**Not Without Honor**

The Nazi POW War Journal of Steve Carano

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On a cold December day in 1943, Claudio “Steve” Carano’s B-17 bomber (Mission Belle) was shot down on the return flight to England. During his confinement, in Stalag XVII B, he filled his war journal with meticulously penned details of his last flight and POW experience.

**December 1, 1943**

We were awakened that morning at 4:30 a.m., and of all the briefings we had, this was the first morning we had powered, rather than fresh eggs for breakfast. The boys all went out to the ship to get their guns cleaned and ready for the trip, and I, being the “radio operator,” went to the briefing room with the officers. I learned for the first time at the briefing that Henslin my pilot, was grounded and in the hospital, so naturally I thought I wouldn’t be flying that day. There was some confusion, as I was scheduled to fly as a spare radio operator, my name appeared on the board to fly with Malone and he, too was grounded. Finally, they changed it again, and I was to fly with Flight Officer Sunde. Although I didn’t know him, after a few words with him, I found him to be one of the finest men I’d met in the Army. We went out to the ship “097” (Mission Belle) together, where he introduced me to the crew. I didn’t know any of these boys, as they were a new crew like ours. By takeoff time, McCutchen and I were well acquainted, and I had some trouble with my gun, and he helped me get it ready for takeoff.

Takeoff was at 7:30 a.m. We assembled over England and after a while the group left the coast of England. Half way over the channel we thought we would have to abort. We couldn’t get the flaps up. Josephson (“Joe”) finally got them up with the hand crank, so we continued on with the others. We encountered our first flak over the Friesen Islands (in the North Sea).

When someone shouted over the interphone “flak” at three o’clock, it was nothing to be alarmed about, as by this time, the danger of “flak” meant nothing at all to us. It just seemed part of the sky that just had to be there. However automatically, we put on our flak suits. I could see through the Radio Room door that the others were doing as I was. The flak that did come up was very little, and very inaccurate. This made me feel a lot more comfortable. It sort of took away the expectant feeling I had, since the moment I was told I would fly the mission as a spare radio operator on a strange crew.

In a short order we had a little excitement. “Fighters” came the word over the interphone, and several of them made a few passes at our formation, but from a distance. It gave the gunman a chance to try a few pot shots at them. By this time, we were well into enemy territory, and the going became a little rougher, as all eyes were staining to see some German fighter come in at us. There were several that flew far below the formation, dancing in and out of the clouds. Up to this time things were going fine, and it looked to us like this was going to be a ”milk run,” as all easy missions were so-called by combat crews. It was a short time, after this feeling of safety, that we turned on our I.P. (Initial Point) and though we never felt the shock on lift of the ship, as it hit, number three engine was hit by flak. To the astonishment of the crew, Sunde yelled the order, “Prepare to bail out!”

In a few seconds, we didn’t quite grasp the meaning of those words. Joe (Josephson) was the first to act, being nearest to the waste door. By the time myself and the others were rid of our flak suits, he had the door out, and in a kneeling position, waited for the order to go. In removing my flak suit, I was lucky enough not to tear the wire loop from my headset. So I heard the order. “Back to stations, we’ll try to make it back to England.”

I yelled over the interphone for anyone to hear, to “Stop Joe,” stop him before he falls out. But in the excitement, I wasn’t heard. Culver, who also wore one interphone, evidently heard the same order and yanked him back, just as he was about to fall out from the lack of oxygen. Culver had him back on oxygen and in a few moments he was all right, and back at his gun. In the meantime, Culver went back to the tail end, after some trouble with him, managed to get Johnnie back on oxygen. Johnnie was almost out and insisted on putting the mask on himself and couldn’t

In coming out of the ball-turret, McCutchen, while trying to get his parachute on, passed out from lack of oxygen. I put his mask on him again, and in a few moments, he was all right. By this time, we had flown away from the formation losing attitude, when three German fighters attacked us. All except McCutchen were already back at our guns.

In the chase that followed Sunde flew that B-17 in such a way as to make any pursuit pilot turn green with envy. We were thrown around in the ship like a pair of dice would be in a glass. One of the Huns in first pass got Joe pretty bad on the left waste gun; a 20 m.m. shattered the gun and Joe’s arm and hand, like so many match sticks, rendering both helpless. At about the same time, Sunde dove the ship straight for the cover of clouds. I might add, at this point in my story, that safe comfortable feeling I had a short while ago, was now gone.

Under cover of cloud we had a short breathing spell, and we needed it. The inside of the ship looked as though a cyclone had hit it, parachute bags were strewn about everywhere, ammunition boxes and belts were all over the ship, and the odor of burnt powder and flesh prevailed in every corner of the ship, and it was sickening. It was during this breathless spell that I prayed. It seemed I said a thousand prayers over and over again.

Calling to Sunde, as I would my own pilot Lieutenant Henslin, I asked, “How we doin’ boss? We going to make it?”

“Sure,” was the reply. “With a little luck.”

With this assurance, I went back to the waist to see if there was anything that could be done. Seeing that both Josephson and McCutchen were badly hit, I started to wipe Mac’s face free of the blood that was trickling down, but he shook me off saying he was all right. So, turning to Joe, and using my lady leg knife (a folding pocket knife with a sheath shaped like a women’s leg) that I always carried with me, started to hack away the sleeve of Joe’s left arm. After what seem like hours, I had him patched up neatly (like a pillow tied with a piece of string), but under the circumstances it was the best I could do.

About this time, the enveloping clouds that were hiding us gave out, and above the thundering noise and vibration that seemed to break our eardrums, we heard a peculiar sound. It sounded like a child running a stick along a corrugated building. It was strange to me, as this was the first experience we had of flak hitting the ship. We all were huddled together in the waist when this started. Upon looking out the window to my surprise, I saw that we were flying about five thousand feet above a city.

Sunde called and told us it was probably the City of Cologne and we were going to “hit the deck.” Those gunners were now shooting at us pretty good. It seemed they never missed a shot, as holes appeared in all parts of the ship, like spots before a drunkard’s eyes. As we left the outskirts of the city, it seemed that only a miracle kept the ship in the air. The co-pilot, Sweeney, who also was flying this trip as a spare, came back to the waist to see how things were going, If I could put into writing the expression on his face as he stared into the waist from the radio room door, my story could end right here. What he saw was a B-17 generally in tip top order and spic and span, turned into a horrible confusion of blood, and debris. Everyone in the waste had been hit by flak over Cologne.

McCutchen, who had been hit before, was even worse now, but he still insisted he was “all right”. We called to Johnnie in the tail and the first thing we heard was a stream of curse words. We asked him if he was hit and did he need any help, but he said he was just nicked in the leg, and it was nothing, then he went on with his cursing. I had some cigarettes and lit one for Joe, Mac, and myself. We were all hit bad, but the feelings amongst us were high as several times we called up to both pilot and navigator, “Boys, we gonna make it? Where are we Chris (Roger Christensen)?” We’ll be over Holland in a few minutes.” Looking out the window we were flying so low, it seemed we braced ourselves a thousand times for the crash that didn’t come.

We were spurred into action again as Chris (Christensen), I believe it was, shouted over the intercom, “Fighters!” Seeing that Joe could not handle his gun, I started to charge it. I tugged and tugged at the damn charging handle, I even put my foot up to it, but the damned thing wouldn’t budge. In the excitement of the second danger of fighters, I had completely forgotten Joe’s gun had been smashed.

As I darted to my own gun in the radio room, I saw McCutchen on the right waist gun blazing away at a fighter coming at us at 5 o’clock. Gong to the radio room, I found I couldn’t use my left foot properly. It felt as though it was broken at the ankle. When I did get to my gun, I was mad as hell, as the fighters were attacking us from the sides and front, and my gun had only a small area about, and to the rear, in which I could fire. These fighters must have known after the first few passes, that most of our guns were out, as they came to within 25 to 50 feet away from us before they would pull away.

I saw the plane go down in smoke at about 5 o’clock, and thought it was either Hap in the top turret or Johnnie in the tail that got him. But after looking back at the tail I knew immediately that it must have been Hap that got the fighter. All that was left of the tail was a skeleton of shreds. Johnnie must surely have been dead. I don’t even try to recall how long this attack lasted, but presently the fighter that did remain ran out of gas or were called back, for they left us.

Here again we had another breather. I have tried to describe what the inside of the ship looked like before the last attack. It would be impossible to describe it now, with photographs. From here on out, we thought it best to stay in our positions. Sweeney called and asked how we were. We told him that the only gun in the rear in working order was my radio room gun, and that isn’t of very much use when attacked from the front, or sides of the ship. We had no chance to check on Johnnie in the tail, but from the condition of the tail, as I’ve said before he must surely have been dead.

We were flying so low this time, on several occasions we passed houses and windmills where we could actually see clear through the windows in the front and rear of them. Once we passed over some kind of field, or infantry camp, and a German guard on its outskirts was shooting at us with his rifle. Luckily, no one was hit by him.

At this time, we learned that Sunde was hit pretty bad in the last attack, and although Sweeny, the Co-Pilot, took over the controls, Sunde, though wounded badly from a 20 M.M. that exploded at his side, still managed to help Sweeney fly the ship. We were now in bad shape but miraculously still flying. Almost all of the control cables were shot away and strewn all over the waist, (the) number three engine was still windmilling, threatening to shake the right wing loose. Number one engine was leaking gas, yet Sunde still said over the interphone. “We’ll make it.”

I asked Chris (Christensen) once again, where we were at. He replied, “About five minutes from the coast.” When we heard that, we surely thought we would make it.

Then the dirty bastard attacked us again. And they must have been told we evidently had no guns in use, as they threw all caution to the winds, coming in very close for the kill. It was during this last attack that thoughts raced through my mind such as in the next few minutes, there would be ten dead men who almost made it back to England.

I prayed, with my eyes straining to catch one of them within range of my gun, yet praying hard and fast as though I wouldn’t have time to finish. Suddenly I felt a hot stinging feeling in my right foot. The panel door to the bomb-bay splinted behind me. Then I saw the cause for it, the ME-109 came up as if out of the ground at our tail. It seemed so close, I thought it would ram us. I can’t explain what it was that spurred me I felt as though I couldn’t move a muscle. Squeezing the trigger, I saw pieces of his plane tear loose.

Suddenly my gun stopped firing, why I didn’t know, until I looked down and saw my hand and the handle of the gun had been smashed. By this time the 109 Messerschmit had disappeared. All this, which though it may sound like hours, must actually have taken place in a few seconds. Scared—scared wasn’t the right word for it—petrified shitless would be more appropriate. After what seemed like ages I started for a belt of ammunition lying across the ball-turret. As I bent down to pick it up, the ship lurched upwards pinning me to the floor. It was then my left hand was hit and a bullet hole tore through the rest of my heavy flying suit. While trying to get the ammunition belt into the gun, the crash came.

There was no warning, no expecting it, no nothing, just an impact that pinned me to the bulkhead, a terrible loud noise, two lurches, then silence. The water was about knee-high before I realized that we had crashed. Strangely enough at this instant, I was no longer scared or in a hurry. It just seemed as though I had been expecting it and this was the end of the line. Starting out the escape hatch of the radio room, I had a glimpse of the waist. It was half-full of water, and down inside the ball turret I saw Joe. I couldn’t see his body, just his side of the ship and with every ounce of strength I had, I gave a final heave.

It could only have been the “will of God,” that I should live. Upon reaching the surface I thought my lungs would break with all the air and water I sucked in. It took me a few seconds before I could think clearly. About fifteen feet away I could see several of the others in the dinghy. I called for help, but it was just a whisper. I don’t recall exactly how I made it to the raft. One moment I would be up, the next under. It must have been the tide and what little swimming I could manage with all my flying clothes on, including the fur lined boots. Chris (Christensen) and Joe grabbed me by the collar, then “Chris” put his arm around my neck and held my head above the water. Joe was in the raft, paddling, and every time he’d lean forward, his knee, which was on the edge of the raft, would press down on my head. I was too far gone to even tell him to stop.

Two Dutchmen came out in a rowboat and I could hear Chris (Christensen) yelling for them to get me in quickly. Lying on the floor of the boat, I had my first chance to really think, though I couldn’t move even a finger. My mind was surprisingly clear. I said a prayer and thanked God for sparing me. As we neared the shore there were hundreds of people lined along the dike. Someone brought a ladder which served as a stretcher to carry me to the house. Four of the others were already there lying on the floor, where the Dutch had spread hay.

At first no one could speak. Cold and hurt as we were, everyone had the same thought in mind. Here were only five of us in the room, yet there were ten in the ship when it hit the water. Joe and Sweeney were brought to the room that we were in, accompanied by a German guard. This was our first view of a German soldier. And what a rough looking character: he seemed to us like a comic strip character in a movie. It was Joe who told us that we seven were the only ones to get out of the ship. Sunde, McCutchen and Healy did not. Three of the nicest, bravest men I have had the occasion to meet, and fight in combat, were dead. Seven men in a single room and dozens of Dutch people trying to crowd in, every one of them eager to help. Some brought food, drinks of all kinds, and dry underwear.

When they finally brought a civilian doctor, he did the best he could to stop the bleeding of six men who were just pouring blood. All he had with him was bandages and powder. Joe never did get any bandages as there were none left. A Dutch woman gave him a towel to wipe the blood. After a few minutes the towel looked like a piece of red flannel underwear. He and Sweeney were the lucky ones that day, they both had a suit of Dutch clothes to wear. (If their wives ever saw them, in those zoot suits, they’d divorce them.) We laughed and mimicked the Germans so much about these suits the Dutch honestly thought we were mad.

There was one person in Holland we will never forget. He could speak very good English. He made the mistake of asking if any of us would like a cup of coffee. Anyone that knows me well knows that this was a mistake. I believe that day I came closer to drowning from coffee than I did in the water. It was so cold, for a while we thought we lived the last few hours only to freeze to death on this straw-covered floor.

Towards evening an ambulance arrived to take us to a hospital. That ride in itself was an ordeal. Hap had a 20 MM hole in his ankle and it was hanging limp over the stretcher. The dirty German bastard who was driving never missed a bump. Although we asked him several times to slow down he never paid any attention to us, instead he drove faster. He seemed to enjoy hurting us. We arrived about one hour later at St. Mary’s hospital in Khoda, Holland, which was under the supervision of nuns who were very quick, efficient, and pleasant with us. It was at this hospital that we received our first good medical treatment, after patching us up good and proper with yards and yards of paper bandages, we were placed in prison ward, two in a room. Tully (O.D.) and I were together. He had some flak in his back and spent a terrible night with it.

The following morning, December 2, we were moved to the Luftwaffe Hospital in Holland. This hospital was used for German airman, being the biggest and best in Holland. The trip to Amsterdam was just a reciprocal of the day before. On our way we passed through “Chips,” Hollands “La Guardia field.” It didn’t take a second look to see that our boys had visited “Chips” frequently. Debris was scattered everywhere. When we arrived at the lazarette we were immediately attended to. Casts, stiches, bandages, etc.

The doctors and nurses were German; though they were very good at their work they still regarded us as enemies and showed. It. Two of the nurses were swell with us. The others, well, they were Germans. One of these had a husband who was a prisoner of war in the States. We’d get her mad as hell saying when the war ends he won’t want to leave the U.S., and she would have to go to him, rather than vice versa. The other one, Charlotte, was the doctor’s right hand chick who attended all our bandaging. Maybe it was because they were the only pretty things around us that we thought they were swell to us; at any rate, we did think so.

“Rufus,” as we so nicknamed Bernard Van Haben (sounds like a German diplomat) was our room orderly. Between the three of them trying to learn to speak English, and we trying the opposite, you can imagine what went on in the single room. They would try to prove to us that we were "Luftgangsters” and we men there proved the contrary. In fact, after a few weeks that we were there, Ottie was ready to pack her bag and leave for the good old U.S.A.

I believe the German people are a very foolish race. Half of them don’t know what they are fighting for; the other half are the Nazi fanatics that should be exterminated. Why, they were astounded to hear of the luxuries that existed in the United States even during the wartime. These included high ranking officers as well as the privates and civilians. For instance, the food. We complained so about the quality and minimum amount we were served. They stood opened mouthed in awe at the tales we told them of our American dinner (slightly exaggerated). While in the hospital this was our daily menu: Breakfast: two slices of “brot,” a German substitute for bread, made of wood pulp. Dinner, this was a feast. “Kartoffeln mit fleisch”—boiled spuds and horsemeat. Twice a week they would add about eight pounds of cabbage to it, red cabbage at that. Supper was a treat, two slices of “brot mit baloney” und kaffee. This “kaffe” was some liquid concoction they called coffee.

A week before Christmas, we received our English prisoner of war parcel and one more on Christmas Eve. The Germans, who had been drooling at the mouth at this time, almost went nuts when Hap piled the contents of his two parcels beside him, the way a grocer displays his merchandise in the window. He was politely asked to put it back in the boxes. “Rufus,” who was to leave New Year’s Day for a sixteen-day furlough with his family in Munster, couldn’t resist asking us for a package of tea to take home to his wife, who loved a cup of tea and hadn’t any in the past five years. Each of us offered him a package. When he saw how little we valued this great luxury, tears came into his eyes. He never again called us “Luft gangsters.” We later learned tea in the German black market was valued at one hundred dollars a pound.

**December 31, 1943**

On New Year’s Eve, we were moved to Dulag Luft, a German interrogation center. (This is probably the center at Wetzler, Germany.) The dirty bastards stole all our flying clothes. We told them they came to the hospital with us on the top of the ambulance. They said we never had any with us. We were given a pair of Dutch civilian pants and underwear apiece. And with this excess amount of clothing we left the hospital walking barefoot in snow. After being in a warm room for one month, I don’t have to mention how cold we were.

They drove us to the station in Amsterdam by ambulance, where we boarded a hospital (train) car (with no heat) in which we had to ride all day, with other Americans that we picked up along the way, to Dulag Luft.

This trip to Germany was something we will never forget. Going through Holland was a pretty sight, beautiful homes, windmills, dikes, etc. You’d never know there was a war going on all around it. The scars of war were evident from the moment we crossed the German border. Here we saw what we never could see from the air. Some folks will never know what a bombed city looks like, and I hope our folks in the U.S. never do, not even in pictures.

We have seen bombed cities, many of them on our trip through Germany, proper. Cologne and Dusseldorf are only two of the larger cities, not to mention dozens of smaller cities and towns that were completely destroyed. We lay over in Cologne for a few hours. Here was a city leveled to debris and ashes. The Cathedral of Cologne, which stood about fifty yards from the station, was a pitiful sight, once a proud beautiful building, where once hundreds of people went to worship, was now just another torn victim of Allied bombing.

People stared as us some with contempt, others with pity, all of them wondering why we were here. As I’ve said before, the German propaganda machine, which in reality is even more powerful that Adolf Hitler, branded us “Luft Gangsters” so these poor simple-minded people stared, or thought they were staring at “Luft Gangsters” who flew all the way from Chicago to Germany just to bomb their homes. Not one of them knew what a gangster was.

We arrived at Stalag XVII B on the morning of January eight. The camp was three miles from Krems in Austria, and all those who were wounded and couldn’t walk were taken by truck, including myself.

Before mingling with the other American prisoners, we were deloused. This included having all our hair cut off, and our clothing placed in cyanide ovens for six hours. While waiting for our clothes to come, we almost froze as we stood in the nude in a concrete room which had no heat at all.

**Note:** Lt. Roger Christensen and his fellow officers were sent to Stalag I at Barth, Germany where they spent 22 months

The rest of Steve Carano’s book described his experience as a POW