"GOOD TIME CHOLLY II" TO "STALAG XVII-B"

By James O. Balvin

PREFACE

In April of 1987 when our son, Mark, was attending Santa Clara High School, he was assigned to report on prisoners of war (POWs). He asked my brother, Jim, to fill out a questionnaire regarding his experience as a POW in Germany. Jim mentioned that his son, Pat, had also asked him to record some of his war experiences. He was, therefore, kind enough to provide Mark with the information requested, which is contained in this booklet.

One year later, in April 1988, Jim?s former commanding officer, Colonel Ralph H. Saltsman, wrote an article for 8th Air Force News about their ill-fated bomber mission. This helped Jim refresh his memory with more details.

My husband, Bob, and I talked to Jim about putting his experiences together in some sort of booklet for the family to have. Jim agreed and we started helping him compile the information.

The booklet was almost finished when Jim?s conditioned worsened. He decided that he didn?t want to work on it anymore so we shelved the project. That was the status at the time of Jim?s death.

Recently Bob and I discussed what we should do with all the information compiled so far. Jim was enthusiastic about publishing this booklet at first. And we feel that if his health hadn?t deteriorated he would have maintained that enthusiasm. Perhaps reliving those memories in his condition at the time was too stressful for him.

But we do feel that this booklet is a good tribute to Jim and his life. He is frank and honest with his feelings and he certainly had something to be proud of in the way he conducted himself throughout the ordeal.

So we came to the conclusion that all of you in the family would appreciate this story. Now, a decade after we started this project with Jim, we are sending the finished work to all of you.

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Very early on the morning of 14 July 1943, I climbed aboard "Good Time Cholly II", a B-17F of the 331st Bombardment Squadron, 94th Bomber Group. I recalled that this was celebrated as "Bastille Day" in France. Slowly I edged into the ball turret on the belly of the aircraft. Because of the limited room in my gun position I could not wear the bulky, fleece-lined clothing used by other crew members. Instead, my bright blue suit was lighter and electrically heated. I had to plug it in after settling into position.

Only five aircraft were flying in the squadron today because the sixth was being repaired. Our squadron commanding officer (CO), Colonel Ralph H. "Salty" Saltzman, was the senior officer aboard our plane which was in the lead position. Captain Willis T. Frank was pilot and second in command. Other crew members were Thurman D. Burnett (bombardier), John T. Wholley (navigator), Dick Davitt (top turret gunner), Willard F. Dovel (right waist gunner), Harry L. Eastman (left waist gunner), Warren R. "Available" Jones (tail gunner), and Robert A. Mabie (radio operator).

After we had taken off, assembled, and climbed to altitude we rendezvoused with the rest of Group 94 over southeast England. Our mission was to bomb installations at Le Bourget Airfield just outside of Paris. Group 94 was flying the low position and our plane was leading the low squadron. This so-called "Purple Heart Corner" was not a healthy slot to be in but we felt pretty good about this mission because we would have fighter protection except for a short distance before we reached the target. Our main concern was not anti-aircraft fire but enemy interceptor planes.

While flying over the English Channel, I discovered a leak in my oxygen system. I notified the CO but advised him that I would be alright with an emergency oxygen bottle. We test fired all the guns and felt assurance by the escort of P-47 fighters flying high to our left.

After we passed the Seine River the P-47s reached the end of their range and had to leave us to fend for ourselves. Shortly after they turned back, we ran into unexpectedly heavy enemy fighter opposition. They were Focke Wulf-190s and Messerschmitt-109s. The first wave hit us about 7:40 AM. Davitt scored on a Me-109 and it exploded right in front of us, swishing by us in pieces. Jones reported that a large piece of the burning plane hit the lead ship of our second element and it went immediately into a spin.

We were about 80 kilometers (50 miles) south of Paris at 8:00 AM, and had just turned north to commence the bombing run on Le Bourget when the second wave of enemy fighters hit us. Twenty-millimeter shells tore into us and damaged our tail section. Captain Frank seemed to be having trouble keeping the plane on a level course, but he was managing. Finally he gave the order to abandon ship. Burnett and Wholley immediately bailed out and I crawled up out of my belly turret. Our CO countermanded the Captain's order and advised the rest of us to stay with the plane as long as we could in order to get as far north as possible. That would give us a better chance of reaching the English Channel on the ground. We were still at 19,000 feet but no longer with the squadron. All four engines were still functioning. Dovel had been hit and we attended to him.

Then a German fighter hit us from below with incendiary rounds and the cockpit burst into flames.

The CO could not even sound the alarm but we knew now was the time to "hit the silk." Fortunately, all the remaining crew members were able to bail out.

I must have passed out from the high altitude and cold but awoke sharply as I landed hard in a heavily-wooded area. My parachute had hung up in 40-foot trees so I could not hide it, which was standard procedure to delay being tracked. I extricated myself from the harness and met Jones, our tail gunner. After he examined my wounds, which were numerous but not dangerous, we walked (with some difficulty for myself because of shrapnel in my lower extremities) for a short time until we reached a road. We followed it a short distance until we came to a farm house occupied by an elderly couple. They indicated they could be of no help because the woods were surrounded by a German search party. They did, however, invite us into the house for wine and showed us pictures of their son fighting with Britian's Royal Air Force.

We asked them to point in the direction of Paris whereupon we went back into the woods. Within a short distance we crawled into a ditch to await darkness so we could move from the woods, unless the Germans came first and forced us to move sooner. My companion, "Available" Jones, named after the comic strip character of the time, and very fitting by the way, promptly went to sleep.

While "Available" slept, I left the ditch to return to the farmhouse. The old lady became worried and left the house, crying loudly to inform the Germans. A matter of minutes later a staff car with an officer and driver arrived. They entered the house carefully. At the sight of me they broke into laughter because of my bright-blue and very-bedraggled-looking flight suit with electrical wires dragging behind like a tail.

At noon we were transported one-quarter mile by a staff officer and left in charge of the squad which was part of the search team. I slept fitfully until approximately 2:00 P.M. and tried to talk to an army private who said he had studied law in England.

We were then transported to a nearby fighter base by the same staff officer and taken to the Squadron Flight Operations Building. Within a couple of minutes what must have been a complete compliment of pilots arrived. They were tall, handsome, blond and blue-eyed -- Goering's elite. Outside we could see training planes with the markings of Goering's "Yellow Jackets" who were famed for their flying ability and aggressive tactics. We also observed Focke Wulf-190 combat aircraft that were painted bright yellow with black striping along the fuselage -- hence the name of "Yellow Jackets."

After they had a quick look at us, I was escorted to the flight surgeon. He performed a cursory look at me and then made the profound announcement, "Flesh wound," and dismissed me.

From there we went to the nearest rail station. Sometime after dark three other injured crew members from our plane arrived and we were put on a train bound for Paris. We arrived at a hospital at 12:00 midnight and met the Luftwaffe Captain Surgeon at the front door, leaving as we were entering. He followed us back in, opened an operating room, and attended to us. Wholley, the navigator, had a badly sprained ankle. Burnett, the bombardier, also had a badly sprained ankle and a four-inch-long gash on his buttocks. The flight engineer/gunner had shrapnel in his foot which was inoperable. I learned 25 years later that he had lost his leg at the hip after multiple amputations -- he is now deceased.

I spent 2 weeks in that Paris hospital and then traveled by rail to Air Crew Interrogation Center at Frankfurt-on-Main, Germany. A week later we enlisted personnel were moved to Stalag=VII-A at Mooseburgh, 20 miles from Munich, which was the dispersal point for all enlisted personnel.

Two weeks later all of us American air crew members were moved to Krems-on-the-Danube in Austria, to Stalag XVII-B. The journey took three days and three nights with 35 of us cramped into a

World War I box car -- called "40 + 8" because it could hold forty people or eight mules. Food during the trip consisted of a piece of black bread and a can of horse meat for every three people.

Stalag XVII-B was a facility that had been used for prisoners of war (POWs) during World War I. There were 300 people in each building -- 150 at each end with a bath in between. The cement tub had only cold water and no drain plug. The bunks were three-tiered with straw mattresses and only one blanket -- summer and winter. Heat was provided by a chimney in the center of the building which had a small door to accept coal or wood -- both of which were in very short supply.

Twice a week we were provided with a three-inch piece of black bread and two ounces of Ersatzs butter. Once each day we had potatoes (occasionally cabbage) boiled. Red Cross parcels were supposed to come weekly but actually only arrived about once a month. There were numerous excuses for not delivering them -- the ship was sunk, the train destroyed or intercepted by Germans. The kitchen was staffed by POWs. When available we ate corned beef from Red Cross parcels mixed with peeled, mashed potatoes or boiled cabbage, which was sometimes wormy.

Our clothing consisted mostly of odds and ends of military uniforms from European countries "liberated" by Germans.

Regarding Medical Attention, I do not recall seeing much of a medical staff in November 1943. There was one POW who had been a pre-med student before entering the service. He lanced a large carbuncle on the back of my neck so that it would drain. It drained for a year.

I received no physical or psychological abuse from my captors, but I did see another person struck on the head with a rifle butt. It was obvious that he was mentally deranged. Two others were killed and one badly wounded in an escape attempt, and another who was inside the building and not attempting to escape was also badly wounded. None of these acts were necessary in my opinion, but they were probably within the letter of the Geneva Conventions.

Non-commissioned officers were not required to perform labor according to the Geneva conventions. The main extent of our daily routine was to form in ranks every morning for a count. Some time later we received athletic equipment, musical instruments, and art supplies from the US. Library and language classes were given with our people teaching.

I said I was not abused by my captors, but I did feel resentful toward nine fellow POWs who wrongfully accused me of collaborating with the enemy. They induced the mental condition from which I still suffer and currently draw l00-percent disability compensation from the Veterans' Administration. When the Germans saw my condition had reached the point where I needed hospitalization, they sent me to a civilian mental institution near Vienna. In about three months I recuperated enough to return to camp. I still feel some resentment over the matter, especially toward one of my own crew members.

During the time of my internment I was not able to send any messages home, although my family was informed that I was alive and a prisoner.

The actual date of my repatriation eludes me but I believe it was September 1944 via Sweden. I traveled from Stalag XVII-B in Austria to a port on the Baltic Sea where we rendezvoused with other prisoners to be traded--1500 British and several hundred Americans. We were then ferried to Sweden where the actual trade took place. I then traveled to New York via Britain on a luxury liner leased from Sweden. After a few days at Halloran Army General Hospital in Long Island, I went to Fitzsimmons General Hospital in Denver. I was discharged on 4 December 1944.

All of our crew survived. Eastman and Davitt evaded capture. By delaying their jump and obtaining help from the French underground they were able to avoid the Germans and return to England via

Spain and North Africa.

It's hard for me to say how this experience affected the rest of my life. There were a few dreams of combat situations widely-spaced over a number of years, but I really didn't take time out to dwell on such things. I was too busy working and planning and raising a family.

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