Mrs. La Vaughn Cunningham-Cope the widow of 2nd. Lt. Edward Cunningham accepted his Purple Heart posthumously. One month as he departed for duty overseas as a bombardier, Lt. Cunningham ordered flowers for his mother and mother-in-law to be delivered on mother's day. By the time the flowers were sent, Lt. Cunningham had been missing in action for over a month.¹⁵⁴

Mr. Lester Miller was awarded the Purple Heart for injuries he sustained in combat in 1944. Mr. Miller then

¹⁵² *ibid.*

¹⁵³ *ibid.*

¹⁵⁴ *ibid.*

Sgt. Miller was a waist gunner on the crew of the B-17, Yankee Doodle Dandee. On a mission to bomb an airplane factory in Leipzig, Germany, German fighters shot down Sgt. Miller's aircraft. Sgt. Miller continued to fire his 50-caliber machinegun at the Messerschmitt 109's that were closing in for the kill. The B-17 was actually upside down when Sgt Miller and the rest of the crew bailed out, and they were captured shortly after landing. Sgt. Miller saved the life of one of his wounded crewmates by carrying him on the march to the prison camp. After 11 months as a POW, Sgt Miller escaped and was rescued by British tanks. ¹⁵⁵

Stephen Toth was a Staff Sergeant assigned to the 388th Bomb Group in Knettishall, England. On his forth-combat mission, a strike against an airfield in Woensdrecht, Holland Stephen Toth was killed in action, nine days before his 22nd birthday. William Toth received Stephen Toth's Purple Heart posthumously.

Many of those Americans who survived aerial combat could never really leave the war behind them. It affected them and shaped the way they lived the rest of their lives. Rather than pausing to reflect on the past, most focused on what they hoped would be a brighter future. When veterans

¹⁵⁵ *ibid.*

returned home immediately after the war, they usually found that, for the rest of America, life went on, so they proceeded to focus their energies on adapting to the postwar world. For every veteran who received a heart felt welcome there were many others who returned home well after the parades and fanfare, wondering if those who had stayed at home appreciated their sacrifices. Without question, the rest of America did appreciate those sacrifices, but, while America's young men went overseas to fight the war, life had moved on for the people at home. After the war, it was up to veterans to adapt themselves to fit back into society, not the other way around.

Some would eventually revisit their wartime experiences to educate future generations or reminisce with buddies about youthful days. Many who endured combat put the terrible memories of warfare, the stink of cordite, the metallic taste of fear in the back of their minds. Sometimes a reunion, obituary or movie would trigger these memories. Probably the biggest reason men had wanted to forget the war after coming home was so that they could go on unhindered with the rest of their lives. True to the cliché, time had undoubtedly healed some of the wounds. The contributions or failures of the dead will, of course, never be truly known, as well as those who fought the

Second World War and came home and tried to carry on. William Toth wrote his wife Ruth that if he ever returned he would be the best husband and father that he could be, never raising his hand to his children and providing for his family as best as he could. He did and has, and at 86 he still is a source of wisdom and knowledge, and plain common sense for his children and grand children. Like most he came home and carried on. ¹⁵⁶

When Stephen and his crewmates the America entered combat in the summer of 1943, they did so with equipment and a doctrine markedly different from those of either its British allies or its German foes. They flew in the principal weapon of the America's Eight Air Force, the Boeing B-17 Flying Fortress. The B-17 was armed at the time with what planners thought to be an adequate amount of 50-caliber machine guns and the not so secret, and not so accurate, Norden bombsight. The planes they flew and the concept of strategic bombing used to implement those aircraft first emerged from World War I and was advocated by Hugh Trenchard of England, Giulio Douhet of Italy, and America's Billy Mitchell. ¹⁵⁷ The strategic bombing theory

¹⁵⁶ Rahm- Toth, Ruth Interview by author 10/06/06.

¹⁵⁷ Stormount, John. *The Combined Bomber Offensive April Through December 1943* (Air Force Historical Research Agency), 22.

advocated by American military leaders stated that long-range, high-altitude, heavily armed, fast daylight bombers flying unescorted in formation could economically penetrate, accurately bomb, and thus destroy key elements of a nation's economy, causing that nation to collapse.

In the summer and fall of 1943, American bombing doctrine was tested and found wanting when unescorted bombers suffered catastrophic losses on most daylight missions. By the end of 1943, the Eighth introduced into combat airborne radar, electronic countermeasures (ECM), and long-range fighter escort made possible by fuel carried in external drop tanks. These weapons and increased strength prepared the Eighth for the decisive air battle that followed in 1944. The long-range fighter escort provided the heavy bombers eventually drove the Luftwaffe from the sky. By April of 1944 the Allies would achieve air superiority in the skies of Europe. During that spring and summer the direct and indirect support of ground forces in operations such as OVERLORD (the Normandy invasion) and CROSSBOW (the campaign against German long-range secret weapons) diverted the Eighth from its strategic bombing offensive.¹⁵⁸

¹⁵⁸ Dear, I. C. B., and Foot, M. R. D., Eds. *The Oxford Companion to World War II* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), 1066-74.

By fall of 1944 the massive flow of replacement bombers and crews and escort fighters would guarantee the Eighth numerical as well as tactical superiority over the Luftwaffe. The Germans, in spite of the constant bombing would continue to improve flak defenses, fighters, and introduce jet aircraft and aerial rockets in an attempt to forestall defeat. It was, however, a case of too little too late.

The Eighth Air Force defeated Germany's air force and weakened Germany's war industry. The heavy bomber crews laid claim to the destruction of over 6250 German fighters in the air. Many thousands of aircraft were destroyed on airfields and on the production lines of bombed German aircraft factories. The attacks on German airplane production in the year 1943 and February 1944 contributed significantly to the winning of air superiority in the critical air battles of the early months of 1944.¹⁵⁹ Attacks on transportation and oil and the dispersion of industry also denied the German Air Force badly needed fuel, ammunition and spare parts. In the end, the Eighth won and

¹⁵⁹ Dunigan and Nofi, 197.

retained air superiority and paved the way for Allied ground forces and the liberation of Europe.¹⁶⁰

The 25th of April 1945, was a bittersweet day for the men of the Eighth Air Force. The 8th mustered 550 aircraft for its last bombing mission of Second World War. During the war, the 8th dropped about 700,000 tons of bombs against the German war machine, and almost 6000 heavy bombers were lost in the skies over Europe. In all, the Eighth lost over 9000 aircraft, along with about 44,500 men originally reported missing in action or killed, and flew over 523,000 sorties.¹⁶¹

The devastation brought by war to Europe and its cities was rebuilt, in part by the Marshall Plan. The fortresses built by the Allies and Axis that dominated the armed camp that Europe had become in the war years are mostly overgrown with weeds and desecrated by the graffiti of a younger indolent generation refusing the lessons of the past.

In Knettishall along the Peddars Way, the abandoned airfield of the 388th is grown over by weeds. Lately the airfield has been used for off road automobile racing. The

¹⁶⁰ Dear and Foot, 1066-74.

¹⁶¹ *ibid.*

sagging, moss-covered buildings are quiet reminders of the boisterous, fun loving young men who used it as a base to fight tyranny and oppression thousands of miles away from their homes. If one listens closely, perhaps they can hear the ghosts of those young men and the echoes of the aircraft engines that flew from there. If one squints slightly into the late English sun, one might almost see the line of returning bombers. Most of those who survived are now great grandfathers in their middle to late eighties, no longer the lean athletic young boys that fought in the skies of Europe attempting to save the world from itself. A bit slower, much grayer, both older and wiser they have watched as America has sent their sons and grandsons off to war time and again.

The men of the 388th flew B17 Flying Fortresses out of Knettishall for two years as part of the 3rd Air Division from 23rd June 1943 to 5th August 1945. In total the group flew 306 missions and 25 experimental missions at a cost of 142 B17's lost in action, 561 men killed, and 801 prisoners of war.

At the entrance to station 136 near the Coney Weston Crossroads stands a simple black granite monument to the

388th Bombardment Group. Inscribed on the monument is the 388th group's motto "Fortress for Freedom".

Stephen's wife Addie was interviewed by the *Toledo Blade* At the Willys Overland (Jeep) plant the day after she received notification of his death.¹⁶² Addie told the newspaper reporter that Stephen made a promise to her to return home. " Always remember I'm coming back to you-no matter what, I'll be back when the war is over". Addie, hoping against hope, told the reporter "Steve is lost or a prisoner somewhere. I'm sure he'll be found and come back to me." Addie waited six years for Steve to come home. When Steve was being laid to rest, Addie was on her honeymoon with her new husband. Ruth Rahm-Toth said of Addie, "At her wedding reception Addie cried and cried, you see she still loved Steve, yet she had to move on. We all did".¹⁶³

Stephen and his crewmates lie in together as they served, comrades in arms. They gave each of their tomorrow's for our todays. Stephen Toth on the day of his

¹⁶² "Toledo Blade" (Toledo) 21st August 1943.

¹⁶³ Rahm- Toth, Ruth Interview by author 10/06/06.

death August 19th, 1943 was nine days short of his 22nd
Birthday. On December 8th 1949 Stephen came home.

Stephen I remember you.

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