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Elden R. Dahl
(Died January 2001)

(Story 24)

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(O.K. to Check-out but not to be copied)

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PRESS RELEASE
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THRU: 5th Wing (US)
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By S/Sgt. William Brink Jr.

AN ADVANCED NORTH AFRICAN AIR BASE -- Returning to his base today was a Flying Fortress pilot who three months ago bailed out of a flaming Fort over Italy, was beaten and lashed by Italian captors when he tried to escape, but later toiled more than 100 miles on foot through German-infested country to the safety of the American battle lines.

The pilot was 1st Lt Eldon R. Dahl, 28, of 31 S. Nilson St., Bozeman, Mont. On Aug 25, 1943, during a Fortress raid on Foggia, his ship was shot up and sent crashing to its death by 25 to 30 attacking enemy fighters. Dahl was flying his 41st mission.

The tall, dark-haired pilot floated to earth almost on top of the small village of St. Andres di Consa, about 45 miles south of Foggia, and was seized immediately by Italian military police. Clapped in the local jail, he was pounded with fists and lashed with a rope in three separate attacks by police who became enraged when he stole a pistol from one of them and made an unsuccessful attempt to escape.

On September 11, after the Italian armistice, Dahl fled a quarantine camp north of Rome where he had been taken. The Italian guards simply left. The pilot lived in caves and cabins in the hills for a month before starting his long trek south. He reached the American lines November 14 after a host of adventures, including capture by two German soldiers whom he outwitted and disarmed. He escaped by leaping into a ravine, breaking his wrist and lacerating his face.

Back at his base, Dahl was decorated with the Purple Heart and raised to a first lieutenantcy. Still bearing marks on his face and with his wrist in a plaster cast, he recalled that coming off the target all four engines of his ship were smoking; three from mechanical trouble and one from fighter fire.

"I called over the interphone and told the crew to prepare to bail out. Something exploded in the cockpit and I was hit in the right elbow. It wasn't a bad wound, though.

"I went to the nose escape hatch to bail out. We were at 23,000 feet. I made a delayed jump, falling 10,000 feet before I pulled the ripcord. After the chute opened I looked up and saw the ship start down out of control. The engines were still smoking and one was on fire.

"I saw three or four other chutes in the air. Maybe there were more--I don't know for sure."

Halfway in his descent Dahl saw a Messerschmitt 109 dive on him. But it peeled off without firing.

"I came down on the outskirts of the little town, and all the people and children were yelling and shouting and running towards me. When I landed I tried to run but the military police had me surrounded."

Dahl was taken to the local jail and placed in a cell. A few hours later, he was allowed the freedom of a room adjacent to the cells, and it was here he stole a pistol when a lone guard went away for a moment, leaving his coat and pistol behind.

"The police were very careless. I took the pistol and hid it under my clothes. I decided to wait for the chicken dinner I had ordered before making a break. They asked me what I wanted and I said fried chicken. I got it."

The pilot waited for nightfall and saw his chance when a guard led the way into his cell to show him his bed.

"I stuck the gun in his back. I expected to get the key quietly and get away, but the guard became terrified and screamed. Then the other guards came running up and I surrendered the pistol before somebody took a shot at me."

The chief of police ran in, learned what had happened, and seized a chair to assault Dahl. Two other guards took the chair away from him and the three started in on Dahl with their fists.

"There were no lights in the cell and I got away from most of the blows by ducking in a corner. A couple of hours later, the same two guards came back again and gave me another beating. I don't think it was brutality, just anger because I had taken the gun. They probably got hell from the chief."

After a restless night, Dahl was attacked in the morning by the two guards, one of whom lashed the pilot with a rope.

"I crouched in a corner and ducked my head in my arms to protect my face. Most of the blows landed on my shoulders and back. Then they led me out of the cell and somebody kicked me. I was taken to a room and placed at a table with all the police lined up in a semicircle before me. I thought I was in for a real beating. But instead, they gave me macaroni."

Several days later, the police chief and the guards who had done the beating took Dahl to Avellino where he spent two nights in two different jails.

"The jails in Italy are very deplorable."

Removed to Benevento, Dahl was turned over to an Italian Air Forces officer and taken by train to Rome, where Italian intelligence officers spent a day questioning him.

"They seemed most interested in what kind of ship I was flying, but of course I didn't tell them anything. I was feeling pretty good because coming into Rome on the train we went through the marshaling yards where our Fortresses had bombed. The damage was devastating. It cheered me up a lot."

Dahl was sent to a quarantine camp in an old monastery 50 miles northeast of Rome where he was when the armistice was signed.

"Church bells were ringing in a little village nearby and the people were singing and shouting. Our guards tried to tell us it was a feast day, but they got ready to leave and the doors of the camp were thrown open. When the news of the allied invasion came, the Italians seemed to think the Americans would drive up in a jeep the same afternoon.

"We posted our own guards and next day about 80 of us went back into the mountains. We lived for a month in caves and cabins, dodging the Germans and living on the Red Cross parcels of food we had brought with us and food supplied by the Italians.

"On October 12, I started south, alone. I figured I could make the front lines. I had no compass, but I carried a reserve of food--a can of beef, cheese and bread. Most of the time, I begged from the Italians. When I could get food, ate good, but sometimes I got pretty hungry.

"I kept walking, keeping off the roads and sleeping where I could--mostly in caves and barns. Several times I went into towns at night and found shelter. Once, I slept in the home of an Italian family who had two Germans sleeping upstairs.

"I had been wearing civilian clothes given me by Italians, but as I got near the front lines, I changed back to my uniform and wore a civilian overcoat."

On the last lap of his journey, Dahl was scrambling down a cliff when two German soldiers spotted him and fired. He had to throw up his hands and surrender.

"They were artillery observers. One was an officer with a knife and the other an enlisted man with a rifle. They asked me if I was an Italian and I said no. They asked me if I was British and I said guess again. Then they asked me if I was an American and when I answered yes, they broke into smiles.

"The enlisted man asked me for a match and I saw my chance. As I handed him the matches, I knocked the gun out of his hands and leaped into a deep ravine. I broke my wrist and scratched my face, but scrambled up and ran like hell. I took cover, and although the Jarries passed within a yard of my hiding place, they didn't find me."

His wrist swollen and painful, Dahl toiled the last few miles across the lines. Several times, he picked his way through German mine fields.

"When I hit the American lines, I couldn't believe it. Then I saw a lieutenant driving a caterpillar tractor with a big U.S. star on the side and I was convinced. I had come a hundred miles, but that was as the crow flies and not up and down mountains.

"It was an American engineer outfit and they gave me a shot of brandy. They asked me what I wanted to eat. I said steak, and I got that, too. I ate a second meal, and then it was chow time, so I ate again."

Dahl was given new clothes, and his wrist treated, received his first bath in two months and went to bed. He was taken to Naples and flew back to North Africa in a C47 transport.

The pilot, who is married to Bunny Dahl of Bozeman, expects to be sent back to the States for a much-needed rest.

*Lt. Col Eldon Dahl
died in January 2001*

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