A SHORT STAY AT BASSINGBOURN

Written by Robert A. "Bob" Dickson

I arrived in the UK in late October 1943. My B-17 crew was one of sixty replacement aircrews that had come over from the US on the Queen Mary.

Several of us were assigned to the 381st Bomb Group at Ridgewell. It was standard operating procedure to require the first pilot to fly 4 or 5 missions as co-pilot with an experienced crew before taking his own crew into "harms way". I flew 2 missions with the 381st, and then on November 18th my crew was transferred to the 91st Bomb Group, 322nd Squadron at Bassingbourn.

It was December 1st and my first mission with the 91st Bomb Group. I was assigned to fly co-pilot with John Wennerberg's crew "Wheel N' Deal". Our briefed target was a chemical plant in Leverkusen, Germany our secondary target was a steel mill in Solingen.

We took off and climbed through a heavy overcast. Once on top we assembled in formation and headed out across the North Sea. Before we reached the Dutch coast an escort of P-47's joined us.

We got some moderate flak over the Netherlands but it grew more intense as we approached the Ruhr Valley. Our escort reached the limit of their range and has to head for home. As soon as they left- here comes the Luftwaffe! German ME 109's and FW 190's making head- on attacks in the classic "12 o'clock high" maneuver.

On their first pass the fighters put a 20-mm shell into our number 3 engine and on their next pass they apparently hit the batteries in the wing root because we lost all electrical power. We had some trouble feathering the prop. With number 3 engine windmilling we couldn't keep up with the formation- we became a "straggler". Without electrical power our top turret and ball turret were useless. Fortunately, about this time our new fighter escort arrived and two P-47's took up a position off our right wing, protecting us from further attacks by the Luftwaffe.

We got the prop on number 3 engine feathered and manually released our bombs while descending to reach the protection of cloud cover below. We were getting pummeled by radar, directed flak. An 88-mm shell came right up through the cockpit behind the pilot's seat and out the roof right next to the top turret. The number 2 engine was hit and the oil tank behind it caught on fire. That's when John Wennerberg gave the "bail-out" command.

I was wearing heavy fur-lined jacket, pants and boots along with a seat type parachute. I remember what a struggle it was to squeeze past the console getting into the co-pilots seat. When it was my turn to bail out I don't remember getting hung up on any part of that airplane. I'd often wondered if I would have the nerve to jump out of a plane but when that sucker was on fire I couldn't get out fast enough!

I dove out the nose hatch and as soon as I cleared the plane I pulled the D ring- nothing happened. I pulled it again and again- still nothing. In desperation I put both hands on the D ring and thrust both arms straight out in front of my body…. Whump! The chute jerked me to a slow descent. When I bailed

out we were in the clouds at around 13,000 feet, when I finally got the chute open I had dropped out of the overcast and barely had a chance to look around before I was on the ground.

It turns out that we were right over the city of Düsseldorf when we left the plane. We were captured immediately. Nine of us got out. Sadly, or tail gunner, Sgt. William E. Roller, was killed by flak and went down with the plane- it crashed into the Rhine River.

I landed in a plowed field in the city of Nuess just across the river from Düsseldorf. An older man, probably a WWI veteran, was there with a Mauser rifle gesturing for me to put my hands up. There was a gusty wind blowing and every time I lowered my hands to try and deflate the canopy this guy would make a menacing gesture with his rifle. The wind carried me a couple of hundred feet, slamming me into a fence, damaging my ribs. Finally the guy realized my dilemma and allowed me to remove my chute. We stood there about 100 feet apart- he with his rifle aimed at my head and me with my hands up in surrender. Soon a motorcycle with a sidecar came charging up. There were two Luftwaffe sergeants aboard. They put me in the sidecar and took me to their headquarters a short distance away. They informed me that we were at an anti-aircraft battery that had been firing at us just a short time earlier. One of them, using gestures and some broken English, let me know he intended to send my parachute canopy to his wife who would use it to make herself some lingerie. Here I heard the phrase that I was to hear many times in the next few days “fur you da var is offar” (for you the war is over). Within a few hours I was taken to an airbase outside of Düsseldorf and put in a jail cell. The next morning I found that the rest of our crew was in adjacent cells. This was the first time we’d seen each other since we bailed out. The train took us to the Luftwaffe interrogation center at Oberursel just outside of Frankfurt. After a couple of days of solitary confinement and several interrogation sessions I was transferred sessions I was transferred to Dulag Luft, a transient camp in nearby Wetzlar.

Again, our crew was re-united but we were cautioned not to discuss our recent experience since the rooms were probably bugged. We were given a toothbrush and a cake of soap. Since the Germans had confiscated my fur-lined flying clothes, I was issued a RAF greatcoat that was a few sizes too big for me but it kept me warm. The next day they separated the officers from the enlisted men and sent us off to our respective permanent camps.

The Germans didn’t tell us where we were going; they just loaded us into a boxcar and locked the door. The car was converted cattle car with bench-type seating. It was cold and drafty. After two and a half days we arrived at Barth, Pomerania, a small city near the coast of the Baltic Sea. From the train station it was a 2-mile march to Stalag Luft 1, a permanent prison camp run by the Luftwaffe for POW allied airman, mostly officers.

I spent 18 months in Stalag Luft 1. There were 16 of us crowded into a room that according to the terms of the Geneva Convention should house only 8. The room had a stove fueled by charcoal briquettes that provided heat as well as a cooking surface. We had to prepare our own meals. The Germans gave us staples such as potatoes, rutabagas, cooked barley and heavy brown bread. The good stuff came in the form of Red Cross food parcels; they had either a can of Spam or corned beef, powdered milk, margarine, or a chocolate bar and cigarettes.

Camp life was boring! It wasn’t like “Hogan’s Heroes”. We did have a library with a limited number of books- the good were always out. Through the efforts of the Red Cross and the YMCA we had some athletic equipment and a few musical instruments. We were able to put together a band and some guys

got together to put on a few shows in a makeshift theater.

It was a cold, damp place most of the year. Often we were standing out in the cold rain for the twice a day head count. After dark we were locked in our barracks with the windows shuttered. In the last few months of the war the Red Cross food parcels stopped coming and at the same time the Germans cut back on our rations. When our senior officers complained, the standard reply was "if your fighters would stop shooting up at our trains the supplies could get through!"

Towards the end of April 1945 we could hear artillery gunfire from the Russian Army advancing from the east. On the night of April 30th all the Germans left the camp, heading west hoping to surrender to British troops. On May 1st we took over the camp. Fortunately our Senior Allied Officer, Colonel Hub Zemke, had planned for this day by setting up an organization of MP's, translators, and Kriegies with various talents needed to run the camp now that the Germans had fled. The Russian Army overran the surrounding area, Contact was made with the Russians and after two weeks of top-level negotiations, B-17's were allowed to land at a nearby airfield and fly us out to France. A B-17 never looked so good!

Col. Hubert "Hub" Zemke

As October drew to a close and his combat hours passed 450, Zemke knew his days as a group commander were about to end. He was ordered to 65th Fighter Wing headquarters as a chief of staff. With his bags packed, he decided to fly one more mission before taking over a desk.

On that mission he ran into the worst turbulence he had ever encountered. He ordered his formation to turn back, but before he could do so, his P-51 lost a wing. Parachuting from the wreckage, Zemke was soon taken prisoner ended up in Stalag Luft 1 at Barth, Germany, on the Baltic Sea.

Newly arrived, Colonel Zemke found himself senior officer in command of 7,000 Allied prisoners, some of whom had been there several years. Conditions were deplorable: insufficient food, inadequate clothing and medical attention, a lack of military discipline among some POWs, and indifferent or hostile German officials.

Zemke quickly established his leadership of the POWs, who numbered about 9,000 by V-E Day. Gradually he developed working relations with the prison commandant and staff and achieved some improvements in living conditions.

As it became apparent that their war was lost, the Germans became more cooperative, especially as Soviet armies approached from the east. Zemke and his staff negotiated an agreement with the camp commandant for the Germans to depart quietly at night, bearing only small arms, and turn the camp over to the Allied POW wing.

To avoid conflict with some POWs and the hated guards, Zemke's staff kept the arrangement secret until the morning after the German departure. Zemke then nurtured friendly relations with the arriving Soviets. (In 1941, he had spent several months in the USSR teaching Russian pilots to fly the P-40. He spoke some Russian and fluent German.) Ultimately, Zemke arranged for the POWs to be flown to allied territory. His strong leadership saved the lives of many POWs.

Col. Hub Zemke retired form the Air Force in 1966 and died August 30, 1994, at Oroville, Calif. He was an extraordinary man, outspoken, courageous, and of unflagging personal integrity and conviction. These qualities, which made him one of our greatest wartime leaders, did not endear him to some of his military superiors and probably denied the rank and responsibilities he deserved. Nevertheless, he will remain a symbol of military excellence long after others are forgotten.

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