

War Era Story Project 2012

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Rhapsody in Junk

My father is no longer alive to tell his story, so I must tell it for him. His name was Lt. Thomas F. Jeffers, and he had been a machinist at WPAFB. After Pearl Harbor, he joined up, and he became a bombardier on a B-24 named *Rhapsody in Junk* based at the 458th Bomb Group in Horsham St. Faith, England. In 1944, one in three crews flying out of England was not expected to return home safely. It is no surprise that he flew only three missions before he was shot down over Germany. Nine of the ten men on the crew survived and became prisoners of war. His top turret gunner, Staff Sgt. Harold Flaughter, from Bloomdale, Ohio, was found dead on the ground. Unknown to my father, Flaughter, too, had been employed at WPAFB before the war. The crew left their deceased gunner at a civilian German cemetery for burial. An old, withered, German woman placed a flower on the wooden box and cried for him. Four on the crew spent the remainder of the war at Stalag Luft III, the camp made famous by the movie, "The Great Escape." The enlisted gunners went to the notorious Stalag Lufts IV and VI.

In January, 1945, as the Russians closed in from the east, Adolf Hitler ordered Stalag Luft III evacuated. At eleven at night, my father marched out into the bitter night with 2,000 other men in his compound during the worst German winter on record in fifty years. With little to eat, taking only what each could carry, and shivering due to lack of sufficient warm clothing, the men were force marched against the Geneva Convention rules for fifty-two miles to Spremberg, Germany, where they were shoved into dirty, overcrowded box cars for another three days on their way to Bavaria. Their box cars were strafed in some instances, and the rickety cars passed through Dresden just twelve days before the bombing and firestorm there. Most men were sick and starving, had little if any food, and no water for the journey. They were only allowed out of the fetid cars one time before arriving in Moosburg, Germany, at Stalag VIIA.

A far worse camp meant to hold 10,000 men, it held 120,000 of all nationalities. The prisoners languished there, hungry, diseased, lice-ridden and filthy until Gen. George Patton's Third Armored Division, nicknamed "The Liberators," drove tanks into the barbed wire and captured the camp. The American flag was run up the camp flagpole after the detested Nazi flag was ripped down. There was thunderous jubilation in the camp, and the ragged men of all nations cried, laughed, shouted, and offered their quiet, prayerful thanks. They were going home. By then, my father knew my mother had given birth to a baby four months before, and the former prisoner of war finally arrived home two months later to meet his new daughter.

For decades afterward, my father always wondered how his top-turret gunner died. When my father was frail and no longer able to research, I felt that the long-burning torch was passed to me. I was hungry to learn of his wartime past and anxious to solve the mystery of his gunner's death. Over the

course of three years, I followed in my father's WWII footsteps. I started with visiting his bomb group airbase in England. It took the full three years to locate his crash site. Once it was found, I left for Germany. I stopped at the remains of the German facility where he was interrogated and found the old German cemetery, where I stood at the former grave of his gunner, Flaughter. I returned to Stalag Luft III in Poland to stand on the broken and crumbling foundation of his barrack and to look down the long road leading out of what remained of the camp, where he had struck out on the Forced March.

My father had always told me he bailed out of his burning B-24 and landed in a farmer's field. The farmer ran up to him, and my disoriented father asked, "Sweden?" But the farmer shook his head and sadly replied, "Nein, Deutschland." With the help of the Germans, I found that field, and I met the woman who watched him bail out that fateful spring day, as his burning plane flew low over her 1620 thatched-roofed home. She had been just ten at the time. Along with her friends, six decades after the war, she took me to the crash site, where I found pieces of his crashed bomber. I brought them home to him and put them into his hands two weeks before he died.

My research continued after his death, and that resulted in my book, "Rhapsody in Junk—A Daughter's Return to Germany to Finish Her Father's Story." I was able to further explore the death of his gunner and regret that my father passed away before those details could be revealed to him.

Along with fifteen other sons and daughters of the POWs, I re-enacted the Forced March for fifty-two miles through Germany and Poland, just as he had done it, in the winter, leaving the camp in the woods at 11 p.m. and marching out in the dark of night. I imagined his feelings not knowing where he was going and looking back to see 8,000 more men trudging along behind him in the blinding snow. Traversing the icy cobblestones, where they had walked, and slipping past the tall pines, those aged and silent sentinels that had watched the prisoners pass by over 60 years before, was the ultimate tribute to our fathers.

My father was one of many WWII "heroes," who risked his life and made sacrifices he could not have dared to imagine so early in his life. To him, and to all those who served with him, the nation must remember and remain eternally grateful.

