

CHAPTER 9 – GEORGE

CHAPTER 9

397th Bombardment Group - On 5 April 1944 Martin B-26 Marauder aircraft of the 397th Bombardment Group started to arrive at Gosfield Air Base after a trans-Atlantic crossing from Hunter Army Airfield, Georgia by the southern route via Africa.

However, no sooner had they arrived than they were moved to RAF Rivenhall when that airfield was vacated by the 363d Fighter Group on 14 April. On the day following the departure of the 363d, the first Martin B-26 Marauders of the 397th Bombardment Group arrived.



Rivenhall Airfield, England April 1944

596th Bombardment Squadron (X2) - The 596th was established in early 1943 as a B-26 Marauder medium bomber group. Initially it was an Operational Training Unit under the Third Air Force in the southeastern United States. It was realigned as an operational squadron and deployed to European Theater of Operations (ETO), and assigned to Ninth Air Force in England in early 1944.

Engaged in tactical bombardment of enemy targets in France and the Low Countries in the spring of 1944, also participated in the extensive bombardment of the D-Day invasion area in preparation for the Operation Overlord landings in France. After D-Day, moved from England to Advanced Landing Grounds in France, providing tactical bombardment of enemy strong points as well as bridges, railroads and other targets in support of Allied ground forces during the Northern France Campaign. Supported the Western Allied invasion of Germany during the spring of 1945, continuing combat operations against enemy targets in Germany until the German Capitulation in May 1945. Squadron demobilized in France during the summer of 1945, returning personnel and equipment to the United States. Inactivated as a paper unit during December 1945.

The group's identification marking was a yellow diagonal band across both sides of the vertical tailplane.

596th Bombardment Squadron



Squadron Markings:
X2 Fuselage Codes

CHAPTER 9 – GEORGE

Over the next few days, more than 60 'bare metal' B-26s were to be seen on the Rivenhall hardstands. Although fresh from the training grounds in south-eastern United States, and having only reached the UK early in April, the 397th undertook its first combat mission on 20 April: an attack on a Pas de Calais V-1 missile site.

During its tenure of Rivenhall, the 397th undertook 56 bombing missions, 32 of them attacks on bridges. Other targets were enemy airfields, rail junctions, fuel and ammunition stores, V-weapon sites and various military installations in France and the Low Countries. During these missions a total of 16 B-26s were missing in action and several others wrecked in crash-landings at the base.



The "Excalibur" shoulder patch worn by the airmen at Rivenhall

GEORGE'S LAST MISSION

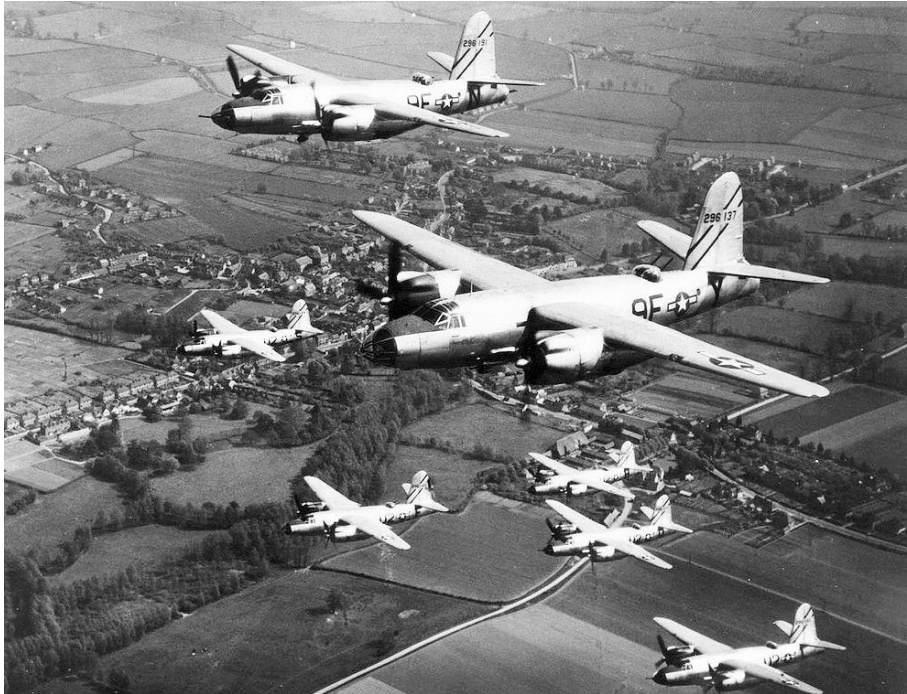
The Briefing



Every briefing is a matter of life and death. Some men will not return. Air crews listen attentively, professionally, to the details of the mission. But almost subconsciously each man is appraising his odds; depth of penetration into enemy skies; expected flack and fighter resistance; friendly cover or lack of it; aircraft position in flight, squadron, group, wing. Some handled it with confidence and some with trepidation – but they were all committed to do their part.



CHAPTER 9 – GEORGE



Milk Run photo from Rivenhall site. Formation of Martin B-26Bs of the 397th Bomb Group. Closest two aircraft are B-26B-55-MA S/N 42-96137 (9F-Y) and 42-96191 (9F-N) "Milk Run Special" of the 597th BS, 397th BG, 9th AF. The other B-26's are from the 598th Bomb Squadron. (U.S. Air Force photo)

42-96137 was shot down on May 13, 1944.

42-96191 was shot down on June 24, 1944.

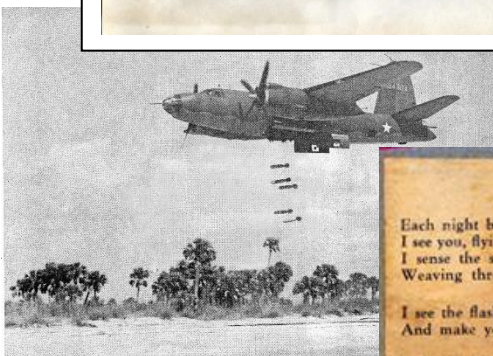
THE MISSION - It is often said ocean waves and bad news come in sets of three. First Gibby was gone. Then Mike was missing. Now, Hazel scoured the newspapers every day looking for some news of George.



Time Out For Hymns

Fliers of the U. S. 9th Air Force, standing in front of a Martin Marauder (B-26), sing the old hymns of Easter at services held on the field of their English base. Some of the men wear their chieftain's hats and bring cups, prepared to take off at a moment's notice. Yesterday, great fleets of American heavy bombers and fighters roared back into Germany, blasting aircraft industry in Brunswick and airbases in Belgium. The attacks prompted the German Air Force into the first major air battle of the month. Berlin's broadcast described the great air battles as extending from the German borders on into the heart of the Reich.

Official U. S. Army Air Force photo.



A Prayer

Each night before I close my eyes
I see you, flying through the skies;
I sense the straightening of your back,
Weaving through the murderous flak.

I see the flash of lights that blind,
And make your target hard to find.

I always think that I won't pray;
That God's had such a busy day
He'll be too tired to heed my plea
And listen to just one, like me.

But, as I toss, I realize
That He hears every heart that sighs.
God, help me through my misery
And bring him safely back to me!

—Carrie Tennis



ON THE NOSE. Huge column of smoke rises from Nazi rail junction at Eusigny, in northern France, as Yank bomber of 9th Air Force gets direct hit. Yesterday nearly 1,750 U. S. bombers and fighters smashed into Germany for fifth time this week to pound an aircraft assembly plant at Tutow and rail yards at Osnabruck.

This prayer was clipped from a newspaper and posted on the first page of Hazel's scrapbook.

CHAPTER 9 – GEORGE



Four B-26's of the United States Ninth Air Force begin the return trip as their bombs explode on the Nazi-held Schiphol Airdrome, Amsterdam, Holland, one of the largest airfields in Europe

April 22, 1944



100TH MISSION COMPLETED. Crewmen of Mild and Bitter, a B-26 Marauder bomber of 9th Air Force, gather in front of plane in England to celebrate completion of 100th mission over Continent. L. to r., Lieut. Lee Rice, Johnston, Ohio; Lieut. Harry Harg, Blytheville, Ark.; Capt. Paul Shannon, Attica, Kans.; Sergt. Wallace Bond, Mesa, Ariz.; Sergt. Robert Johnson, Grand Rapids; and Sergt. James Brandemuhl, Bozeman, Mont.

May 12th, 1944



ON INSPECTION TOUR of U. S. Army 9th Air Force Marauder medium bomber fields in Britain, Gen. Eisenhower (center) watches armorer load up the bomb-bay before the B-26's takeoff on mission. The Marauders yesterday got in their lick for invasion. "I'll."



A B-26 Marauder dumps its load

Striking for the second time yesterday, Marauders and Havoc light bombers of the Ninth Air Force attacked in the evening military objectives in Northern France and the Poix airfield near Abbeville.

The bombers were escorted by R.A.A.F., R.N.Z.A.F. and Allied Spitfires.

Earlier in the day more than 150 Marauders had to circle their targets till they could find holes in the clouds to bomb objectives along the northern coast of France.

Small forces of R.A.F., R.C.A.F. and Allied Bostons, Mitchells and Spitfire bombers also attacked military objectives in Northern France.

Sent from
England

Thunderbolts Strike

U. S. 9th Air Force Marauders and Havocs attacked a big freight yard in northern France and the Creil Airfield, one of the belt of Nazi Airdromes circling Paris. Escorted by Lightnings, these bombers set fire to the main hangar 25 miles north of the old French capital. They met no enemy fighters and all returned to their bases.

American Thunderbolt fighter-bombers also were over France, planting their loads on military installations in the north.

Clearing weather before dawn permitted fast-flying RAF Mosquitos to dart to Cologne to give that German industrial and rail center another hammering. Military objectives in France and the Low Countries also were bombed and mines were laid in enemy waters. No British plane was lost.

Highlights of these attacks were two major operations by the B-26 Marauders of the 9th Air Force, bringing their total to 15 major blows in the last 10 days. In their first attack the Marauders pounded vital railway spans at Liege-Seraing and Liege-Renory, far inside Belgium, losing five planes in a furious German anti-aircraft barrage.

Later in the day, they returned to smash the rail center of Amiens and other rail and military targets in northern France and Belgium.

Flak was weak

Flak, too, was generally weak, and only one plane is missing from the whole day's operations. These were the targets:

Bostons and Mitchells, with Spit-fire escort — Hirson, Northern France.

Fortresses and Liberators, with
Mustangs and Thunderbolts—Pas-
de Calais.

Mustangs and Thunderbolts—
Namur and Haine St. Pierre,
Belgium.

Fortresses and Liberators, with Thunderbolts, Lightnings and Mustangs—marshalling yards at Brussels (Belgium), Rheims, Troyes, Metz and Sarreguemines (France).

warblers and A-20 light bombers, with Spitfires and Mustangs—Douai and Mantes-Gassicourt (France) and Charleroi-Montignies and Monceau-sur-Sambre, near Charleroi (Belgium)

Marauders to Fly Without Paint

A U. S. Medium Bomber Base in England, May 13 (AP).—American B-26 Marauder bombers attacking German installations are adopting the practice of American heavier bombers and will fly again with silver sides and bellies. Unpainted planes are considerably lighter, can fly 10 miles an hour faster and yet are no more conspicuous. Paint will be left on the planes' tops, however, to blend the machines with shrubbery while grounded and to protect fliers' eyes from glare.

Lighter Bombers In Wide Attacks

NAPLES, May 16 (AP).—Poor visibility grounded the heavy bombers of the Mediterranean Army Air Force yesterday, but Marauder (B-26) and Mitchell (B-25) medium bombers were sent against Italian harbors, bridges and industrial installations, flying a total of 1,800 sorties

Mitchells attacked harbor installations at Piombino, scoring hits on the docks and starting several fires. They lashed at steel works in Portoferraro, and a railway bridge at Orvieto, probably cutting both approaches. Marauders went after rail bridges at Pontedera, the Pisa viaduct north of Livorno harbor on the Ligurian Sea, and Acona on the Adriatic coast.

Heaviest attack by the Mitchells was on the steel foundry docks, warehouses and shipping at Portoferraio, which is on the island of Elba. The bombers caught two medium-sized vessels steaming out of the harbor and trapped one in a full bomb pattern.

Atlantic Wall Raids Resume On a Big Scale

By WALTER CRONKITE

London, May 15 (U.P).—Some 1,200 Allied bombers and fighters paced by B-17 Flying Fortresses and B-24 Liberators, blasted French coastal fortifications, railway and airfield targets today, roaring through heavy clouds over the Continent to maintain the pre-invasion pressure on Hitler's Atlantic Wall.

Resuming heavy bomber operations after bad weather Sunday broke a non-stop month-long assault, 200 Fortresses and Liberators made the short flight to the bomb-pitted Pas-de-Calais region of northern France shortly after breakfast.

All Bombers Return.

Escorted by some 200 P-51 Mustang fighters of the 8th Air Force, the American fliers reported "eight-tenths" cloud over the French coast, and worse inland. Temperatures at 20,000 feet were 20 below zero.

No enemy fighters rose to combat the bombers as they dumped hundreds of tons of explosives and fire bombs on Field Marshal Gen. Karl von Rundstedt's anti-invasion defenses. All bombers returned safely. One fighter was missing.

Lieut. Claude E. Wilson, Fortress lead bombardier from Dallas, Texas, said: "Despite the cloud, we had a good bomb run and put our bombs right in there."

Criel Airfield Blasted.

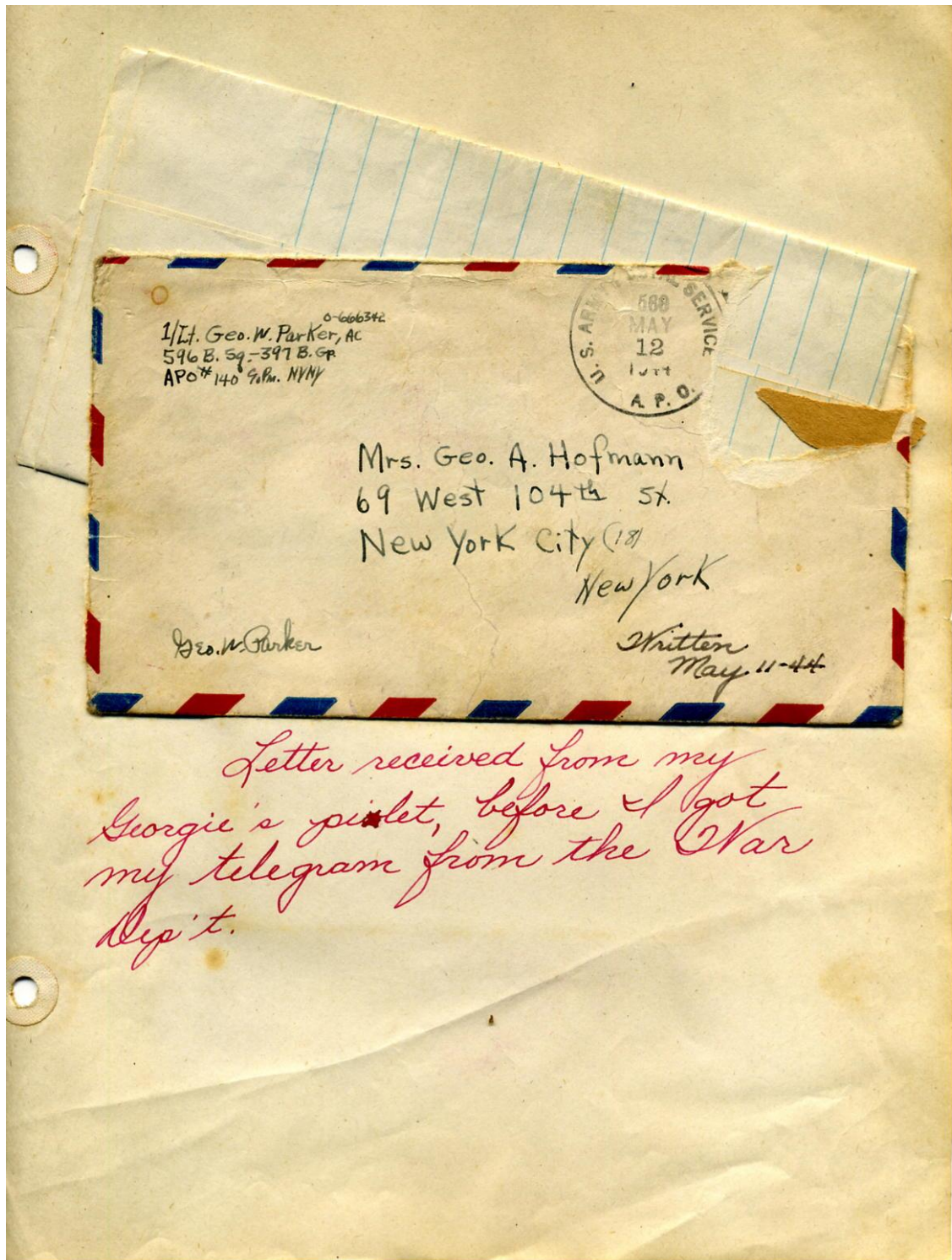
As the bombers returned, other Allied air fleets roared across the Channel to continue the bombardment of the enemy's defenses.

U. S. 9th Air Force B-26 Marauders and A-20 Havocs attacked a big freight yard in northern France and the Creil airfield, one of the belt of airdromes circling Paris, during the morning. Escorted by P-38 Lightning fighters, the bombers set fire to the main hangar. The medium and light bombers met no enemy fighters. All returned safely.

Escorted American P-47 Thunderbolt fighter-bombers also were over occupied France, pounding military installations in the north.

Unknown to Hazel, the first clipping on April 22nd was George's first mission. All other clippings came after May 12th. She was unaware that something very bad had happened on May 8th. And then, just after she put these encouraging clipping in her scrapbook, a letter arrived from George's pilot, George Parker ...

CHAPTER 9 - GEORGE



Thursday 11 May

Dear Hazel —

Want to let you in on the secrets of Merry England — what a place! Honestly, have intended writing you & letting you know just how punk your husband really is. Thought you'd enjoy hearing that.

As George has told you, we had a nice trip over — he & I came different ways, but ended up together anyhow. Our ship "Missouri Mule II" has plugg'd along swell — and our crew is one of the best. I guess you knew that before we left! We have had quite a time over here! Geo. & I work pretty close together having to get up at the same times etc. Our huts are close — he probably told you who his hutmates were.

I wrote Lois & ask if she had written you or vice versa — I'll give you her address. She'd be glad to hear from you. I don't believe you'll get any mail from George for awhile, and I'm telling you this first, because I think you'd want to know. Secondly, I know you'll wonder why letters stop for awhile. Please take this as I tell you & let it go at that for I will write you as soon as I am free to do so & tell you all you'd want

to know. Mainly, I want you to know that everything is O.K. Believe what little I tell you now then you'll have the ease of mind you should have. I don't ~~want~~ want you to get excited over me telling you this either for you will be notified why letters have stopped for awhile later. I just want you to remember that I know George is O.K.

This all may sound a bit hazy to you - I hope you'll understand. Write me how this finds you & by then I can write you a big letter. It's not anything serious & perhaps may even be a bit of luck.

How's that big boy? I saw some pictures of him the other day. My daughter Peggy is going to catch up with him one of these days. HA!

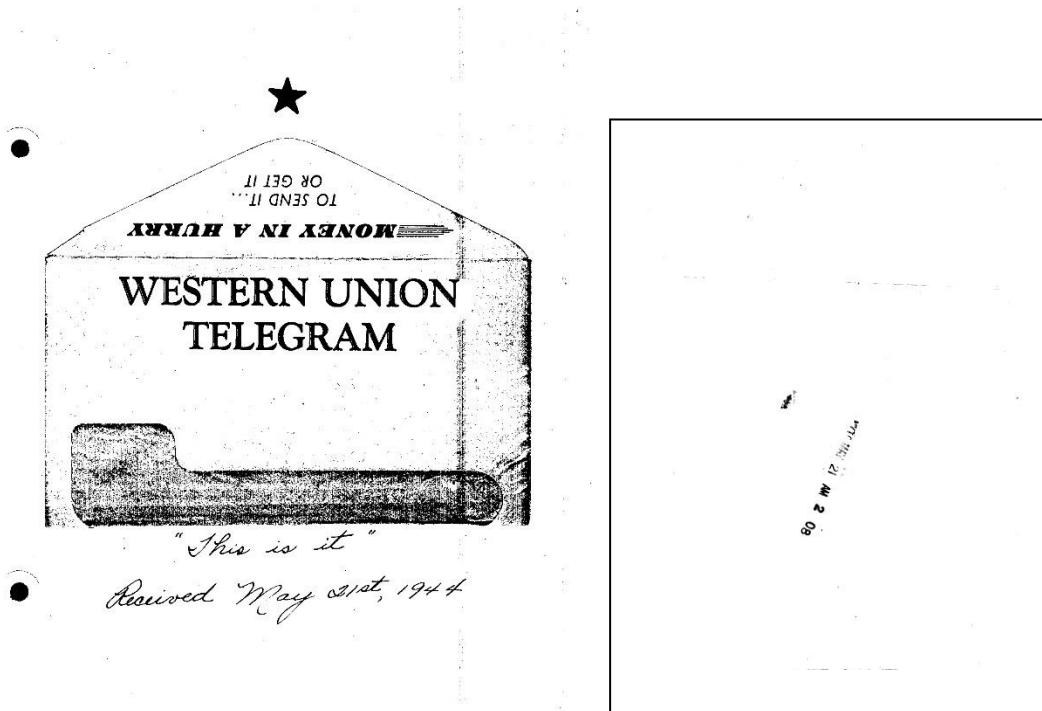
Oh yeah! I forgot to tell you - that lug of a husband is a buddy of mine & we sure think a lot of him. I'll see you later - keep the chin up & you'll hear from the ^{your} hole man pretty soon.

Best wishes always,

George M. Parker

CHAPTER 9 – GEORGE

The telegram from the war department confirmed the worst one week later.



CLASS OF SERVICE		WESTERN UNION		SYMBOLS	
This is a full-rate Telegram or Cablegram unless its deferred character is indicated by a suitable symbol above or preceding the address.		A. N. WILLIAMS PRESIDENT		DL - Day Letter NL - Night Letter LC - Deferred Cable NLT - Cable Night Letter Ship Radiogram	
The filing time shown in the date line on telegrams and day letters is STANDARD TIME at point of origin. Time of passage is STANDARD TIME at point of destination.					
WU 29 44 GOVT=WASHINGTON DC 21 1209A					
MRS HAZEL J HOFMANN=					
69 WEST 104TH ST NYK:					
THE SECRETARY OF WAR DESIRES ME TO EXPRESS HIS DEEP REGRET THAT YOUR HUSBAND SECOND LIEUTENANT GEORGE A HOFMANN HAS BEEN REPORTED MISSING IN ACTION SINCE EIGHT MAY OVER FRANCE PERIOD IF FURTHER DETAILS OR OTHER INFORMATION ARE RECEIVED YOU WILL BE PROMPTLY NOTIFIED=					
DUNLOP ACTING ADJ GENERAL.					
THE COMPANY WILL APPRECIATE SUGGESTIONS FROM ITS PATRONS CONCERNING ITS SERVICE					

The third and final secret Missing Air Crew Report for this inseparable band of brothers had been issued on May 10, 1944, Hazel's twenty-second birthday.

CHAPTER 9 – GEORGE

4429

~~CONFIDENTIAL~~
 RESTRICTED

Classification changed
 to RESTRICTED
 by P. O. [illegible], Lt. Col., AG
 Date: MAR 10 1965 - AG

8 May 1944 1036	26 May 1944	KU 1760
Auberville	2nd Lt. KOFMAN	George Adam C-741310 capt.
15 km. ESE Dieppe	2nd Lt. WALTER	Harry Elwood C-805539 capt.
Type: Marauder	2nd Lt. FREEMAN	Elmer Clayton C-805432 capt.
596 MB Squadr.	Sgt. ROSE	Marion 35623274 capt.
397 Group	S/Sgt. MODULIK	
Airfield:	Sgt. YOUNG	
Rivenhall 168		
Target:		
Airfield Command		
Abbeville		
Drucat		

MACR 4429

CHAPTER 9 - GEORGE

HEADQUARTERS 397TH BOMBARDMENT GROUP (M) AAF
APO # 140, U. S. Army

9 May 1944.

SUBJECT: Missing Air Crew Report.

TO : Commanding General, Ninth Air Force, APO # 696, U. S. Army
ATTENTION: 26th S/C/U.
Commanding General, Ninth Bomber Command, APO # 140, U. S. Army
ATTENTION: Stat Control.
Commanding Officer, 98th Combat Bombardment Wing, APO 140, U. S. Army
ATTENTION: Stat Control.

In compliance with Ninth Air Force memorandum 35-5, the following report is submitted.

1. ORGANIZATION: Location 168; Ninth Bomber Command; 397th Group; 596th squadron.
2. SPECIFY: Point of departure 168; Course 1738; Intended Destination, Railroad Bridges at OISSEL; Type of Mission, Operational.
3. WEATHER CONDITIONS AND VISIBILITY AT TIME OF CRASH OR WHEN LAST REPORTED: Light thin scattered cumulus 1/10 to 2/10 cloud cover between 2-3000', visibility 10 miles.
4. GIVE: (a) Date, 8 May 1944; Time, 1015; Location, Near ABANCOURT FRANCE.
- (b) Last Sighted.
5. AIRCRAFT WAS LOST AS A RESULT OF: Enemy Anti-Aircraft.
6. AIRCRAFT: Type, Model and Series B-26B; AAF Serial Number 42-96143.
7. ENGINES: Type, Model and Series, R-2800-43; AAF Serial Number (a) 0-61312-L, (b) 0-61323-R.
8. INSTALLED WEAPONS: Cal 50 M2 Browning Machine guns as follows: 602734, 607368, 603173, 1077088, 1077608, 1077744, 1077560, 387947, 388066, 388441, 388366.
9. THE PERSONS LISTED BELOW WERE REPORTED AS BATTLE CASUALTIES.
10. NUMBER OF PERSONS ABOARD AIRCRAFT: Crew 6; Total 6.

Crew Position	Name in full	Rank	Serial Number
1. Pilot	Freeman, Elmer Clayton	2nd Lt.	0-886432 - RTD
2. Co-Pilot	Walter, Harry Elwood	2nd Lt.	0-805539 - RTD
3. Bombardier	Hofmann, George Adam	2nd Lt.	0-741310 - RTD
4. Engineer	Young, Oscar Eugene	Sgt.	39852035 - RTD
5. Radio	Hodlik, Henry Joseph	S/Sgt.	32766661 - RTD
6. Gunner	Rose, Marion (NMI)	Sgt.	35623274 - RTD

11. BELOW ARE THOSE PERSONS WHO HAVE LAST KNOWLEDGE OF AIRCRAFT:

1. Brown, Francis E.	1st Lt.	0-727846	Last Sighted
2. Ganther, Richard A.	F/O	T-61336	Last Sighted
3. Humphries, Winfred E.	2nd Lt.	0-741180	Last Sighted
4. Buscheri, John	S/Sgt.	11088629	Last Sighted
5. Dabkowski, Peter	S/Sgt.	11044803	Last Sighted
6. Ragard, Anthony J.	S/Sgt.	12216275	Last Sighted
7. Flowers, William V.	1st Lt.	0-795454	Last Sighted
8. Elliott, Paul E.	2nd Lt.	0-812237	Last Sighted
9. Carl, Scott W.	S/Sgt.	19088503	Last Sighted
10. Coffman, Linden B.	S/Sgt.	13145301	Last Sighted
11. Soonsert, Hilary C.	S/Sgt.	16156767	Last Sighted
12. Gray, Monte D.	S/Sgt.	16144698	Last Sighted
13. Illanes, Gregory H.	1st Lt.	0-437416	Last Sighted
14. Ridenour, Albert R.	2nd Lt.	0-812312	Last Sighted
15. Iuvana, Alfred	2nd Lt.	0-741181	Last Sighted
16. Pensinger, Hubert R.	T/Sgt.	35582010	Last Sighted
17. Willse, Martin J.	S/Sgt.	32765458	Last Sighted
18. Miller, Floyd	S/Sgt.	14046471	Last Sighted
12. It is unknown whether any of the personnel survived.
13. No aerial photographs of that area available.
14. No eyewitness description of missing plane, only sighted it going out of formation.
15. No search made by this Group for missing aircraft.

For the Group Commander:

K. C. DEMPSTER,
Major, Air Corps,
S-3

CHAPTER 9 - GEORGE

Distributor Dala Luft, Oberursel
24 May 1944

Downing and POW Report

Luft Command Belgium/North France, 8 May 44

KU 1760

Discharge No.	Shot down by	Place of Crash	Aircraft type
1	? 1036 W.	Auberville, 15 km east southeast of Dieppe	Marauder
POW			Remarks
3 men captured:	2nd Lt Walter Harry E. O 805539 2nd Lt Hofmann, George A. O 741310 Sgt Rose, Marian, 35623274		Disposition of the rest Unknown

MACR
4429

CHAPTER 9 - GEORGE

Local Quarters 8 May 1944

Airbase Command
E (v) 227/XI Place: Abbeville

Final Report Concerning Air Forces Personnel

Date of Crash: 8 May, at 1036 hours
Place of Crash: Auberville, 15 km east southeast of Dieppe
Aircraft type: Marauder, on its way back
Identification markings: Fin side, 296
43
Kind of Landing: Crashed on fire, 100% destruction
Kind of Capture: By flak

Disposition of the Crew

3 men captured

2nd Lt Walter Harry E., O 905539, captured in Angerville, 1055 hours

2nd Lt Hofmann, George A., O 741310, captured in St. Wast. Equiqueville, 1110 hours

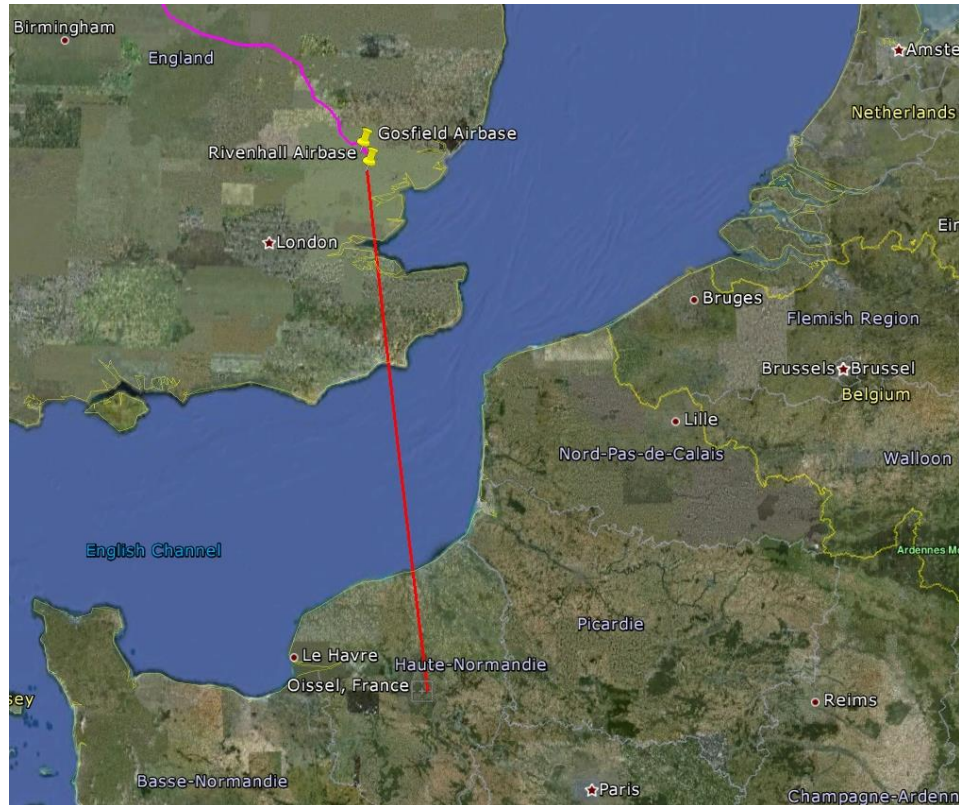
Sgt Ross. Marion, 35623274, captured in BoscGeffroy

KU 1760

CHAPTER 9 – GEORGE

The story is more complicated than captured in this terse report⁹. Pilot Elmer Freeman's crew was short a bombardier on May 8, 1944. George's regular crew on the Missouri Mule II, piloted by George Parker, was not scheduled to fly that day. Wanting to get another mission-completed-credit towards a trip home, George volunteered.

The target was in northern France. It was a short flight south over the English Channel into occupied and highly fortified Nazi territory. The formation left the Rivenhall air space on a heading of 173° bound for the Oissel Railroad Bridges – one of many links supplying the German western front that needed to be knocked out before the Operation Overlord D-Day invasion at Normandy in June.



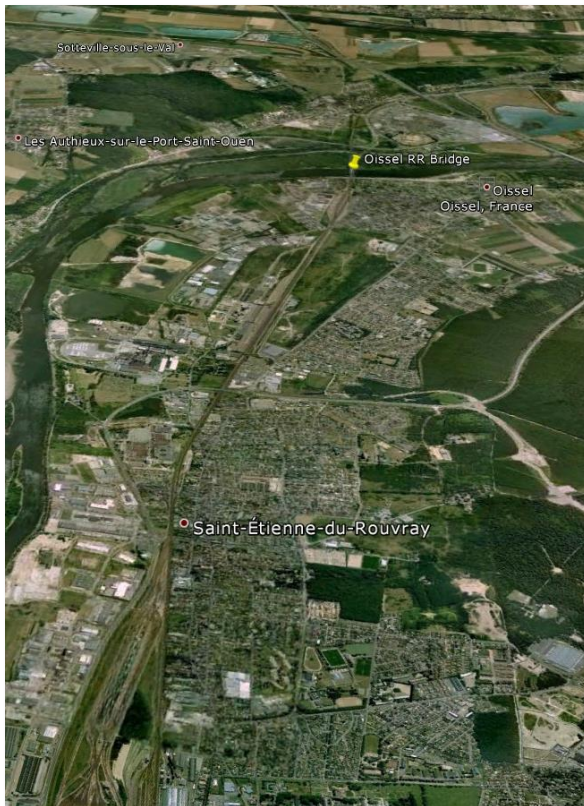
⁹ The full story of 2nd Lt George A. Hofmann's WWII experience has been compiled and published in a 1,600 page, 23 chapter, two-volume book set available for free at <https://untoldvetstories.com>.

CHAPTER 9 – GEORGE



Bombing Run – Inbound at 173°

Oissel Rail Yard and Bridge looking North



In spite of heavy anti-aircraft activity in bombing thus far, no B-26s had been lost in 14 missions. However, there were always a few who had just enough luck to return to England – a testament to the survivability of the B-26 Marauder and other American aircraft.

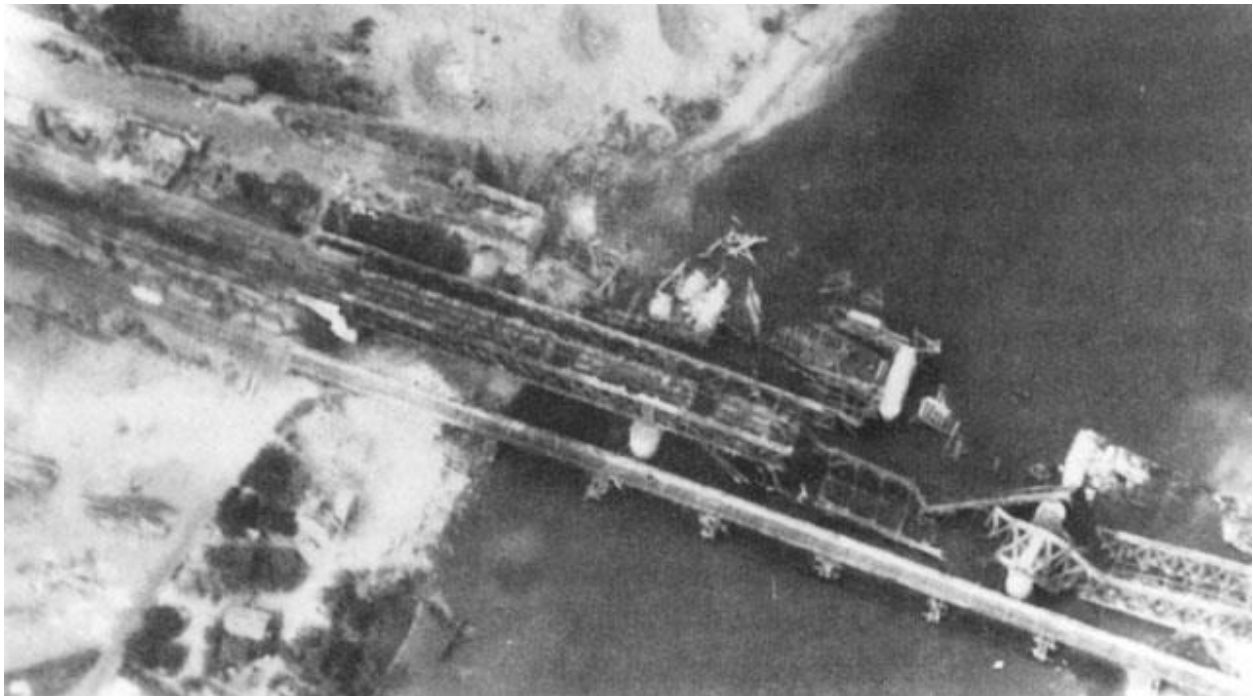


CHAPTER 9 – GEORGE

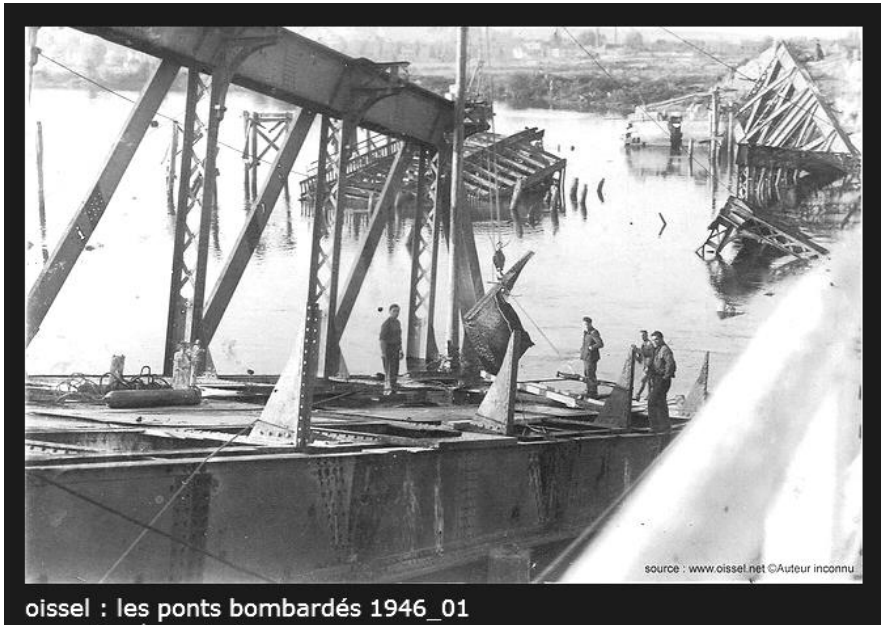
The bombardier/navigator had the best seat in the house. It is like riding in the front seat of a glass roller coaster. Exhilarating!! But sometimes fatal.



But on May 8, 1944, their luck ran out! While the Oissel Railroad Bridges were destroyed ...

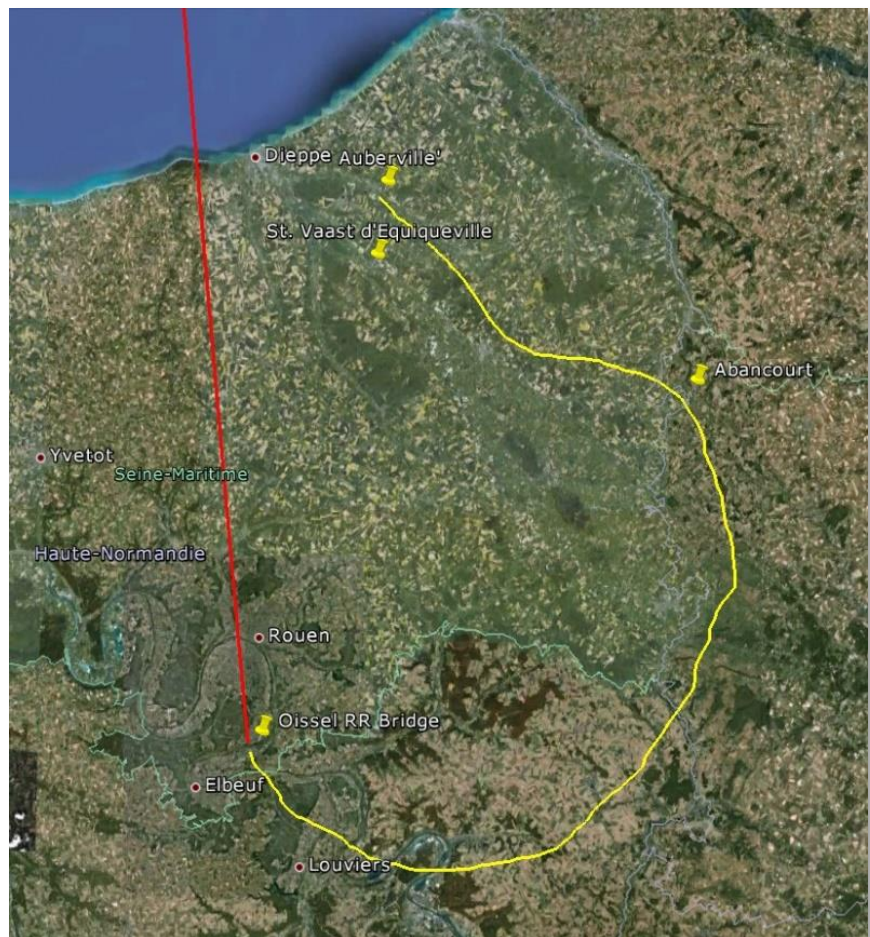


CHAPTER 9 – GEORGE



... the mission had a steep cost.

On their final approach to the targeted Railroad Bridges at Oissel, France, the mission came under very heavy anti-aircraft ground fire and George's plane was hit by flak. With both engines smoking they peeled out of formation and ran for the English Channel and safety. They began their retreat with a long turn to the east and then north. By the time Aircraft 96-143 had reached Abancourt, France, it could no longer maintain altitude and was seen by escort fighters heading 270° - due west – still trying to make the Normandy coast. Protected by the escorting fighters, the order was given by pilot Elmer Freeman to bail out and the crew landed in the woods near St. Vaast d'Equiqueville, France, just seven miles short of Dieppe and the coast. The plane crashed very near the village of Auberville'.



CHAPTER 9 – GEORGE

Over the next few days as B-26 crews and their fighter pilot escorts debriefed, more details were reported. Aircraft 96-143 was seen crashing on fire and 100% destroyed - but the crew may have survived.

SECRET (Debriefing)

15 June 1944

596TH BOMBARDMENT SQUADRON (M)

397TH BOMBARDMENT GROUP (M) Station 168, England

Spitfire escort reports six chutes from this aircraft landing in a wooded area.

The following crew members were reported missing in action:

Pilot – Elmer C. Freeman, 2nd Lt. – O-805432

Co-Pilot – Harry E. Walter, 2nd Lt. – O-805539

Bombardier – George A. Hofmann, 2nd Lt. – O-741310

Engineer Gunner – Oscar E. Young, Sgt. – 39852035

Radio Gunner – Henry J. Hoderlik, S/Sgt. – 3276661

Gunner – Marion (NMI) Rose, Sgt. 35623274

Three of the six crew members were able to avoid capture but three were not. The three escapees including Freeman, Young and Hoderlik, were taken by the French Underground Forces and hidden for several months in an attempt to get them back to Allied Forces. Bitterly, on their last leg home, a double agent turned them into the Gestapo. With no military identification they were sent to Buchenwald Concentration Camp as spies.¹⁰

George also momentarily escaped into the woods but was forced to return to his parachute to retrieve his dog tags, his only military identification. Without those he could be labeled a spy and could be executed on the spot. That delay cost him his freedom and he was captured by three armed German soldiers.

While I have not yet found the original German newspaper source, the following photograph from the archives of the United States Air Force Academy in Colorado, shows the moment of capture of an airman near his Irvin parachute. I believe it is a photograph of 2nd Lt. George A Hofmann at the beginning of his nightmare. I am certain that is his face and it is exactly the way my father described the moment to my brother and I, at one of the very few times he ever talked about the War.



German POW Photo Home recovering in 1947

¹⁰ A documentary film, "The Lost Airmen of Buchenwald", produced by pilot 'Easy' Freeman's grandson, Mike Dorsey, aired in 2011 featuring conversations with the pilot and some of the crew.

CHAPTER 9 – GEORGE

The Longest Mission - Missions that end in capture and POW status are often referred to as, “The Longest Mission”. Unlike daily sorties that began before dawn and ended when the crews returned later that same day, The Longest Missions began before dawn and proceeded with an uncertain length, uncertain sequence of events and an uncertain ending. For George, he would face one year of uncertainties before being liberated and coming home. While one year might not seem that bad, unrelenting abuse and anxiety for that long permanently scars your life.

Having your aircraft blown up from under you, partial deployment of your parachute causing permanent physical injuries that would remain untreated, and staring down the barrels of loaded rifles were only the beginning. With his fellow captives, he was:

- paraded unprotected through Frankfurt in Germany where hostile citizen cursed, struck and spit on them,
- put in solitary confinement with no windows or food for more than one week at Dulag Luft, the main interrogation center for Allied Airmen POWs at Oberursel near Frankfurt,

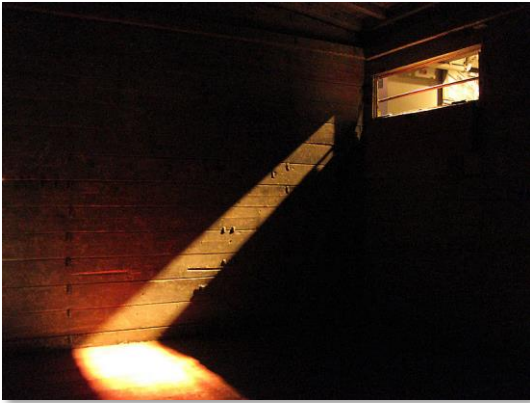


Solitary confinement cell at Dulag Luft

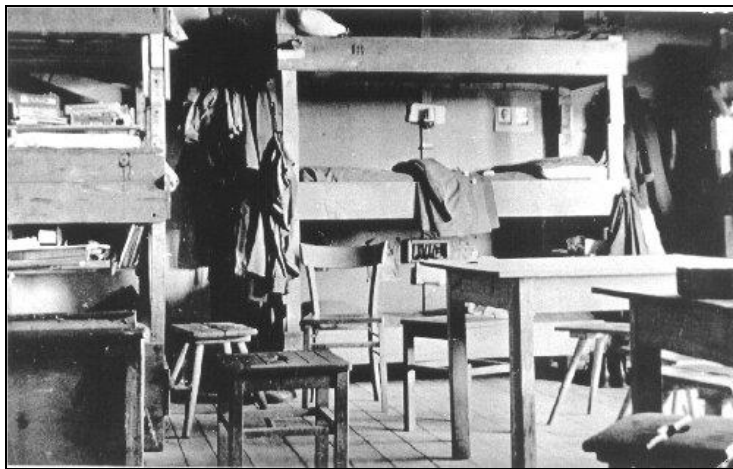


CHAPTER 9 – GEORGE

- crammed in forty-and-eight cattle cars and transported without relief, food or water, across the German countryside to prison camp Stalag Luft III in Sagan, Poland,



- housed in crowded, barren, partially heated barracks,



- fed poorly and sometimes not at all for extended periods. (These clandestine photos show the staples in the German ration for one man, one week – black bread, a few vegetables and “soup”. Shown is the meat which sometimes went into the once-a-day soup issue. It was usually the carcass or head of an old ox or horse from which all the useful meat had been gleaned),
- fighting dysentery and other communicable diseases in unsanitary conditions – no hot water, showers or toilets



In spite of it all, the prisoners watched out for one another and collectively kept their spirits high with whatever sports, arts and music they could muster, religious ceremonies and sporadic but great support from the Red Cross. Perhaps the best medicine was the ability to write and receive letters from home – albeit, censored and unpredictable.

CHAPTER 9 – GEORGE

Hazel began writing immediately when his POW status was confirmed and she was given an address. Their letters to each other went unanswered and, in fact, undelivered for many months, but once the system began to work, forty-four letters in all were exchanged.

George began writing as a POW at the end of May. As of this date of this twelfth letter on July 29th he had still not heard from home. In his own handwriting, the contents of this letter tell the entire story:

My Dearest Hazel - July 29, 1944

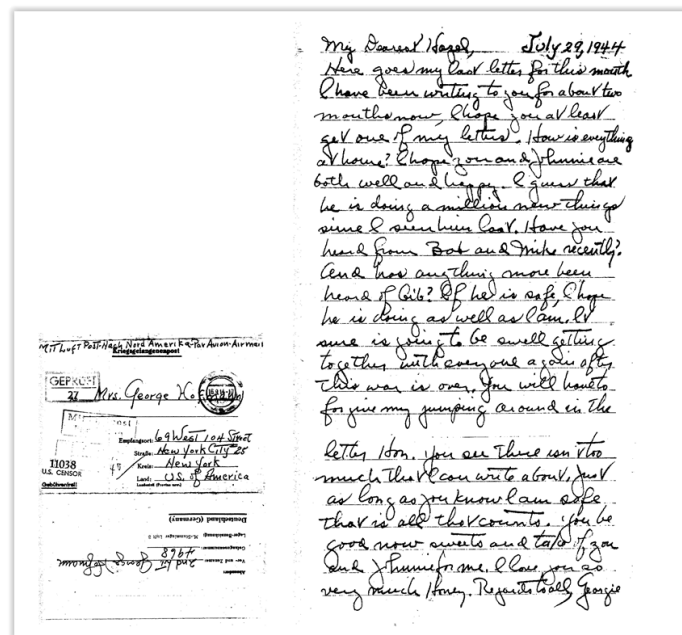
Here goes my last letter for this month. I have been writing to you for about two-months now, I hope you at least get one of my letters.

How is everything at home? I hope you and Johnnie are both well and happy. I guess he is doing a million new things since I seen him last.

Have you heard from Bob [Swayze] and Mike [Iriarte] recently? And has anything more been heard from Gib [Rauh]? If he is safe, I hope he is as well as I am. It sure is going to be swell getting together with everyone again after this war is over.

You will have to forgive my jumping around in this letter, Hon. You see, there isn't too much that I can write about. Just as long as you know I am safe that is all that counts.

You be good now sweets and ta/c of you and Johnnie for me. I love you so very much, Honey. Regards totally, George



Thirty-two additional letters were exchanged and the theme remained the same. On September 10th, he again asked about Gibby and still had not received letters from home. On September 29th he turned twenty-six – still no mail. Finally, on October 15th, the avalanche of backed up letters began to arrive. He must have read them dozens of times. By November, photographs arrived as did the tears of joy to hear and see something from home.

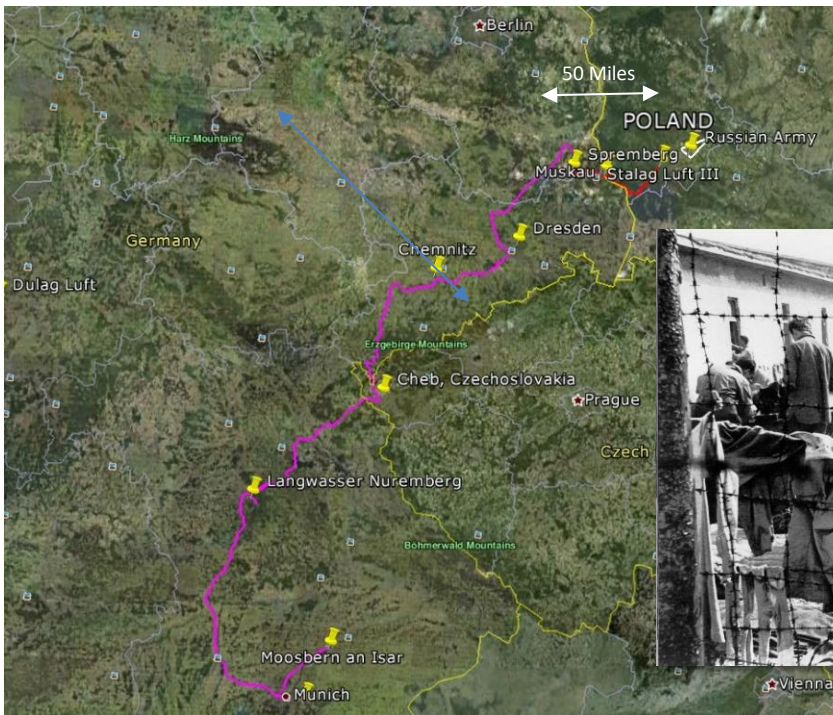
CHAPTER 9 – GEORGE

December 1944, the month of miracles, did not disappoint. Packages mailed six months before, arrived along with a bundle of eighteen letters. It provided momentary respite from the misery of being alone, far from home, in a hostile environment, at Christmas. It probably saved his sanity, if not his life itself.

Then in January of the New Year, the letters home to family stopped coming!

The European Death March – By January, the Russian Army was closing in on the eastern front. Prison Camps and other German installations in Poland were at risk. It was clear to the Third Reich they would lose the war and to secure more favorable surrender terms, Hitler ordered the evacuation of all Stalag Luft POW Camps to his headquarters location at Berchtesgaden in the Bavarian Alps. He would offer the lives of tens-of-thousands of Allied Airmen in exchange for his terms. If his terms were not accepted, he would give the order to the SS to have them all killed.

On a moment's notice, Stalag Luft III and other camps across German occupied territory were ordered to evacuate. In Sagan, prisoners had less than one hour to grab everything they could carry and head out into the worst blizzard of the century. They would march for weeks and again be packed into forty-and-eight cattle car for seemingly endless hours. Four-hundred miles later, those who had not died or been shot along the way arrived at prison camps Stalag XIID at Nuremburg then on to Stalag VIIA at Moosberg in southern Germany. There, 280,000 prisoners would be packed into camps designed to hold 40,000. Conditions were worse than they had ever been.



CHAPTER 9 – GEORGE

It all came to chaotic by mercifully quick end on April 29, 1945. General Patton bashed the gates in at Moosberg without a shot being fired proclaiming, "I am going to kill the bastards that did this." The next day, Adolf Hitler and Eva Braun committed suicide. It was over in Europe. But it was far from over for the POWs.

Now the old adage learned in boot camp came home to roost once again as hundreds of thousands of POWs and soldiers needed to go home or be reassigned to the Pacific theater – "hurry up and wait" was the order of the day. For those being redeployed, delay was a good thing. For the POW's, it was maddening.

Going Home – The logistics were horrendous. Due to limited transport capacity, a point system was implemented to identify those most worthy of being first. George won the lottery and was one of the first. He would wait for days near an airfield for transportation to one of the "Cigarette Camps" in northern France where he would be clothed, fed, medically treated and debriefed several times. This again would last weeks but now they were being treated well.



George's third stop was le Havre, France, where on May 16th he boarded the SS John Ericsson. On May 30, 1945, he was back in the United States.

While this may seem like a joyous occasion, many of the returnees were in bad physical, mental and emotional shape. The process for being discharged was well-oiled by mid-1945 and typically repatriated soldiers were back in civilian life in one to two weeks. For many, however, there would be long periods of hospitalization, convalescence and counselling to deal with the horrors burned into their souls and the shock of coming home to a world quite different from the one they had left.

George was finally discharged on December 1, 1945, six grueling months of rehabilitation later. His medical records are depressing to read. No words could ever describe it - his face tells the whole story

The photo at the right was taken in early June just a few days after arriving home. His questions were finally answered – he now knew he was alone.

