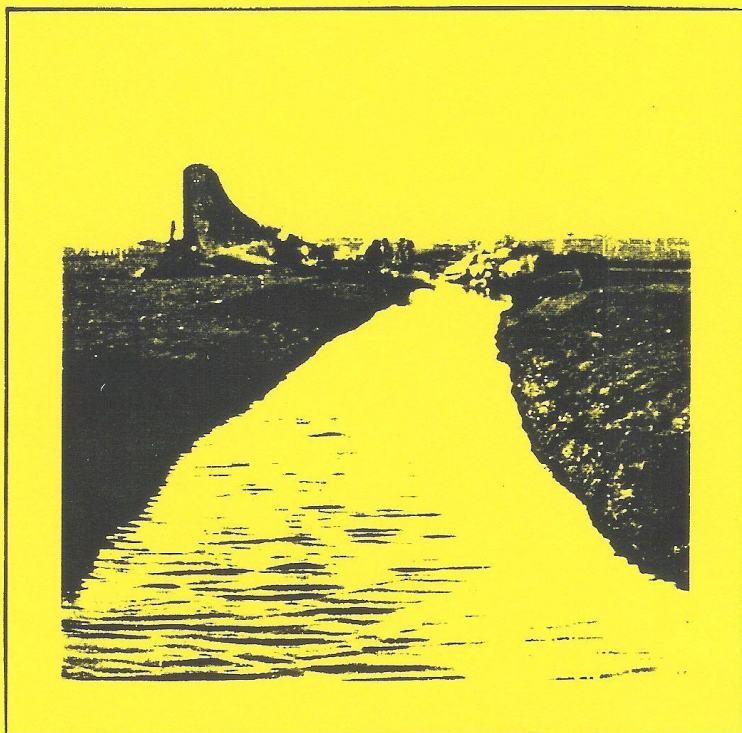


Second, revised edition, May 1996

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FEBRUARY 4, 1944:

## AN AIRCRAFT HAS LANDED AT THE TIENDWEG

Part 1:  
Ary Verwaal and Wen J.C.Boon  
Part 2:  
Ary Verwaal.

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Dedicated to the crew of A/C 42-31292 B-17G "Dolly"  
and all the men of the 390th Bomb Group (H), at station  
153, Framlingham, U.K.

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## PART 1.

### PREFACE.

After the German occupation had been finished, finds from the war could be produced without any risk. Then Ary Verwaal got the bomberjacket, that one of the crew-members of a crashed American B-17 had given to Ary's father in February 1944, as a reward for the help he had rendered.

Something special to put on and walk around in it during the cold winter-months, and by all means for a boy, who had always been very much interested in everything that had to do with aviation.

When the years passed by, Ary began to think more and more of giving the jacket back to the original owner.

Unfortunately the many efforts to find the owner were in vain.

In September 1991 the Lekkerkerk Fire-brigade Association "Prepared by Practice" celebrated its fiftieth anniversary. On behalf of members and supporters a commemoration-booklet was issued in which among others you could read descriptions of a number of fires in the past fifty years.

In this connection there was also the story about extinguishing a fire in a burning bomber that had come down at Lekkerkerk and about the problems that had resulted from that.

Ary Verwaal, being a former Lekkerkerker, got to see the fire-brigade booklet and read the story about "his bomber", the aircraft that had occupied his mind for so many years.

This led to a contact with the author of the booklet, Wen Boon. A renewed contact since the joint trainings-college years at the town of Schoonhoven and the first years after that period. Besides bringing back the good memories of the "years-gone-by" and the separated ways thereafter, the coming together produced something more; the decision to try together to get an image as complete as possible of the events of February 1944.

In a sort of allocation of tasks, Ary would look for the backgrounds of the unexpected visitors, who lay down in the Lekkerkerk polder in February 1944. Wen would concentrate on what there was still alive in memories of that event in Lekkerkerk.

The investigations regularly produced information, which was sometimes of a surprising sort. So much, that it seemed a good idea to publish the results. The editorship of "Historic Encyclopedia Krimpenerwaard" were willing to reserve an issue for this.

Both wrote a number of chapters concerning their investigations, showed each other their copies and that which was effected by mutual approval is now before you.

We thank everybody who, by telling their memories, showing their finds, helping to find illustrations, made it possible for us to pass on the story of the crashed bomber, the adventures of the crew-members and the experiences of inhabitants of Lekkerkerk. Last but not least we thank the editorship of the "Historic Encyclopedia Krimpenerwaard" who gave us full scope in writing the booklet.

September 1994. Ary Verwaal and Wen J.C.Boon

## CHAPTER 1.

### FROM FRAMLINGHAM TO LEKKERKERK.

Framlingham, 1944. Life of the inhabitants of this nice, old little town in the English county of Suffolk in S.E.-England had been drastically changed by the second worldwar.

In the first years of the war people witnessed the Battle of Britain and the German bombers flying over by day and by night.

The rationing of the daily necessities of life, the frequent air-raid alarms and especially the departure of almost all young men to the different armed forces put a heavy weight on the inhabitants. Then, in January 1942, the Air Ministry requisitioned a vast area of farmland at Parham, near Framlingham, for what was planned to be an RAF airfield.

On completion in 1943, it was allocated to the USAAF. After that, one after another Boeing 17, nicknamed "Flying Fortress", landed, a heavily armed, four-engine longdistance bomber, flown over directly from the United States. A B-17 had a crew of ten and to keep the aircraft ready for action, you needed at least another ten people, so that Framlingham air-base soon was populated by hundreds of American airmen. All this must have been an uncommon experience for the inhabitants of the quiet town that it once was. Not only tens of big four-engined aircraft roared over the little town every day, but the look of the streets changed drastically as well.

That was dominated now by groups of Americans, dressed in smart uniforms, enjoying a couple of hours leave.

In strictly rationed England they didn't seem to lack anything. Compared to their own "boys" the Americans were paid better, fed better and dressed better. Many "Yanks" generously shared their apparently inexhaustible stock of cigarettes, chewing-gum and chocolate with the inhabitants, for the English then already an unprecedented luxury. This generosity, together with their American accent and their, to English standards, jovial manners, will have raised many a brow, but one must say, generally the "Yanks" were treated kindly. Anyway, they came as rescuers from distress....

The same situation could be found in many villages and towns in East-Anglia, S.E.England.

Between 1942 and 1945 the Americans had 122 airbases in that area, on which, besides fighter-planes, about 4000 B-17 "Flying Fortresses" were stationed. East-Anglia, flat and rolling farm-country, hence was sometimes called "the green aircraft-carrier".

Framlingham was going to be the base of 390th bomb-group, the "Square J", called after the big J which was painted in a rectangle on the tails of the B-17's. On December 1st 1943 a brand-new B-17 landed at Framlingham, freshly from the United States. One of the crew-members was 25-year-old Herman Alesiani, born in Monessen, a steelworks-city near Pittsburg in Pennsylvania. Herman's parents were emigrants from Sicily, Italy, who managed to build up a new and good living.

After elementary school Herman got a technical education. In spite of the recession of the thirties, Herman succeeded in getting work, among others as a bricklayer and as an assistant in a grocery-shop. When in December 1941 the United States were going to take part in the war, it didn't take Herman long to volunteer for the Air Force. Volunteering was a normal thing to do in the United States, as there was no

Conscription. Herman thought, that he should do something for the country, that had taken in his parents and that had been good to himself.

Both his brothers took actively part in the war as well, one in the commercial navy, one as a marine.

His mother worried for years about her sons, but the three of them survived the war. Herman joined the Air Force, because he wanted to be a pilot. During his training there was a moment, that he failed one of the strict selection-procedures and in many of those cases the candidate was automatically trained as a member of the crew of a bomber. For Herman it was going to be a B-17. To understand Herman's future experiences on board of his B-17 better, first some information on this aircraft.

The B-17 was meant to be an answer to the massacre that the German anti-aircraftguns FLAK (Flieger Abwehr Kanone) and the fighter-planes caused among the Allied bombers. The B-17 could fly higher than the British Lancaster bomber. An altitude of almost 9 kilometers was no exception. Yet at that altitude as well the newest FLAK-guns sometimes succeeded in hitting their target.

Flying at high altitudes, with temperatures of 40o C. below zero, the crew wore electrically heated flying-suits, flying-jackets with sheepskin on the inside and electrically heated boots and gloves. Besides that they breathed via oxygen-masks because of the thin air.

At the end of 1943 the Allied Forces had fighter-planes at their disposal, e.g. the P-51 Mustang, that were able to accompany the bombers as far as their target, sometimes far into Germany. This meant a turning-point for the Allied Air-Force, as the air-war over Germany had almost been disastrous for them up to that moment. Before that time, the escorting fighter-planes had already to fly back to base over Holland or Belgium, because their fuel-supplies were not sufficient.

Then the bombers were thrown on their own resources and were often an easy prey for German fighter-planes.

That's why the B-17 was equipped with 10 to 13 (depending on the type) .50 Browning machine-guns, with which the crew was able to protect the aircraft in any direction.

Hence the nickname: "Flying Fortress".

For that time it was a huge plane. It had a span of 31,54m. and a length of 22,72m. For an average flight it had 10,000 liters of petrol on board and a maximum bomb-load of 5760 kg. To get this enormous weight airborne, the four engines used 1520 liters of petrol per hour during take-off. From the statement of a German fighter-plane pilot, we know, that this aircraft impressed him and his colleagues very much. When he saw his first formation of B-17s he remarked: "I was rather timid, when I saw them approach. Compared to those four-engine giants we felt pretty tiny".

What was the allocation of tasks like on board of a Flying Fortress?

In the cockpit, just past the front-side of the wing and up in the aircraft, to the left there was the pilot and beside him the co-pilot. The pilot was the commander of the aircraft, but in the field of flying he worked in cooperation with his co-pilot. Before them, a little lower, was the navigator, responsible for the correct flying-course and handling the two machine-guns to the left and right of the nose.

Right in front was the bombardier, who had a free view in frontal direction through the plastic nose. He served the Norden-bombsight, a device to drop the bombs at the right place. As soon as the bomber had arrived at the point, from where the bomb-run was started, (some miles from target) the pilot switched over to the automatic pilot.

The Norden-bombsight was connected to the automatic pilot and the bombardier was able to correct the altitude and the sideways direction of the aircraft with the help of two buttons. The bombardier was responsible for dropping the bombs and in fact, during the bomb-run he took over command from the pilot. As soon as the bombs had been dropped, the pilot himself took control of the aircraft again. Then the bombardier could return to his second task: serving the two machineguns in the nose-turret.

The engineer had his working-spot behind the pilots. He was responsible for the technics on board during the flight: the engines, the fuel-supplysystem, the hydraulic system of the under-carriage, brakes etc. Besides that he served the two machine-guns in the turret on top of the aircraft, just behind the cockpit.

In the radio-room behind the cockpit you could find the radio-operator. During the flight he continuously listened to messages from base or from the squadron-leader. He was the gunner of the machine-gun which protruded from the roof of the radio-room as well.

Half-way the fuselage the two waist-gunners did their jobs. They kept their eyes on the air to the left and to the right of the aircraft and they each served a machine-gun.

Right at the back of the tail of the aircraft was the tail-gunner behind two machine-guns that covered the space behind the B-17.

Finally, folded up in the ball-turret under the belly of the aircraft, lay, half-sitting, the ball-turret gunner, who with his two machine-guns protected the area under the B-17. The turret could turn completely round, so as a matter of fact the gunner could cover the whole area under the aircraft, but in practice it was mostly the area behind and under the tail.

For this function small men were needed. The room in which this gunner had to do his job was so small that he couldn't wear a thick bomberjacket and he had to put his parachute somewhere above his turret on the floor of the aircraft.

As German fighter-pilots liked to steal upon the bombers from below, the ballturret-gunner had a responsible task, which asked for strong concentration and a good shooting-skill. These were two qualities Herman Alesiani possessed and as he was of a small stature, he was trained to be a ball-turretgunner.

After Alesiani had landed at Framlingham on December 1st 1943 he and the other crew-members had to take part in a short training-period. They had to be fitted in into their squadron, they had to get used to the special conditions of the British climate in winter (fog, black ice, snow, heavy clouds) and gain extra experience in formation-flying and in what was expected from each crew-member in his own task. At that time there was a clear allocation of tasks between the British R.A.F. and the American Eighth Force. The British bombed by night and their targets were mainly the big German cities.

By wholesale bombardments they tried to undermine German morale and to create big chaos in the densely populated areas.

The Americans bombed by day. They specialized in precision-bombardments on vital objects for the German war-industry such as oil-refineries, aircraft-plants, railway-junctions etc. An American Air-Force general claimed that they, thanks to the secret Norden-device, were able "to drop a bomb into a barrel of gherkins". By these joint tactics the Allies at any rate didn't give the German defenders a moment's rest any more and they had to be on the alert by day and by night. The effects of these bombardments were often horrible. Complete cities were changed into disconsolate rubbish-heaps and there were thousands of victims. On the

side of the Allies the losses were severe as well. Hundreds of bombers didn't return to base and their crews were killed or ended up in POW-camps. Of the American air-men stationed in England 20,000 were killed and 26,000 were made prisoners of war. Against oppression the Germans went on producing new fighter-planes and they improved their defense-systems.

Besides that they came with a new threat. Everywhere along the coast of N-France, Belgium and Holland ,they built launching-sites from where they harassed London with their new weapon, the V-1, the flying bomb.

So it was not surprising that the first mission of Alesiani's B-17 on December 24th 1943 was aimed at such a rocket-launchingsite at the French side of the Straits of Dover. He remembers that this mission was completed spotlessly. Of course there was a lot of tense, it was really serious now, but he had to be so concentrated on the field of fire from his narrow turret, that there was little time for fear or panic. "Sometimes you had only a few seconds to shoot at the German fighters. Might you be too late by unattentiveness, then that might be fatal for the whole crew", says Alesiani.

Another mission over France, in January 1944, still stands out clearly in his memory. "Suddenly our squadron was attacked by a swarm of German fighters. They were everywhere and our Fortress rocked with the bursts of machine-gunfire my buddies sent to them. I kept my end up as well, for the Germans tried to attack us from behind and below, exactly in my field of fire. With each of my guns I shot my whole supply of 800 shells and I was mad, because I hadn't been able to notice any hit. At any rate, we came home without damage, perhaps because we had taken on so fiercely. I was still mad with myself, but years after that I've often thought, that probably it had been good for myself, that I hadn't made a victim. Who knows, perhaps I would have felt the moral burden up to this moment".

Herman Alesiani made 2 extra bombing-flights as a replacement for missing ball-turret gunners in other B-17s. "Any gunner was capable to handle the machine-guns at any place in the aircraft", Herman says, "except in the ball-turret, because for that position you needed a small built person and so I was for it".

On February 3rd 1944 Alesiani flew his eighth mission. For the other crew-members it was their sixth. It was a long, difficult flight in bad weather, so it took extra attention and concentration. From dawn to dusk the crew were in harness, and when they landed at Framlingham, they were pretty worn-out.

There they got a 48-hour pass, because their B-17 needed regular maintenance. Forty-eight hours rest, they rather liked the idea. The co-pilot, who felt rotten, went to report sick, and the pilot, Clarence Strait, remarked that it gave him 48 hours time to recover.

During the night of February 3rd to February 4th 1944 there was a lot of bustle at Framlingham air-base. Around the lined up B-17s it was a going and coming of gas-wagons, bombtrailers and ammunition-trucks. Under the aircraft and at the engines the ground-crews were busy doing the last check-ups. All of this happened in nearly-darkness, only here and there a flashlight showed a landing-gear or an opened bomb-bay. In their cold, draughty Nissenhuts the crews were fast asleep, unconscious of what happened at the airfield. At three o'clock hasty footsteps could be heard everywhere between the Nissenhuts, figures, hardly visible in the darkness opened doors and switched on lights. In Herman's Nissenhut too the light was switched on and somebody called: "Breakfast at four, briefing at five and take-off at six!" Without opening his eyes, Herman answered that his B-17 was grounded for maintenance and that he had a 48-hour pass. The voice answered: "Today we are mounting a maximum effort and all crews will be flying".

Now we let Herman tell his story:

"I finally opened my eyes, only to see a colonel. Why was such a high rank asked to perform such a lowly duty? Then a rush of adrenalin hit me - This was to be the very first history making daylight bombing of Berlin -!

For a long time there had been rumours that the moment for it was approaching: it was us who would be making history!

Being very cold and before getting dressed, I wrote a letter home that all was well and to save all newspaper stories about the air war over Europe. At the mess hall door a medic was passing out vitamin pills - a first. No powdered eggs today, but real fresh eggs! I toyed with my breakfast, too excited to eat. It was important to eat because 16 hours is a long time to go without food. Outside the briefing room another first . . . would you believe five newspaper reporters vying for the one spot permitted to fly on this mission?

As I entered the briefing room for the ninth time, again I read the sign above the door: *"The deeds of the men who pass through these portals will endure long after these walls have fallen crumbled into dust"*. At last the guard closed the doors and the briefing began. A dead silence prevailed. Before us, hidden behind two curtains, there was a large map of Europe.

We knew that within a few moments we would see a red yarn, stretched across the map from our base to our target. To the left of the curtains there was a counterweighting-pulley to keep the red cord tight. Was the counter-weight low, then the cord had not been pulled out far and the target would be comparatively near.

The counter-weight was much higher than in most previous missions!

The curtains were parted, a wave of excitement went through the room. The yarn showed our route - not east to Berlin but southeast, or target Frankfurt. A big disappointment, but also a great relief.

Our mission was to fly south to make believe another target, then turn east and north to Frankfurt. Our target was, if I remember well, a chemical plant near Frankfurt, probably synthetic petrol was produced there.

The weatherforecast on our route was bad; strong winds from the north-west, much turbulence in showers and over our target it would be overcast with some breaks in the clouds.

We were to be escorted by long distance fighter-aircraft. A shock of surprise went through the room when we heard that we would be a part of a fleet of about 800 B-17s and B-24s, a sufficient number of bombers to heavily damage German war-industry round Frankfurt. Shortly before take-off we assembled at the B-17 assigned to us. At her nose was her name: "Dolly". Although Dolly was an unknown aircraft to us, it didn't matter much, because all our B-17s had about the same lay-out and the equipment didn't differ much as well.

We struggled into our flying-outfits, a total of thirty kgs, per person and went aboard. The engines were started and we taxied in a long line to the beginning of the runway.

Every 30 seconds there was a flash from the runway control van, the sign for the foremost aircraft to take off. Then it was our turn and once again I underwent the thrill of the noise, power and speed with which our four engines dragged us over the runway. This time, loaded to capacity as we were with fuel and bombs, it took a very long time before our Fortress lifted off. In the cockpit our pilots were very busy. They took our aircraft to a certain altitude, where they flew in wide circles till all our bombers had taken off and had found their places in the formation. Then our Group joined the formations of other bases at the allotted place. After these manoeuvres had been finished, the whole air-fleet climbed to the briefed altitude.



Doing all this, our pilots had a hard job. Violent gusts of wind made the aircraft shudder, continuously they had to deal with the effects of turbulence, they had to stay on the correct course and take care not to collide with the aircraft around us. We flew in the briefed box-formation, that means that groups of six to eight aircraft flew above, beside and below each other.

It had been proved, that this formation made the aircraft the least vulnerable to enemy fighters and besides that it gave the gunners the best field of fire possible. Meanwhile above us an "umbrella" of fighter-planes had formed, which every now and then flew away from us to look for and attack possible German fighters. According as we gained altitude it was getting colder in the aircraft and it was going to be time to put on our oxygen-masks. We switched on the electric heating of our clothing and in this way one could reasonably function. It was never a picnic.

The oxygen-mask pressed against the lower part of your face like a clammy hand, you were troubled by your heavy flying-outfit and you were, like me, locked up in a narrow plexiglass-ball, in which you could only move your arms to handle your machine-guns. There were great problems for the man who had to go for a pee. For that purpose there were "exhaust-pipes" in the bottom of the aircraft but most of the time they were frozen and often you didn't even try to unpack layers of flying clothing and held it up, sometimes for hours. Or you didn't . . . . .

Over the open sea I got permission to test-fire my guns. Two brief bursts of gunfire proved that they were O.K. My colleague-gunners test-fired their guns as well. Continuously I kept searching my field of fire for enemy fighters, but no German was to be seen. Also the intercom, with which we were all connected, didn't pass on the well-known cry: "Bandits at two o'clock!" That would mean, that German fighters were on their way towards us, before us, to the right.

The spot where a possible attacker was seen, was indicated by means of the dial-plate of a clock. Twelve o'clock was right in front, six o'clock was right at the back etc.

Meanwhile we had completed our alteration of course, direction Frankfurt and so far, so good. Till we got over Heidelberg! There we met with a violent barrage of FLAK, so violent, that crew-members, who had a view on it, later told never to have seen such a thing before. Red, white and green the shells rushed into our direction and at the moment of explosion they changed into black, cauliflower-like puffs of smoke. As for myself, because of my limited view and the concentration, with which I kept searching my field of fire, I didn't notice that much of it.

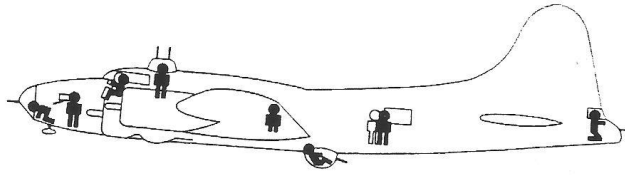
Till I suddenly heard a noise like stone falling on a metal roof. At the same time a shudder went through the aircraft, that didn't predict much good. Immediately the voice of our pilot, Clarence Strait, came through the intercom. "Pilot to crew. A burst of anti aircraft shell has knocked out both right engines. Report any injuries or damages to the aircraft".

All reported okay and no further damages were noticed. Our navigator said that Switzerland wasn't that far. By hindsight he was the only one that made sense. Flying on two engines our ship reasonably went on, but, heavy-loaded as we were, we inevitably lost altitude.

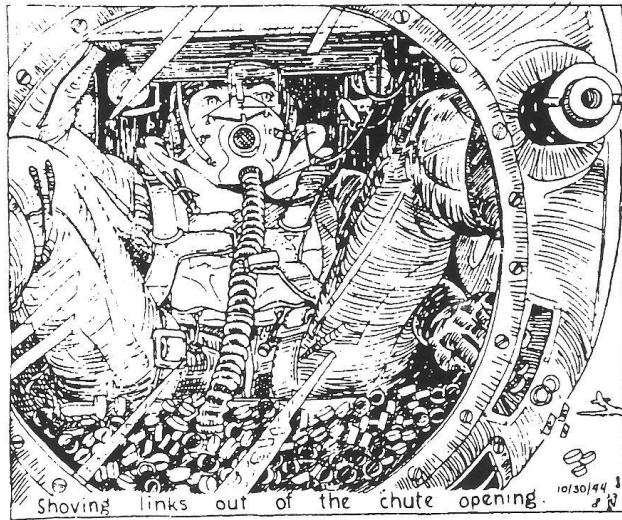
The bombardier reported, that we had already begun our bomb-run and that we might as well finish our attack and drop our bombs on target at Frankfurt, instead of getting rid of them over Heidelberg.

As at that moment in fact the bombardier was in control of the aircraft, the pilot agreed and we proceeded our attack. In about ten minutes we were over our target and away went the bombs.

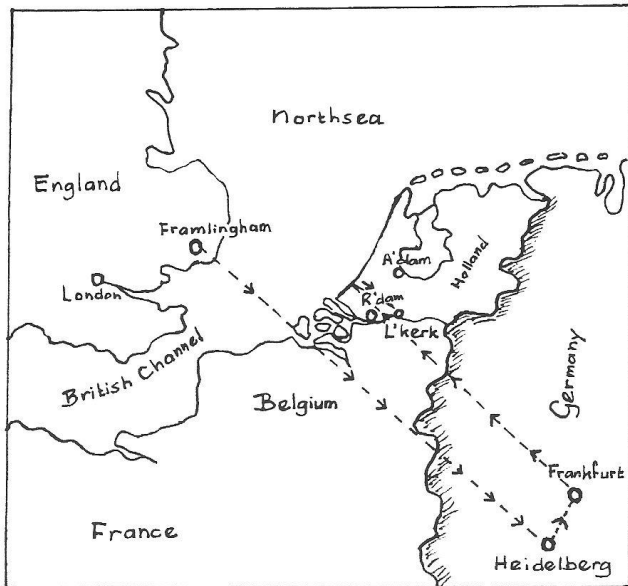
Deep down it was a hell of smoke, fire and explosions. There was Strait's voice again: "Boys, mission completed, anyone who wishes to bail out has my permission



The spots in "Dolly" were the ten crew -members were . Below,hanging in the middle, the puppet which indicates Herman Alesiani. The two "missing" puppets are indicated in white, exactly next to their colleagues.



Position in action of the ball-turretgunner. Drawing by a colleague, made in a P.O.W.-camp.



The route "Dolly" took as Herman Alesiani thought it did. Mind the last part of the route: Past Rotterdam to the coast and then in glide to Lekkerkerk.

to do so. But I'm going to try to see this lady home". All decided to stay. Besides, who would feel like a jump downwards, into that hell of fire, if there would be a chance to get home?

The aircraft was much lighter now, yet we kept losing altitude very slowly and we dropped behind to the formation before us.

Stragglers were easy targets for German fighter planes, so we were even more on the alert than before. Meanwhile some crew-members, on pilot's orders, were throwing anything that could be missed, out of the plane. The lighter Dolly was going to be, the better.

That's how we started our long flight back to Framlingham. The two left engines had to work at full throttles to keep as much altitude and speed as possible. That's because, and because of lacking pulling-power on the right, the aircraft was difficult to be kept on course.

Yet Lt. Strait managed to keep the ship reasonably stable, although that constantly took a lot of effort. Optimism among the crew was increasing with time passing. We were still flying and not a German fighter-plane had turned up yet. Lt. Strait continuously kept the intercom connected so that we at our different positions could hear the cockpit conversations. Somehow that was reassuring. We heard the co-pilot read our altitude at intervals, from which we could conclude that we kept losing altitude.

When he reported 5000 ft., (1665m) the navigator passed on the news, that he saw the British Channel. (Remark Verwaal: This must have been the North Sea). At the same moment both left engines quit, overheated. . . . .

Now we were really in the soup! Flying without engines there was no choice but trying to land in glide. On our current course that meant ditching in the sea, and in the icy-cold seawater we would have little chance to survive.

Clarence Strait decided to turn back. We were all ordered to sit in the radioroom, with our backs against the wall, hands behind our heads and knees to our chests. It was a slow glide to Terra Firma.

Lt. Strait fought to keep the aircraft manageable, assisted by the co-pilot. We were witnesses of a heated cockpit-discussion. It was about landing-gear up or down. It was going to be a belly-landing. This proved to be the only right decision.

The landing site was made to order. How many times I thank the unknown landowner for having his land free of obstacles!

The aircraft jumped up once or twice and then smoothly slid along till it lay still, slightly listing to starboard. For a moment there was an unreal silence. Then we realized, that we had all survived without any injury worth mentioning and that even our aircraft lay on Terra Firma in one piece.

Clarence Strait had made the landing of his lifetime!"

## CHAPTER 2.

### THE FOURTH WAR-TIME WINTER AT LEKKERKERK.

#### Daily life.

The weather in January 1944, gloomy, wet and windy, made people disconsolate and slowly but surely it increased the feeling of dejection. From week to week people felt sliding down to more and more miserable conditions of life and there was no prospect to a quick improvement. During this fourth warwinter shortages were growing more and more perceptible. Still there was no starvation. By what you could

get for your food-coupons, made up by the crops of allotment gardens, most families had sufficient daily food. As for the moment there was still enough, but the composition of the foodparcel was growing more and more monotonous. Groceries disappeared from the shops already shortly after the occupation: Coffee, tea, overseas spices. For years one had got used to the fact that the daily cup of coffee wasn't made of real coffee any more, but was an extract of the substitutes "Pitto" or "Fama", sometimes seasoned a bit by a spoonful of "Buisman". By lack of the necessary spices, preparing a tasty daily dish was growing more and more difficult, as more over meat, bacon and fat or butter were only available in a scantily measure.

For an extra, for instance for a birthdayparty, creative mothers could sometimes find out something. With a bit of flour, some chopped dried apples and pears, they baked an imitation-currentloaf, but continuously creating a decent daily meal was a pretty tall order for the mother's creativity.

Creativity, the quality to always do the best you can out of almost nothing, however wasn't only a necessity for the preparation of daily meals.

Taking care to decently dress the family was a matter of improvising by hook or by crook.

Altering the elder children's clothes for the younger brothers and sisters was a well-known practice, poor families had been used to it already long before the outbreak of the war. But now more was needed. You could not throw away anything. The things you could buy on your textile coupons were not worth mentioning. Darning and mending torn clothing was a weekly item on the workingprogramme.

Un-used knitted clothing was unpicked and out of the unpicked wool something new was knitted.

Coats, cloaks and suits were turned inside out by tailors, the "new suit" was nothing but the inside of the old one.

That was what happened with everything. If shoes or furniture were worn out it wasn't just simple to buy something new. If you weren't able to make something useful out of old materials, you had to go without it. The nasty thing was, that mending and repairing didn't give a lasting solution. The moment was always near, when something couldn't be repaired or mended with the best will in the world.

That situation arose in the course of the fourth war-winter, people felt they were slowly but surely sliding down to poverty and that was what made people disconsolate. To what extent would this situation be going on and especially: for how long? People were informed about the course of the war. In the newspapers, which were getting thinner all the time, the Germans, who supervised all newsservices, had to admit that they were withdrawing at the eastern-front for already more than a year, such under pressure of the Russians. The newspapers had reported that the Germans had been driven away from Africa, that in July the Allied Forces had landed in Italy and that at the beginning of September Mussolini had even been driven away.

For months people didn't hear or read the fussy news-items or newspaper reports anymore, in which the Germans boasted of the number of registertons of Allied shipping space that had been sunk by their U-boats.

So at sea things were improving. And what about the air-war? Regularly one heard the Allied bombers flying by during the night, while on their way to Germany, by day one saw the white contrails at high altitude, so much the more evidence that the liberators domineered the sky and took their bombloads to Germany.

So one was not ignorant about developments in the war, one could listen to the radio or read the papers.

The first illegal newspapers that came out, the news broadcast by the B.B.C., they all told the same news, only a bit earlier and more extensive.

There was no doubt about it, the war was going well. The slogan you saw everywhere in 1941 and 1942: "V=Victory, German is winning at all fronts", then unfortunately true and for that reason so irritating, was definitely past tense. Now reality was: "Germany is losing at all fronts".

Only not here! That much was understood by the people, that in Western-Europe they would not have to be liberated by the Russians from the Eastern-front or by the Western-Allied Forces in Italy.

For our liberation an invasion was necessary, somewhere at the coast between Norway and southwest France. This fact was not made a secret of. Via B.B.C.-radio, in illegal papers, but also in German supervised newspapers, regularly items about that popped up.

It was even known that Stalin, more or less angrily demanded this second front, so that he wouldn't have to pull the chestnuts out of the fire on his own. The invasion should bring the solution, everybody understood, but after all the writing and talking about it, fewer and fewer people believed it would be soon there. And that was what people made dejected, moreover because as the winter wore on, the daily worries increased from week to week.

Those gloomy feelings had grown in the course of the winter, during the autumn of 1943 there had still been time for pleasant things. In spite of the fact, that nobody was allowed to be in the streets after 10 p.m., the traditional performances had gone on. The church-choir, the women's-choir and the string-orchestra had their usual evenings. The wind-band invited Arto Post (a theatrical company) from Schoonhoven for their performance. The cultural club provided its members with a lovely lecture about Uncle Tom's cabin and they invited the ornithologist Jan Strijbos for a lecture about a journey along the river Danube.

K.D.O. (the gymnastic club) celebrated its 35th anniversary, they had already organized a demonstration with top-lady-gymnasts during the past summer and they gave a performance in Amicitia (the local festive-hall). There was even a new start: the foundation of a First-Aid branch. For the greater part of the Lekkerkerk people it was even going to be an exciting season: L.F.C.I (the local footballclub) was performing tremendously and was going to be the champion in March 1944.

At first sight life in the autumn of 1943 didn't seem to have considerably changed for the worse. It is true that all activities started earlier in the evening, the usual dance-parties after performances had been cancelled from the programmes, everybody had to be at home at 10 p.m., but on the whole it seemed good and pleasant.

Seemed, because during these evenings too, one was constantly reminded of another source of concern and unrest. At any occasion the audience had to be informed about which members unfortunately could not participate because of their (forced) departure to Germany. The fact that in the wind-band the vacant places were taken by lady-members, meant that the band could continue to exist, but the men had gone to Germany, or to stay from there, into hiding. For those who stayed behind, in September 1943 those were the relatives of 183 men who did forced labour in Germany, this meant anxiety and fear.

For them the passing allied bombers were more than the friends, who, with each bombing weakened the power of the hated occupier, the bombs on board might as well hit their husbands, sons or friends.

That's how the Lekkerkerk population lived at the beginning of February 1944. Somewhat dejected by the failing to come of the necessary invasion, the worries about the fate of those who had been forced to go to Germany or those who had

gone underground, the fear that many had, to be caught and taken away. And above all, the efforts to keep one's head above water, the care for daily life, demanded almost all attention.

February 4th, 1944, Anton den Ouden: "The turves were flying sky-high".

Anton den Ouden, 15 years old, worked as his father's farmhand at the farm at the Tiendweg-West. As there had been no frost during the past few weeks, the canals lay open and on that Friday Anton could punt a wooden boat full of cow-dung from the farm to a piece of land beyond the Wetering. (A country-lane running east-west through the meadows). The dung had to be unloaded to be mixed with mud from the canals. Growing-power for the meadow, that in the course of the war had to go without fertilizer.

As usual, Anton was at home at 12 o'clock sharp to have his dinner and even so as usual immediately after his meal he went back to the fields without taking a nap. It must have been shortly after 1 o'clock p.m. when he started to mix dung with mud, it was dry weather between the showers and rather cold, because the wind came from the northwest.

Suddenly he heard a loud cracking sound, he looked up and saw a huge aircraft coming down. The cracking was caused by breaking alder-shrubs, hit by the aircraft when coming down.

"I stood paralysed and couldn't believe my eyes, the enormous thing sailed down, comparatively quietly, because the engines didn't produce any noise. The landing-gear was up. Shortly after the alder-shrubs the aircraft touched the ground, the turves were flying sky-high. After some bouncing the aircraft slid like a sledge over the land, right across the canals and lumps of earth and turves were flying around all the time. At the "Smalle Kampje", exactly off the meadow where I was working, some hundred meters away from me, the aircraft came to a standstill, with the nose over the canal. The wing at the side of the Tiendweg went a bit downwards. Then there was silence for a moment. Automatically I had walked towards the Wetering, into the direction of the aircraft. Then I noticed that I wasn't the only one present. Jaap Wink, who worked for Geert Bos (a farmer), was punting a boat full of dung towards me. He jumped from his wooden boat on the land, with his punting-pole in his hand. What we said to each other I can't remember, but together we jumped over a canal and walked on the meadow east of the "Smalle Kampje" towards the aircraft.

Suddenly we saw people getting out of the aircraft, they walked a bit about, they took off things and threw them into or into the direction of the aircraft. Suddenly the aircraft was in a blaze and people came walking towards us. Whether we were afraid that may be bombs could explode in the burning aircraft, I don't know, but both of us walked back to the Wetering and we saw the airmen coming into our direction.

The front of Jaap's boat meanwhile had floated against the north of the meadow where a bridge had been to the Wetering. The airmen used Jaap's boat as a step to the Wetering. One of them limped a bit and was helped by the others. And that's where we were, on the Wetering, the ten airmen, Jaap and I and perhaps then Adriaan Slingerland, Kees Neven's farmhand, was there too.

The men showed us a map on which they pointed out Rotterdam, they wanted to go there. We didn't understand English and they didn't understand us. How we made it clear to them that they couldn't reach Rotterdam walking westwards via the Wetering (that's because somewhat further on there is a wide separation-canal) I don't remember any more, but they really understood. They were discussing

things together, but we couldn't understand what they said.

After about five minutes they were going to walk along the Wetering, direction Kerkweg(eastward). We stood watching them and saw that two out of the ten went together towards Gert Ooms' land, eight went on and stopped for a while at the Brand's house. I guess we will have looked around and talked a bit, together on the Wetering.

Because of the fire we didn't dare to walk to the aircraft, although we didn't hear any explosions or something like that. We saw groups of people walking along the Tiendweg, who stopped at about Leo de Jager's house. We couldn't see everything clearly, certainly not at the beginning, because the smoke of the burning aircraft was blown into their direction. I don't think I did a lot of work in the meadows that afternoon. Finally I went home at about 3 o'clock to take care of the animals".

For Anton den Ouden this was the liveliest memory of the landing of the bomber. His father forbade him to go to the wreck, even if during the next days there were lots of people, mainly boys, who were nosing and looking for things to take home. On the Monday after the landing a Mr.A.Kennis from Eindhoven reported at the Den Ouden family. As a demolition contractor he was ordered to demolish the wreck. With a number of assistants he was looking for a boardinghouse and found it with the Den Ouden family. Anton remembers that he went to have a look at the wreck once, together with his brother, his father and Mr.Kennis. The bigger part of the wreck had already been removed then.

Another thing Anton remembers is that Kennis at one time took a part of an aircraft-tyre with him, out of which strips of rubber were cut which were used to make solid tyres for bicycles.

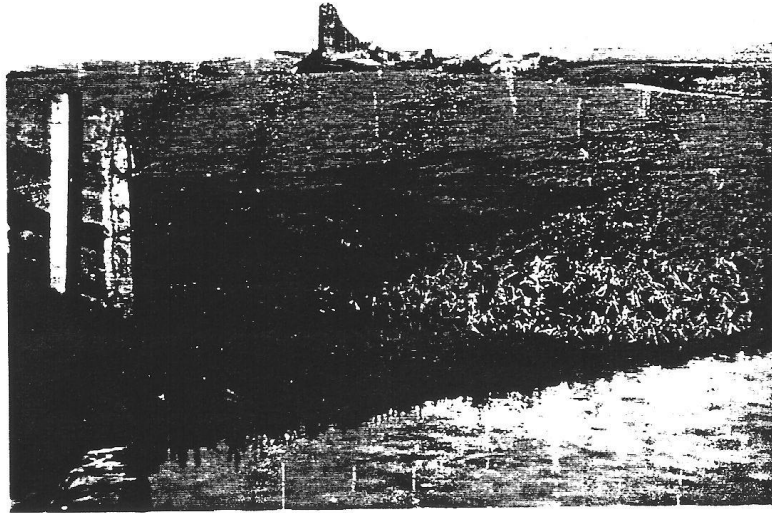
February 4th 1944 - Arie Ros:"The thing arrived silently like a thief in the night".

Arie Ros was eleven years old, lived at Tiendweg-West, and he always rode on his bike with solid tyres to the Primary School in the village. At noon he came home to have a meal together with his mother, because his father had lunch at the shipbuilding-yard.

On Friday, February 4th 1944 the ride home was no picnic, there was a bleak wind from the north-west with sleet showers every now and then. From the dinner-table one could see who was passing by at the Tiendweg, usually that happened occasionally. That Friday apparently something was going on. When Arie had almost finished his meal he saw a lot of people passing by and all of them went into the direction of Krimpen aan de Lek. (a neighbouring village to the west of Lekkerkerk). Just being outside he learned from passers-by what was up: an aircraft had come down. It was not difficult to believe that, when he looked into the direction where the thing was supposed to be, he saw clouds of smoke going up.

"My bike didn't want to go into the direction of the village and I completely forgot to be at school in time.

I went exactly to the opposite direction, to the fire.'Not as near to it as I'd wished, for Jantje Nobel (a farmer) stopped us and said that we were not allowed to go any further. In the burning aircraft, that I could clearly see lying there, bombs might perhaps be coming to explode. Behind the aircraft I saw a number of people, I think there were eight to ten, running away fast into the direction of the Wetering. I don't exactly remember the number, because the burning aircraft was much more fascinating to me than a bunch of running men. The smoke of the burning aircraft came to our side. After some time the police and the fire brigade showed up. The



Picture of the wreck, secretly taken by Paulus Verwaal. (second picture on the cover). The demolition has been going on for about a week. To the left the gate, from behind which most people saw the aircraft.



Arie Ros with cartridges from "Dolly", kept by Adrie van der Graaf. Especially the blue-pointed one in his left hand, according to Alesiani appeared to be a very dangerous one, that exploded if it hit something.



firemen produced a tiny spout of water which fell on the burning aircraft. Whether that extinguished the fire, or that it stopped burning by itself, I don't know. The police didn't allow anybody to come nearer than to the gate of the strip of land on which the aircraft was. Then the best thing for me to do was to go to school, before the police and the fire-brigade left.

At school my thoughts were more with what I had seen than they were with my lessons. When it was half past three I rode home like mad, something very special was happening at the Tiendweg, wasn't there? A policeman was still at the gate and nobody was allowed to pass it. Meanwhile the fire-brigade had gone.

The wreck was lying there, quietly and deserted, still smouldering a bit. If I remember well, there was nobody to be seen near it. But there were still lookers-on at the Tiendweg. There was a lot of talking. I remember that they kept saying it was not a German aircraft and so it was "English". I couldn't recognize that from the aircraft. If I'm not mistaken, I didn't see any letters or numbers on it, perhaps they had been vanished by the fire. Besides that, I was still at a distance of about 100 to 150 meters from the wreck, so if there had been letters to be seen on it, they mustn't have been very large.

Of all the people who were looking and talking, nobody had seen the aircraft coming down. Neither had we, who were living relatively shortly to the landing-site. The thing arrived "silently like a thief in the night".

At the end of that afternoon the lookers-on went home again and so did Arie Ros. When the night was coming on, the wreck could not be seen any more, from the Tiendweg. The police kept watch. The next day a German soldier appeared to have taken over that task. During the days thereafter the site remained an attraction for curious people. Adults soon lost their interest; curious, often souvenir-hunting boys from miles around kept coming till after a couple of weeks everything had been cleared away.

The next Saturday Arie Ros was abroad early and he noticed, that the German soldier didn't mind him passing the entrance-gate to the land, but allowed him to go to the aircraft.

Round the wreck it was littered with things from the aircraft. Funny, because there hadn't been an explosion or something like that. Had this been done by souvenir-hunters who had been near the aircraft already before him? Who had perhaps climbed into the aircraft, though that wasn't an easy thing to do?

Arie hadn't gone into it, because it was too difficult, too dirty because of the thick layer of mud that was inside, because it was too dangerous, or just because of "I don't know for what reason".

For Arie, who had gone there hoping to find something interesting, however, there was no problem at all: there was enough to be found. Many cartridges, single ones but sometimes in metres-long belts as well. "I took a number of those bullets with me, simply in my hands. The German guard saw them and beckoned me to come to him. He took the bullets out of my hands and I thought: I won't see them back again! The German smiled a little, went to the gate in which there was a big cramp-iron and with this he jerked the bullets from the cartridge-cases. After the bullets had been removed, he scattered the powder on the bridge. When he put a match to the heap of powder there was an enormous flame. The empty cases were given back to me. From that moment on, that German was "a nice guy" to me and my friends. And that's how it was the next days, walking around near the wreck, picking up things and throwing them away again if you found something more interesting. Pretty soon I took a rake with me from home. With that you could fish up things from the canal and you could even put it through a hole in the wreck and get out things from the inside.

Partly burnt parachutes, bullets again, but all kinds of little meters too were removed from the wreck in this way. Probably I gave away or threw away most of those things, except a little compass that I still have. In those days already I thought it a nice little thing and the letters U.S. that were engraved in it meant United States.

Finally one of the finds provided me with a good scolding by my father! It was a big thing, fished up from the canal, probably a part of a machine-gun. There were a lot of little holes in the sleeve round the barrel and that was something which was almost impressively beautiful to me. It must have happened during the days, that there was no guard any more, because the German soldier certainly wouldn't have allowed me to pass the bridge with that rather big thing on my back.

Before I got the chance to show my father how proud I was of my find, Dad was very clear in letting me know that he didn't like to have any of those implements of war in or near his house.

The thing was put into his wooden boat and somewhere, far from home he threw it into a wide canal. Dad was very much relieved when he came home again. Looking for things and nosing went on until everything had been cleared away.

Not every day, but perhaps more than other boys, because the demolition contractor, Mr. Kennis, was a boarder at one of my playmates: Kees den Ouden. That Mr. Kennis demolished the wreck and he didn't mind my and Kees's poking about the wreck and taking things with us. Mr. Kennis won't have seen that part of the machinegun, he certainly wouldn't have allowed me to take it with me. With a small breakdown-lorry Mr. Kennis and his assistants took the wreck apart in big pieces, those pieces were taken to the Tiendweg and there they were loaded on big German trailers".

Other memories of the crashed aircraft.

*Wim Berrevoets*, a sergeant of the Dutch Military Police, had been transferred from the town of Hoogeveen in January 1944 and came back to Lekkerkerk. He found board and lodging with a family at Churchroad and that Friday-afternoon he was summoned to the barracks at Emmastreet. Possibly by means of a telephonic mention, it had become known, that an aircraft had crashed at Tiendweg-West. Berrevoets was ordered to keep watch there and to keep the public away from the wreck.

"When I arrived there, there were a lot of lookers-on at the Tiendweg, no Germans or members of the Sicherheits Dienst. (German secret police, mostly called "S.D."). After a short time the fire-brigade arrived. For a short time they've been spouting at the burning aircraft with a little jet of water and it didn't take them a long time before they left again. As the afternoon wore on the lookers-on left to go home and I stayed behind alone. At first I did not think it wise to walk to the aircraft. Might not the thing be full of explosives? Later on I went to the wreck after all and walked around it; here and there were lying around all kinds of things from the aircraft, both at the north and the south-side of the wreck. I had a look at many different things, picked them up and dropped them again and in the end I took a Very-pistol and two flares with me.

After the war I gave the pistol to the Regional Museum at the village of Krimpen aan den IJssel, the flares were stolen from my house later on.

In the course of the evening I was relieved by a German guard and I could go home, the end of what seemed to be common practice. But in a nasty way I was confronted with the fact, that this wouldn't be the end of the matter. The next

Monday I was summoned to immediately report at the Sicherheits Dienst at the Ridder van Catsroad at the town of Gouda.

I had to sit down at a long table, in front of me there were some members of the S.D. and behind me some armed soldiers. A slanging match full of threats started and it had everything to do with the crashed aircraft. An S.D.-officer, who was a former Lekkerkerker, dominated the "conversation".

His reproaches:

After the aircraft had landed, it had been set to fire, the crew had been able to take to their heels, groups of people had looted the aircraft and whatever they hadn't thrown away around the plane, they had taken with them. Fortunately part of that had meanwhile been delivered up with the River-police-group at Krimpen aan de Lek.

Berrevoets was held responsible for everything that, in the opinion of the gentlemen had gone wrong; hadn't he been ordered to maintain order? Later I was informed of the fact that the S.D. had considered to set an example by punishing a number of people from Lekkerkerk for, what they called, looting.

The Lekkerkerk group-commander of the Dutch military police, Van de Waal, a member of the N.S.B., (Dutch-Nazi-party) however had been able to convince his "comrades" that it had really been a matter of force majeure and that one couldn't defend the decision to punish innocent civilians for it. Then the plan of making reprisals was abandoned, but about Berrevoets' responsibility there was no discussion possible. Apparently the word had been passed on that I had taken something with me, though fortunately the Very-pistol wasn't mentioned. In the very end this matter blew over for me. After hearing out reproaches and threats at Gouda for a couple of times and having to experience the same treatment with the S.D. at Heemraadavenue in Rotterdam, the matter was apparently done with".

*Goris Bouter*, a farmer who lived at the Tiendweg, was asked to transport the demolished fragments of the aircraft by horse and cart to the Tiendweg. The surface of the meadow was too swampy for the heavy trailers on which the scrap was transported.

"I didn't notice anything of the landing of the aircraft, it was later on that I was informed about what had happened. I don't remember who ordered me to appear with horse and cart, maybe the Germans, or perhaps the demolition contractor asked me to do so.

One or two times I had to put two horses to the cart, probably then the heavy parts were dragged away, such as the engines. At the demolition there were no Germans present, demolishing and loading the trailers was done by Mr. Kennis and his assistants. The pieces of scrap were thrown alongside the southern side of the Tiendweg from where the Germans took them away on their trailers every now and then.

Sometimes I took something with me which seemed interesting to me, for instance a little lock and handle and once a sort of altimeter. I'm under the impression that other people as well walked to the wreck during the three weeks period of demolition and took with them whatever they fancied".

*Dirk Eikelboom* was twelve years old in 1944, he lived at Opperduit (a part of Lekkerkerk-East) and he was a pupil of the denominational school at Churchroad. He was one of many Lekkerkerk boys who were told that an aircraft had landed in Schuwacht. (A part of Lekkerkerk-West). He was also one of the many boys who were tickled by the news. He had to be there, for there was something to be seen

Command Air Base District: 6/III

Local Quarters: 26 Feb 1944

Postal No: L 10 664 Salvage No. 17/44

Report

MACR 2352

Salvage Detachment: 16/IV

Location: Eindhoven

Postal No: L 10 218

Local Quarters: 20 Feb 1944

Salvage of Enemy Aircraft

Place of Crash: Lekkerkerk-Kispen

Crashed: 4 Feb 44, 1430 hours

Type: Boeing B 17 Markings: CCF

Nationality: USA

Make No: J 231 292 F

Location: Side Fin

1. Engine No. 4. SV 002863 A. C 24 157

Type: Wright-Cyclone

2. Macelle: 98%, engine 1. 90%, 3. 80%, 4. 75% destruction

3. Kind of landing: Belly landing

5. Crew: 10 men. 10 men captured

7. Salvaged by: Salvage Detachment 16/IV

Time: 9. 2. to 19. 2. 1944

8. Shipped by: Salvage Detachment 16/IV

Time: 14 and 15 2. 44

9. Loading Station: Gouda

Travel No: 06417263

10. Kind and No. of waggon: W S 55 708 and W S 90 747

11. Disposition of Macelle: Hertogenbosch

Engine: Hertogenbosch

14. Armament: 13 M G

15. Ammunition: Belts

German report of "Salvage of enemy aircraft", translated into English by the USAAF.  
Interesting details:

1. The Germans were interested in engine # 4.
2. After "Make No" it says: "J 231292 F, Location Side Fin."  
So contrary to what the witnesses at Lekkerkerk said,  
actually the "Square J" and the serial number where there.
3. The Germans transported 2 waggonloads of scrap from  
Gouda to 's-Hertogenbosch.

and above all, to be found! On his free Wednesday-afternoon he ran home from school, took his bike and rode to the wreck.

There were no guards anymore so he could nose around freely. In the end he got home with his booty: a pair of pilot's trousers, stuffed with cartridges and a pair of socks. A shoe or boot with an electric plug was left behind. In the shed the cartridges were stripped off the bullets, in the course of time the socks disappeared, used or not. There were many boys like Dirk, living everywhere in the village, who were drawn like by a magnet to the wreck of the aircraft in the course of the weeks and all of them with the same object: to find something. Almost everyone found cartridges and almost in all cases "something was done with them": breaking off the bullets, hitting them with a hammer, getting the powder out of them and so on. One might call it a miracle, that from those days we've got no reports about mutilated hands or worse.

*Huib Eikelboom*, Dirk's nephew lived at Wetering-East. On the Friday-afternoon in question he went home from school, the denominational school at Churchroad. On his way home Mr. Aarnoudse's little truck passed him. Next to Mr. Aarnoudse, Huib saw Mr. Tintel, a policeman. In the back part of the lorry, of which the tarpaulin was partly taken aside, Huib saw a group of men, the crew of the crashed aircraft. Whether there were eight or ten couldn't be seen. The lorry was driving at Churchroad between the Tiendweg and the Wetering and it was on its way into the direction of "de Loet". (Northern area of Lekkerkerk).

*Paulus Verwaal*, Ary Verwaal's uncle, was an amateur-photographer. In spite of the shortage of materials and the fact that in many places it was strictly forbidden to take pictures, he continued his hobby during the war. In February 1944 he heard about the crashed aircraft, about the jacket his brother got from one of the crew-members and about the glove his brother Jan had fished up from the canal. Paulus too wanted a souvenir, but in his case it should be a photographic one! During the weeks when the demolition of the wreck was already proceeding, he set out to take pictures. He took a simple camera with him. From the Tiendweg he took some pictures, keeping the box-camera hidden in his coat because taking pictures openly was too dangerous. Most probably these secretly taken pictures are the only photographic memories of the crashed bomber.

This enumeration is not an account of all the memories, many more Lekkerkerkers told about what they knew about the crashed aircraft "behind the Bakkerswaal". (A little lake just behind the river-dike, which is a bird-sanctuary).

In many cases their memories were confirmations of the stories written before. Sometimes that what was told was so dim, that it didn't become clear whether the memory was connected to the forced landing on February 4th 1944 or had something to do with another crashed aircraft in the course of the war. Some other stories, for instance about finding amounts of paper-money, actions by resistance-groups to take something valuable out of the aircraft, a doubtful part the Dutch police would have taken at the arrest of and the transfer of the crew to the Germans, seemed too dim or too unlikely to be mentioned.

However we may assume that there are more memories among the Lekkerkerk people than have become known up to now. More objects will have been taken home from the wreck and kept, than have come to light. Probably a part of the parachute-silk was taken and used to make ladies' blouses.

*The jig - saw- puzzle is far from complete.*

By the many stories that were told, many facts have come to light, but the jig - saw - puzzle is far from complete.

In this connection there are still questions like:

\*In what way and by whom were the police informed about an aircraft that had landed at Schuwacht?

\*Who ordered Aarmoudse to transport a group of people? Where he exactly took them on his truck and what route he took in Lekkerkerk has remained in the dark up to now.

\*How was it possible that so many things from the aircraft lay scattered around the wreck, already soon after it had landed? Who have been able to do that, apparently without being noticed by the lookers-on or the police, in the afternoon or at night on February 4th?

Completing information will probably not be able to enrich the contents of this report, nevertheless we will be glad to get it.

Not for this report, but the "Dolly - file" will remain open as long as the jig-saw is not complete. Who will be able to help us in this case? Most probably the men and women of today of which especially the boys belonged to the group whose sense of adventure was tickled by the wreck of the aircraft and the little meters, the cartridges and all that was worth finding while nosing around.

For most of the grown-up people of Lekkerkerk of 1944, the impact the landed aircraft made on them, seems to be limited to a somewhat superficial curiosity. One had a look at it, one talked about it and that was all there was.

In a way this can be understood. People waited for the liberators, but from this small group of "Englishmen", as all the western allied forces were called then, there was no change in the situation to be expected. Whatever things might be found in the wreck, they didn't provide you with anything useful, at any rate they didn't contribute to the solution of the more and more acute problem: how to keep one's head above water.

### CHAPTER 3.

#### WHOLE SKIN KEPT, BUT NOT YET FREE BY A LONG WAY!

Alesiani:

"We didn't take much time for rejoicings after our safe landing. The main rule after a forced landing: "Abandon aircraft like hell!" I appeared to be sitting with the mud up to my knees and after pulling myself out of it, I beckoned my buddy next to me, the tailgunner Peter Selvidge, to follow me and exite from the top escape hatch. The hatch could be opened without any difficulties (by using the handle and lock that Arie Ros handed to me again fifty years later!). We slipped down from the fuselage. Meanwhile the other eight crew-members had come out by way of the big hatch. They were standing around one of them who had problems with a sprained ankle. Peter and I decided not to wait any longer but to take to our heels. Peter shouted to the others:"Might you be arrested and questioned, tell the Germans that we did not get out of the plane". We started to walk away from the plane in eastern direction.

Then we saw the first inhabitant of the area in which we had landed. It was a fisherman with rod in hand. We wanted to ask our location, but the man behaved oddly. As we walked towards him, he kept walking backwards, gazing at us with an astonished expression on his face. I could understand his behaviour afterwards. Imagine this is happening to you:"You are fishing at your ease and suddenly a huge

aircraft lands almost on top of your float! From that aircraft two fellows emerge, dressed in odd suits, a sort of Michelin-men, who start shouting at you in a language you don't understand!" The man must have been terrified. We didn't pay much attention to him any further, because we were alarmed by our exploding .50 ammunition. Our aircraft was on fire! The pilot had pulled an opened parachute through the hatch, turned on the oxygen, blew oxygen into the parachute and fired a flare into it. He had acted according to instructions. Our B-17 was not to be fallen into the hands of the Germans undamaged. The last thing I saw and heard of our good old "Dolly", was a raging blaze, thick black smoke and the cracking noise of exploding ammunition.....

Peter and I took to our heels, we didn't want to be killed by our own ammunition. We jumped across at least three canals and after some time we came to a small brick farmhouse. When we looked back we saw that all the crew-members were following. Everybody assembled at the farmhouse. Some of us kept asking the navigator where we were. Some folks came out of the farm, they were youngsters. Suddenly I saw that they were wearing wooden shoes and I called out: "Look, we are in Holland".

The pilot asked the Dutchmen the way to Rotterdam, but they didn't speak English and we went on. After some time a truck stopped behind us on the country-lane on which we were walking. The driver motioned to us to get into his truck. I told my pilot the action of all getting into the truck was wrong because the Dutch underground would never handle ten airmen at a time. He replied that we had no choice. The driver hid us under a tarpaulin and we drove away. After a short drive the truck stopped at a red brick house with a white picket fence. Upon entering, we found two Dutch policemen. It slowly dawned on us: we had been arrested! Each of us will have had his own feelings on that occasion, but I remember, that I was more than disappointed, to say the least.

A lot of tension fell off however and suddenly I realized that I was starving. After a phone call several German soldiers arrived. The funny part was that they didn't look our way at all. Shortly afterwards a shouting match began between the soldiers and the truck driver. Of course I didn't understand a word of it, but then I concluded that the truck-driver must have been a bounty-hunter and wanted to collect his reward times ten.

Fifty years later I understood that I had jumped to the wrong conclusion and that the driver might even have tried to keep us out of German hands. For years I had wished that after the war he be tried as a collaborator and paid his due. May the Good Lord forgive me for being judge and jury.  
May his soul rest in peace. . . . .

From Lekkerkerk we were transported to a jail in Rotterdam. After having been locked up for a while, an English speaking German soldier came into my cell. He told me that I was a lucky one. "For you, the war is over". Then he asked for my dog tags. Upon reading my name he said: "Herman is a good German name". I was informed that my name would be sent to the Geneva Red Cross who would inform my government, that I now was a P.O.W. Before he left he also told me that if I learned my everyday manners at home, I would probably get back there. However, if I didn't, my chances of becoming a German landowner were good. Believe me, I minded my manners for sixteen months as a P.O.W.!

After a night in the Rotterdam jail we were taken to Frankfurt via The Hague and Amsterdam. It was a first-class train ride. At Frankfurt there was the interrogation center for all P.O.W.-airmen.



The first house with "living souls" that Alesiani's crew saw after the landing. The children's wooden shoes were proof that they were in Holland.



May 20, 1994: Herman Alesiani back at Lekkerkerk. Meeting with the Mayor and Lekkerkerk witnesses of the landing. From left to right: Ary Verwaal, Herman Alesiani, Pauline Alesiani and Elly Verwaal-Oudendijk.



At Frankfurt Central Station we had to wait for transport to the center. The train station was still in fair shape. Some of the roof was gone from previous Allied bombing. On the busy platforms of course our small group couldn't remain unnoticed and passing German civilians called us names and spat at us. A woman rushed to me and tried to punch me in the face. I ducked away just in time. We could understand the Germans' attitude, but nevertheless we were happy when our guards, for our own safety, locked us up in the station restrooms.

At the interrogation-center we all got solitary confinement for one week. I think the intention will have been to ripen us to make confidential statements during our interrogation.

Of course the Germans wanted to hear more from us than just our names and registration-numbers! The actual interrogation took 4 to 5 days. During those days we were put through our paces one by one. It wasn't that bad after all. The German who interrogated me appeared to know surprisingly much about me. He was so proud of that fact, that he told me how that came about.

When they searched the co-pilot they found the crew- and loadlist, the list with which everything was checked at Framlingham before take-off. Was it bluff-poker, just a trick to make me talk? There were no real important data on it, but yet the Germans boasted to know more about us than what we were to yield up according to the Geneva Convention. The Germans were so enthusiastic about their little success, that at night they broadcasted the story of the list, just as a propaganda-stunt, complete with our names and our addresses. It was so happening that a woman in New Jersey, in the U.S.A., caught this broadcast via the short-wave. She made a note of my name and my address and called my mother to tell her, that her son was safe in German captivity. Within 20 days after our forced landing my mother was informed of my weal and woe. It lasted months before she got the official message. In between she got a message that said that I was missing in action.

After our interrogation we were finally permitted to take a shower, we got shaving-kits, Red Cross parcels and clean clothes. After that I have not seen our 4 officers (the pilot, the co-pilot, the navigator and the bombardier) anymore. They were sent to another P.O.W.-camp than we were. Even for prisoners of war the caste-system persisted! We were taken to Frankfurt-railwaystation again, we rode in a box car for about a week until on February 19 we arrived at Heidekrug, a little village east of Berlin, at P.O.W.-camp Stalag Six. Our compound was a new addition to the British camp. I heard that some of the British P.O.W.s had been captured at Dunkerque in 1940. Life at Stalag Six was boring. Every day after morning and afternoon roll call, we were free to do nothing. The British, who had been there already for a long time, had, in one way or another, succeeded in getting their hands on sports-gear and even a record-player and records. Every now and then we were allowed to borrow things from them, on which occasions the guards shut their eyes for it. Our guards were all veterans of World War I, because all the younger soldiers were needed for combat. We were lucky because of that, generally speaking our guards were good-natured fellows, who were especially anxious to save their own skin and were afraid of being sent to the eastern front.

Every day we got two soups and one loaf of bread a week. The guards got the same rations, but besides that we got one Red-Crossparcel every week, so we had no cause to complain. Those parcels contained cigarettes, chocolate, biscuits, tinned food etc. A welcome addition to our scanty rations and sometimes a good help to get special favours from the guards.

The only excitement we had was when a new group of P.O.W.s arrived. We would run to the gate and we turned those boys inside out with questions about the war. Of course we looked if there were any guys we knew. I was lucky, I met seven boys from my home-town. Three of them were well-known to me and I graduated with one them.

Round about July 1944 the number of P.O.W.s in our camp had increased to 2000, all of them American enlisted airmen. Then the evacuation of Stalag Six began. The Russian army had pushed to the Baltic Sea. We were shipped by boxcar to the nearest seaport and into the hold of a cargo vessel. We stood in the hold for two days with nothing to eat or drink, until we reached Swinemunde, a seaport at the Baltic, north of Stettin. After leaving the ship, I saw a German warship dockside. We watched as the German sailors practiced battle drills and as they piped officers on and off the ship. Little did we know that we would meet these sailors again! Another boxcar ride brought us to a train station called Kiefeheide. As we exited, the sailors were waiting. We were shackled together, two by two, at the hands. As we lined up, ready to march, yelling broke out and dogs began to bark. As we ran, we were bitten by dogs and jabbed by bayonets of the younger sailors. It was a wilde scene. Packs were dropped or discarded. Each time the sailors jabbed, they would shout out the name of a German city that had been bombed. I was lucky. I was first in line and suffered no bites or wounds.

We finally arrived at Stalag Four, which was little different from Stalag Six. We stayed there till February 1945. Early in February, the Russians started their winter offensive. The front line was only 40 miles from Luft Four. Evacuation of the camp was only a matter of time. On February 6, we were given a food parcel and told it would be a three-or four-day-march to another camp. What started then has been called a dead march. For eighty days we plodded on, along snow-covered roads, growing more and more hungry and exhausted in the long run. The roads were full of fugitives, German civilians, workers from many occupied countries, forced to work for the Germans and P.O.W.s, all of them on their way to the west, with only one objective: remain in front of the Russians! Our guards kept us together and had us stopped for the night at barns along the way. The farmers were ordered to boil potatoes for us, our daily ration consisted of three boiled potatoes each. Saved up food from the Red Cross-parcels soon ran out, till the last days I saved a chocolate-bar and a tin of beans. I shared the chocolate-bar with a buddy who was in bad shape and I gave the tin of beans to a giant of a gunner who was starving. The tin had swollen up, I didn't trust the contents any more. I warned him for that, but he heated it on an improvised fire, emptied it completely and it didn't give him any trouble.

Finally, in early April, we arrived at Camp 357 Fallingbostel, a little city north of Hannover. We were housed in a giant circus tent with straw for beds.

#### L I B E R A T I O N .

On April 17, 1945, I awoke early in the morning by, what I realized only later, a strange silence. I carefully looked through a tent-opening, outside there was nobody to be seen. Not a single German guard and the watch towers were empty. I was quite at a loss and carefully walked to the main gate. Still no Germans! Then I suddenly saw German uniforms scattered on the ground. The guards had put on civilian clothes and had taken to their heels. I ran back to the tent and shouted out the news. Everybody exited the tent. The excitement was indescribable. Yet we couldn't do anything but wait for the things to come, we were still behind barb-wire and the gates were firmly shut.

At about 10 p.m. we heard a clanging noise coming into our direction. And there they were! A column of British Army tanks rolled past the camp. You would not believe the cheers. They kept going, but soon a British quarter-master corps arrived. The main gate was forced open and cheered by everybody, the British entered the camp. The first thing set up was a kitchen and at last, after all these months, a warm meal! And the best of all: white bread! In the days that followed we were driven by trucks to a captured German airfield and from there we flew to Brussels in a D.C.-3.

It was there that we were housed in deserted Belgian army barracks. We were still guests of the British and I must say, they were extremely good to us. A British officer gave us 800 francs, saying: "Boys, go to town and enjoy yourselves. If you run out of money, come back for more". Together with Oliver Smith, a buddy from my hometown, I walked through the gate of the barracks. It was only then, that we realized, that we were really free! After having been prisoners for over 14 months we were free to go or stay where-ever we wanted. Believe me, it was a wonderful feeling and at the same time it was almost difficult to get used to it.

The British officer had told us, that there was a service-club at Brussels, run by Americans, fitted with all modern conveniences. Oliver and I decided to take rooms there. This seemed top-luxury to us: a room with a bathroom and a bed with real sheets! We got a kind reception, but on our way to our rooms Oliver remarked, that this was really something different from a P.O.W.-camp. The servant in charge who heard this, understood that we were ex P.O.W.s, he stopped us and asked if we had already been deliced. When he noticed, that we didn't really understand what he was talking about, we were inexorably turned away. Outside it had grown dark meanwhile, so it was difficult to find back the barracks. In the kitchen the lights were on. We went in and helped ourselves to as much grilled bacon and pastries as we wanted.

After 2 days we were trucked to the American camp "Lucky Strike" in Le Havre, France. That's where we got deliced. We were also debriefed there about our mission to Frankfurt.

At the end of that interrogation I asked the officer, who noted my statement, to take care that our pilot, Clarence Strait, would be given recognition for the uncommon act of skill and bravery he showed on February 4, 1944, an act with which he saved our lives. The answer was: "My boy, the war is over, there is no need for heroes". An answer I've never been able to accept.

At Le Havre we boarded an old Libertyship for the voyage home. Just before departure a British war-correspondent came into our camp to interview us about our war-experiences. The man was in a hurry, he had to catch a plane to England to get his story in the evening-papers.

On the bonnet of his jeep I quickly wrote a letter home and I asked the Englishman to mail it for me in England. In this way my mother knew that I was on my way to the States, long before she got the official notice. The slow Liberty-ship sailed under convoy to the U.S.A. It took us almost a month. Originally the ship had been loaded with rations to take German P.O.W.s to the States, so we were stuffed with sauerkraut and Frankfurters. When we finally arrived at New York harbour I stayed awake to see the Statue of Liberty.

From New York we went by train to Fort Dix and there I got the ticket home I'd been so keen on and a thirty day leave.

My mother was overwhelmed with joy and at my home-coming she wanted to surprise me with a real American steak-dinner. She had gone to the butcher's with all her meat-coupons, but what a pity, he'd only got hotdogs. The very things I'd had to eat on the ship for a month! The dear poor soul had to cry a little about it, but the joy for being home again didn't suffer a bit from it! I always considered Liberation Day, for me April 17 1945, one of the happiest days of my life, but when I arrived home on June 6th, I raised my arms and shouted" "Praise the Lord".

Over Frankfurt Clarence Strait made up his mind to see "the lady" home. That did not come off, the lady was left behind at Lekkerkerk. However, at least one of her crewmembers came home: Herman Alesiani!

#### CHAPTER 4.

##### WANTED, CREW.

There are few events that took place during W.W.II that I remember as vividly as the one I partly witnessed as an almost 12-year-old boy. It happened on a Friday-afternoon, early 1944 when my friends and I at half past three, when school was over, heard the exciting news: "*An aircraft has landed at the Tiendweg.*"

We immediately hurried into that direction. There was a strong, cold wind from the north-west and every now and then there were sleetshowers. We walked across the meadows to the Tiendweg and pretty soon we saw a black pillar of smoke over the land. When we arrived at the Tiendweg we saw the cause of the smoke. At the end of a black stripe of rooted up earth there was the huge tail of a big aircraft. On the tail was the letter J in a lighter-coloured rectangle. A part of the fuselage of the aircraft, from the tail, was still intact and on it a white star was clearly to be seen. The rest of the aircraft had burnt out, through the smoke you could see the skeleton of the frame. The wing was exactly over a canal and you could see the twisted propeller-shafts protruding above the land.

Then already I was very much interested in anything that had to do with aviation and airplanes and I was often prying about the aircraft-identificationbooks that belonged to one of my uncles. That's why I recognized the aircraft from the slowly sloping line from the tail to the fuselage. This was an American B-17, a Flying Fortress! My friends laughed at me. Wasn't everybody saying that it was an English aircraft, one of the Tommies? Among the lookers-on I saw my uncle Jan, who was fishing something up from the canal along the Tiendweg, using his crutch. It was a glove with a little electric plug on it. He quickly smuggled the thing away.

At home of course I wanted to tell my story, but it struck me that my father hardly responded to it. In the following days I heard the wildest stories. The crew had been arrested by one single policeman riding a lady's bike, among the crew-members there were pitch-black people etc. My father reacted to most of those stories with the word: "Rubbish".

He seemed to know more about it. That however became obvious only after the war was over.

Then a thick, brown, leather jacket turned up, completely lined with lambskin and with a fine fur collar. A real pilot's jacket, a bomberjacket. The jacket, rolled into a piece of tarpaulin, had been hidden in a reed-stack in an outlying polder till the end of the war. It was then too, that I was told how my father got it. He had witnessed the landing of the aircraft, he had seen eight men exiting it,(he had not seen Alesiani and the tailgunner) and saw, how one of them fired a flare into the aircraft so that it caught fire. As he was at work "beyond the Tiendweg", he could help those

eight men to cross a canal via his wooden boat. One crew-member was helped on by two others, there was something the matter with one of his legs. When leaving the wooden boat, the man who had set fire to the aircraft, pushed the bomberjacket into my father's hands. My father pointed out an escape-direction, to the north-east, but then he made himself scarce. First there was the exploding ammunition of the burning aircraft, second there were the first lookers-on arriving at the Tiendweg. It would be better if nobody saw that he took something with him from the plane, for who could you trust after all during those days? With the bomberjacket rolled into his own coat he went on his way home. Yet somebody must have seen it and must have blabbed, for on one of the next days my mother got a member of the "Grüne Polizei" (German military police) at her door. How she managed, I don't know, but he let her put him off.

In the years shortly after the war, during wintry bicycle-rides to trainings-college at the town of Schoonhoven, the bomberjacket served me very well. For years the jacket, neatly greased, was stored in a wardrobe. A souvenir of an event at Lekkerkerk, that had impressed me very much. Yet at the back of my mind there was always that unsatisfactory feeling, that what I had witnessed at Lekkerkerk, was only a small part of a much bigger story. Where did the aircraft come from? Why did it make a forced landing? What had become of the crew? Did they survive their captivity? These and other questions from time to time occupied my mind. To get an answer to my questions, fifteen years ago I decided to try and find the crew. An attendant thought was, that if I was to be successful, it would be nice to give back the bomberjacket to the original owner: the pilot. At first my efforts were without much result. Perhaps I questioned the wrong persons, or I approached the wrong official bodies. Perhaps there wasn't that much interest for such an event yet, but it is a fact, that even the exact date of the forced landing could not be traced. About five years ago I started anew and already soon I was more successful.

It would carry me too far to mention all persons and official bodies, who have been ready to help my investigations. After many letters and telephonecalls a "File B-17 Lekkerkerk" developed.

I owe much to Mr.H.Th.M.Kaufmann, head of the section Airforce-history of the Royal Dutch Airforce and his staff. They provided me, sometimes gathered with much tenacity from their side, with copies of all the reports about the landing at Lekkerkerk, that were to be found in various archives.

Though the reports contradicted each other at certain parts, it became clear that the landing took place on February 4th 1944 after 12 o'clock noon. Besides that a number of facts came to light which have been worked out elsewhere in this booklet. However no clues about the crew of the aircraft were to be found anywhere, no names, no details about the place of their captivity, nothing! I was advised to contact Mr.W.Berrevoets at Lekkerkerk. As a retired policeman and directly involved, he might have information at his disposal about the crew. That proved not to be the case, but Mr.Berrevoets could give me much shocking information about what happened at about February 4, especially concerning the reactions from the side of the Germans. To my surprise he advised me to contact Wen Boon.

While Wen succeeded in gathering much interesting material from testimonies, I hadn't come one step nearer to "my crew". I was already being thinking about calling in the help of the T.V.programme "TRACKLESS". (Very popular T.V.programme in the Netherlands, the staff of it succeeds time and again to find people all over the world).

Then the golden tip came! My daughter Annette, who worked as a registered nurse in Los Angeles in the U.S.A., was on holiday in Holland in August 1992. I told her about our investigations and the problems in finding the crew. In Los Angeles she knew a woman-colonel of the American Air Force and she promised to ask her advice. Via the colonel I got the address of "EX-POW-BULLETIN", a monthly magazine for American ex-prisoners of war. On October 14, 1992 I wrote an extensive letter to the editorship of this magazine and requested them to cooperate in tracing down the crew of the B-17. Just before Christmas 1992 there was suddenly a letter on our doormat from an unknown sender in the U.S.A. Herman Alesiani reported himself as one of the crew-members!

A moving and at the same time very satisfying moment, that will be clear.

In an enthusiastic letter he told about everything that had led to the events in Lekkerkerk, his experiences after the landing and his captivity. He finished his letter with the sigh: "I can't believe I'm writing this after 48 years!"

Between him and me an extensive correspondence developed, pictures were exchanged and we spoke to one another on the phone. Herman appeared to have tried to find his old crew for years already, but in vain till this moment. In one of his letters he wrote, that he would like to come to Holland, together with his wife Pauline, to see the landing-site back. Wen and I had already been playing with that idea and we decided to try and make something unforgettable of that visit. Of course it would have been very nice, if Alesiani would have been standing at the "Smalle Kampje" on February 4th, 1994, exactly fifty years after the landing. For several reasons that proved not to be practicable. However, Wen and I, together with one of the witnesses of the landing, went to the landing-site on that particular day, a foggy February-day. I must admit that, now many questions round the events of fifty years ago had been answered, it was a moving moment to be there again.

Meanwhile Wen started to organize the Alesianis visit to Lekkerkerk, the Rotterdam Dagblad came out with an article about the landing of "Dolly" and the expected visit of Mr. and Mrs. Alesiani, while my wife and I from Dronten made the last arrangements with the visitors. At last there was the final message:

"We'll land at Schiphol next May 16, at 7.45 a.m."

## CHAPTER 5.

### THE VISIT.

And there I was, at Schiphol-airport-arrivals, in the early hours of the morning of Monday May 16, 1994, waiting for the announcement from the speakers: "Delta Airlines, flight 38 from Atlanta, has landed". When the eagerly expected words came, it was time to get posted at the right exit, carrying a notice saying "Mr. and Mrs. Alesiani". We didn't know each other, did we, I might only be able to recognize Herman from a picture he'd sent me. It was no problem at all. When they came through the slidingdoor amidst the crowd of travellers I at once recognized Herman and he and his wife saw the notice. It became a spontaneous greeting as if we were people, who had known each other for years. Herman and Pauline, yet both in their seventies, appeared to be vital, interested, open and cordial people and what struck me from the beginning, was Herman's sense of humour and Pauline's warm personality. From Schiphol I called my wife to tell her, that we were to go on our way to Dronten.

She asked: "What are they like?" I answered: "They're very nice people" and there was no need to review that opinion in the week that followed.

When we drove into Flevoland the Alesianis were impressed by the stately landscape, the beautiful colours of the vegetation on the fields and especially by the fact, that we were about 5 meters below sealevel. Herman remarked drily: "I hope Hans Brinkers has got his thumb ready".

That afternoon we visited the center of Dronten. In front of the town-hall there is the aimen-monument, a tribute to the Allied aimen from W.W.II. The monument consists of a propeller of a British Lancaster-bomber that was found when southern Flevoland had been reclaimed, between Dronten and Lelystad, the province capital. During the reclaiming of the polder, tens of aircraftwrecks were found, a tangible proof of the fact, that the air-war took many young lives over the Netherlands too. So it has been a good idea to commemorate all these people at this place. On May 16th there were still many flowers round the monument, which were put there on May 4th (the Dutch national commemoration-day of the dead of W.W.II). Herman and Pauline were very much impressed by the attention that is paid in the Netherlands after so many years to the Allied aimen who lost their lives. Every year Dronten is host to a great number of ex-airgunners, most of them from England, but from Canada and the U.S.A. as well. They use to arrive round May 4th to commemorate their fallen colleagues together. Inside the town-hall these veterans have their own small museum, "the air-gunnersroom", in which lots of objects and pictures remind us of the air-war.

When we visited this museum with Herman and Pauline, to his surprise Herman saw a big picture on the wall of a B-17 with a J on the tail. It was an aircraft of his own bomb-group and besides that it was the only picture of a B-17 in the museum. Of course we've been talking a lot during those days. Fortunately there were no language-problems and Herman and Pauline were people with whom you could talk about any subject. Very quickly the ties of friendship were growing between the four of us, our guests felt comfortable and there was a lot of laughing about Herman's many jokes with which he kept surprising us. The story of "Dolly" was closely gone through once more and during those conversations Herman was often surprised by the things he spontaneously remembered. When I asked him if he had any idea where the rumour came from in Lekkerkerk 1944, that there were black people among the crew-members, he was suddenly reminded of the name of a crew-member from Mexican origin: "Antonio Elizondo, one of the waist-gunners, was a very dark boy, perhaps it was because of him".

Herman hasn't any psychical problems left from his war-experiences. "I've always been able to talk freely about everything I went through, also with Pauline and our children. I didn't bottle it up, that's not how I was made, everything has really been digested. With our visit to Holland I'm hoping to round off a thing or two".

That what Herman has left from it, is a profound dislike of war. "Sacrificing so many young people, no matter of which nationality, can never be explained away, it's a horrible waste of young life".

During our conversations Pauline, like Herman, appeared to be of Sicilian origin. Her parents emigrated to the U.S.A. as well. And she may call herself a "war-veteran" as well.

When Herman was in captivity, she served as a nurse in a military hospital in the Phillipine Islands. After the war they met and together they succeeded in making a very good living in Monessen.

As I said before, we talked a lot, from light-heartedly to seriously, but for Herman there was one day, he was looking forward to: Friday, May 20, the visit to Lekkerkerk. On the morning of May 20, "the big day" like Herman called it and

transformed to "Dolly Day" by Wen Boon, he was a little bit on edge. The drive to Lekkerkerk lasted a bit too long for him, but once we had arrived at Bak's little celebration hall much of the tension disappeared and you could see how he and Pauline enjoyed themselves. In a relaxed atmosphere, sometimes not without any emotions, Alesiani and those present exchanged experiences. Herman eagerly went into the questions he was asked and let the party enjoy his humorous view on many matters.

The fact that the Mayor, Mr. Van 't Laar, was present on behalf of the city-council, was appreciated very much by Herman and Pauline, as well as the kind words the Mayor addressed to both of them in his speech.

Afterwards Herman said to me, that he was especially touched by the interest in and the gratitude for what he had done during the war. "It moved me and it did me good", were his words. After the meeting at Bak's we went in a small company to "'t Smalle Kampje", the landing-site. On arrival there, Herman hesitated for a moment. He missed a canal.

When we told him, that one of the three canals had been filled up to construct a road, he was convinced. "It was just here", said Herman. Then he did, what he already intended to do for a long time: he kissed the ground. "What the Pope can do, I can do as well", he joked, but this remark could not disguise the deeper meaning of his act: a fond gratitude for the fact, that he had survived at that place fifty years ago. Perceptibly impressed Herman kept looking around, digesting with difficulty, that he was at the spot again, where his life took a total different turn in 1944. From "'t Smalle Kampje" the company went to the Loetfarm, the place of the arrest. There Herman got into problems. Everything looked different from what he remembered. He didn't recognize the farm. Many things can change in fifty years and this holds certainly good for the surroundings of the Loetfarm. New roads have been constructed, there has been a lot of planting up and the surrounding houses have changed as well. On what is a storage yard now, then there was a big reddish site. From it the construction of the provincial motor-road, now called C.G. Roosroad, was controlled. Most likely Alesiani and his buddies were "received" by the Germans in that building. So it's no wonder, that Alesiani didn't recognize the place, the building what it was probably all about, had disappeared.

Another thing Herman couldn't imagine, was, that they had covered such a big distance from "'t Smalle Kampje" till here, walking all the way. "You were fifty years younger then, dear", Pauline said with a smile, indicating by that remark, that Herman then, as a young fellow, under pressure of the circumstances, will hardly have felt the distance.

At the Loet, having coffee together, we said goodbye to Wen, but not after Herman and Pauline had thanked him for organizing "Dolly Day", for Herman in his own words: "The day of my life".

On Monday May 23 we saw Herman and Pauline to Schiphol for the journey back to Monessen. We said goodbye to two people who were tired by all the experiences, but who felt very satisfied. We had become friends in a very short time, which gave extra contents to the idea, that a story, which had started fifty years ago, now had been completed with a happy end.

## CHAPTER 6.

### ALESIANI'S EXPLANATION OF THE FINDS.

On May 20, 1994, Herman Alesiani came back to Lekkerkerk for one day. The day started with a cosy gathering at Piet Bak's. On the one hand there were Mr. and Mrs. Alesiani, on the other hand there was a group of people who, in one way or another,



had memories of the events of February 4 1944. Mutually questions were asked and answered.

*Stien v.d. Berg-Aamoudse* heard how Alesiani completely changed his opinion on her father. By correspondence it had become clear to him, that the truck-driver, who had transported him and the other crew-members, hadn't been the Judas for whom he had always mistaken him. Not understanding the language he had assumed that Aamoudse at the time had been disputing about the amount of prize-money he would get for handing over the airmen. Now he understood that Aamoudse, who was one of the few who still drove a truck during the war, and because of that every now and then was summoned by the city-council or the police to deliver a load of something for them and that he didn't act on his own authority. Now it also seemed plausible to him that the rather excited conversation Aamoudse had, had probably to do with the extra ration of wooden generator-blocks he wanted to have for this drive. Alesiani was pleased to be able to tell Stien, that he could reconsider his hard judgment about her father.

*Adrie van der Graaf*, a florist from the Tiendweg, showed Alesiani some of the cartridges he had kept from the aircraft. The air-gunner could tell Adrie everything about it.

The red-pointed bullets were tracers. At any ten bullets there was one red-pointed one in the belts. These bullets traced a stripe of fire and that's how the gunner could see in what direction he was firing. The blue-pointed bullet was a dangerous one! It was filled with explosives, it exploded as soon as it hit a target. It may be called a miracle, that among the many cartridges, the boys took home at the time, there were not many of these blue ones. One of the games of the youngsters, hitting the bullets, with these specimen would certainly have had disastrous consequences. The black, armour-piercing bullets were the least dangerous ones..

*Wim Berrevoets* brought the Very-pistol that he had temporarily taken back from the Regional Museum at Krimpen aan den IJssel. According to Alesiani these Verey-pistols were used when the bombers had arrived at the place where the bombs should be dropped. In this way one of the aircraft marked the target.

*Arie Ros* could show two things. The lock and handle that Goris Bouter had taken with him at the time. This object moved Alesiani a bit. Herman Alesiani was one of the airgunners and in action he was lying in a small turret which was at the belly of the aircraft. This space was so limited, that only small-built men were selected for this post. But even for small-built men the space was too limited to be seated in it with a parachute. Alesiani's parachute was, in case he needed it, above him in the fuselage of the bomber.

From the fuselage he had to wriggle into the turret. The entrance to the turret was closed by a hatch in the bottom of the aircraft. The lock and handle Arie Ros showed, was in the escape-hatch at the top of the aircraft, which Alesiani used when he, together with his buddy Peter Selvidge, exited the aircraft.

The second object Arie Ros showed, was a little compass he found. Alesiani knew, that part of the crew, possibly the officers, had such a thing in their equipment. Perhaps to be used when escaping after a crash-landing? He, as an airgunner, had never got such a thing.

*Ary Verwaal's* bomberjacket was recognized by Alesiani as a pilot's jacket. As the dog-tag was missing, he couldn't say whether this jacket had belonged to the pilot or to the co-pilot. At any rate it was a pilot's jacket, you could recognize that from

the back, which was worn out in certain places. Pilot's were sitting with their backs against armour-plates in the metal frames of their flying-seats. During flights which lasted for hours, the pilots shifted their positions every now and then and then they rubbed with their backs against the armour-plates. The many worn-out spots showed, that the one who had worn this jacket had spent many hours, shoving on his aircraft-seat.

*Uncle Jan's* glove was the last find presented, not the least funny one, because of the anecdotic story which had to be told with the glove. It was a pilot's glove, necessary for flying at high altitudes, where not only the outside temperatures are tens of degrees below zero, but the inside temperatures as well. The bombers were not equipped with the luxurious pressurized cabins in which tourists are transported to their holiday-resorts nowadays.

To keep the hands sufficiently warm, the gloves were electrically heated. In the fingers were copper-wires which got warm when the glove was plugged in and thus the fingers were kept warm.

When Ary's uncle Jan came to size up the situation, he saw something floating in a canal, he fished it up with his crutch and saw it was a glove. He took it with him and at home he immediately hid it in a barn. There was already so much twaddling about the jacket his brother had got, the fact had even come to the Germans' ears, that uncle Jan carefully hid the glove. The glove would not be worth the misery which would be caused, when it might be discovered. After the war, more or less by chance, uncle Jan found the glove back, but now two fingers and the thumb were missing.

At first he thought, mice had been feasting on the leather, but on second thoughts that couldn't be possible. The mice in that case wouldn't only have eaten the fingers, but would have bitten off the wires as well, as these were clearly cut off. The mystery was solved by Granny. When peeling potatoes, she used to protect her finger by a rubber cap. When you couldn't buy rubber caps any more and Granny had found the glove in the barn, her problem was solved. She cut off two fingers and the thumb and she could go on peeling potatoes as usual.

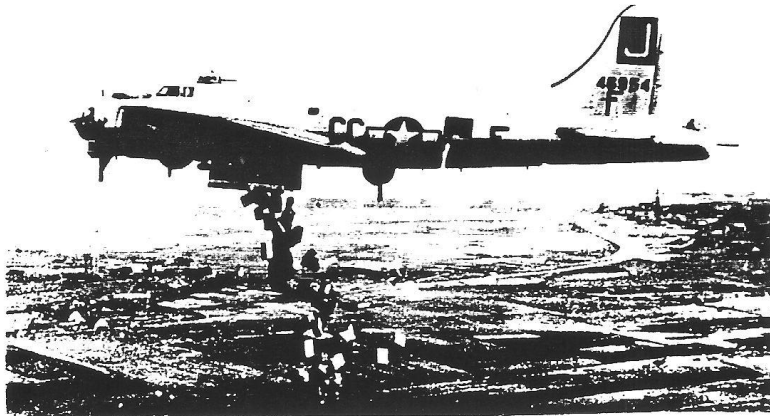
## CHAPTER 7.

### C. BERNARD STRAIT, AN ACE.

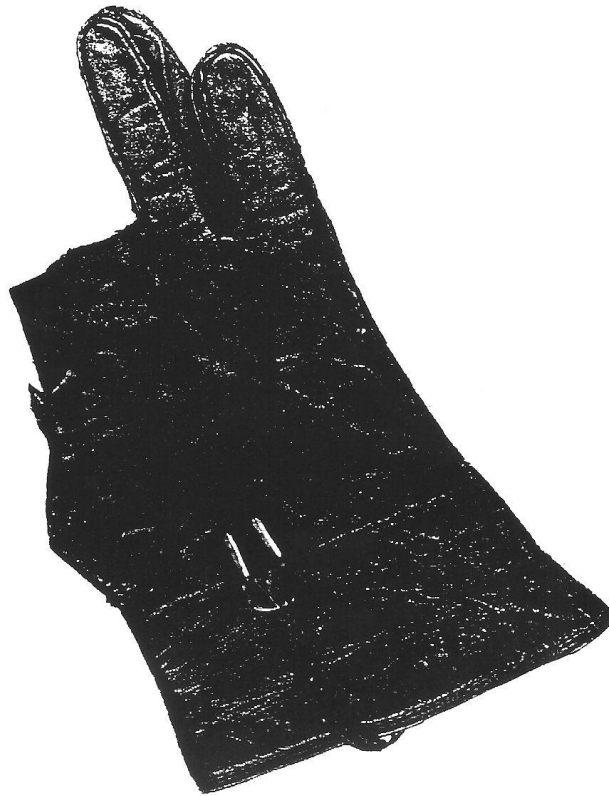
In the years after B-17 "Dolly" had landed at Lekkerkerk, it became more and more clear to me, that the pilot had achieved something particular. As during the last few years the investigation of the crew progressed, this achievement appeared to be unique as well. That's because, also in official files, there hasn't been mentioned a second case of a successful belly-landing of a B-17 *in a marshy pasture-area in occupied western Europe.*

Besides that, Strait didn't land lengthways a meadow, but right across a couple of meadows and canals. The risk, that the aircraft at the chosen direction of landing turns right over or breaks into pieces, increases a lot. Why the pilot landed into this direction, I didn't understand till I heard Herman Alesiani's explanation. He landed with failing engines, the B-17 flew as if it was an enormous glider! That's why he had no choice: he had to land into the direction of his glide to the ground.

Every plane has a certain "stallspeed", an aviation-term for the speed, over which the aircraft will still be manageable. Should it get under the stallspeed it will inevitably whirl down like a leaf. When over the Dutch coast the two remaining engines quit, Strait had to act within a few seconds.



A B-17 of Alesiani's Group, with the J on the tail, dropping K-rations over Valkenburg air-base on May 1st 1945, the first American fooddrops over western Holland.



"Granny's glove"

Making use of the speed, he still had at that moment, he made a turn towards land. After that, to keep speed, he kept the nose of the aircraft down and in this way he got into a glide. The problem the pilot faced during that glide was, not to dive down too steeply. It would provide speed, but there would be a big chance then, that one couldn't get the aircraft out of that dive any more and it would bore itself deep into the earth. Would he however keep the aircraft too level, then it would lose so much speed, that it would become unmanageable and would crash.

With the utmost capability and in perfect teamwork with his co-pilot, Strait accomplished this task; it was even going to be a relatively smooth landing, the aircraft didn't break into pieces and the crew got off lightly without anybody being severely hurt.

Surveying the whole flight, from the moment, when over Germany the two right engines were knocked out, the pilot's performance becomes even more brilliant. When a four-engined aircraft loses the power of two engines at one side, the aircraft gets into a sideway course, the so-called "crab-course". In the case of "Dolly" the two left engines, running at full throttle, pulled the aircraft to the right. The pilot could only solve this problem by strongly steering a course to the left. Probably he did so by putting both feet with much strength on the left rudder pedal. As long as the aircraft kept flying in this way, he had to continue this effort.

This necessary course-correction could not prevent the aircraft from showing the tendency of drawing to the right. That's why it flew a more northern course than the instruments indicated. According as the flight advanced, it became more and more difficult for the navigator to fix the right position.

Thus it is not surprising, that when he reported to see the coast, he thought that the British Channel was in front of him. That's why the crew only knew that they were in Holland when they saw youngsters wearing wooden shoes! Strait didn't choose the easiest way. He agreed on flying on "lameley" to Frankfurt to drop the bombs only there, on target, instead of dropping them somewhere at random. After that he decided to see the aircraft and the crew safely home.

Of course the co-pilot had an important task in all this. The better the mutual cooperation of the crew of a B-17, and that especially went for the pilot and the co-pilot, the more chance of survival there was. When I put "the last flight of Dolly" to a retired captain of four-engined passenger-planes, he reacted as follows: "That boy was of course very lucky, but that does not take away anything from his uncommon performance. With the little experience, these young fellows of about 21 years old had, he must have been a born flyer with great cool-headedness and skill, qualities that saved his crew's lives".

## CHAPTER 8.

### THE SOURCE - MATERIAL.

To get an image of the crash on February 4, 1944, it was soon clear that the source-material necessary for it, should be found in official documents, general books of reference and especially the stories from witnesses. Finding the witnesses and particularly the crew-members of the bomber, was an investigation in itself.

As for the documents: the Defence Department sent a brief copy of a report of February 4, 1944. In it a forced landing of a B-17 was mentioned, at about 500mrs. north of the river Lek, 8 km. south-east of Rotterdam. "Aircraft set fire to by crew". Later the Department sent a completing report, such with reference to information by the Regional-Archive-Service Middle Holland at the city of Gouda. In reports of

the police-archive Gouda was noted, that on February 4, 1944, at 3.28hrs. p.m., a Labas-message had been received requesting "tracing, arresting and bringing up of 12 persons, being the crew of a B-17 that came down burning at about 2 o'clock p.m." At about 5.15 p.m. this message was withdrawn again. The message had been sent by the deputy group-commander of the military police at Lekkerkerk. This scarcity of reports from Dutch police-archives can possibly be explained from the fact, that the case wasn't treated by the Dutch, but by the German authorities. It was striking that the official documents were not identical. In one case it said: "coming down of a burning aircraft", in another document it said: "aircraft set fire to by crew".

The points of time and the number of crew-members weren't identical in various reports as well.

Looking for statements by witnesses produced more material, but here as well the stories were not always identical.

The search for years for the crew-members, Ary Verwaal's work, can be found in one of his contributions. Collecting the stories of Lekkerkerkers went according to the "ink-spot-system", talking to one of them provided you with the names of some others. One got the impression that the coming down of the bomber didn't impress the adult Lekkerkerkers of those days very much. Conversations with the few, still alive old people, are an indication to that. They didn't have any or only vague memories of the events and didn't remember that they had been more or less impressed at that time. It was quite a different case with those who were about 10 to 12 years old in 1944. With a single exception stories with relatively few real, factual elements, in most cases memories of a tickling boys-adventure. Nosing around the huge aircraft-wreck, taking home all kinds of things and then especially the bullets.

If one studies the recent past, one cannot go without personal memories as sources of information. This investigation, in which several memories of contemporaries could be put beside one another, taught us again, that one should be very careful in using this source-material. A testimony by a contemporary or an eye-witness is no guarantee for the historic faithfulness at which a historic investigation should be aimed. Some stories suggest an almost photographic record, but by comparing them to other memories they appear to be drastically distorted.

Often fragments of the original observation have faded away.

Thus Anton den Ouden couldn't possibly remember what clothing the crew had on, not even the colour of it. But he had been with them for over five minutes and he had talked to them. Neither did he remember if there were coloured people among the crew.

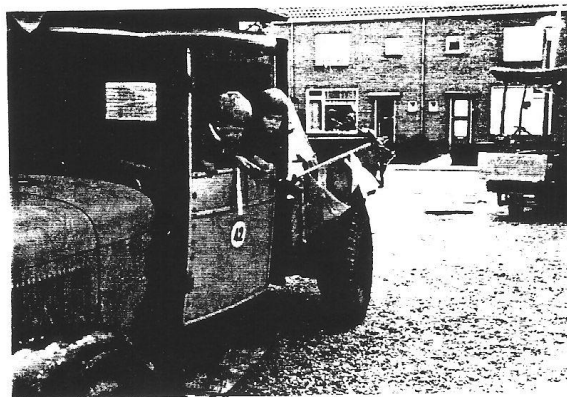
Arie Ros's machinegun also came forward in a number of other stories, much more vague than in Arie's story, but the element of the angry father was there, dropping the thing somewhere into a deep canal. In this case probably "hear-say-stories" have been mixed with personal experiences. Sometimes the story "that the aircraft was on fire and the bullets were buzzing round your ears" is a bit overdone. In the report of the fire-brigade, in which is written about the moment they tried to extinguish the fire, nothing is mentioned about explosions etc.

There were stories, all with an element of overdoing, that started with: "I didn't hear or see, but I heard somebody say that . . . .". After these opening words stories followed about paper-money that had been found, Dutch, French and even German. Also about an action by the Underground to get something out of the wreck that on no condition should fall into German hands.

There were also facts that were right in itself, parts of stories of crashed aircraft elsewhere in the Krimpenerwaard, (the polder in which Lekkerkerk is situated) but in the stories they got situated at "t Smalle Kampje" in February 1944.

In our opinion, the source-material we gathered, enabled us to build up a nice, journalistic-historic story. For a historic article about "Dolly in Lekkerkerk 1944" it's not enough. Possibly it'll ever come to that, if the missing source-material emerges, perhaps this contribution will be an impulse to that.

Mr.A.Aamoudse, the truckdriver who transported "Dolly's" crew.



The old Ford-truck, picture taken in 1965, it was 30 years old then.

## PART 2

### PREFACE.

In October 1994 the Historical Encyclopedia Krimpenerwaard published the original and first version in Dutch of the story about the last mission of B-17 G "Dolly" and her crew.

Immediately after publication I started to translate the booklet into English, my wife Elly typed the text into the computer in a nice lay-out and soon "*An aircraft has landed at the Tiendweg*" saw the light.

This booklet found its way to those in the U.S.A. and the U.K. who in any way were connected with the events which were described, or had contributed to our search for the facts.

In the last paragraph of our booklet we expressed the hope that it might be an impulse to lay hands on missing source material.

As for the events at Lekkerkerk on February 4, 1944, we were disappointed: no new material emerged. Facts about "Mission 54" and its backgrounds however, suddenly and at a rapid tempo began to stream in! It had taken me years to collect the necessary material to write my part of the booklet and now, within a few months, a great many new and interesting facts came into my hands, so many, that there was every reason to revise the original story in some aspects and to write a second part to it.

Why that sudden outburst of information? Partly it was caused by some strokes of luck, partly it was a result of the interest several people in England and the U.S.A. took in what I was doing, but above all it was their willingness to help me and to provide me with information and documents, of which I didn't even know they existed.

Here follows, how my "Dolly-file" more than doubled within half a year. It all started in the early spring of 1995, when Elly and I were planning a holiday in England. As usual, we would take a car-ferry from Holland to England and drive to our destination, which would be Poole on the south coast this time. At our travel-agency we were informed, that there was no day-boat on the Flushing-Sheerness line, the one which was the shortest way to our destination, so we decided for the Hook of Holland-Harwich line. Just a coincidence, but one with unexpected consequences! The idea struck me, that Framlingham was less than an hour's drive from Harwich, so why wouldn't we take a bed- and-breakfast there and have a look around in the area, where the old 390th base had been? As up to that moment, I hadn't been able to find anything in books of reference about what was left of the base, I assumed that, like many other former USAAF bases, 390th BG-base had disappeared from the Framlingham area.

To be sure, I wrote a letter to the Framlingham Town-council announcing that we would visit the town next May 3rd and asking if there was anything left of the old base. I explained why I was interested in the history of that particular base.

To my great surprise and joy, within a few days a letter arrived from Mr. Tom Fuller, clerk to the Council, in which he told me, that there was quite a lot left of "Framlingham Aerodrome (Parham)" and that he had contacted a Mr. L. Keeping, a former American 390th BG. serviceman, who was willing to help me with further information. The next day I got a letter from Mr. LeRoy O. Keeping, written on paper showing an image of the Framlingham Control-tower, now a 390th BG. Memorial Museum. Mr. Keeping told us that he would gladly show us around on the field and in the control tower and that he could book a good bed-and-breakfast place for us.

Of course this was exciting news and now we were even more looking forward to our holiday in England.

Our experiences of that day at Framlingham have been described in chapter 4, but here I must already reveal a surprise that LeRoy Keeping had in store for us: He gave me the complete crew-list of A/C 42-31292 B-17 G "Dolly", a list I'd been looking for for ages!

Back home at the end of May, among the pile of mail that was waiting for us after a three-week-holiday, there was a letter from Mr. John S. Warner of 390th Memorial Museum Foundation at Tucson, Arizona, U.S.A., in which he gave me the addresses of "Dolly's" pilot, C. Bernard Strait and the co-pilot, George F. Wilson. New excitement! Mr. Warner told me, that he had been telephoned by Lt. Col. Lois Schwartz, USAF, regarding B-17 "Dolly" and her crew. This was the same Colonel, who had given me the golden tip that resulted in finding Herman Alesiani! (See part 1, page 25).

My daughter Annette, living in Los Angeles, had shown Mrs. Schwartz a copy of the English translation of the booklet and Lt. Col. Schwartz "found" the 390th Mem. Museum Foundation and Mr. Warner.

I then sent Mr. Warner a copy of the booklet and in reply he sent me a lot of most valuable information on Mission 54, among others all the official reports of 390th BG. on the events of February 4, 1944, the mission target Frankfurt. Lots of pieces of the jig-saw-puzzle suddenly fell in place! The contents of these reports have been worked out in chapter 2.

Meanwhile I tried to contact Mr. C. Bernard Strait, the pilot, at the address I obtained from Mr. Warner. The weeks went by, but my letter was not answered. Then I wrote a letter to Mr. George F. Wilson, the co-pilot and this time with remarkable success! A long letter, written by him, arrived, dated August 27th 1995, in which he expressed his surprise about my interest in his wartime experiences and his willingness to cooperate in my efforts to complete the story.

This contact was another landmark in the development of the "Dolly-story". Another exciting and moving moment, like the one when Herman Alesiani's first letter arrived.

After that first contact a number of letters from both sides followed. George Wilson's letters were a pleasure to read, giving a lot of valuable information and providing me with his special view on the subject, which was both very interesting and useful to me, as he gave me a backing to handle fifty-year-old memories and information in a careful way and with some feeling for their relativity. The reader will find George Wilson's contribution in chapter 3.

An unexpected result came from our visit to Framlingham. "The East Anglian Daily Times", a newspaper in the Framlingham area published an article on our visit. A British reader sent a cutting of this article to the Dutch "Association of Air-war documentalists, 1939 - 1945" who gave it a place in their Newsletter. Mr. Piet Brouwer, a member of the committee of that Association, read the article and was struck by a line that said: "Ary Verwaal, of Dronken" etc.

He realized, that "Dronken" must have been miss-spelled, it had to be "Dronten", the village where he lived himself! In the telephone-directory he found my name and to his great surprise he saw, that we were living in the same block of semi-bungalows, with only two bye-streets between our houses.

We soon made each others acquaintances and Mr. Brouwer proved to be able to provide me with a lot of information, the most important of which is "the Big Blue



Book" the history of 390th BG., published in 1947, a most valuable book for anyone who is interested in the air-war and by now a collector's item. I borrowed it from him and the book proved an indispensable source of information.

Of course I joined the Association and between Piet Brouwer and me a good contact developed, based on our mutual interest.

An amazing fact is, that when Herman Alesiani stayed with us, he often passed Brouwer's house on his morning-walks, not knowing, that many of the questions he and I had, could be answered from Piet Brouwer's extensive library, at a few feet from where Alesiani walked! Alesiani's name is even mentioned in these books several times!

David Wetherill, editor of the 390th Veterans Association Newsletter, sent me a copy of the Fall 1995 issue, in which he published a letter I sent to the Association, concerning the "Dolly"-story. Result of this article was, that I got some requests from interested people in England and the U.S.A., to send a copy of my booklet. One of the requests was by Mr. Lester Ippel, a former 390th BG. pilot, who happened to have taken part in three of the "Chow-hound" missions, the food drops over Holland. I asked him to write down his experiences during these remarkable missions, which he did. His story is to be found in chapter 1.

Then, at the end of January 1996, when part 2 of this book was on its way to completion, Pauline and Herman Alesiani had great news: They found Bernie Strait! Another happy and satisfying moment on the road to complete the "Dolly"-story. Without taking anything away from Alesiani's and Wilson's contributions, I had always considered Bernard Strait a key-figure, without whose story the book couldn't be finished. At any rate, he was the Captain! During the month of February I contacted him and his wife Marion, by telephone and by exchanging letters. Chapter 4 gives an account of those contacts.

I hope that all these new facts and memories, worked out in the following chapters, will be met with the same interest and understanding as our initial story did. It's just an effort to record the experiences of those "who were there", for them, for us and for those who'll come after us. If this booklet will help to give its readers a better understanding of what it was like for all those young airmen, far away from home during W.W.-II, it will have achieved its aim.

Dronten, May 1996.

Ary Verwaal.

## CHAPTER 1.

### STATION 153, PARHAM, 1943 - 1945.

Anyone, who would like to know the history of Station 153, Parham, and that of the men of 390th BG., should read "The story of the 390th Bombardment Group (H)", by Howard Vincent O'Brien and others, published in 1947.

It is a monument in itself for all those "who were there".

Unfortunately, "the big blue book" as it is nicknamed has been out of print for many years and is very rare.

I had the good luck to be able to borrow a copy from a fellow "Air-war documentalist" and it proves to be an indispensable source of information for anyone, who wants to try and understand what it was like at Station 153. In its

preface it says: "It is a record of activities and life on a heavy bombardment station written by the men of the many departments before the fighting and the travail of battle had stopped. Some things will not be found in the words or pictures, they are the calm, intrepid courage of the boys who flew the Fortresses, and took all the risks; the mud, the chill and the wet of the unpredictable English weather, the long winter nights, the crowded huts, the inadequate stoves. To those of us, who were there, the book will be a reminder of what we did. For others it will be the answer to the question: "What was it like?"

These sentences say exactly, why, even if one tries to tell the story of only one mission, one cannot leave out the story of the air-base where it all started. In this chapter I'll try to give an idea of wartime Station 153, Parham, however incomplete my account may be.

East Suffolk is farm country, very old farm country, with a rich history, going back for centuries. From the North Sea on the land rises gradually, sometimes flat, sometimes rolling, till at about 10 miles from the sea it attains an elevation of a little over a hundred feet. At the foot of the slope to the west is the small village of Parham and about three miles to the north is the little town of Framlingham.

It was here, on the high ground, that the British Air Ministry in January 1942 requisitioned a large area of land from the farmers in order to lay out an RAF airfield. Work was started in March 1942. The peace and quiet of centuries was roughly disturbed. The hedges, which so neatly divided the fields, disappeared, trees were pulled down, ditches filled in. The people who lived where the airfield was to be laid out, had to leave their houses, which were later blown up and the ground flattened out.

A tragedy for those families who felt strongly attached to their land, which had been cultivated by generations of farmers before them. A minor tragedy of course, compared to all the suffering this war had already caused, but yet a hard intervention in the lives of many people.

The land, lost by *Mr. Percy Kindred of Crabbes Farm*, formed the majority of the airfield. Crabbes Farm had a long history, it was originally built in the 16th Century. In spite of this fact, Mr. Kindred developed a special liking for the Eighth USAAF in general and for the 390th BG in particular. He was called "Friend of the Eighth". In volume 2 of "the 390th BG. Anthology" he describes his personal experiences with the Americans. I'll quote his contribution.

"What a beautiful aeroplane . . .". This was my first impression of the solitary B-17 F which landed gracefully at Station 153 Framlingham on 20th of April 1943. It came in from the direction of the North Sea, about 15 miles to the east. It landed on the main runway, then unfinished, and came to a stop near the junction of one of the intersecting runways. After the four propellers had jerked to a stop, out jumped the American crew, who, to my great surprise, appeared to be little more than schoolboys, obviously very excited and talkative".

After this first landing of a B-17 it was not before July 1943 that the 390th BG. arrived. About their missions Mr. Kindred says:

"During the daytime on mission days it was very quiet around the base. In the late afternoon distant specks in the sky above the horizon were our first sight of the B-17s coming home to Framlingham. We were always glad to see the planes

return but we grieved at the sight of red flares coming from the occasional bomber signalling that it had wounded airmen as they approached the base and landed. These planes were always given first priority to land. The empty, oil-stained hardstands, as dusk approached at nightfall, were an especially sad and poignant sight. But the hope that the young crewmen of these missing Fortresses had all managed to bail out in time always existed".

About the airmen Mr. Kindred tells us:

"Most of the American airmen I met were nice fellows and extremely generous. In fact, they were the most generous people I have ever met. If we were ever short of anything and they had it, you could be sure they would share it with you. They behaved like gentlemen and if ever they set a foot wrong I would only have to whisper and they never did it again. They were young men in a strange land, fighting and dying for this country, and it goes without saying that I held them in the highest regard".

At the end of his contribution Mr. Kindred tells about his feelings when the 390th BG. left Framlingham:

"We all looked forward to the time when the war would end, but when it did, and the last 390th Fortress lifted off from the main runway in June 1945, an awful feeling of emptiness and sadness came over me. As some of the B-17 crews waved goodbye to me from the waist gunners open window, I sat down on the perimeter track and wept.....

I shall always remember the 390th and nothing gives me greater pleasure than to welcome back any of the old veterans. Naturally, I am very proud to have been connected in a very small way with the 390th Bombardment Group".

Mr. Percy Kindred, President of 390 BG Memorial Air Museum, died on 15th August 1996. He will be greatly missed by all who knew him.

Early in 1943 the air-field was completed and was turned over to the 8th USAAF. It was a class A type heavy bomber base with three intersecting runways, the main one being 6400ft in length and the other two were 4400ft long and all 150ft wide. A perimeter track 3 1/2 miles long had hardstands branching off for aircraft dispersals. Two large T2 type hangars were used for aircraft maintenance. Some 400 buildings dotted the vicinity, among them Nissen hut accommodation for about 3000 personnel, a cinema, a chapel, Red Cross building, hospital, beerhalls and two huge kitchen complexes.

On 12 May 1943 the 95th Bombardment Group took possession. They had extremely bad luck. On one raid only three out of eighteen planes returned and the commanding officer went down. A few days later they were moved to another Base. In the first part of July the 390th arrived and took over.

The Group consisted of four Squadrons: 568th, 569th, 570th and 571st, each equipped with B-17 Flying Fortresses. They were based at Framlingham (Parham), Suffolk, from 14th July 1943 to 4th August 1945. Their first mission was on 12th August 1943, when an optical instrument factory at Bonn, Germany, was attacked. The last was 20th April 1945 to marshalling yards at Oranienburg, Germany. A total of 301 operations were flown, plus six food drop missions over Holland (Operation "Chowhound"), just prior to VE Day in May 1945. Over 19,000 tons of bombs were dropped for a loss of 176 aircraft; 144 Missing in Action and 32 to other causes. . . . .

The Group holds two D.U.C.s (distinguished unit citations) for Bombing Accuracy and two 8th Air Force records, one for the most enemy aircraft destroyed in any one mission (62) and the other for a gunner who flew 100 missions.

This history in a nutshell of 390th BG. may be quickly written and read, but one should never forget that it were the men of Station 153 who really wrote that history, whether they did their duty on the ground or in the air. During their stay in England, the men of 390th BG. built up an excellent record of service, but the price they paid for it was high, their history was written in blood, sweat and tears. Let's have a look at the story behind the proud record 390th BG. put up on October 10th 1943: 62 enemy aircraft destroyed in one mission.

On the morning of October 10th 1943 the briefed target was the built-up section of Münster, a rail center north of the Ruhr Valley. There was nothing unusual in the importance of the target. The crews were told, that in the target area a maximum of 245 single-engine and 290 twin-engine aircraft could oppose the operation. As they approached Münster, the three Groups that composed the 13th Combat Wing (100th BG., 95th BG. and 390th BG.) were hit in the most violent and concentrated attack yet made on an Eighth Air Force formation. Nearly 250 enemy planes engaged the Wing and fought viciously until the Fortresses had bombed. They showed definite tendencies of concentrating attacks on one Group at a time. After disposing of the 100th Group, the attack switched to the 390th, and then to the low squadron of the 95th Group.

At the time the fighters first hit the 100th Group, the formation was average. In two minutes' time the formation was broken up, and within seven minutes 12 of the 14 participating aircraft of 100th Group were shot down.

The Luftwaffe then turned on the 390th and added some tactics never seen before by B-17 crews.

While the FW-190s and ME-109s were slipping through the formation, twin-engine fighters stayed out of range and fired explosive cannon shells from twelve hundred to fifteen hundred yards. JU-88s attacked with rockets from eight hundred to a thousand yards, and a new feature was the use of Dornier bombers, which flew parallel to the formation and fired rockets from a fifteen hundred-yard range. One rocket entered a plane's fuselage, but before it could explode, the gunner picked it up and threw it overboard. He described it as a one pound dry cell battery with one end of tin, like a stove pipe.

Thunderbolt escort finally came to the rescue and drove the enemy away.

When the 390th Group returned to base, there was cause to debate the future of the heavy bombardment program. They took off that morning with 19 B-17s and only 11 returned.

Eight out of nineteen missing in action meant that eighty crew-members did not see Station 153 back that day . . . .

The crews who returned were unaware that many Groups bombed during the mission without seeing an enemy plane. All that they realized was that they had scored some sort of a Pyrrhic victory. They had shot round upon round of ammunition at enemy planes. As some gunners put it: "We didn't have to aim. We just pulled the triggers -- something was bound to get hit".

In destroying 62 enemy planes the Group established a record for heavy bombardment groups that was never equaled. But in losing eight of their number, the Group lost much faith in the credo of B-17 firepower. They knew formation flying was good, but they did not see how it could stand up when outnumbered twelve to one.

It was the blackest day in the Group's history. And to make it worse, on the return to the field heavy haze covered Framlingham. B-17's that were full of holes made as many as three approaches to land. Some landed cross-runway style. One, with seven hundred holes in it, limped into another base with half a crew. Another pilot of one of the Forts, with a leg shattered by canon shell, stayed in a propped-up position directing his co-pilot to the field.

In later days the Group spoke of "*the men of Münster*" as the British spoke of "*the men of Arnhem*".

One doesn't need a vivid imagination to try and understand what this mission did to the men who took part in it. They went through hell in a whirlpool of bursting shells, machinegun-fire, exploding and breaking-up aircraft, and all the time they were terrified and it was just the will to survive that kept them going.

Those who landed safely at Framlingham found empty places left behind by crew-members, who were reported "missing in action", sometimes they were their buddies and many of them were tormented by the question if "missing in action" could mean "killed in action".

Daily life for the combat-crews at the base was very much influenced by their combat-experiences. S/Sgt Robert A. Mygatt gave an impression of how he felt in that period of his life, which might be similar to the feelings most of the crew-members experienced:

"It was the present I lived for in those days, the little pleasures and satisfactions that could be found in life as it came to me hour by hour. I say I lived in the present, but as I think back, it seemed to be the immediate present and the distant future, a combination of the two, that concerned me. The intermediate space of time - next week, tomorrow, even the events of the approaching day - I chose to push back in the far corner of my mind".

About the thoughts which ran through his mind before and during a mission he says:

"The nervousness, the tension, the tightening of the stomach and the emotional relief after the danger is passed".

So far the spotlights have been on the combat-crews, but we should not forget the ground-crews.

They wore neither wings nor medals; they told no thrilling tales of aerial combat, but yet their hard work was of utmost importance to keep the Group operational.

Working with fingers numbed by cold wind and continuous rain, they toiled through the black-out nights, always fighting against time to ready the battle-scarred bombers for the briefed take-off. Often mechanics worked stretches of twenty-four and thirty-six hours to put their flak-hacked B-17s into shape. Along with a job that never ended, maintenance men suffered the disheartening experience of losing crews and planes time and again.

"Sweating out a mission" wasn't just a slogan; it was what the ground-crew did during the long hours of waiting for the return of their crews and ships. The flyers lifted their Fortresses from the earth knowing that the strong hands of the ground crew had toiled for the utmost in dependability.

Airmen riding lone limping bombers homeward knew that miracles of hard work and thoroughness brought them back.

Some serious incidents occurred at the base. A German plane dropped a string of bombs aimed for the control tower, but he did no better than plant them in the open fields. They didn't explode!

In the early hours of April 12th 1944 a B-17 Pathfinder plane was coming in to land and when the pilot turned on his landing lights to land, a German night intruder, an ME 410 shot it down and it crashed, killing three of the crew. The Germans were sending V-1 buzz bombs across, all during summer, winter and spring of 1944. Several came down very close to Base, one of them just missing the bomb dump.

On 27 December 1944, on a cold, foggy morning, one of the 390th planes failed to take off and crashed on the main highway in Parham Village. The crew had not had a chance. All ten were killed instantly. There were explosions of the gasload, the popping of .50 cartridges and some of the fivehundred-pound bombs went off. It was remarkable that no one in the village was hurt. Every house had cracks and fallen plaster and broken windows.

Just before VE-day 390th BG. participated in six missions, code name "Chow Hound", which were unforgettable for all the crews that took part in them. These were the food drop missions over the west of Holland, where the people were famine-stricken. Of course the crews initially had their objections. After all, the war wasn't over yet, they were going to fly over enemy territory at less than 400 feet and would be sitting ducks for German Flak in that way. Would the Germans stick to the agreement to stop hostilities during the food drop missions? The crews doubted that. Yet they went and came back already looking forward to the next mission. They were very much impressed by what they had seen: crowds of people cheering at them like mad, waving with everything they had at hand, flags, clothing, bed-sheets. Yes, there had been incidents with Germans not holding their fire, damaging aircraft, but on the whole the agreement worked pretty well and the reactions the crews had noticed from the Dutch made them eager to go on.

Some time ago I had the pleasure to get into contact with Mr. Lester Ippel, a former 390th BG. pilot, who flew three "Chow Hound" missions to Holland. For him these missions had a special meaning, as both his parents were born in Holland and grew to young adults there. With their families they emigrated to the U.S. round the year 1900. After flying nine bombing missions, he felt dropping food so much more satisfying, especially as he was able to help the needy Hollanders in the country where his roots were. Here is his report about the missions:

"Fifty years ago I was in Framlingham, England, assigned to the Eighth Air Force as a B-17 pilot. Our crew had had its last bombing mission over Germany on April 18. The war was almost over . . . the mission had been an easy one: the weather clear, no anti-aircraft (Flak), no enemy fighters.

On May 2, 1945 we were assigned to fly a mission, not of destruction but of help and to save. The bomb bay was loaded with American K rations, large boxes which we were to try to deliver to the starving people of Holland. The "target" listed in my diary for May 2 was Amsterdam Municipal Airport. We took off and flew directly to Holland, not in formation as we did on bombing missions, but in single file. We flew at about 300-400 feet to get as low as possible so as to minimize the damage to the packages.

When we came to the airport, there was the large white cross at which point we were to drop the food. The bombbay doors were opened and at the signal the parcels were let loose and kicked out to drop as near the target as possible.

We saw many people around the airport and other parts of the city. Many were waving their arms or flags or pieces of clothing. We remember that we saw a food

package out in a farmer's field, quite far from the target. Evidently one package had become stuck in one of the planes ahead of us and had been kicked out at a later time. A farmer was hurrying out with his wheel barrow to retrieve it. At another place we saw a number of cows running as fast as they could go, evidently frightened by the low-flying planes coming over one after another. We noticed that the large ditch filled with water (a canal, most likely) did not stop them, . . . they plunged right in.

On May 3 we were again assigned to a mission to drop food at Utrecht, at a triangle formed by a railroad and a field.

I don't recall how the target was marked, but we dropped a load of British rations in large sacks. On May 5 we flew another mission: the target city was Haarlem.

The YANK magazine, a U.S. Army weekly, on June 6, 1945 had a story and a number of pictures of the "grocery missions". They show a B-17 with the food packages falling out, the field with a large white cross and a large number of packages lying about. Another was a picture of boxes dropping on a residential area of Utrecht, a field with "Thank you Boys" in large letters printed on it. Another was a square in Amsterdam with large crowds of people. . . .

it's caption, "Wildly cheering crowds gathered in Amsterdam to greet planes. Note Bandstand being erected for VE meeting".

Yank magazine also reported that during that week 11.410.000 meals were delivered by air by the Eighth Air Force and the RAF".

Quite another aspect of the history of Station 153 is the contacts there were between the USAAF servicemen and their British neighbours. If we try to get an idea of what these contacts were like, we must keep in mind that there was a war going on and Framlingham base was not a holiday-camp.

That situation naturally limited the contacts, but on the whole they were very good. Let's give some examples:

Thursday, 23 December 1943, the Americans gave a Christmas party for all the schoolchildren in the district between the ages of five and eight. It was held in the Red Cross Club on the Base. The children had a wonderful time and so had the boys. The boys saved up their candy rations so that every child could have something to take home. Christmas 1944 the schoolchildren were welcomed again. On 23 August 1944 a big party was held to celebrate the 100th Mission. Hangar Number 2 was beautifully decorated with bracken, with bales of straw around the side to sit on, and a great many blue lights. There were thousands of persons from neighbouring villages, British service girls and American WACs. Glenn Miller's band played for the dance.

The 200th Mission party was held on Sunday, 8 October 1944, with civilians again invited to attend. There was a football match and an open-air performance by a variety show from London. In the evening there were four dances to choose from -- at the officers' club, the Rocker Club, the combat mess and the Red Cross Club.

A clear proof of the good relationship between the Americans and the British was the fact that 51 American servicemen, officers and enlisted men, married British girls.

The Anglo-American Club in Framlingham, staffed by British volunteer hostesses, was a hub of social life for men of the 390th. They lounged there in the evenings, sipping tea and eating English cakes. There were dances almost every week attended by both G.I.s and British servicemen. It was a good place to meet the local girls and played a big part in making life more pleasant for a lot of soldiers.

We'll finish this chapter with some observations taken from a record kept by an English girl who lived on one of the farms on the base. The full commentary can be found in the "big blue book".

"I remember being awakened about half past four in the morning by the roar of the ships taking off. It was still quite dark, and I could only see them by their lights. Others were going up from airfields all around, and the sky was filled with hundreds of coloured lights. As dawn began to break, I heard our cowman calling in the cows and everything began to wake up all around, while way up above the ships were getting into formation. They would circle round and round, gaining altitude before starting east toward the coast. Then, the planes gone, the Base would wake up to the work of the day.

We generally knew when the boys were returning from a raid, for two or three fighters would arrive and fly around, then we would hear the bombers coming. They would come right over our house in perfect formation. Then away would go the flares, and the planes would begin peeling off to land. We never felt at ease until they all had landed. We called those boys "our boys" and their ships "our ships". Many a time we knew that some of the planes were missing, and we could see others with holes in them.

The 571st. Squadron was just across the roadway from our farm, and we got to know almost everyone in it. Soon after the boys arrived, names began to appear on the doors of the huts. There was "The Sleepy Lagoon", "Ye Olde Pig Sty", "Consumption Center 3rd", "The Dog House", and several names of night clubs. At harvest time the boys used to ride on our empty wagons, and some of them came and helped us in the fields. They were interested in our farm and our work, and the neat way we made our stacks. We exchanged ideas about farming in America and England.

Almost every evening there would be a game of baseball going on. We never could make out why they had to make so much noise while they were playing. We English may get very excited over some of our games, but I do not think we ever do quite so much shouting and cheering. They played volleyball and throwing horesoes too, but they didn't make so much noise over these games.

I must not forget to mention all the dogs that lived on the Base. There were dogs everywhere, big ones, little ones, all colours and every kind, chasing trucks, riding in jeeps, following the boys to eat, and always around somewhere.

The train from Framlingham to Wickham Market was always packed. The boys made jokes about our train, as it is only a small branch-line train, with three coaches and a small engine. It amused us to see the boys get on when they first came. They clambered on from both sides and some even rode in the engine -- they just seemed to swarm onto it like a bunch of ants, but they soon learned the right way. Many of them also learned to ride bicycles and we thought it awfully funny to see some of them learning. They mostly landed on their knees with the bike on top of them. When they could ride quite well, they carried others on the crossbars, and one often saw two or three on one bike.

We always knew when it was eleven o'clock, for there was a daily tannoy test -- "Report any failures to Extension I-O".

Shortly after that the boys all went to eat, and the roadways were packed, truck loads and jeeps too. It was surprising the number of persons who could ride in one jeep.

The boys liked to tease us. There was always something being said about our "limey" weather, and they teased us about the way we talked, and tried to copy us.



It sounded funny to hear them say "I cawn't". I expect we were just as funny when we tried to talk through our noses like them.

I shall never forget the months after VE day, when the boys were preparing to go home and began to leave one group after another. The last squadrons to leave were 568th and 569th, on Sunday, 5 August 1945. They went off shouting and singing and waving. We could hear them as they went along the road to the station, until they got farther and farther away, then everywhere became silent. The Yanks had come --and now they were gone! I shall always remember that vast contrast when the boys left. One moment it was all noise, shouting, trucks starting and stopping, and then dead silence, with everything deserted. We walked back home across the runway. There was no one in sight, it was just as if everyone had fallen asleep. We shall never forget the 390th, the boys who had come so far from their homes in America, many of them never to return. For more than two years they lived in and were part of our countryside, and we missed them sincerely when they were gone".

## CHAPTER 2.

### MISSION 54, 4 February 1944.

This will be a chapter of names, facts and figures. For that reason it might be boring, if one would forget that the names are of young men who wrote history, however small their part in it may be. The facts and figures illustrate the enormous size of missions like this one, a size never equalized before or after W.W.-II. Last but not least they give us an idea of the mortal dangers in which the airmen constantly were.

The first official document about aircraft and crew I got, was given to me by LeRoy O. Keeping at Framlingham. Besides a crewlist, it showed data about "Dolly". It said that the serial-number was 42-231292, that this B-17 G was accepted by USAAF on October 12th 1943 and joined the Eighth AF on 10 November 1943. The aircraft made thirteen sorties.

As for the crew, via John S. Warner of 390th Memorial Museum Foundation, I got a second crew-list, which, as an extra, gave the names of the towns the crewmembers came from when they joined the Air Force.

These were "Dolly's" crew-members:

Pilot: 1st Lt. Clarence B. Strait from Oneonta, NY.  
CO-pilot: 2nd Lt. George F. Wilson from South Gate, CA.  
Navigator: 2nd Lt. Joseph J. Klingenberg from Covington, KY.  
Bombardier: 2nd Lt. Thomas L. Heath from Springfield, OH.  
Top-turretgunner: T/Sgt. Clinton E. Hahn from Caldwell, ID.  
Radio-operator-gunner: T/Sgt. Merrel G. Merrick from San Mastso, CA.  
Ball-turret-gunner: S/Sgt. Herman Alesiani from Monessen, PA.  
Right-waistgunner: S/Sgt. Carl R. Lewis from Robson, WV.  
Left-waistgunner: S/Sgt. Antonio Elizondo from Los Angeles, CA.  
Tail-gunner: Sgt. Thurman P. Selvidge from St. Louis, MO.

These were the men, who to their great surprise and probable annoyance, because they had a 48-hours pass, were awoken in the early hours of the morning of February 4, 1944. "Today we are mounting a maximum effort", said the colonel, as Herman Alesiani remembers and a maximum effort it was! From Roger Freeman's book: "The Mighty Eighth War-diary" we learn, that a total number of 748 bombers

were despatched, which means, that 748 aircraft were ready to take off or really took off. Effective were 633 bombers, which means, that that number reached the target. The planes that didn't, aborted the mission after take off or didn't even leave their bases, mostly for technical reasons. Ninety of the 633 bombers were B-24s, the others were all B-17s.

The fighter escort of this mission consisted of 56 P-38s "Lightning", 537 P-47s "Thunderbolt" and 44 P-51s "Mustang", a total number of 637 fighters.

If we realize the number of people, needed to fly all these aircraft, we find amazing figures. The bombercrews consisted of 633 x 10 = 6330 airmen, plus 637 fighter-pilots means that there were at least 6967 men in the air!

Of course in later missions these figures were outnumbered by far, yet this mission marked a phase in the air-war on German communications, as we'll see later on.

Back to 390th BG. The most important documents for my investigations were sent to me by John S. Warner of the 390th Memorial Museum Foundation. I couldn't believe my eyes:

A thick packet of micro-fiche copies of all the official Framlingham documents of "Mission # 54, Target-Frankfurt, Germany. Date - 4 February 1944", as it says on the first copy. They are all marked "Secret". The copies give the briefed data before the mission, reports on the events during the mission and reports on the debriefing, regarding battle-damage etc.

First we'll have a look at the list of participating pilots and aircraft, time of take-off and landing and aircraft that aborted the mission.

Pilot	Detail	Squadron	Aircraftnumber
1. Capt. Orice D. Settles	D.F.C.	570	927
2. William S. Branum		570	812
3. Lt. Col. Lewis W. Dolan from 482nd B.G. Silver Star, D.F.C. , Croix de Guerre with Palm. K.I.A. 30-11-44.			970
4. 1st.Lt. Burgess W. Murdock	D.F.C.	570	275
5. Capt. Robert H. Hubbell		571	651
6. 2ndLt. George C. Temples	D.F.C.	570	850
7. 1st.Lt. Robert W. Biesecker KIA 18 March."44		571	199
8. 1st.Lt. John F. Walters		569	512
9. 1st.Lt. Clarence B. Strait MIA 4 Febr.'44		569	292
10. 1st.Lt. Maurice G. Crosbie	D.F.C.	560	134
11. Capt. Russell L. Bush	D.F.C.	569	603
12. 1st.Lt. Robert B. Bowman MIA 26 Febr."44		570	434
13. 1st.Lt. William J. Holt		569	926
14. Capt. James E. Wilkinson	D.F.C.	570	902
15. Capt. Jerome E. Osadnick	D.F.C.	569	466
16. 1st.Lt. Albert C. Rood		571	473
17. Capt. James C. Waggoner	D.F.C. Silver Star	568	321
18. 1st.Lt. Darold W. Jenkins		568	262
19. 1st.Lt. Thos J. Sutters		570	323
20. 1st.Lt. Robert W. Rayburn		571	806
21. 1st.Lt. Donald K. Wray		569	566

There was no indication about pilot William S. Branum's rank.

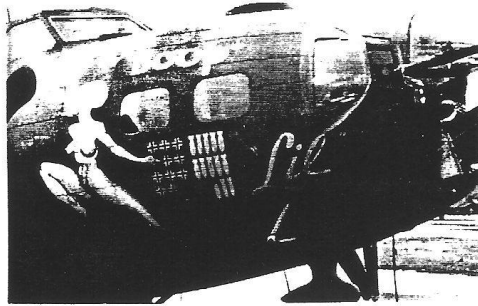
**Betty Boop—Pistol Packin' Mama**

Squadron 570th  
Number of Aircraft 42 30434  
Call Sign DI-A

Derivation of Name: The name Betty Boop was provided by the Pilot — his wife's nickname. Pistol Packin' Mama was added later. It was suggested by the Tail Gunner.

Aircraft Disposition: Aircraft MIA 25-2-44

Source of Information: Richard H. Perry



**Crew Members:**

Pilot ..... James R. Geary, Jr.  
Co-Pilot ..... Richard H. Perry  
Navigator ..... Gus Mencow  
Bombardier ..... Hugh J. Carthy  
Engineer ..... Shirl J. Hoffman  
Radio Op. .... Clarence W. Medeck  
Waist Gunner .....  
Leonard A. Baumgartner  
Waist Gunner ... Clifford Puckett  
Ball Turret ..... Paul B. Morris  
Tail Gunner ..... Donald F. May

"Betty Boop - Pistol Packin' Mama", flown by Robert B. Bowman, aborted mission 54.



These crewmen of the 570th Bomb Squadron, 390th Bomb Group, pose in front of their B-17G, serial 42-312275, named *G.I. Wonder*.

"G - I Wonder" was flown by Burgess W. Murdock.

In the column marked "Detail" I made a note of the decorations awarded to these pilots. We count nine D.F.C.'s (Distinguished Flying Cross), two Silver Stars, and a Croix de Guerre, which tells us something about the rate of experience these pilots had.

Had I also noted down all the Air Medals and Oak Leaf Clusters, the column would have become rather crowded, so, with due respect to all who were entitled to these decorations, I took the liberty to leave them out. It's another proof of the fact that most of the pilots and crews were not going on their first mission!

Browsing through books about "The Mighty Eighth" sometimes produces surprising results.

In that way I found, that A/C 434, pilot Robert B. Bowman, was well-known "Pistol Packin'Mama". Wellknown, because this ship was 390th BG's Lead Fortress on the mission of October 10th 1943, when 390th BG lost eight out of nineteen aircraft. (See Chapter 1). During that mission Capt. James Geary was the pilot of "Pistol Packin'Mama" and took her safely back to England. The ship's first name was "Betty Boop" – that was the nickname of Capt. Geary's wife.

Another Fortress, mentioned in the "Big Blue Book" is A/C 134, pilot Maurice G. Crosbie. This ship was nicknamed "Gung Ho", although she sometimes flew under another name, when there was a change of crews. "Gung Ho" flew 101 missions and on the record-scale of missions she shared a third place with A/C 932 "Sister Kate".

In the 1996 issue of this book, I stated about Dolan, the third pilot on the list ;  
"I couldn't find any further information about Dolan, probably because he came from another Bomb-group."

Mr. John Warner, of the 390th Memorial Museum Foundation again came to my assistance with some, in my opinion, very interesting information :

"While Dolan's aircraft, # 42-25970 was listed from the 482nd B.G., Lt. Col. Lewis W. Dolan was assigned to the 390th. B.G. as the Group Air Executive and for this mission was flying in a PFF aircraft. ( PFF means: "Pathfinder Force"). This was a specially equipped aircraft with new radar and electronic aids. Normally, such an aircraft would be the lead aircraft and would have aboard the Command Pilot for the 390th aircraft on this mission. As you can see from the crew roster, Settles was the Lead Pilot, Jeffrey (Deputy Commander of the 390th) was the Command Pilot and Shore (the 390th Group Navigator) was the Navigator. Jeffrey later was transferred to the 100th B.G. as Commander. Probably Dolan was in a training phase in the PFF aircraft. Later, Dolan was KIA on 30 Nov. 1944 on a mission to Merseburg."

Piet Brouwer gave me the following information on the same subject:

"The 482nd B.G., Dolan's B.G., was a special unit, which operated chiefly as a pathfinder organization. Removed from combat status in March 1944 and after that operated a school for pathfinder crews, with the object of training a pathfinder squadron for each Eighth AF bombardment group; tested radar and other navigational equipment; flew a pathfinder mission in Normandy on 6 June 1944 and sometimes dropped propaganda leaflets. Redesignated 482nd B.G. ( Heavy) in Nov. 1944. Continued its training and experimental work until V-E Day."  
(Source: "Airforce Combat Units of WW II, History and Insignia, by Maurer Maurer")

One of the Mission-documents shows a formation diagram at assembly. You'll find a replica on the next page. We see that A/C 434, "Pistol Packin'Mama" and A/C 134, "Gung Ho", both flew in the High Squadron, just like A/C 292 "Dolly".  
"Gung Ho" even flew at "Dolly's" port wing.

It so happened, that in the book: "The 390th Bomb Group Anthology", volume II, I found an account on this mission by "Gung Ho's" pilot, Maurice G. Crosbie. In this chapter I'll quote from his contribution several times.

The formation-diagram shows two spare aircraft, but the names of the pilots were not mentioned, nor were the ships' registration numbers.

The Lead Fortress of the formation, bears two names, Jeffrey and Settles. Capt. Settles was the pilot and Lt. Col. Thomas S. Jeffrey was Deputy Group Commander at Framlingham at the time.

Three ships are indicated: "Abort". They are A/C 199, Biesecker, A/C 434, Bowman ("Pistol Packin'Mama") and A/C 902, Wilkinson. In the official report it says:

"Twenty-three aircraft including two (2) spares left base as shown in Diagram A.

Three aircraft left formation before reaching the English coast and were not despatched. Thus twenty (20) A/C were despatched and all twenty attacked and are credited with sorties".

The three ships that aborted the mission, due to technical failures, all landed at Framlingham between 11.25 and 12.17, long before the other ones.

The first B-17 that took off was the Lead Fortress Settles, at 08.26 and the last was Wilkinson at 09.49. Perhaps there had already been technical problems with A/C 902 before take-off. Strait with "Dolly" was sixth in line at 08.48.

What did Maurice G. Crosbie tell about this first part of the mission?

"This pre-mission morning started routinely as most previous ones had; early awakening for 05.00 briefing, fresh eggs for breakfast and a typical February morning in England. At the briefing we were informed that the target would be Frankfurt, Germany. This would be no stranger to us, since it would be our third visit there in about ten days. Take-off was to be at 08.30. We in B-17 # 134 would be flying in number three position in the high squadron. I vividly recall that at the briefing they advised us to anticipate nearly 100 mph tailwinds at altitude. At the time I remember thinking this would be a great asset going over the target, but it would also mean a long trip back, particularly if enemy fighters were encountered, or battle damage to the aircraft occurred. Later I was to have more reason to be concerned.

While at the hardstand checking the aircraft over, before boarding for take off, my thoughts were occupied by a conversation I had with the 569 Squadron C.O., Major Armstrong, a day or so earlier. He had called me to his office to discuss my future assignment after completing my tour of 25 missions. At the time I had completed 20. My reply included this quote, "until the wheels of # 134 (with myself at the controls) stopped rolling at the hardstand upon the completion of my 25th mission, I was not about to formulate any plans for the future". Now, I was embarking on mission 21, as was John Flottorp, Co-pilot. The take-off and assembly over England was routine and we proceeded to altitude and Germany over an undercast".

Crosbie, as an experienced pilot, called assembly "routine". We must not forget, especially in the bad weather conditions of that day, that during assembly, with so many ships flying their rounds, collisions were always possible. To avoid them, the pilots needed all their skills and their crews' attentive assistance.

On page 32a there is a copy of the chart, showing the briefed route and the actual route flown. About the altitude at which the formation flew, the report says:

Lead A/C 29.000 ft.

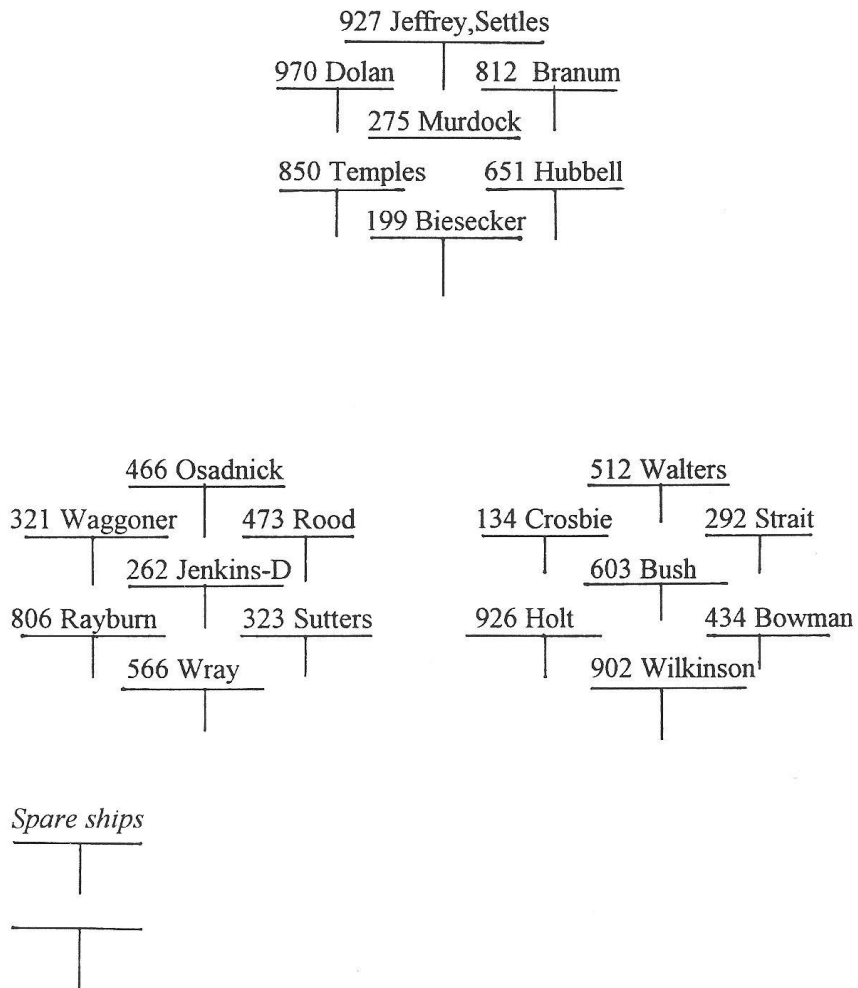
High A/C 29.800 ft.

Low A/C 29.500 ft.

**390th. Bomb Group (H) - B.group.**  
**Mission no. 54 4 February 1944**  
**Diagram "A" Formation at Assembly.**



⊕ FORMATION ⊕



The official Flak report:

"390th B Group first encountered Flak from Schouwen Island. It was scattered and meagre. A moderate low barrage was observed over Antwerp to the right of course. At München-Gladbach an intense accurate concentration of continuous following type Flak with ground rockets which burst in large black circles among the normal bursts. A moderate, accurate barrage was encountered at Bonn. A moderate barrage, level and accurate was also encountered at Koblenz. At Frankfurt an intense barrage, inaccurate on Group was encountered. At Aachen a concentration of intense Flak, barrage type was met. At Brussels a moderate barrage was observed over the city to the left of the course.

In the target area the crews report trails of smoke coming from the ground to an altitude of 24.000 ft. It is believed that these were ground rockets".

Now what does Maurice Crosbie say about all this?

"Over enemy territory the Group got off the briefed course and to quote Dick Maddox, Navigator, from his log, "Think we flew over every Flak position this end of "Happy Valley" (The Ruhr). As we neared Bonn at 24.000 feet, the temperature was minus 42 degrees and we encountered heavy Flak. I started to reach under the seat for my "tin hat", but thought better of it, since the thing would not fit me and would pivot on my headset, fall over my eyes and obscure my vision.

Suddenly I felt a tremendous blow to my head, that ripped off my helmet, goggles and oxygen mask. I also heard a loud explosion. Discovering I could only see out of half my face, I immediately realized I had been hit by Flak. I knew my left eye and possibly a chunk of my face was gone. It was bleeding very badly. Why, I'll never know, but my first reaction was to look at the clock. It was 11.55 hours".

In the mission report there is a passage about "Dolly" Missing In Action (MIA). It says:

"Our Group:

A/C No 292 was hit by Flak at 12.02 hours near Laacher Lake (5025 N-0717 E) at 24.000 ft. The leading edge of right wing near # 3 engine was damaged. Smoke was pouring from a hole in wing about a foot and a half wide, located near # 3 engine. A/C remained in formation for about 5 minutes thereafter and then began to fall behind and lose altitude.

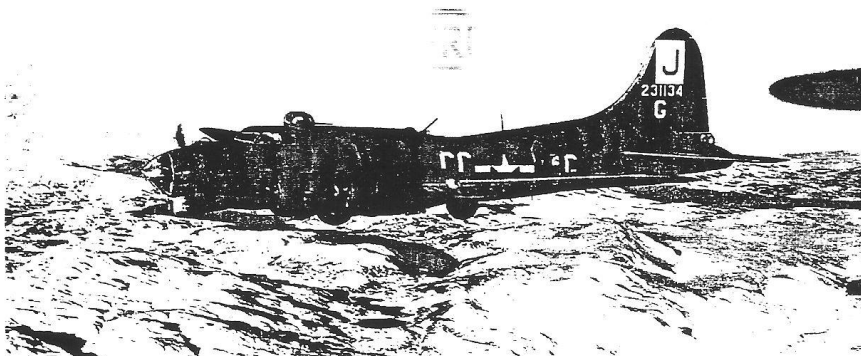
No chutes reported. As this occurred near target area A/C is presumed to have bombed".

From the information given by Crosbie and the report concerning "Dolly", considering the moments both aircraft were hit, 11.55 hours and 12.02 hours, we may presume that first "Gung Ho" was hit and then "Dolly", probably by the same concentration of Flak.

We know from part 1 that among "Dolly's" crew there were no casualties. On board "Gung Ho" it was quite another story.

Crosbie:

"Looking over at John, my Co-pilot, his eyes looked as large as saucers above his oxygen mask, which seemed to confirm my suspicions of the extent of my facial damage. I must have been a gruesome sight. As I was completely cut off from all communications, verbal, intercom, etc. I tried to convey to him that I still possessed my faculties, and for him to carry on.



An early B-17G 42-31134 in the 569th Bomb Squadron, 390th BG, en route to Rjukan, Norway, on 16 November 1943. (USAF.)



*Gung Ho*, serial 42-31134, was assigned to the 569th Bomb Squadron, 390th Bomb Group. It crashed at Nurnburg on 9 October 1944.



Maurice G. Crosbie, 1945, taken at Valley Forge General Hospital,

Maurice G. Crosbie and his "Gung Ho".



Being aware of the fact that it was necessary to have oxygen and not able to wear my mask, I unplugged the hose from the mask and put the hose end into my mouth. With no access to intercom, I was unaware of the fact, that Donald Wilson, Radio Operator/Gunner, had been severely wounded, was out of action and in need of medical attention.

The oxygen systems in the tail, waist and radio positions had been damaged, requiring some of these positions to be vacated.

Dick Maddox, Navigator, came up into the cockpit and applied a battle dressing to my head. Again it was necessary to communicate with hand signals to try and convey that I was okay.

My second step towards survival consisted of keeping busy, so I concentrated on checking the engine instruments and making any necessary adjustments.

I was aware we were nearing the target at Frankfurt due to the heavy Flak and I could see other B-17s opening their bomb bay doors. After "bombs away", we turned homeward to encounter our nemesis. The friendly strong tailwind would now become the "enemy headwind". It was to be a long haul home".

That same thought must have tormented "Dolly's" crew and although nobody in their plane was wounded, they had another problem: Would their two remaining engines be sufficient? We know they weren't. . . .

Luck was with both the crews in one aspect: there were no real attacks by German fighters, although Crosbie mentions FW 190s when they were near the Channel coast. These FW 190s are also mentioned in a report about the mission in the "Big Blue Book".

Crosbie didn't know anything about the damage the Flak had caused to his ship, cut off as he was from any communications.

In addition to the loss of some of the oxygen systems, the rudder cables had been shot away and the trim tabs were out of service. There was also a problem with the # 4 engine and a flat landing gear tire. Eventually they reached the English coast and John Flottorp let down in a hurry. About this time Crosbie began having severe attacks of nausea.

It was agreed that he should leave the cockpit and move down into the nose for the landing. John Flottorp moved into the Pilot's seat and Andy Wallner, Top Turret Gunner, slipped into the right seat to assume the co-pilot's position. John Flottorp did an outstanding job in spite of the obstacles, including a flat tire. "Gung Ho" and her crew were home, badly shot up, but safe. Time of landing: 14.55 hours.

Maurice Crosbie still had a long way to go, nearly two years of hospitalization, many operations and disappointments. But thinking back, he says in the same book: "I remember the fortunate experience of having been a member of a compatible, dedicated, well-disciplined and trained combat crew, who had the capability to succeed in, and did, becoming men before their time".

Although this booklet is about "Dolly" and her crew, I think Crosbie's story is a valuable completion to give the reader an idea of what such a mission was like. Besides that, here we have the rather unique situation, that after more than fifty years, we have the detailed stories of 2 crews in their B-17s that flew the same mission side by side, got into severe trouble, but survived.

It's another example of the skill and desperate perseverance with which these young pilots fought to fly their combat-battered ships home. It also shows what a magnificent aircraft the B-17 was; crippled, shot up, almost brought back to a heap of flying scrap, many times she performed the impossible: she saw her crew safely home.

That Mission 54 was a tough one, must be clear by now. The 390th BG. report gives some details about the battle damage recorded after the aircraft had landed at Framlingham, the last touching down at 15.46 hours. (A/C 466, Osadnick).

Aircraft damaged:

A/C 262, Jenkins. Flak damage to entire airplane. Extensive.  
A/C 134, Crosbie. Flak damage to entire airplane. Extensive.  
A/C 473, Rood. Flak damage to right wing and stabilizer. Extensive.  
A/C 566, Wray. Flak damage to tail. Moderate.

In Roger Freeman's "War Diary" we find the figures of losses and casualties of the entire mission.

Out of 633 bombers participating, 20 were missing in action.

Three ships came back so severely damaged, that they were beyond repair. More than half of the remaining aircraft, 359, were damaged.

Casualties: 7 airmen were killed in action, 20 were wounded and 203 were missing in action.

The Framlingham reports finish with some notes. One of them is an ironical remark: "Suggest that Anti-Aircraft installations at Dover not fire on returning friendly aircraft".

We finish this chapter with an overall report on Mission 54 from the "Big Blue Book":

"On 4 February, with the Frankfurt rail yards again in the offing, the crews were told:

"No photographic cover has yet been obtained on attack of 29 January.

Unconfirmed ground reports through neutral sources have depicted the damage as severe, although these reports should be received with caution.

Bombing again was done through total clouds by instruments, with results unknown.

In the target area cross winds carried the formation into Flak concentrations, and

one plane was lost. On return home over Belgium 14 FW 190's circled the

formation, and 1 was shot down when it attempted an attack.

*This mission marked a phase in the air war on German communications.* It started the spring period, when rail yards could be attacked more effectively by visual means. Pathfinder at this time was in a stage of development, and because of limited numbers gave inconclusive results.

However, the very fact that rail targets were scheduled for bombing time and time again, lent credence to the belief that communications would be the first priority until the German defenses had been worn away sufficiently to launch an invasion".

### CHAPTER 3.

#### A SECOND CREW-MEMBER REPORTS.

In the first week of September 1995 I received a letter, dated August 27, which, as I said in the Preface, was another landmark in my efforts to complete the "Dolly"-story.

It was from George F. Wilson, the former Co-pilot of A/C 292. After this first letter some others followed and in this chapter I'll try to compile them to one story.

It goes without saying, that most of this chapter will be in George Wilson's words, for who am I, trying even to get near his excellent style?

Wilson's first letter started as follows:

"What a pleasant surprise to find your letter of August 20, and what faded memories you revived! Who would have imagined that anyone would be interested in just one of the many B-17s of 1944, interested enough to go all the effort you have made to find the facts of that day. My memories of that day are indeed fuzzy. They are not, however, exaggerated by retelling the story over the years -- my family all thank you. According to them, this is the first time I have ever talked about the experience. I hope what follows helps you with your publication.

Before the war, I was a premedical student. When drafted, I was simply advised by the draftboard not to reenroll and was called up in the infantry. So was my future brother-in-law. In the month or so between notification and call up, the two of us decided to choose our own way to fight and took the exams for flight training. Naturally, part of the examination was an eye test. It turned out that I had very poor depth perception. That test consisted of pulling on two strings to align two poles about twelve feet away.

Finally, the test giver took the strings away from me, moved the poles around a little and returned the strings with an admonition not to move them too much. I guess the air force really needed pilots.

The result was confusion. I was drafted into the infantry and trained for two weeks before the army air force called me up. Delayed arrangements with the infantry caused me to miss the air force call and I ended up with two and a half months leave while the two divisions straightened things out. Then, with dreams of the Red Baron ringing in my head, I chose to train for fighter duty.

Training was in Texas, at San Antonio, Sweetwater, San Angelo, and a place on the Mexican border known as Eagle Pass. By the time I had finished training, however, disaster had struck in the Eighth Air Force in England. The massive bombing raids had not gone totally as planned and casualties were extremely high. (I recently read an account of the landings on D-day and was surprised that the first B-17 and B-24 raids resulted in higher losses than did the initial landings on D-day. All in all, the Allied casualties from the bombings were about the same in percent of combatants as was the invasion of Europe).

The Air Force had not at all planned for the loss of so many of the few pilots who chose to train in multi-engine planes. The solution was to raid the single-engine trainees and team them with the bomber trainees.

Those trained in multi-engine flying became pilots, the single-engine fliers became their copilots. These pairs with their complete crews were organized in the United States, given about 8 hours flight training and shipped overseas.

The United States was in no way prepared for the war. My first assignment for B-17 training was to Moses Lake, Washington, a place no one on the Mexican border had ever heard of. When I finally made my way there, I found an airport with one unfinished runway and one B-17. My training consisted at first of flying around with a dozen other trainees and taking turns at the wheel.

Very shortly, however, other B-17s arrived from Seattle and crews were organized. After a few short flights we were sent on a mock bombing flight of the Boeing factory. That flight was my first emergency. The pilot to whom I was assigned was leading one group of three planes flying in formation. But one wing plane got a little over zealous and too close -- we came together in a blow that sent one of our propellers through the other plane's navigator, collapsed their cockpit and left a gaping hole in our plane. All survivors of both planes were told by the pilots to bail out.

Our bombardier did and I prepared to, but dropped down first to make sure the crew had obeyed Ben's (our pilot's) orders. As it turned out, they hadn't. Suddenly Ben

realized that he had not fastened his parachute and called me back to fly the plane while he got ready to bail out.

That was fortunate: A B-17 was a very stable airplane and it felt very flyable to me. Ben agreed and we decided to land the plane.

The airport was not far away. Unfortunately, we did not realize that the collision had disabled our flap controls. Without them, we sailed nicely over the airport and landed a few miles away in a wheat field -- very surprised that all but one of the crew had stayed with us.

God was with us! No one was hurt and the plane did not explode even though it was carrying 2200 gallons of fuel in the wing tanks.

Our crew remained intact and we were shipped off to Grand Island, Nebraska.

There we were given a new B-17 and instructions. We would fly to Bangor, Maine, then Gandor, Newfoundland, Greenland, Iceland and Framlingham, England.

Anyone, deviating from that plan, was to be court marshaled. We didn't believe that. Besides, our navigator, Tom Egan, lived in Newark, New Jersey, which had a fine airport. We landed there shortly and were then escorted by fighters over Boston to Maine.

The second disaster came when we were flying on a cloudy night toward Greenland. None of us saw what was coming, before we flew into a thunderhead. In about the blinking of an eye, we dropped a thousand feet, rose a thousand feet and proceeded as if nothing had happened. At Greenland we discovered that a good many rivets in the plane were loose or missing. That plane was grounded and we proceeded to Iceland with another one.

The excursion to Newark had not caused a lot of trouble, so we decided on one last fling. We all wanted to see Scotland, so we arranged to claim an emergency oil leak and landed at Edinburgh. By then, however, our luck had run out. The air force put us on a train to Framlingham and decided some one else to deliver the plane. We arrived at the barracks in Framlingham to be placed in an almost empty Quonset hut. The quarters were bare, except for a neat pile of luggage stacked at one end -- all that remained of the last crew. It was November 1943".

From then on, George Wilson was going to fly combat-missions. According to his "Personal Missions list", which I got from 390th BG. Memorial Museum Foundation, he flew thirteen missions, the first on November 13, 1943 and the last on February 4, 1944. During that period he flew in eight different B-17s. One mission he remembers very well, was his fourth.

"On our fourth flight with another new pilot and the same old navigator, Tom Egan, we were to fly out over the North Sea and then turn and fly southwest to bomb Berlin. In the North Sea area we didn't expect to encounter any of Germany's good fighters and we were right. But they didn't need their first line fighters. As we crossed land, some ancient Heinkel 111s struck us flying directly out of the sun. Before we could even see them, we had been very well shot up. The pilot and the navigator, both sitting on the left side of the plane were wounded, and so was the engineer. With our pilot unable to carry on, I had to take over. We staggered home, but this time, I remembered Moses Lake and checked what we had to work with while in flight. Not much!

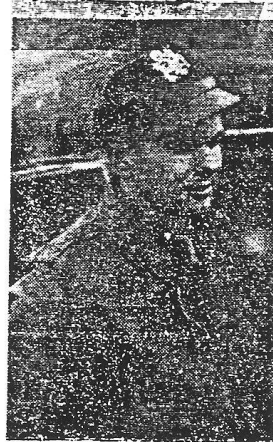
No flap control again, a shot up and broken up tail assembly . . . . .

It was the best landing I ever made in a B-17, but I wondered if I could fly or land a B-17 that was in one piece.

This B-17 appeared to be so riddled, that it was junked".

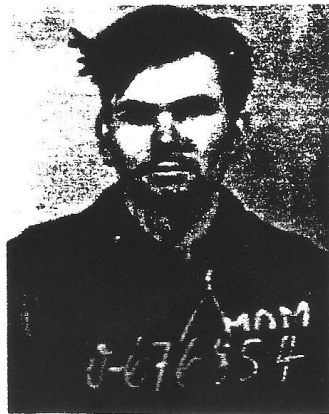


George F. Wilson, co-pilot, 1943.



### WINS PRAISE

● TAKING over the controls of his Eighth Air Force Flying Fortress, after the pilot had been wounded during a recent mission over Embden, key German north sea port, and returning to his base in England to land with the rudder controls shot away, Second Lieutenant George F. Wilson, 23-year-old co-pilot on an Eighth Air Force Flying Fortress won the praise of his entire crew. Formerly a student at the University of California at Los Angeles. Wilson is the son of Mrs. Rose H. Wilson, 9337 Dearborn street, South Gate.



George POW in Germany, 1944.  
See the word "MOM" on his jacket.



George and sister Alice, Aug. 1989,  
50th high school reunion.

According to the "Big Blue Book" and George Wilson's missionslist, this raid took place on 11 December 1943 and the target was the Emden shipyards, Germany. He remembered the Heinkels well; the Book says, there were six of them. They knocked out the lead ship and were followed by 30 single-engine fighters, that shot down 4 other Fortresses. The only comfort was, that the 390th BG. gunners were credited with 11 destroyed, 3 probably destroyed, and 8 damaged enemy planes. George Wilson's mistake about the target is quite understandable; at that time there were constant rumours about Berlin being the next target. Actually that didn't happen before March 3rd 1944.

"On February 4, 1944, the 390th Bomb Group of which we were part was assigned to carry out a raid deep into Germany.

My memory of the assignment at this late date was we were again headed for Berlin. With your help however, I can now remember that the mission goal was Frankfurt. It was ironic, that four days later we were in solitary confinement in Frankfurt and were hearing what it was like to be on the receiving end of those bombrbrids. Soon after we were imprisoned, the Eighth Air Force struck Frankfurt again.

Briefing for the mission revealed just one major obstacle -Cologne. That city lay on a direct line to the target, but we were cautioned that Cologne was fortified with perhaps the greatest number of anti-aircraft weapons of any European city of the time. We were specially cautioned NOT to fly directly over the city, but we were in a large formation directed by a lead navigator on another ship. It was, therefore, a surprise when our own navigator told us he thought we were headed right over the city -- and we were!

The rain of anti-aircraft shot confirmed his calculations.

Some higher power must have been protecting us on that day.

We were hit almost directly by anti-aircraft shells, but no one was injured. It was as if the German gunners had used rifles to knock out our engines. Immediately the far right propeller began to wobble and the engine to spout oil.

O.K., we could fly without one engine, so we feathered it to avoid that propeller having the effect we had in Moses Lake. Then the No.3 engine (I guess) just blew out smoke and oil and quit. We aborted the mission to try to make it back to England, or at least to the English Channel.

We could still make it on two engines. About midway through the trip to the coast, the number one engine gave up with the same smoke and oil. We babied the last one along until we were near Rotterdam. Then that one too failed, and we discovered that B-17s were never intended to be gliders. I imagine that the idea of finding a place to land rather than parachuting from the plane was my idea. I had listened to the air corps standard instruction about parachutes,(If it doesn't work, bring it back and we'll replace it) and didn't much like the idea of jumping. Besides, I had had previous practice twice, as told before.

At any rate Bernie and I decided to land the plane.

(Clarence Bernard Strait hated his first name, so we called him Bernie). We were not too uncomfortable because we still had about 15,000 feet between us and the land. Your assessment of the landing was absolutely right. We were so intent on trying to get at least to the water (don't ask me why --we were young, invincible and stupid) that by the time we decided to crash land we had no choice of directions. It seems to me that people in these situations think of the strangest things. My most vivid memory of the landing was not whether we would land safely or not -- of course we would. I was feeling sadness when we scraped the crops in what looked to me then to be an orchard. I was really concerned that some grower had worked hard to plant the orchard and we were going to ruin it".

This is a very nice example of how our memory sometimes works. George still has a vivid memory of his concern, that they were going to ruin the orchard, in itself an unimportant fact, at the very moment that their lives were at stake!

They didn't ruin it, they just trimmed the top of a row of alder-shrubs, as Anton den Ouden, one of the eye-witnesses of the landing, saw they did. (See part 1, pg 12). When I appeared at the landing-site that afternoon, one of the first things I noticed, was the neatly trimmed row of shrubs. Those shrubs had been planted there as a wind-shield for the little orchard behind them. When during my investigation I discussed the landing with the farmer's wife's daughter who still lives in the little farm at the back of which there is the orchard, she was absolutely sure that there had been no trimming of the alder-shrubs.....

"We were carefully briefed. Don't leave the Germans anything from which they might learn of our weaponry. (What a laugh that turned out to be. I, and I suppose the other officers were interrogated by a German captain who had in his possession complete engineering drawings of a B-17 G of a later model, of which I had absolutely no knowledge).

So, after we were all safely out of the plane, I went back, opened oxygen outlets and fired our signal pistol to start the fire. I imagine your father did not work much the rest of the day. The sound of exploding 50mm. machine-gun shells could be heard for some time after we left the scene.

Our other instruction was to break up in units of two or three for the best chance of successful escape. After we were safely away from the wreckage, we did go various separate ways. Those canals, however, were very confusing to us. Within half an hour, they had led us all back together again.

Before we could separate again, we were picked up by men who we thought at the time were Dutch police. They took us to a building that seemed to be some sort of public building in the center of a small community. There our Dutch captors apologized. They would gladly help us, they said, except that the landing and gunfire had aroused German soldiers, who now had all of us surrounded.

We were soon in the hands of the German army, and shortly thereafter in boxcars on the way to an interrogation camp in Frankfurt. For me, four days in solitary confinement and interrogation was laughable.

Apparently, the German interrogators had a standard line. Herman reported being told that the Germans had a list of our crew (that they got from me). The opening "neighborly" visit from a German officer, who had gone to school at Santa Monica Junior College (I had attended the University of California at Los Angeles about five miles from his college), began the same way. Something like "You might as well tell us about your crew since we already have a list of all the crew members". It would of course have been a violation of the Air Force rules for me to take a crew list on board during the mission. At any rate, there was no need to give the Germans any information. The crew-list was certainly not a secret -- they had picked all of us up together.

The second interrogator was really a frightening captain, with a huge head and upper body and roaring at me from behind a large desk, until he finally became so frustrated that he moved from behind his desk to show me the plans of the B-17 G. It was difficult to keep from laughing when the move revealed that the huge captain was really scarcely five feet tall. At any rate, had I been at liberty to do so, I could not have told the interrogators anything they didn't already know. After four days, the four officers were sent to Stalag Luft I near Barth, Germany. The camp had been a World War I prison camp and then a camp for Hitler Youth.

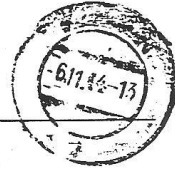
Kriegsgefangenenpost

Postkarte

GEPRÜFT  
105

An

Miss Alice Wilson



Gebührenfrei

Absender:

Vor- und Zuname:

2nd Lt. George Wilson

Gefangenennummer: 2658

Lager-Bezeichnung:

11857 Stalag Luft 3  
U.S. CENSOR  
Deutschland (Allemagne)

Empfangsort: 9337 Dearborn St

Straße: South Gate, Calif.

Land: U.S. of America  
Landesteil (Provinz usw.)

Kriegsgefangenenlager

Datum: October 11, 1944

Dear Sis, just got my first parcel. We've been eating soup ever since. Otherwise there's not much going on here. Just finishing up a big bridge tournament. Joe and I teamed - did fair. Hope everything is OK there. Tell everyone hello. Still haven't gotten a picture of you. Only ones are of Joyce and Mom - love

A postcard George Wilson was allowed to send to his sister on October 11, 1944 from POW-camp Stalag Luft 1.



There were more than 10,000 of us in the camp, including British pilots who had fought in the 1940 campaign in Africa.

For sixteen months, we entertained ourselves by digging tunnels to escape (only to find that the German guards knew about them and would come to hold a mock funeral services for each of the tunnels as soon as we were ready to escape). As I remember it, I had two official jobs in camp, and one that I assigned myself. My reputation for quietness was mistaken for brains and it fell to me to divide the rations given us equally among the 149 prisoners in my barracks. I had also made the mistake of taking a semester of German at UCLA, so could understand when we had overextended our liberties with the guards – it became my job, and that with a few others, to steal the tin cans we needed to build air tubes for our digs.

Somehow, the prisoners had and managed to keep a radio. So we were irregularly informed about the progress of the war through a camp newspaper called POW WOW. Prison camp was boring, and the news in POW WOW was dreary, so one day I printed on a gelatin pad a camp newspaper called BOW WOW.

It was a great hit and was printed almost as regularly as POW WOW.

Prison camp allowed me to change my career. Before the war, I had planned to be a medical doctor, but visiting my shot up friends in hospital proved very uncomfortable, the odor of hospitals made me ill.

In prison camp we did many things to keep alert and pass the time. We organized a sports league. We organized classes in various subjects. This gave me a chance to teach biology and, of course, because of my "vast experience" with the language, German. Teaching was enjoyable, so after the war I became a teacher in high schools, then a trainer of science teachers at the University of Southern California, and finally a filmmaker and writer of educational materials.

#### Liberation.

One night, someone noticed that all the German guards had disappeared. It didn't appear to us that they intended to return, so we went back to bed figuring that we would all plan to leave camp in daylight. But during the night a single Russian soldier, reported around camp to be about 15 years old, and riding a horse, screamed from just outside that the gates should be opened immediately or he would open them by force. Thus we were "rescued" by a single Russian teenager.

Stalag Luft I was located near Barth, Germany, about halfway between Kiel and Stettin. It was comfortable enough, except that the Germans never saw the need to allow us access to the nearby beaches as they had the previous tenants. At any rate, in this relatively remote area, we played a game with our Russian liberators. They had it in mind for us to pack our bags and walk the 100 miles to Stettin, where they would load us on boats for France.

We did not want to walk. Besides, our radio had brought us a promise from General Jimmy Doolittle that planes would fly in to take us out. So we played a stalling game, and sure enough U.S. Air Force planes did eventually come to take us to a camp near Le Havre, Camp Lucky Strike. (About two years ago, I met a former pilot who had just become a member of the same YMCA support group to which I belonged. To my surprise Don Sheeler had been one of the pilots on the missions to take us out of Germany).

Bernie Strait and I shared the same 14-man barracks room all through the prison experience. Then he went back to upstate New York to work as a salesman for a babyfood company, and I went home to California. Perhaps fifteen or twenty years ago, Bernie decided to move to Los Angeles and we met again several times in the

next year. Then he decided the move had been a bad one and returned to New York.

I have not seen or heard of any of the other crew members since the war, so it was a pleasure to hear about Herman Alesiani. We had heard in Camp Lucky Strike that all the enlisted men had gone to the same prison camp, had a considerably more difficult time than we officers did, (Germans had great respect for rank) and had had to walk out of Germany to freedom. So, I was reasonably sure, that all the crew members came out of the war OK. It was good to hear a small confirmation of that. From Camp Lucky Strike we were shipped to Virginia. From there I took a train to Sacramento, California. I chose, along with four other fliers from the Los Angeles area, to be released immediately. It being midnight when we got leave orders and there being no buses or trains, the five of us took a taxi the 400 miles from Sacramento to Los Angeles!

A couple of years later, I spoke about the experiences in prison camp to a Lions Club and then did not think about it for years. Perhaps like most people of that time, I was in a great rush to get on with my life after the war was over... ..".

#### C H A P T E R 4.

##### BERNIE STRAIT, DEBRIEFING HIS LAST COMBAT MISSION.

Before in February/March 1996 I got into contact with C. Bernard Strait, I had already an impression of the man and commander of his B-17 he was, thanks to Herman Alesiani and George Wilson. When Herman and Pauline Alesiani visited us in 1994, Herman told about his pilot with great esteem and respect. He had always fully trusted Strait's skill as a pilot and his leadership as a commander. He strongly felt that Strait had saved his life and therefore, regarding his war-time experiences, one of his aims was to find back his pilot. As for George Wilson's opinion on Bernie Strait, I quote a passage from one of his letters which speaks for itself. It's his reaction to what he read in part I of this book, on page 30, ( the not yet revised version ) where a retired captain on civilian airplanes gave his opinion on Strait's performance on February 4, 1944. One of the things he said, was:

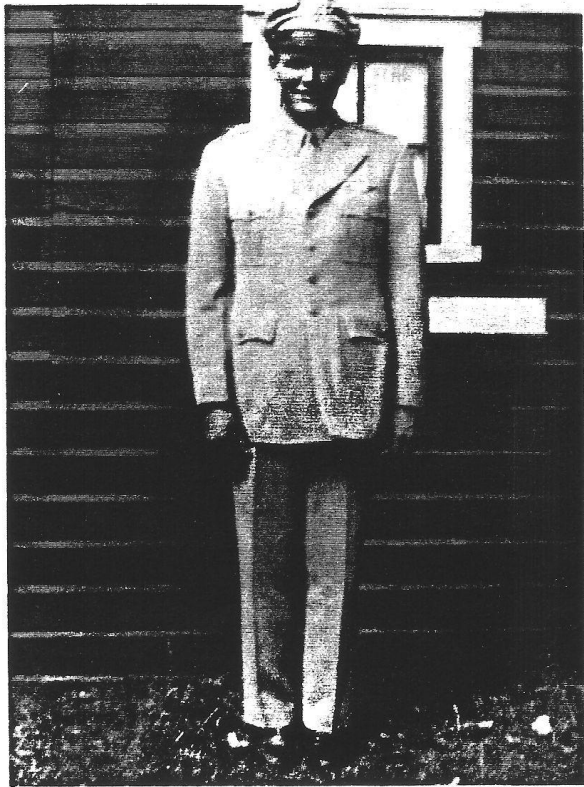
"He must have been a born flyer with great cold-bloodedness". George Wilson's reaction: "Your experienced pilot's assessment of Bernie was dead wrong. He was one of the most sensitive men I have ever known and was always worried about his crew and about his family. He was also a great flier, but nervous and not cold-blooded. He was like a big brother to his crew".

Not being a native-speaker, one always runs the risk to walk into a "language-trap". The captain used the Dutch word "koelbloedig", which means "undaunted". In my overconfidence I literally translated the Dutch word into "coldblooded", whereas it should have been: "cool-headed". Thanks to George Wilson I now know that "cold-blooded" means:

"indifferent, unconcerned". A positive result of my mistake was George Wilson's description in unmistakable terms of how he saw Bernie Strait!

Strait and Wilson spent their time as P.O.W.s in the same camp and in the same barracks-room. That gave them plenty of time and opportunity to get to know each other better.

Wilson says about that: "Bernie and I spent many hours in prison camp arguing whether or not our dispositions were shaped by the very different paces of life, He came from an almost rural upstate New York and I came from the hub-bub of Los Angeles city. The argument was finally resolved when Bernie moved to Los Angeles for a year. He couldn't stand the pace and went back to his job as a baby food salesman in upstate NY".



1st Lt. C. Bernard Strait in 1943 .



Bernie and Marion Strait at their grandson's wedding in April 1996.

During the winter-period Herman and Pauline Alesiani use to stay in Florida for some months. Pauline wrote to me, that this winter she and Herman were going to try and find Bernard Strait. We had an address in Florida where he might live. They tried and were successful. Here's what Pauline wrote about that meeting, Bernie and Herman having not seen each other for almost fifty-two years.

"Couldn't wait to get home in Orlando to write to you. *We not only found Clarence (Bernie) Strait, we visited with him and his wife!* We had a lovely afternoon. (a non-stop talkfeast!). They are lovely people and wanted us to stay over but we had commitments and had to get to my sister's in Lakeland".

It must have been an emotional and happy reunion, especially for Herman, who had been looking for his pilot for many years. I'm sure Bernie Strait was very pleasantly surprised as well. When I spoke to him on the phone some weeks after the Alesianis' visit, one of the first things he said was:

"My ballturret-gunner and his wife came to see us; that was great!"

On Saturday, March 9 1996, I received a letter from Bernard Strait, in which he told his story. Just like I did with Alesiani's and Wilson's letters, I literally quote from his.

"Following is what I can remember of our Feb.4, 1944 Combat Mission over Frankfurt, Germany:

We had dropped our bombs over Frankfurt and were about to make the returntrip to England. There was a lot of Flak and all of a sudden we were hit in the two engines on our right side of the plane.

We feathered our engines on that side and made a fast exit of the formation, because we did not have enough power to keep up the pace.

I talked to the crew on the intercom and told them they could jump or stay with the plane. They all agreed to stay.

Our next procedure was to hit the deck so German gunners could not spot us and get a good shot at us.

Our evasive action tactics (violent changes in direction and altitude) were exhausting and required a lot of cooperation between George Wilson and myself. The whole Rhurvalley was a challenge.

The action was very stressful on the remaining engines and our gas supply, which ran out over Holland and "the Verwaal residence".

There was very little time to seek a landing area and we simply headed our plane for a muddy deadstick landing on the Verwaal property.

After the landing I went to the rear of the plane to see if there were injuries to any of the crew-members. Thankfully there was only an ankle injury to Sgt. Lewis, the right waistgunner.

We set the plane afire and joined the rest of the crew, running from the 50 cal. bullets exploding in the plane. There was a lot of water in the area and we became soaked to get to dry land. It is hard to remember but I think Mr. Verwaal's father brought a boat to help us out. We asked him if he could hide us, but realized that would be impossible with a downed B-17 in his frontyard.

Soon we were picked up by a truck and put under a canvas cover, but it was no time before the Germans arrived and took us prisoners.

I want to commend our crew and co-pilot George Wilson for their bravery and help on our last mission. It would have been impossible without his help.

Next we were taken by train to a place where we were put in solitary confinement.

Luckily, I had a piece of paper in my pocket which I tore in small squares to resemble playing cards. I passed the time for the week by playing solitaire between interrogations by German officers.

Next we were loaded onto boxcars and sent to Barth, Germany, on the Baltic Sea. Stalag Luft I was located there and we spent the next 15 months as warprisoners. The Russians released us on May 15, 1945. It is very interesting that you have spent so much time and effort in researching our flight on Feb. 4, 1944. I thank you very much on behalf of my crew and myself".

Here ends Bernard Strait's brief but clear account of his experiences during and after Mission 54. His wife Marion added the next note: "That was Bernie's 13th mission. His first mission was with a crew that were on their 25th and final mission". Bernie Strait's contribution may be a brief one, yet it contains some important new elements, that fill in some gaps in the story and he mentions facts, that confirm the probability of some events, about which there was considerable doubt. These facts will be discussed in the last chapter: "Epilogue".

## CHAPTER 5.

FRAMLINGHAM - May 4 1995.

May 3 1995: On our way to England! This time our holiday in the U.K. would start quite differently from the ones that went before. We were going to visit Station 153 Framlingham the next day. An exciting thought for us, who had been busy investigating one of Framlingham's aircraft and crew for such a long time. Although the mighty engines of the "Koningin Beatrix", our Hook of Holland - Harwich ferry, gave the boat a considerable speed on a smooth sea, our crossing couldn't be fast enough this time. Tomorrow we would be at the place from where "Dolly" took off for her last mission, more than fifty years ago. Another surprising development in what started as an effort just to find back the crew. What would there be left of Station 153 after so many years? This question and many more kept our minds occupied, covering mile after mile in the direction of Harwich. Tomorrow we would know . . . . .

Disembarkation was just routine and so was the drive to Colchester. After that, taking the A 12 direction Ipswich and Wickham Market, the route was new to us. We had never been in this part of England before. After Wickham Market we enjoyed the narrow country-road to Framlingham. The familiar hedges on both sides, the peace and quiet of the country-side, so beautiful in early May, they are some of the reasons why we like England. There was one thing however, that puzzled me: When would we come to "the flat meadow area" where the airbase was situated, as I had read in one of the books of reference I had used?

The landscape wasn't flat at all, undulating would be a better word and the road to Parham was clearly rising. Perhaps the wrong image I had had in my mind was caused by what we Dutch, understand by flat: our polders, flat like a billiard-table! Soon we drove into Framlingham, exactly the nice old little market-town my "Guide to England" promised it to be. The winding and slightly rising and descending streets, bordered by mostly old houses and some lovely cottages, the little stream running through the centre, all in all a nice place to live.

The bed-and-breakfast accommodation Mr. LeRoy Keeping had arranged for us was to our liking and he soon phoned us there to make an appointment for the next morning at ten.

That evening we had a good pub-meal at the Crown Hotel and after that we had a nice conversation with some of the local customers. They told us, that many of the

airmen of 390th BG. used to visit this pub, so, thinking of the aim of our visit, we were already on a historic spot!

May 4th 1995. After a delicious English breakfast we met LeRoy Keeping at his nice bungalow. We soon felt at ease in each others company, after all we shared the same interest and LeRoy turned out to be a very kind, sensitive and quiet man, with an almost encyclopedic knowledge of the history of 390th BG. and Station 153. Born near Hawley, Minnesota, he arrived at Framlingham at the end of July 1943 as a 23-year-old S.Sgt. Power Turret specialist. As a ground crew member, LeRoy was there, during the entire stay of 390th BG. at Framlingham airbase. In September 1944 he married a local girl and for that reason he volunteered to stay behind and help clean up the living quarters, after in August 1945 the Group went home to the U.S.A.

With his wife he farmed for nine years in Minnesota, but because of his wife's health they moved back to England.

LeRoy found a good job in Framlingham. In 1983 his wife died and he has lived on his own since that year. His two married daughters live in Framlingham and he spends most of his time doing a bit of gardening and helping out at the museum at Parham Airfield.

In LeRoy's livingroom we were amazed about the number of books about the 8th USAAF and about 390th BG. in particular he has collected in the course of the years. Besides that there were beautiful B-17 models, a great painting of a B-17 in flight and other interesting souvenirs of those days gone by.

For an aircraft-history addict like me, this room was sheer paradise!

After we had given LeRoy some documents and pictures concerning "Dolly", to give them a place in the museum, he came with his big surprise. In his own quiet way, just casually, he handed us the complete crew-list of "Dolly".

It took away my breath: there it was, completely unexpected, after years of searching!

Then it was high time to get on our way to Parham, to the old airbase. In LeRoy's car we started "an expedition", which was going to be beyond all expectations. The weather was our ally, a sunny, warm day early in May, with spring in the air, ideal for a day in the English country-side.

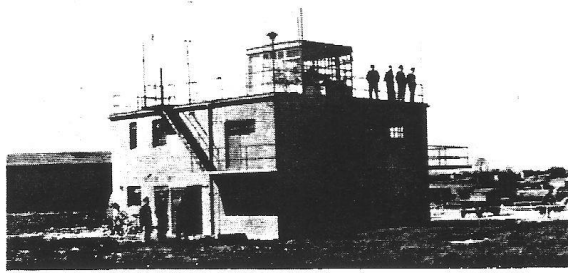
Driving to Parham we passed the building, that once had been Parham railway-station, well-known by many veterans. Many of them arrived there to start their tour of duty at the base, others took the train there for a trip to London and when the base was closed, most of the personnel left from there.

After that we left the main road and took a narrow countrylane that led to the 390th Bomb Group Memorial Air Museum – in short the Control Tower of Station 153. At a moment we left the trees and shrubs that bordered the road behind us and came at a wide, open field. And there it was, Parham Airfield!

From a picture LeRoy had sent us, we recognized the green Control Tower. At the same time there was a very wide, curving concrete road before us. A part of the original perimeter track, LeRoy told us. Near the control tower we saw a massive, box-like building, which was one of the two T2 hangars of the airbase.

Might we have doubted to find anything original at the former base, from this moment on we were sure a visit would be more than worth while. In front of the Control Tower we were welcomed by the Museum Manager Mr. Colin Durrant, on which occasion he even produced the Dutch national flag! Before entering the Tower/museum, we must tell the history of the museum in brief.

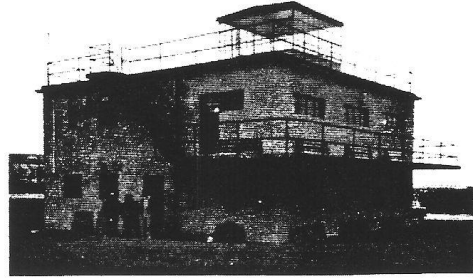
In a wide circle round the airfield, but especially between Parham and the sea, many aircraft, American, British and German, crash-landed, collided in the air and



1944

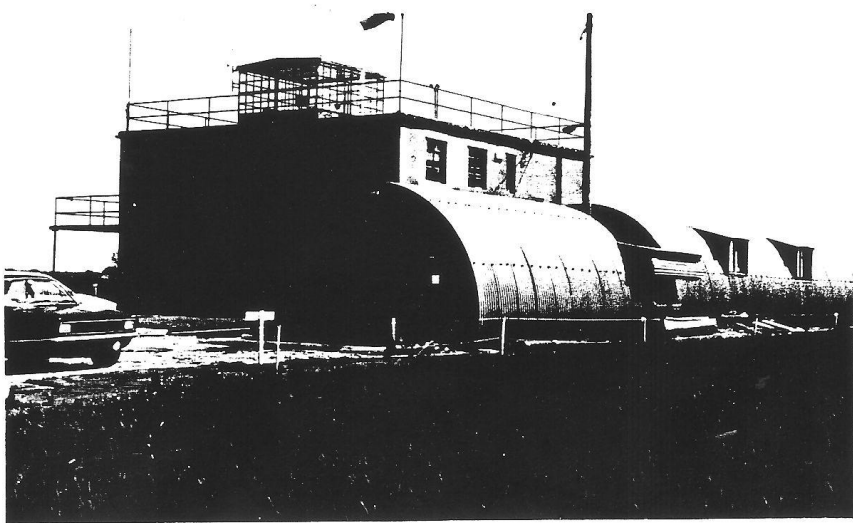


1974



1984

THE 390TH BOMBARDMENT GROUP MEMORIAL AIR MUSEUM WAS DEDICATED 13 MAY 1981 IN GRATEFUL TRIBUTE TO THE ALLIED AIRMEN WHO, IN VALOUR, GAVE THEIR LIVES TO THE VICTORY THAT MADE REAL THE CHALLENGE FOR WORLD PEACE AND UNITY. 1939-1945.



The Control Tower, May 4, 1995.

exploded or were shot down. During and shortly after the war most of the wreckagees were cleared away by recovery crews. Their main task was to remove and identify possible killed crewmembers and to see to it that explosives were taken out of the debris. Sometimes wreckagees or parts of them were bulldozed and buried, or if, for instance in the marshes, the debris had disappeared under the surface, no attempts were made to recover them.

For years these wreckagees lay undisturbed, but in the early seventies teams of mostly young enthusiasts began to make inquiries after the places where forgotten debris could be found and they started excavating them. Their efforts were quite successful. Lots of interesting finds were made, sometimes the items were in remarkably good condition. For example a parachute was found at a depth of over 15 feet.

It had been so well preserved for more than thirty years, that it could be draped overhead in the museum. So many valuable finds were made, that the problem arose where to store them.

Then, by the help of Mr. Percy Kindred, about whom I told in chapter 1, a perfect solution to this problem was found.

On his farmland, which covered most of the former airbase, there was still the controltower, albeit somewhat derelict.

It was used as a store for fertilizer. Mr. Kindred put it at the disposal of a small band of enthusiasts. I quote from the "Official Guide to Exhibits" of the museum:

"They determined to restore the decaying building as a museum in tribute to the endeavours of the 390th Bomb Group, 8th USAAF and other Allied airmen operating from bases throughout East Anglia, during World War II.

A five year restoration programme began, using volunteer labour and funded from their own resources".

In 1980 the museum was opened and from then on it was called "The 390th Bomb Group Memorial Air Museum". In his story about the base, LeRoy Keeping says:

"The museum was officially dedicated on 13 May 1981, when a large group of veterans along with their wives and a gathering of local people attended the memorial service and dedication. A B-17, "Sally-B", flew over in tribute to the 390th and to all the young men (boys really) who gave their lives for freedom. There were many tears in the eyes of hardened men that day and it's a day I shall never forget".

LeRoy's poem about "Sally-B" is on the next page.

Those volunteers did a splendid job, we could see that with our own eyes. The control-tower looked like being in full operation. Painted in the original colour, with a neatly mown lawn around it and on top the radio-shack, perfectly restored and surrounded by aeriels, a wind-velocity meter and a wind-sock. Nothing suggests that you're entering a museum, on the contrary, you get the sensation of being taken back in time.

That sensation increases as soon as you've entered the building; the amount, the variety and the quality of the exhibits is so surprising that you're staring your eyes out.

To get an idea of what it's like, I'll quote our guide, LeRoy Keeping.

"On arriving at the museum, you wouldn't think that there would be a great amount to see, but as you enter the doorway, you will be amazed at the amount that has been dug up and at the good condition that some of it is in, after being buried in the ground after a crash that happened years ago. Complete engines from B-17s and B-24s, a tail fin from a liberator, power turrets, bombs etc. Upstairs you will see hundreds of items pertaining to the war that have been donated to the museum by veterans and civilians, including the British public. Some of the items include the



## TRIBUTE TO B17 PRESERVATION

*B17 Preservation plays a great part,  
'Sally B' will always hold my heart;  
To see her flying in the sky,  
Reminds me of those days gone by.*

*The Fortress with her graceful lines,  
Her missions she flew so many times;  
Some were easy, but most were not,  
We who worked with her have not forgot.*

*She was beautiful but also tough,  
Battle damage was sometimes very rough.  
Her engines gave sound of a powerful drone,  
And we gave thanks when she returned home.*

*In May '81 'Sally B' flew over Parham,  
She flew with grace and grand decorum;  
Our museum was opened and dedicated,  
To all concerned it was appreciated.*

*To see a Fortress in the skies,  
That day brought tears to many of our eyes;  
The 390th Bomb Group on that day  
Had nothing but thanks and praise to say.*

*On April 10th in eighty-seven,  
Betty Roberts was called to Heaven;  
The members roll no more to take care,  
She's now a true member up There.*

*Ted White was also called up High,  
No more the 'Sally B' to fly.  
Their ceaseless energy and devotion  
To the rest of us is a driving potion.*

*The 'Sally B' she still flies on,  
To honour young lives long since gone;  
They gave their lives that we might see,  
A peaceful life and live quite free.*

*So 'Sally B', God rest her soul,  
We hope she continues to play her role,  
We'll do our best and keep on trying,  
To have her majestically keep on flying.*

LERROY O.KEEPING



LeRoy O. Keeping, laying a wreath at Cambridge American Cemetery, May 1991.

Norden Bombsight, clothing, parachutes, flying suits as well as hundreds of wartime pictures. Go out on the balcony and around and up the stairs and you can enter the control tower itself from where the planes were controlled for take-off and landing, even in very foggy weather sometimes. Here you will also see a complete layout of the airfield, showing how the planes were dispersed around the field as well as the living quarters in case of enemy attack. While going around the museum you will enjoy listening to Glenn Miller music or other music of that era. Outside next to the tower we have constructed 2 Nissen Huts, one is our tearoom and souvenir shop and the other is our library and archives".

While showing us around, LeRoy drew our attention to certain exhibits with a story behind them. We saw an engine cowling panel bearing the serial number of a B-17, 42-31370.

This aircraft came from the 385th BG., based at Great Ash-field. On 21st February 1944 the Group attacked an aircraft depot at Diepholz, Germany. This is what the Museum Guide says about it:

"At that time crews were required to complete 25 missions before finishing a tour of duty and this was the last mission for Captain John N. Hutchinson and his crew, flying A/C 42-31370. Propaganda to lift morale and recruitment could be made from this, so a young photographer, Sgt. Bud Creegan,, was sent to film the attack. Although hampered by bad weather, the Group inflicted severe damage on the target before returning in deteriorating conditions. At 15.37 hours they crossed the English coast whilst losing height in preparation for landing. On board Hutchinson's plane, he and his crew celebrated, the pilot lighting a large cigar as they slid into cloud at 4000 ft -- they were almost home. When the Fortresses emerged, the B-17 flown by Lt. Warren Pease had disappeared from its formation position on the starboard side of Hutchinson's aircraft. Moments later the missing aircraft came boring through the undercast in a deep dive, pulling up directly in the path of the Flight Leader. The right wing of Hutchinson's ship tore into the other B-17 completely severing its tail section.

For an instant the tail-less bomber hung over Hutchinson's aircraft before stalling onto it. Both aircraft then fell into the marshes with the loss of all 21 airmen . . . .".

Knowing the story behind it, one looks with different eyes at an exhibit. And that's the case with many of the items there are to be seen. So many, that one morning or even one day will not be enough to see and digest everything properly.

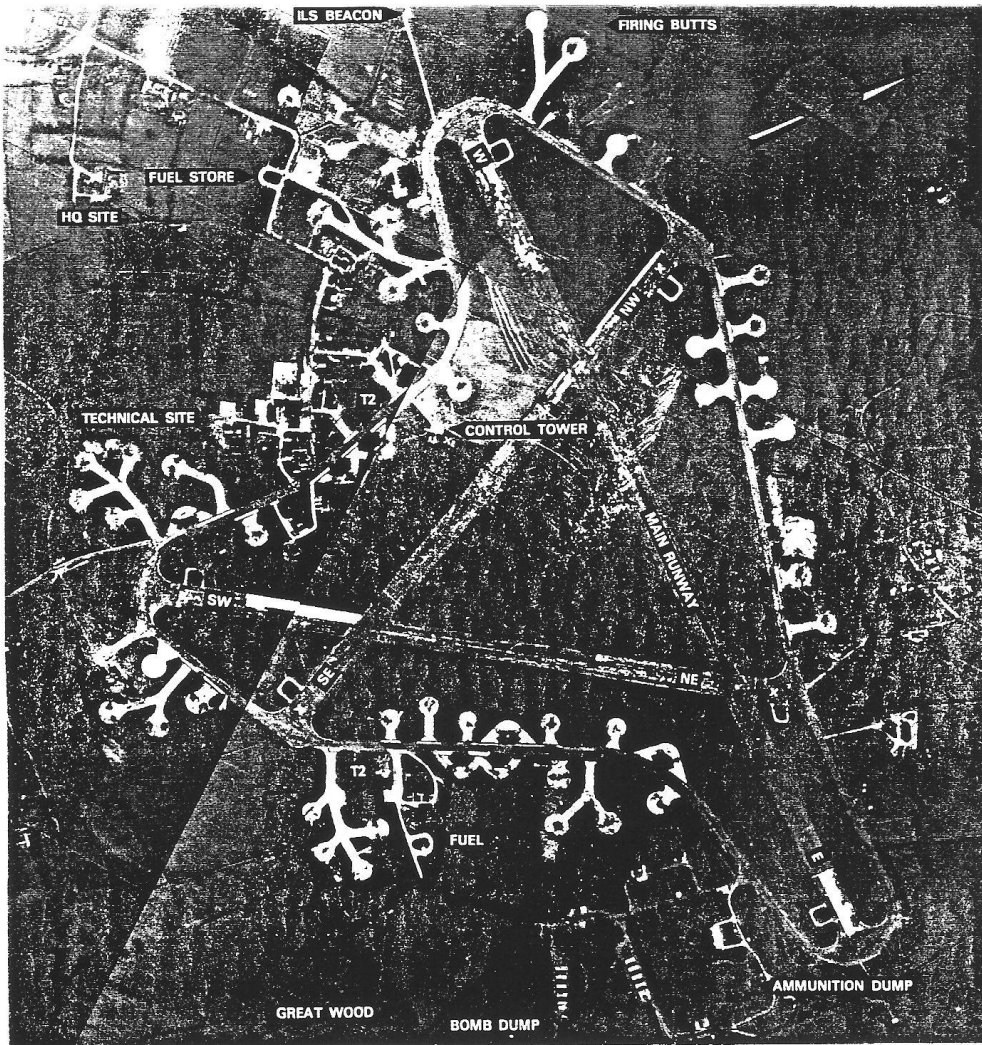
On top of the building we visited the radio-shack. LeRoy demonstrated, that the radio still works and that all the original pieces of apparatus have been installed again.

From there we had a splendid view of the entire former airfield. We could see a thin grey line, crossing the green fields in front of us, all that was left of the main runway. Even on this bright day in May, with the whole landscape around us so peaceful and quiet, it was not difficult to try and imagine what it had been like. You could almost see the heavily loaded ships roaring along the runway, one after another, getting off the ground and slowly gaining altitude. "Dolly" had been one of them!

The three of us spent quite some time up there and I had the sensation, that there were not just the three of us.

It's not easy to find the words to describe the experience, might it have been the shadows and voices from the past?

It was a strange and moving sensation and looking at LeRoy I got the impression, that he saw much more than there was actually to be seen . . . . .



An RAF photo-montage of Framlingham air-base, Station 153, Parham, on June 21, 1946.



THE COLLECTOR (Ken Stockman)

Much later, back home again, I read in the Museum Guide: "Reflect a moment on the anxiety experienced up here as those left behind "sweated out" the mission. The tower is said to be haunted. As aviation historian Roger Freeman recently expressed it: "If there are ghosts - they are here".

From the Tower we went to the tearoom for a refreshment and some nice souvenirs. In the library there was an interesting wall with lots of names and addresses and signatures of the many veterans that paid a visit to the airfield and the museum. Then it was high time for a bite and LeRoy took us to an old and cosy pub "The Crown", where we had a good ploughman's lunch. During the war many airmen had a drink in this pub. Another place full of memories.

Back at the airbase we spent the afternoon driving around it to see and visit what was left of buildings, Nissenhuts etc.

Again we were astonished at how many of them that had stood wear and tear of time.

Almost all the buildings are in use by farmers for storage of farm machinery, some are used as pigsties and others for storage of cattle-fodder etc.

Time and again LeRoy surprised us with his intimate knowledge of the large area, that once was Station 153. At a moment we stopped at a gate, behind which there was a meadow with grazing sheep and LeRoy said: "Look, here were your friend Herman's quarters". And pointing at a construction of a large tank on steel legs: "That was our water-tower, now in use by the local waterworks. He must have seen that many times".

Another interesting building was the former cinema and next to it the chapel. LeRoy showed us the box-office and inside the cinema we saw the small openings in the rear wall through which the pictures were projected. Most amazing was the fact, that before the windows there were still some rags, that once had been the black-out curtains.

The headquarters building was still there and though it was clearly in use for agricultural purposes when we saw it, it still radiated a bit of the old image of importance it must have shown fifty years ago.

We saw a lot of Nissen huts still in use, and though some of them were rather derelict, we saw others, that were in well repair. LeRoy showed us a door to a Nissen hut on which it said: "Orderly Room".

Driving the full length of one of the short runways tickled our imagination: although only a narrow strip of the original runway was left, we drove on the same old concrete on which the wheels of the B-17s had rolled - for us an exciting experience.

At the end of a well-spent day and with our heads full of new impressions we drove to Framlingham, where we had tea with LeRoy. Over our tea we still didn't lack subjects for conversation. We appeared to have more interfaces with LeRoy than just 390th BG. and we felt, that not only had we had the best guide we could wish to visit Station 153, but we had found a friend as well. For LeRoy some busy days lay ahead: On the 6th of May he was laying a wreath at the Cambridge American Cemetery, where many of the 390th were buried. He does so every year. "It's always a heavy day", he said, "but I want to do that as long as I can".

On the seventh there would be a group of 31 veterans and families visiting their old base, as a part of a tour they were making. On the very day we were at Framlingham, they were visiting Holland to commemorate the Chowhound missions.

We said goodbye to LeRoy, thanking him for the unforgettable day he had given us. The next morning we left Framlingham to continue our holiday. As far as we are concerned, our visit to Framlingham will not be a once-only one!

## CHAPTER 6.

### EPILOGUE

In this chapter I'll try to round off the story of Mission 54. Thinking about what went before, John S. Warner's words, used in one of his publications for the 390th Veterans Association, are applicable here as well: "This is not just one story . . . it is many".

Many people told their stories: American, Dutch and English. Many facts and stories were found in books and documents.

All of them they had one thing in common: they were connected, directly or indirectly, with ten young American airmen in their B-17 on February 4, 1944.

Yet the attentive reader may have noticed, that not all facts mentioned from different sources, are identical. Before we're going to scrutinize some of these discrepancies, we should be aware of the following facts:

- a. We are absolutely sure that our witnesses gave their testimonies as they truly remembered them.
- b. Almost all the testimonies were given fifty years or more after the events took place.
- c. In the case of the crew-members, these young men, on that day in February 1944, went through more frightful experiences in one day, than many other people go through in a lifetime. Emotions tend to colour, confuse and even block our memory.
- d. Even official reports cannot always be trusted, as they are mostly the results of human observation, which isn't always reliable.

With regard to these considerations, George Wilson gave a nice example of how a witness, with the best of intentions, gave an interpretation to what he saw, which was absolutely wrong. In Wilson's words:

"Please be careful about taking at face value the reports of nearby crews - or even our own views of the event. In truth, we were all frightened out of our wits - anyone who says that he was not nervous on every flight must certainly have his sanity suspect. Beside that, we were all very busy. An example of what I am suggesting is seen in the actions of Harold C. White; who was bombardier on the original crew I flew with. "Clyde" was bombardier in a nearby plane on that flight to Frankfurt. (Flew with Osadnick, A/C 466, see mission-diagram-Verwaal).

Shortly after the mission, he wrote to my mother, saying that he was certain that I was alive and well since he had seen the parachutes open after the plane was hit. We were certainly not the only plane in trouble when that flight got too near Cologne. For years, I thought that Clyde White had just made up that story to make my mother feel better. But about five years ago, after many attempts to contact him and thank him, I received a letter from Clyde telling me about the 390th Veterans Association and asking to meet him at a convention. During our opening conversation at that meeting, Clyde asked me why I was not a member of the Caterpillar Club (an organization of people who had parachuted out of a plane) and was surprised when I told him I had never done that. Crew members' perceptions in the heat of the battle are not very accurate".

Of course Clyde White had seen parachutes. As said before in chapter 2, the Eighth lost eighteen B-17s during this mission and two B-24s. So, in the hell of those Flak-

NAME	P	FAT	CRW	Y	M	D	SER_NR	MSN	TARGET
Wilson, George F	12		42	431113	230266	29	Bremen GE		
Wilson, George F	12		29	431126	23297	32	Paris-Hisp-Suiza F		
Wilson, George F	12		29	431205	239926	35	Bordeaux FR		
Wilson, George F	12		29	431211	239926	36	Emden GE		
Wilson, George F	12		36	431224	237723	41	Quoeux FR		
Wilson, George F	12		27	431231	229962	43	Paris-CAM FR		
Wilson, George F	12		27	440104	239852	44	Kiel GE		
Wilson, George F	12		36	440111	237723	47	Brunswick GE		
Wilson, George F	12		27	440121	230642	49	Heuringhem FR		
Wilson, George F	12		27	440129	230642	51	Frankfurt GE		
Wilson, George F	12		27	440130	230642	52	Brunswick GE		
Wilson, George F	12		27	440203	230642	53	Wilhelmshaven GE		
Wilson, George F	12	POW	27	440204	231292	54	Frankfurt GE		
Alesiani, Herman	17		21	431224	239879	41			
Alesiani, Herman	17		27	431231	229962	43			
Alesiani, Herman	17		27	440104	239852	44			
Alesiani, Herman	17		36	440111	237723	47			
Alesiani, Herman	17		27	440121	230642	49			
Alesiani, Herman	17		27	440129	230642	51			
Alesiani, Herman	17		27	440130	230642	52			
Alesiani, Herman	17		27	440203	230642	53			
Alesiani, Herman	17		27	440204	231292	54			

Missions flown by George Wilson and Herman Alesiani. Compare the serial numbers of the aircraft and the mission numbers (MSN).

## Big American Bombers Over Reich Again

1944

LONDON, Feb. 4 (U.P.)

Several hundred American heavy bombers escorted by hundreds of long range fighters battled through a thick curtain of anti-aircraft fire today to an unidentified target in Western Germany today and left it wreathed in smoke and flames.

(The clandestine radio station Atlantic said the American target was the German arsenal city of Frankfurt.)

The fleet of Flying Fortresses and Liberators was believed to be as large as the 700 heavy bombers which dropped 1,100 to 1,600 tons of explosives on the big German naval base at Wilhelmshaven yesterday.

United States Mustangs, Lightnings and Thunderbolts flew with the heavy bombers in such strength that the small forces of German fighters they encountered were reluctant to press their attacks.

Some of the airmen reported that they flew through the heaviest anti-aircraft fire they ever saw the way in and out from the target.

The difficulties were increased by strong winds occasionally hit a peak of 150 miles an hour, buffeting the big bombers and making precarious wing-tip-to-wing-tip flying.

Clouds over the target area opened a little, enabling some crewmen to see a billowing mass of smoke and flame which indicated the objective was taking a beating.

In Frankfurt, a chief railway junction for western Germany, some 500,000 persons are engaged directly or indirectly in transportation, in manufacturing chemical and machine tools for the Wehrmacht and in the distribution of supplies which funnel into the city's inland port at the juncture of the Main and Rhine rivers. Prime target of the manufacturing communities in and around the city was a suburban plant turning out possibly half of the propellers used by the Luftwaffe.

Thunderbolt and Lightning fighter groups and long-range Mustangs escorted the Fortresses and Liberators in relays to the target and on the way home. More relays of USAAF fighters carried them back to within range of Allied Spitfire escorts.

While the heavies were hitting Frankfurt, Marauder mediums carried on the pounding of the military installations in the Pas de Calais area. The B26s now have flown 1,500 sorties with the loss of only three planes. Saturday's was their eighth attack of the month.



HERMAN ALESIANI

Cutting from American newspaper for which Alesiani had asked his family.

barrages, one could easily mistake one aircraft for another.

I'll try to find plausible conclusions by comparing statements and reports that contradict each other in some cases throughout the story. Mind, I don't pretend my conclusions to be right; they're just assumptions.

In part 1 Herman Alesiani says, that the co-pilot, whose name he didn't remember, was a replacement. Neither Bernie Strait, nor George Wilson remember that being the case. If we compare Alesiani's and Wilson's official lists of missions we notice that both of them belonged to the same crew during their eight last successive missions. If the data on these lists are correct, Alesiani probably was mistaken with another mission. The A/C numbers correspond as well and according to the lists they flew together in the same aircraft, with the same crew-number on eight combat missions. It was not easy for Herman to get to know all his fellow-crewmembers. The officers and the enlisted men lived in separate quarters and during the missions for Herman, on his isolated post in the ball-turret, the officers were just voices on the intercom.

A more complicated puzzle to solve is to find the exact spot over Germany where "Dolly" was hit by Flak. Herman Alesiani remembered it was over Heidelberg, George Wilson thinks it was near Cologne and the Framlingham combatmission report says : "Near Laacher Lake", which is about 12 miles NWN of Koblenz. There's one point on which the three statements agree: It happened before reaching the target.

Bernie Strait remembers it happened *after* they had bombed Frankfurt.

Maurice Crosbie, Bernie Strait's wingman, says (part 2, chapter 2) that when nearing Bonn, they encountered heavy Flak and were hit at 11.55 hours. If the time, when "Dolly" was hit, mentioned in the Framlingham report, was really 12.02 hours, so seven minutes after "Gung Ho", we've got a combination of data, which might indicate the right spot.

The official Flak report says, there were accurate barrages both at Bonn and Koblenz, so it might be possible that "Gung Ho", was hit near Bonn and seven minutes later, "Dolly" was hit near or beyond Koblenz.

Possibly George Wilson had been focussed on what was told at the briefing at Framlingham: NOT to fly directly over Cologne because of the tremendous Flak barrages that were to be expected there. Both Crosbie and Wilson report, that Group got off the briefed course, so the formation came too near to Cologne. This fact is even to be seen on the official course diagram.

That Herman Alesiani thought it was over Heidelberg, might be explained from the fact, that near this city was the briefed point, where the formation after having bombed, should make a 90° turn in WNW direction, to fly home. His mistake was, that he thought they turned over Heidelberg before having bombed (See diagram part 1, page 8a ).

Whatever the right place may have been, we can't blame our witnesses for not reporting more unanimously. They were flying over a heavy undercast at 24.000 ft, the temperature was minus 42, oxygen-masks were pressing against their faces and around them there was an inferno of bursting anti-aircraft shells. Under these circumstances *what* happened was of infinite greater importance than *where* it happened, that may be clear.

Then there is the question: Did they bomb on target, or did they not?

According to Alesiani and Strait they did, although the difference between their reports is, that Strait thinks they bombed before they were hit, whereas Alesiani

says, they bombed after they were hit. George Wilson is pretty sure, that after being hit, they aborted the mission. In one of his letters he says:

"I am quite sure (even though it is said that only jack-asses are positive) that we were first shot while flying too near Cologne. On my maps I cannot find Laacher Lake, but if it is far from Cologne, even the official report is in error. Perhaps the reporter took sightings at the time he first noticed the smoke.

My atlas indicates that the distance for Cologne to Frankfurt, in a straight line, is about 90 miles. Since a B-17 was capable of flying 150 miles an hour unloaded and going down hill, that put us, when damaged, at least 36 minutes from Frankfurt. As I remember the raids, "bomb run" were rarely that leisurely. It seems unlikely to me that we finished that run. Certainly, soon after running through the Flak, we found ourselves all alone in the sky and no pilot I ever met was fond of flying more than necessary alone over German territory. My recollection is that we aborted the mission and dropped the bombs in a field".

George Wilson doesn't rule out that he confuses missions, but the reports from other sources cause him to wonder.

Then there is Maurice Crosbie's report. According to him his plane was hit near Bonn at 11.55 hours. He continued on to the target and bombed.

If this is correct and "Dolly" was hit seven minutes later, we may be inclined to believe what the Framlingham report says in the last sentence: "As this occurred near the target area, A/C is presumed to have bombed".

Perhaps the word "presumed" supports what George Wilson says about it: "I do not know that one can ever get to the real facts after so many years".

A comparison of the recollections our three crew-members have of their flight back after being hit, results in some interesting considerations.

They agree on one point: Both starboard engines were knocked out by Flak and to get home they had to manage on the two remaining port engines.

Both Wilson and Alesiani suggest, that these engines quit in the end because of mechanical failure. (overheating etc.)

Bernie Strait gives a different reason. According to him they gave up because of lack of gas. Their evasive action tactics finally had exhausted their fuel supply. Besides that, the engines had been running at full throttle and had therefore consumed a maximum of gas.

May be there was a combination of reasons: mechanical failure because of the strain on the engines and lack of gas for the same reason.

One tends to see running out of gas as the main reason.

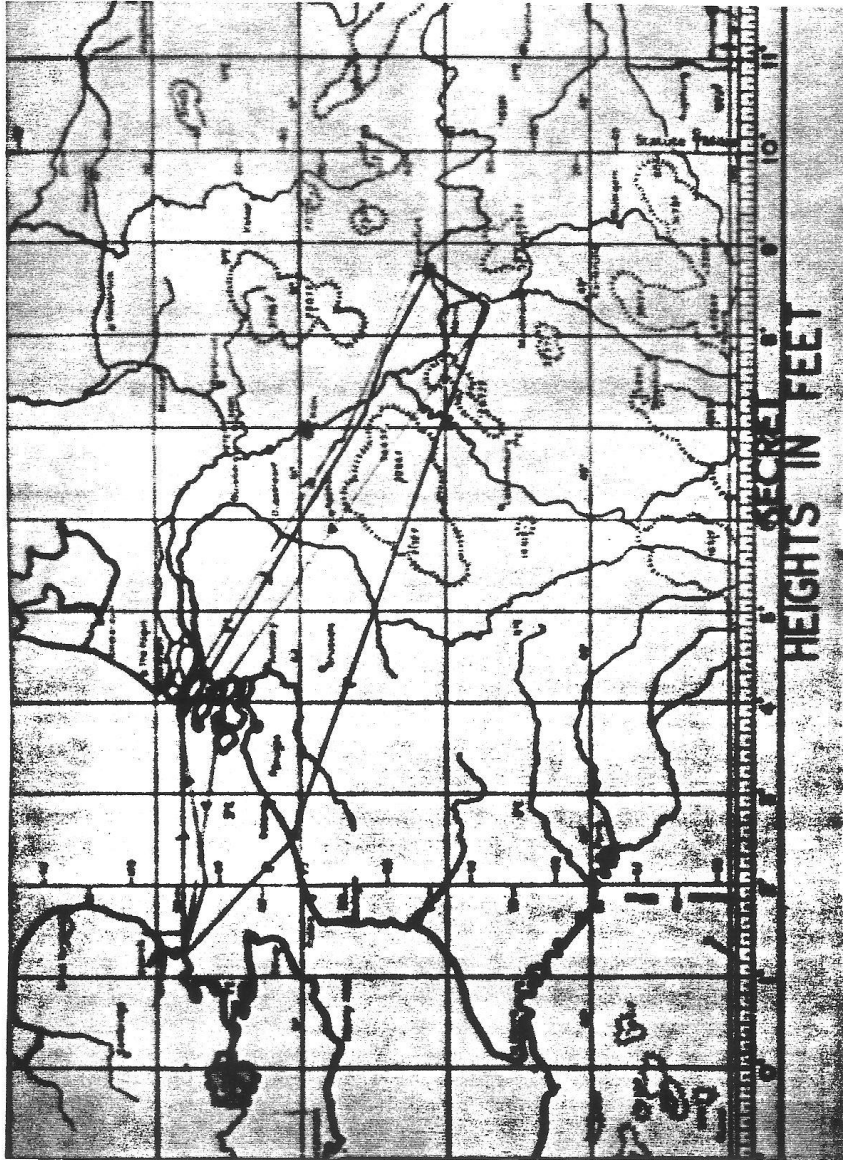
First, may be they lost part of their precious gas supply from the tanks in the damaged right wing and second, when after the landing they set fire to the plane there are no accounts of witnesses about heavy explosions.

If there had been a considerable supply of fuel in the tanks, such explosions could have been expected.

Another aspect of this "lame bird flight" is again the observation that the B-17 was an excellent aircraft. It was capable to fly on two out of four engines, even when both of them were on one side of the plane, the most unfavourable situation, as has been explained in part 1, page 30.

Although Bernie Strait remembers how exhausting this part of the flight was for the pilots, they managed, and didn't only keep their plane flying, but carried out evasive actions as well. A great compliment for the quality of the aircraft and her pilots!





The official route-map of mission 54. The thick line is the briefed route, the thin line is the route actually taken. See the sharp alteration of course south of Cologne (Köln).

One aspect of mission 54, the fact that the landing at Lekkerkerk was an exceptional one, as described in part 1, failed to sink in with many people who took note of it. Not even the crew-members realized, that their landing was unique, the only successful one under these circumstances in occupied Western Europe in WW II.

Herman Alesiani says: "It was an easy glide to Terra Firma. The landing site was made to order. How many times I thank the unknown landowner for having his land free of obstacles!"

In this respect, Herman's use of the expression "Terra Firma", dry, solid land, was rather ironic, without him realizing that.

Georges Wilson writes: "I am surprised at your finding from the Netherlands RAF that ours was the only known safe crashlanding of a B-17. That great plane was very stable and easy to handle".

Bernie Strait says laconically: "We simply headed our plane for a muddy deadstick landing on the Verwaal property".

None of them had the slightest idea, that the most dangerous aspect of their landing was the quality of the landingfield. What lay before them as a friendly green and flat piece of land, indeed "free of obstacles", was in reality a treacherous, grass-covered swamp, ready to swallow the B-17 and her entire crew.

This may sound dramatic, but it's the reason why the landing is recorded as "unique". The fact, that the pilots had to land "Dolly" as if she was a glider, made the event even more spectacular.

A case in point is, that when later the wreck was demolished, the Germans couldn't use their trucks to remove the pieces of wreckage. The subsoil was so weak, that they would have sunk. That's why a Dutch farmer was hired with his horse and cart to do the job.

Bernie Strait must have made an extremely smooth and level landing, keeping his plane in one piece and his crew alive, as only a pilot, who has flying at his fingertips, can do.

There's no doubt about it, that George Wilson's experienced assistance in doing so, was an indispensable help.

Perhaps it was a good thing, that the pilots had no idea of the muddy adventure that lay ahead during their landing - if they had, their self-confidence would perhaps have suffered from it, with possible dramatic results.

Being captured by the Germans shortly after the landing, must have been a great disappointment for the crew, after having done so well up to that moment. Yet they stood little chance of evading the Germans, which was due to some unfavourable circumstances, such as:

- a. They landed too close to a residential area.
- b. They landed in clear daylight.
- c. The burning aircraft drew the attention of many people in a wide circle around it.
- d. The landing-site was in a flat, open meadow-area, in which walking people are visible miles away.

For all these reasons my father sent them northeastward, away from the populated area and into the direction of some lonely farms surrounded by trees and shrubs.

They actually reached that area.

Then a remarkable thing happened. Walking along a narrow country lane, the crew were picked up by a truck, the driver of which hid them under a canvas cover. Soon after that they were stopped and arrested by two Dutch policemen.

As Alesiani stated in part 1, he presumed that the truckdriver collaborated with the Germans.

Actually, the truckdriver, Mr. A.Aarmoudse, was known among the people of Lekkerkerk as a vehement anti-Nazi. His daughter, Mrs. Stien van den Berg-Aarmoudse, told Alesiani, that even in the years after the war, the words "Germany" and "Germans" were taboo in his house. He never spoke about his experiences on that 4th February 1944. As he died years ago, we'll never know, what his feelings were, when he picked up the crew.

In an earlier issue of this book I considered the possibility, that Aarmoudse might have tried to keep the crew out of German hands. A clue to support this consideration might be, that he covered the Americans with a tarpaulin, just to hide them from curious eyes.

However, discussing this possibility with Wen Boon and Mr. Aarmoudse's daughter, we came to the conclusion that we can easily rule it out for the following reasons:

- a. We know, that Aarmoudse had been summoned to transport the crew either by a municipal official or by the Dutch police. Thus the route and the time of his ride were known.
- b. He met the airmen all together, in one group. How on earth could he hide ten airmen in clear daylight, with the Germans already in the neighbourhood?

Aarmoudse's daughter told me, that her father was a member of the Lekkerkerk resistance-group, that towards the end of the war the Germans wanted to arrest him, so that he had to go into hiding and that because of this background he must have realized, that an attempt to hide the Americans at this stage would have been doomed to fail.

Aarmoudse must have hated the whole situation he was in, and in a somewhat pathetic gesture to show his good intentions, he covered the wet, cold and worn-out airmen with a tarpaulin, to protect them from the bad weather . . . . .

Up to now, it still isn't certain, who phoned the police to report the presence of U.S.-airmen in the Lekkerkerk area.

The police-reports don't say anything about it. In our opinion it may have been a farmer who sympathized with the Nazis and who saw the crew somewhere on his property, or just somebody who popped in at the townhall to tell the news. A fact is, that from an early stage, the feared S.D. (German Secret Police) at Gouda, had been informed about the landing and took an active part in anything that had to do with the aircraft and her crew. (see part 1, page 16 ).

For that reason the two Dutch policemen were in a delicate position. They knew that, like Aarmoudse's, all their actions would be suspiciously observed by the Germans, and they wouldn't have any chance to sabotage the orders to arrest the crew.

George Wilson remembers that they apologized for having taken them prisoners. It was a pity for them, that after the arrest their popularity among the Lekkerkerk people didn't rise, to put it mildly. They got all the blame and I remember my father and the grown-ups among my acquaintances expressing their anger.

Normally the S.D. didn't deal with captured allied airmen and enemy aircraftwreckage. That was a task for the regular German army. Why their special interest in this case?

We think that was caused by the poor means of communication in those days. At the S.D. headquarters at Gouda a message was received, that the crew of an American bomber had fled after their crash and a request was made for their "tracing, arresting and bringing up". Between the moment of receipt of this message and the withdrawal of it, there was a gap of about 2 hours, time enough to alert the S.D. Then the S.D. was informed, that people had stolen things from the wreck, reasons enough for the Germans to get very suspicious about what had

happened at Lekkerkerk that day.

That's why Mr. Wim Berrevoets, a member of the resistancegroup himself, had such hard days at S.D. headquarters at Gouda! (part 1, page 16).

Quite interesting, in my opinion, are the examples given by Herman Alesiani and George Wilson, of the tactics the German interrogators used, to make the captured airmen talk.

From Alesiani's report in part I we know, that he was told that they had the complete crew-list, and what made it worse, they had found that list on the co-pilot when he was searched. Presumably this was an attempt to drive a wedge between Alesiani, an enlisted man and one of his officers.

The suggestion was, that when an officer was so stupid, why should he as a sergeant, bother? Of course they hadn't got a list from Wilson, moreover, Wilson was told the same.

"You might as well tell us about your crew, since we have a list of all the crewmembers". The list of crewmembers was certainly not a secret - they had picked all of them up together.

Besides the tactics of taking Wilson by surprise by showing him the drawings of the latest B-17 G model, they had another nasty trick for him in store. In Wilson's own words:

"Many of the fliers in WW II left behind wives and sweethearts. So it became a popular tribute to write the name of a loved one on the flight jacket. Some of the more immature fliers, like myself, had left no sweethearts - so a few of us signed our jackets in tribute to our mothers - MOM. It happened that, at that time, Chicago was being terrorized by a crime mob known as "Murder Incorporated". The inventive Germans managed somehow to take MOM, whose meaning they pretended not to know, as the symbol for Murder Inc. and threatened to treat me as a gangster. It was just another effort to break down a prisoner of war".

George Wilson and Herman Alesiani both were unpleasantly surprised by what the Germans seemed to know about them and that was the experience, many of their fellow-POWs had. One of them, a 390th BG. navigator, Melvin L. Johnson, tells in volume I of "390th BG. Anthology":

"They knew more about our base than I did! Even used our "secret and confidential" code number, 153, to identify the base. They knew most of the permanent personnel as well as the Squadron Flight Leaders".

While I was writing this chapter, Mr. Piet Brouwer, my fellow Airwar-documentalist, drew my attention to "The shoe leather express", book 1,2 and 3, by Joseph P. O'Donnell.

Some main subjects in these books are the evacuation of Stalag Luft Four, the march across Germany referred to as "The Death March" and the "Kiefeheide-incident", where groups of American POWs were forced to run the gauntlet between bayonets and biting dogs.

Herman Alesiani tells about these experiences on page 21 of part one.

Reading O'Donnell's books, once again I was struck and moved by what these POWs had to endure. The books are full of detailed testimonies by ex-POWs, which give the reader a clear perception of what it was like.

The virtue of these books is, that all these stories have been recorded for us and for next generations, stories which mustn't be left untold. O'Donnell did a great job!

Rereading Herman's account of the events it was with respect that I found how retiring and matter-of-fact his words are, describing experiences which must have been awful.

O'Donnell says about the "Death March": "This particular march, "The Shoe Leather Express", endured for 86 days and 600 miles of beatings, starvation, amputations, frostbite, frozen feet and hands, dirt, lice, filth, degradation, heat, thirst and death".

One of the minor facts in the "Dolly"-story that puzzled my co-author of part 1, Wen Boon, and me, was whether there had been exploding ammunition in the burning plane or not.

None of Boon's witnesses, when interviewed, remembered anything about that, and the fire-brigade didn't mention it in their report.

Only my father did and he even mentioned the "fireworks-effect" some of the whizzing bullets gave. Those must have been the tracer bullets. At any rate, for my father there was reason enough to leave the vicinity of the burning aircraft as soon as possible.

At the time Boon wrote about this subject (part 1, page 31) his evidence for the truth of this event was too weak to take it for granted, so he qualified it as "a bit overdone".

Now we know, from Alesiani's, Wilson's and Strait's reports, that the bullets were really "buzzing round their ears".

The reason why my father was the only Dutch witness who noticed the exploding ammunition, was, that he must have been closer to the aircraft and at an earlier time than any of the other witnesses.

In the course of my investigations I sometimes encountered a fact, that was not essential for the story, but yet interesting enough to mention. I noted them as "bits and pieces" and I'll give two examples.

Leafing through "The 390th BG. Anthology", volume 1, I happened to see the next contribution by Albert L. Buehler, bombardier, 569th squadron, "Gloria Ann": "About the last week of January, I lost my cadet class ring. One week later, Bernie Strait discovered it was my ring he had been wearing and returned it to me on 3 February. Bernie was shot down the next day".

Another fact that struck me, was that the number 13 was three times present on this mission. The aircraft made her thirteenth sortie and both Strait and Wilson were on their thirteenth mission.

I know that crews many times saw these things as a bad omen. I wonder if Strait and Wilson ever realized . . . . .

This must be the end of the story about "Dolly" and her crew. It's a great pity that up to now I couldn't find the whereabouts of the seven remaining crewmembers, nor did I succeed in contacting any of their relatives. A great pity for them in the first place, for they are part of the story as well and have a right to be acquainted with my findings.

I can only hope, that one day these contacts will be effected. For that reason the "Dolly-file" will not be closed, but kept open for their stories . . . . .

For myself and all the Dutch who consciously experienced WW II, many facts described in this book are events we'll never forget.

The huge fleets of aircraft, droning over by day and by night, the crisscross of contrails against a blue sky, looking like a surrealistic painting, for us they were the signs of hope for an end of the war and kept us going.

Then there were the food-drops, for many Dutchmen still an emotional memory with profound feelings of gratitude to those young men, who again risked their lives to save us from starvation.

This gratitude, to all the USAAF and RAF airmen, has been one of the motives for me to investigate the facts of the story about some of them, the crew of A/C 42-312292 B-17 G "Dolly".



January 1996 :

Herman Alesiani (left)  
and Bernie Strait reunited  
after more than fifty years.

## APPENDIX I

### ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS.

This booklet would have been impossible without the generous help and great interest that I have received during the past six years from many people in the Netherlands, the United States and the United Kingdom.

I wish to express my gratitude to all of them; they made it possible for me to find an answer to many questions that occupied my mind from time to time since I was a schoolboy.

Besides that, they made it a pleasure for me to perform the task I had set myself; to write the story of B-17 "Dolly" and her crew.

The following persons provided invaluable help in locating the veterans who witnessed the events described in this book: Annette Verwaal, Los Angeles, U.S.A., Lt. Col. Lois A. Schwartz, USAF, Goldsboro, NC., the editors of "The Ex-POW bulletin" and John S. Warner of the 390th Memorial Museum Foundation, Tucson, Arizona. I owe them many thanks.

I'm very grateful to Herman Alesiani, George Wilson and Bernie Strait for telling me their stories and for their constant willingness to answer my many questions.

Special thanks to LeRoy O. Keeping, former ground-crew 570th BS, turrets, Framlingham, for having been an excellent host and guide at Parham airbase and for his contribution to this book.

Much relevant information was given to me by John S. Warner of 390th Mem. Museum Foundation. He sent me lots of documents about Mission 54, for which I'm very grateful.

Many thanks to Piet Brouwer of Dronten, the Netherlands, documentalist Air-war 1939-1945, who gave me full access to his library, which provided me with most valuable information.

The following persons deserve many thanks as well: Tom Fuller, clerk to the town-council, Framlingham. Wim Veerman, Lt.Col. Ward (rtd) and H.Th.M. Kaufmann, all Royal Netherlands Air Force. My uncle, Paulus Verwaal, for taking pictures of "Dolly" on February 4, 1944 and saving them all those years. Louis van den Berg, ex-airliner captain, for his observations on flying technique.

Lester Ippel and Karen Goodwin, U.S.A., and E.B. van Beers and J.A. Hey, The Netherlands, for their contributions. Linda DeSmet and Egbert Kruithof, Zoetermeer, The Netherlands, for their technical assistance in computerizing this book.

Last, but by no means least, my wife Elly for her constant support and interest throughout and for typing all my hand-written texts into the computer.

## APPENDIX 2.

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APPENDIX 3.

GLOSSARY.

Part. 1.

Ch. 1.

Lancaster-bomber: British, four-engine, heavy bomber, developed by AVRO. Service-ceiling 24.500 ft. (B-17 35600 ft.).

P-51 "Mustang": Single-engine, USAAF fighter-aircraft, famous for its range: 1520 km. with extra fuel-tanks. The best all-round fighter of W.W.II.

Bomb-run: The flight course of a bomber just before the release of bombs.

Squadron: A formation of aircraft, usually six or more.

Nissenhut: A half-cylindrical metal structure, usually for personnel-quarters, developed by P.N.Nissen.

Powdered eggs: An omelette made from egg-powder.

Ch. 2.

Mussolini: Fascist dictator of Italy, 1922-1943, killed by Italian resistance in 1945.

U-boats: German submarines.

Stalin: Soviet dictator, 1923-1953.

Tiendweg: A country-lane, running east-west through the meadows at Lekkerkerk.

The Smalle Kampje: The narrow piece of meadow, surrounded by canals, running north-south, where "Dolly" came to a standstill.

Very-pistol: A flare pistol used esp. for signaling, designed by USN. Lt. Edward W. Very.

Ch. 3.

P.O.W. : Prisoner of war.

Stalag 6: (German: Stammlager). A permanent German prisoner-of-war camp.

D.C. 3: Also: C-47, a twin-engine aircraft, designed to carry heavy cargo and troops. Popularly called "the Skytrain" by the Americans and "Dakota" by the British. Built by Douglas.

Liberty-ship: Type of cargo-ship, built in the U.S.A. in W.W.II. The ships were built in a very short time, in about 2 months, with a record of 4 1/2 days.

Ch. 4.

Schiphol: Dutch international airport near Amsterdam.

Ch. 5.

Flevoland: The Netherlands' 12th province, totally proclaimed from the former Zuiderzee. (An inland-sea).

Hans Brinkers: The boy who, according to the legend, once prevented Holland from being flooded, by putting his thumb into a hole in the dyke.

The Loet: A small community, north of Lekkerkerk.

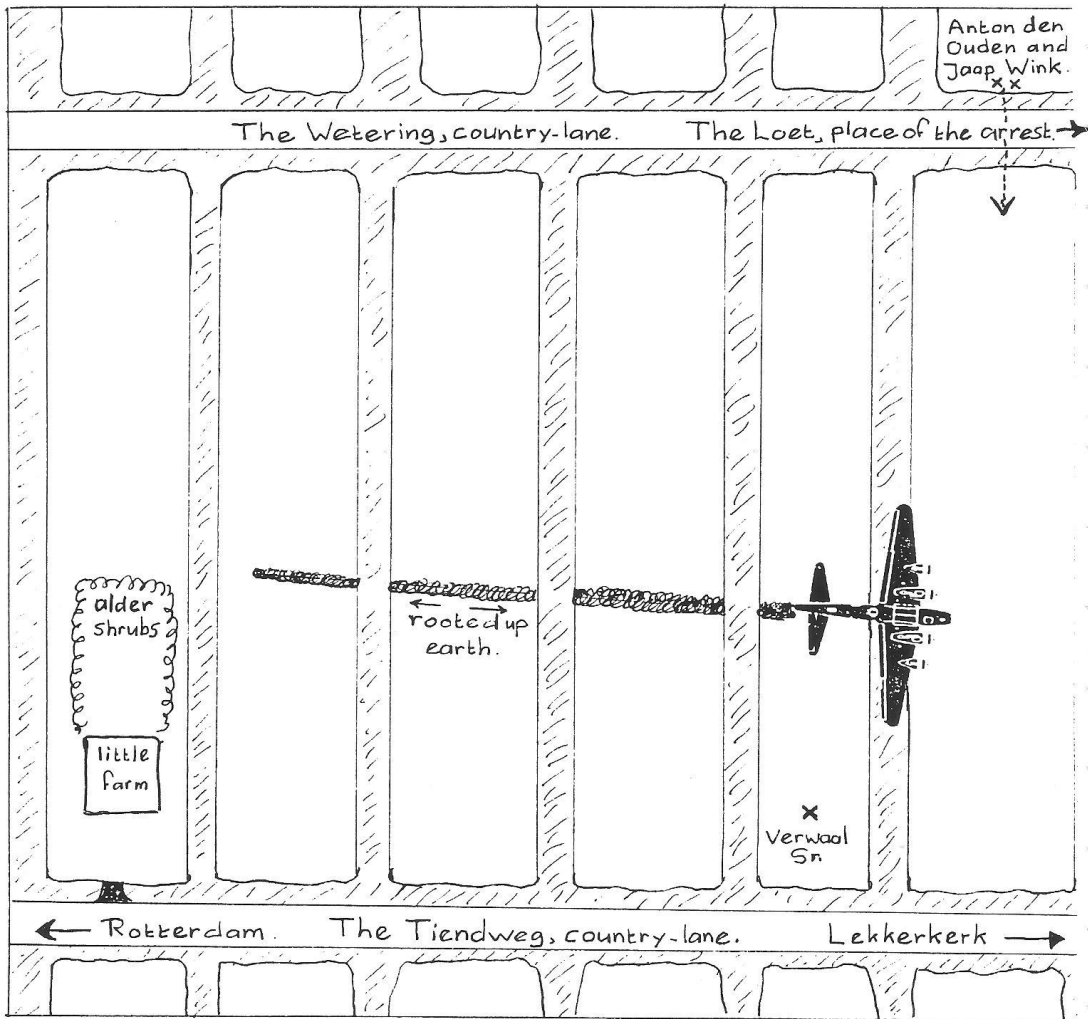
Part. 2.  
 Ch. 1.  
 FW-190: Focke-Wulf-190, the best German all-round fighterplane, single-engine, wide-range.  
 ME-109: Messerschmitt-109, single-engine German fighterplane.  
 JU-88: Junkers-88, twin-engine German fighter-bomber, crew of three, later developed into Germany's most successful night-fighter.  
 Dornier bomber: German medium bomber, twin-engine, crew of three, later types used as night-fighters.  
 Hardstand: Specially-prepared surface for parking an airplane, normally adjacent to a runway or taxiway.  
 Pathfinder plane: An airplane used in the operation of pathfinding, seeking out a target, drop zone or release point and marking it by dropping flares or beacons.  
 V-I buzz bombs: German robot bomb, provided with wings, a horizontal and a vertical stabilizer, rudder and elevators, powered by a pulsejet engine mounted on its back. "V" stands for: Vergeltungswaffe, Revenge Weapon.

Chow-Hound-missions: Codeword for food-drops over Western Holland in 1945.  
 K.ration: Lightweight, packaged emergency ration.  
 WAC: A member of the Women's Army Corps.

Ch. 2.  
 B-24: A four-engine, midwing, heavy USAAF bomber, with twin fin and rudder, nicknamed: "Liberator".  
 P-38 "Lightning": USAAF twin-engine fighter aircraft with a twin-tail boom, developed by Lockheed.  
 P-47 "Thunderbolt": USAAF single radial-engined fighter and fighter-bomber, developed by Republic.  
 Silver Star: A military decoration awarded any person (military, civilian or foreign) who, while serving in any capacity with the Air Force, distinguishes himself by galantry in action against an enemy of the United States.  
 DFC.: (Distinguished Flying Cross). A military decoration awarded in the US for heroism or extraordinary achievement while participating in aerial flight.  
 AM.: (Air Medal). A decoration awarded to any person serving in any capacity with the Air Force who distinguishes himself by meritorious achievement while participating in aerial flight.  
 OLC.: (Oak Leaf Cluster). A small emblem consisting chiefly of a number of bronze or silver oak leaves bunched together, representing an additional reward of the same kind.  
 Croix de Guerre: French military decoration awarded for galantry in action.  
 Lead ship: Lead bomber in certain bombing formations, navigating for the entire formation and signaling the proper time for: "Bombs away".  
 Tin hat: Steel helmet.  
 Battle-dressing: Standard model emergency-bandage.  
 Trim tabs: Tabs attached to an elevator, rudder or other control surface to trim (keep in balance) the aircraft.

Ch. 3.  
 The Red Baron: Freiherr Manfred von Richthofen, Ace of W.W.I, German fighter-pilot, who shot down more than 80 Allied aircraft.

- Flap-controls: Device to move the flaps, in this case the surfaces used as speed-brake.
- Quonset-hut: A modification of the Nissen-hut.
- Gen. Jimmy Doolittle: At that time Commander of the 8th USAAF.
- Ch. 4.
- Feather an engine: To change the blade angle of a controllable-pitch propeller so that the propeller blade chords are parallel to the line of flight.
- Hit the deck: To come down to a low or minimum altitude.
- Deadstick landing: A landing without engine power.



 canals

Schematic sketch of "Dolly's" landing-site.

## APPENDIX 4.

### THE FINAL CHAPTER.

Joe Klingenberg, navigator, Peter Selvidge, tailgunner, Tony Elizondo, left-waist-gunner.

After the reprint of this book in September 1997 I doubted if we would ever be able to find any more crew-members of "our" B-17. This pessimistic feeling was even intensified by a letter from the New Stories Dept. of "Unsolved Mysteries" a nationwide T.V. programme in the U.S.A., dealing with among others tracing down missing people. They told me, in a very polite letter, that because of limited air time, they would be unable to comply with my request to help me find the crew-members not yet found.

So it was a big surprise, when at the bi-annual convention of our Association of documentalists Airwar 1939-1945 in November 1997, my fellow-member, Ivo de Jong, told me, that he had found Joe Klingenberg, the navigator.

My excitement rose when Ivo told me, that in 1944 Klingenberg had put together an account of the mission, the crash and life at Stalag Luft I in a Log book supplied by the International Red Cross. I realized that this was a first hand account given from a fresh memory! So one can imagine that I was looking forward very much to reading that Log book.

Ivo promised to ask Klingenberg to write me and early in January 1998 Klingenberg's first letter arrived. I answered it and sent him this book, to which he reacted enthusiastically: "I was completely overwhelmed by the fantastic information contained therein".

We went on exchanging letters and some months later Ivo could share the contents of the Log book with me. There was not only Klingenberg's Log book but a Scrap book as well, compiled by his wife Evelyn, of the period between February 4th 1944 and his homecoming.

Leafing through the Log book my excitement rose with every page. Here was an account of the mission, the crash-landing, the arrest, the transport from Holland to Germany, the events at Dulag Luft Frankfurt and the box-car journey to Stalag Luft I, followed by a very detailed description of life in that POW-camp. Klingenberg described camp life in all its aspects, so meticulously and completely, that I can only give a random selection of the subjects he dealt with, just to give the reader an idea of the contents.

He starts with a map of the North Compound, of which his contingent were the first to occupy it. Then follows Block 8, a part of that Compound, divided into 16 rooms, with a description of what every room was used for. Strait, Wilson, Klingenberg and Heath found their quarters in room 2. A map of room 2 shows where their beds were. There are the names, profiles and drawn portraits of their roommates and maps showing room-rearrangements that took place later on.

Klingenberg describes the way the POWs organized camp-life, who was responsible for what, who had special duties etc., again complete with the names, profiles and drawings of the persons concerned.

You find names and portraits of "Block Characters", lists of the contents of British, American and Canadian Red Cross-parcels, lists of books available in the Library, Entertainment and Study-programmes etc.

A very surprising and sometimes moving item is the journal Klingenberg kept, titled: "As time goes by", covering the period between Febr. 20, 1944 ("Arrived

Stalag Luft I") and June 26, 1945 ("Arrive Camp Aterbury Ind. - Arrive home").

We find notes like:

April 11: 8th hits Rostock.

June 6: Invasion.

June 22: Red Cross rations arrive.

August 15: Received first letter from Ailyn (Klingenberg's wife).

January 19: All Jews moved to Block II, this compound-Ghetto.

January 28: Bitter cold, Russians 150 miles away.

February 4: Anniversary passes dismally.

February 22: Hunger overtakes camp as foodreserves are exhausted.

March 18: One American shot and killed by Germans for being outside. Canadian also shot.

April 30: Germans pulling out.

May: 1: Russians contact us at 20.22.

May 13: Fly in B-17 to Rheims.

Klingenberg's "Wartime Log" is a unique document, full of facts, names and details, most valuable for those who want to try and understand what a POW's life was like, and for those who were there, especially the ones who were in North Compound, Block 8.

But there is more! At the same time Klingenberg wrote his log, his wife Evelyn was compiling a Scrap book. In it you find newspaperclippings reporting her husband's M.I.A., the official telegrams she received about the same subject, letters from people who had received a short-wave radio-message from Germany, saying that Joe was a POW now, encouraging letters from relatives, friends and sometimes from perfect strangers, all of them trying to hearten her. There is her correspondence with the U.S.A.-Red Cross about sending parcels to her husband, the official list of items allowed to be sent to Germany etc. etc.

This scrap-book gives a clear image of what the relatives of an airman reported MIA went through, their fears, their hopes and in this case their relief after receiving the official announcement that he was alive, and their constant anxiousness thereafter, till he came home.

Another valuable document, a personal portrait of an era, which will be recognized by many people.

A very remarkable aspect of these books is that both Klingenberg and his wife compiled an account of this period of their lives, having almost no means of contact and not knowing that they were doing the same: Collecting and committing to paper the things that each of them was occupied with. In this way they filled up the gap in their mutual experiences that had been caused by Joe being a POW in Germany.

Klingenberg wrote me, that the Andersonville National Historical Site in Georgia has indicated a desire to add the Wartime Log book to its collection of POW memorabilia. That's a very good thing to do, as in that way it'll be preserved for next generations and historians doing research about the Airwar in W.W.II

In the September 1997 version of my book I said at page 36, part II, that the "Dolly-file" will not be closed, but kept open for the other crewmembers' stories. Little could I suspect then, that Joe Klingenberg would be able to add so much and such detailed information to my file. I promised him to add a chapter to the book, to be sent to those most involved, the crewmembers of B-17 "Dolly" and the three museums that have the book in their libraries.

## Flyer Is Missing



Lieut. Joseph A. Klingenberg

## Lieut. Klingenberg Missing in Action

Lieut. Joseph A. Klingenberg, 24, a navigator on a U. S. Flying Fortress, is missing in action in a raid over Germany on Feb. 4, his wife, Mrs. Evelyn Morwessel Klingenberg, 507 Garrard street, Covington, was advised Tuesday by the War Department.

Lieut. Klingenberg, a son of Mr. and Mrs. Joseph Klingenberg, of 51 Pleasant Ridge avenue, Ft. Thomas, enlisted in the Air Corps in October 1941 and had been based overseas for a year.

Lieut. Klingenberg is a graduate of Covington Catholic High School, where he won a four-year university scholarship. He later was graduated from Xavier University. Prior to his enlistment he was employed as a chemist at the Kroger Food Foundation, Cincinnati.

A brother, Paul, is in the medical corps, stationed as a student at St. Louis University.

Lieut. Klingenberg's father operates the Klingenberg Hardware & Paint Co., 1230 Greenup street, Covington.

## Navigator Missing Since February 4, Army Informs Wife

Lieutenant Joseph A. Klingenberg, husband of Mrs. Evelyn Morewessel Klingenberg, 507 Garrard Street, Covington, navigator of a Fortress, has been missing in action since February 4, the War Department has informed his wife.

He is the son of Mr. and Mrs. Joseph Klingenberg, South Fort Mitchell. In a letter dated February 3, Lieutenant Klingenberg wrote his wife that he was "nearing completion of the required number of missions" before a leave was granted. He holds the Air Medal for completing five missions.

A chemist at the Kroger Food Foundation, he enlisted in the Army Air Forces in October, 1942. He is 24 years old. A brother, Paul, is a medical student in the Army Specialized Training Program at St. Louis, Mo., University.

## Missing



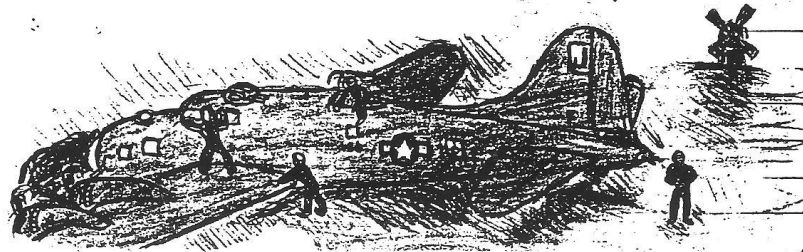
LT. J. J. KLINGENBERG, WIFE

Lt. Joseph J. Klingenberg, son of Mr. and Mrs. Joseph Klingenberg, South Ft. Mitchell, has been reported missing over Germany. The Flying Fortress on which he was a navigator failed to return from a mission on Feb. 4, his wife, at the right, Mrs. Evelyn Morewessel Klingenberg, 507 Garrard Street, Covington, was informed.

Klingenberg joined the Air Force in October, 1942. He was a chemist for the Kroger Food Foundation prior to joining the service. His second wedding anniversary was on St. Valentine Day.

A brother, Paul, is at St. Louis University in the A. S. T. U., and a sister, Rita, is bookkeeper for the Coppin Co. Another sister, Thelma, attends the Blessed Sacrament School. His father is proprietor of the Klingenberg hardware store, Greenup Street, Covington.

Newspaper clippings reporting Joe Klingenberg's MIA, from Evelyn Klingenberg's Scrapbook.



Drawing by Joe Klingenberg, depicting his B-17 shortly after the crash-landing at Lekkerkerk. Illustration from Klingenberg's Wartime Log.

Writing that chapter proved to be a difficult task, as I had to restrict myself to that part of most valuable information, that would fit in the set-up of my book. If I had not, the chapter would have grown into a new book! So apologies to Klingenberg for abridging his book to this extent, but nevertheless I hope I did him justice! Here follows Joe Klingenberg's contribution:

#### INTRODUCTION TO DEUTSCHLAND.

"I felt no great feeling of uneasiness as we learned, that dark, damp morning of February 4, that Frankfurt was to be hit again. We had been there before - without incident. The briefing looked good - lots of clouds and plenty escort. Soon we were off - everything going well. But halfway into Germany the unexpected happened. Suddenly, bursts of Flak appeared from where no Flak was supposed to appear. Off track? Perhaps Aachen or Cologne. We had no time to consider, for Jerry had a shell with our number on it that day and he sent it dead in number four engine. A piece of it burst thru the upper fuselage and whizzed past my ear with a loud clatter. I still have that brown, jagged 1 x 4 piece of German Steel. With one engine out we soon fell behind the formation. Our situation looked bad but not critical. We limped along as best as we could, on toward the target, but we could not make it. Lest we lost our brother eagles, we turned short so as to pick them up on the way back. The events that followed have been and shall remain deeply imprinted upon my mind. Prospects of staggering back now looked good. Not a German fighter appeared in the sky. The retreating formation loomed consoling above and ahead. But there was that solid wall of Flak again. Flak was everywhere. We looked on helplessly as we saw it pepper the group ahead, fully aware that we, a single, crippled hulk of flying metal had to pass that sky-littered Flak. For twenty torturous minutes we dived, twisted, turned and squirmed. Somehow we got thru, and it seemed as if we might make it, for as the clouds broke, there was the coastline and the sea beyond. The preceding forts, appearing like distant flocks of birds, turned toward England. But that was not our fate. The Flak had done its job and the churning engines began to fail. Now we were on two engines and Bernie asked for an E.T.A. to England. (E.T.A.=Estimated Time of Arrival). Too much time! Could we ditch? Possibly! The engines decided otherwise. A third quit and we started to descend in a slow spiral. A crash landing was imminent. The crew was magnificent. Everyone performed their appointed task and quietly sat back to await the crash. Then followed those remaining, anxious, omnious, silent (all motors had now quit) moments of waiting. It came with a loud bang as the human cargo tossed like squirrels in a cage. Came a second bang and I felt as though I should lose my senses. Then it was all over. Our fort lay buried in a Holland mud bank. I was out second among the crew. I stepped onto the wing to see about Bernie and George. Soon all ten of us were out, unharmed.

#### ODDITIES.

Every mission is an adventure. Every adventure carries some amusing incident or incidents born out of the very elements of adventure itself. Our last mission was no exception. The more memorable occasions are listed below:

1. Heath - after carefully salvaging gum and candy bars from my knapsack before the crash, he ruined same by several involuntary swims in the Holland canals.
2. Wilson - had a co-pilot's field day. Four whole engines to feather - all in one day.

Oh Joy!

3. Strait - "this is O for Freddie calling".

4. Yours truly-inadvertently pulled out his ear plugs to go on "radio silence" for quite a period until the mishap was discovered and rectified".

In the next entry in his Log Klingenberg asked his fellow-crewmembers and room-mates at Stalag Luft I to write down their experiences. I left out Strait's contribution, as there were no new facts in his statement. Below Wilson's and Heath's stories:

Wilson writes: "We took off in a new ship early in the morning of February 4 1944, for a mission to Frankfurt, Germany. Everything went smoothly for some time, but evidently the formation had got off course and we found ourselves over "Happy Valley". The Flak was pretty thick (our tailgunner, Peter Selvidge, counted 92 bursts in one small area at one time) and we soon had our number 4 engine oil cooler out. It wasn't long before the oil pressure was rapidly falling and the prop winding up. (attempts to feather failed). This prop eventually fell off. Meanwhile we got to the IP (Initial Point) but decided to drop early and try to get home, when our number 2 engine began to smoke and wind up and had to be feathered. We dropped and began to trail after the other groups on the way out. Our other two engines were hit and were leaking oil badly. Occasionally number 3 would wind up and had to be throttled back. Finally we feathered this engine when it wound up permanently. With one engine we were losing altitude at a discouraging rate. At 16,000 ft the ice was pretty thick but we figured we could get better than half way over the Channel. Started the radio for ditching dikes when we were just on the Dutch coast. Couldn't see much. With one engine we were slowly circling to the left. Occasionally this engine would get out of hand and wind up pretty high. As we broke out of the clouds, the oil, sealing a leak, melted and the oil poured out of our last engine. Wasn't doing good anyway, so we feathered. This helped our control of the plane and we crash-landed near Rotterdam. We were soon captured and put in jail. Later we visited Amsterdam, then Frankfurt, finally arriving at Barth on the Baltic".

Tom Heath's ( the bombardier) version: "The target was Frankfurt, Germany, a usually pretty rough show. We, along with the entire 8th Air Force were off our course, due to probably faulty metro data and were running the gauntlet of Flak guns over "Happy Valley" - the Ruhr. We were first hit by a Flak burst over Cologne, Germany. We got it in the oil cooler and between number three and four engines and couldn't keep up with the formation. However, we kept on into the Target area below and behind the rest. We labored on until it became apparent that we couldn't get clear in with our bomb load. So I salvoed the bombs somewhere in the vicinity of Koblenz, with no particular targets sighted, although there were several air-dromes in that vicinity.

Results were unnoticed, so we turned and joined the homeward bound forts. The Flak was terrific. As far as the eye could see, ahead and behind, the sky was blackened with the bursting death. There were no enemy fighters in sight due to the protective undercast. The trip was one of the longest I have ever sweated thru. There were several other ships in trouble - one in particular was shooting red flares all over the sky.

By now the Flak was coming straight for us - ugly, black patches of hell trying to catch up to our evasive action and coming damn close too. There were several more hits on us, one jagged piece about four inches long entering the nose but doing no particular damage. When about over the German border number 4 prop dropped off and soon after number 1 was feathered.



Still losing altitude by trying to make home on our two good engines, we passed over and identified the Zuyder Zee and Amsterdam. It soon became apparent that we could not make home - quite a helpless feeling. The gunners started throwing out the guns and ammo cans - we made contact with another plane, one who could get back - explaining our intention to ditch. He wished us luck and relayed our message to England.

Then number 2 was feathered, leaving us with only one engine and the coast of Holland in sight. We were losing altitude rapidly now and I went back in the radio-room to see if all was ready to ditch. But on one engine we couldn't hold a straight course, circled over the Hollandish coast and decided to crash land in Holland - enemy territory!"

From here on, Joe Klingenberg continues his story.

#### IM GEFANGENSCHAFT GERATEN . . . . .

"We landed in an open field near Lekkerkerk. We fired the ship and hastened away. At last sight I saw the plane enveloped in huge black clouds of smoke and heard the fifties exploding. It was snowing and sleeting all the while.

The field was bare, with forest on one side and villages on the other three. We split up into small groups, but the dikes were of such a nature, that we had to assemble again to get over the one bridge which crossed the main dike. We congregated into a small barn to talk things over and learned from the natives standing by of our situation. The snow had stopped.

Just as we were about to shove off, a native came along in a truck and motioned us in. We climbed in and were covered by tarpaulin. From nowhere appeared a Dutch policeman and that was the end of our freedom.

Next thing we were at the local police office, surrounded by an ever increasing number of strangely uniformed men. After a search we were hustled off in an old cabbage burner to a Rotterdam prison. We were placed in barren rooms where we sank down to the floor, exhausted. After another search and some questioning we were given food, blankets and a strawbed. Soon we were all asleep.

The next day we were hustled up to Amsterdam by modern fast electric car via the Hague and Haarlem. We were taken to a highly camouflaged German military camp, searched, questioned and fed. From there we were taken to another spot and confined to individual cells. Life was now beginning to get a little bit rough. But it was destined to become a little bit rougher. For ahead of us lay Germany, Dulag Luft, our target city itself, Frankfurt . . . . .

#### GERMAN ODYSSEY.

The morning of Feb. 7 we were escorted to an Amsterdam train station. By this time we were beginning to look like ferocious barbarians, clothed as we were in bulky heated flying clothing, big clumsy boots and three days growth of beard. A crowd of Dutch people gathered to watch as we waited for a train. They gave no outward sign of their feelings, but their faces looked kindly and their eyes friendly. The train ride lasted all day and in many ways it was quite pleasant. For one thing we were together in each others cheering company after three days of solitude; secondly the ride proved very interesting under the circumstances. We passed rapidly the crowded, quaint Holland countryside thru Utrecht, Amhem and Nijmegen and then we were in Germany. On we rolled, town after town. Late in the afternoon we reached Cologne and there saw the first sign of the air war's result.

Cologne had been mauled, that was evident from the limited view we had thru drawn curtains. At Cologne we also picked up the Rhine-river. From Cologne to Koblenz is the scenic Rhine valley region with its beautiful hills and vineyards surmounted by charming old castles. As dusk arrived, we were headed toward Mainz and approaching our final destination - Frankfurt - the very city which we had tried to bomb. I suppose the Germans could gloat over this as some sort of retribution, if they wished. To me it wasn't very funny - at the time. At Mainz we had to change trains and at the same time meet the German population face to face. They didn't seem to like us very well. This was one time that I was glad to be accompanied by a German guard and their guns.

#### DULAG LUFT.

I almost looked forward to internment at Dulag Luft that night of February 7. It was midnight and I was tired and ready to sleep - anywhere. Upon arrival we were one by one "checked in" as it were, after a thorough search in which all of our possessions were taken away for the duration of our stay, except the clothes on our back. We were then ushered into a private room, all on our own, with bed and table. As I entered I glanced at the number over the door. It was "drei-zehn". That night, or what was left of it, I sank into the bed, little observing or caring about the surroundings and lapsed into a deep, sound sleep. The next morning I began to take more cognizance of my surroundings. The room was bare, except for the bed, a table and a chair. An electric heater placed beneath a barred window of opaque glass gave warmth to the room. The walls were of dull, grey asbestos. Just then the guard came with breakfast: a piece of black bread and ersatz coffee".

In the passage that follows, Klingenberg describes his days of solitary confinement. To me, it's one of the best personal accounts of such an experience I ever came across. His words speak for themselves:

"I don't quite know how to describe the hours of existence in that little room. They were not very pleasant hours, but how much worse they might have been. The whole experience could be described as a great conflict of contending emotions. I was afraid - yet determined that the Germans should get no information from me. It was dreadfully lonesome. The food was scarcely edible and hardly sufficient for subsistence. Time, measurable only from meal to meal, seemed endless. My hands, face, my whole body reeked with the accumulated dirt and smell of days without access of soap and water. The foreboding uncertainty of the future hung like Damocles' sword over my head. Concern about those back home was an ever present worry. All was misery. To counteract all this I tried every means that I knew. I slept when possible; often I just lay there dreaming of pleasant things gone by. I ate slowly and deliberately at every meal - time prolonging the pleasant repast for the longest possible period of time. I inspected every inch of the room over and over again. By peering close up to the window I could see the snow covered exterior, the sun's shadow as it moved thru the day's course and the blurred images of the guards as they moved about. From time to time I played checkers with myself, using straw and matchsticks for men and the back of the tabledrawer as a board. The monotony of the solitude was broken on two occasions by the interrogations of the German intelligence. The first visit was marked by an attempt to have me answer and sign a questionnaire, which I would not. On the second day I was taken to

the main question center in another building and there quizzed and threatened in the usual manner of army interrogations. They made it all the more unpleasant by threatening to keep me there forever, which, at the time, they appeared perfectly capable of doing. I remained silent however, and having no further use for me, on the morning of the third day, my release from Stalag Luft came . . . . .

#### LIFE SMILES AGAIN.

From Dulag Luft we were taken to another camp in the Frankfurt area. Here life began to assume the appearance of being a little more sunny and bearable. It was heartening to be met by the smiling faces of fellow Americans after our recent ordeal. And still more gladdening was our treatment. First there was a hot shower. How grand felt the water and fluffy suds! Here also we received the first of many assistance from the International Red Cross.

Each incoming prisoner received a package containing various simple clothing materials: towel, soap, razor, handkerchiefs, underwear, socks and countless other things, as well as heavier articles of clothing and shoes. I shall never forget the warm and happy feelings with which these things were received. I remember writing home that: "it was just like Christmas". A third but perhaps most important event was our first decent meal for many a day. What a delicious and memorable treat! Here again the Red Cross showed its merciful hand, for much of the food was obtained from their hands. Lastly we were permitted to send a postcard home. This softened a lot of worry and concern, which we naturally felt for those we loved back home. We spent seven full days at this camp, passing the time eating, card playing and "chewing the fat". Each individual had his own vivid yarn to spin and every other prisoner lent an eager, sympathetic ear to his tale.

All awaited uneasily transport to a permanent camp, for we knew that the "forts" would be back, this time with us underneath the receiving end . . . . .

#### GERMAN ODYSSEY.

Continued.

Light and happy I felt as we packed up to leave this target town on a wintry February 17th morn.

Even here there was red, traveling tape as we whiled away the time in line for food issuance, search, and just plain waiting. Little did I foresee what an ordeal it would prove to be!

It was shortly after an uneventful busride to the trainstation that I came to suspect what an ordeal it was to be. It was when I first saw what was to be our method of transportation, They were box cars or more expressively the "forty and eight" cars made famous in World War I. These cars are shorter and more sturdy than their American counterpart. In them were placed twenty-eight prisoners and four German guards. There was a tiny stove in the center of the car and three long boards suspended in each half of the car forming benches capable of seating 4-5 men.

It was crowded in those cars and travel was not comfortable. Still we were fresh and rested and such a trip, though long, if not protracted, should not be too fatiguing.

Such was not the case. German troop trains bear no difference from American ones when speed of progress is concerned. We sat in the Frankfurt yards the whole of the afternoon. It was only after dark that we started to move. The first evening we passed the time in singing and chatting. Thus began our tour of German marshalling yards!

Shortly after, our first stop occurred, supposedly caused by an air raid overhead. The more weary attempted sleep on the hard wooden planks. The remainder huddled

around the stove, which was proving to be quite incapable of combatting the cold of the winter outside. Shortly after midnight the cars lurched forward, jolting the sleepers and non sleepers alike. And so it went all thru the night - start and stop, from siding to siding.

Once again, as in solitary, I feel quite incapable of presenting an accurate and true picture of the next few days' events. Far from being filled with horror and tremendous suffering, they were nevertheless hours of great discomfort and unpleasantness - such that they shall remain a vivid experience in my mind for a long time to come.

The 18th of February passed by much as the previous night. Our progress consisted mainly in an endless succession of short runs from siding to siding, marshalling yard to marshalling yard. It seemed like every train in the Reich was routed ahead of us, every railroad yard was a stop. The guards were quite friendly. One was even quite a comedian. He kept us entertained for some time. Another was talkative and we tried our hand at conversing with him in German, with indifferent success. By evening our freshness was all worn out, our nerves frayed, our limbs cramped and the ardours of the trip began to take their toll. It was impossible to get a restful sleep. Many tried sleeping on the floor to gain the benefit of the inefficient stove and to escape the hardness of the planks. The ill-prepared food refused to lie comfortably in our stomach. Thus passed the second night on the train as every inconvenience persisted in ever increasing aggravation. There was one note of incongruity. It snowed that night, presenting a scene of beauty and peace that still lingers in my memory.

The third day came and passed - but ever so slowly. We were by that time thoroughly worn and dispirited. At that time we seemed to be making considerable progress as we passed a countryside of rolling farmland and evergreen forest. Our fuel ran low. At one stop we stole enough coal to replenish our failing stock. At the same time one of the guards stole a wooden box of unknown contents to use as firewood for the stove, which persisted in dying out - an act, which was to have almost fatal results that night.

That evening was a wretched one in more ways than one. I had taken a cold and was beginning to feel weak and sick. On one occasion I became dizzy and faint and sank down to the floor of the car. There I lay on the dirty straw, miserable and wretched. A second event drove this experience into oblivion.

During one of numerous stops at a small town, a guard and several prisoners busied themselves starting anew the fire in the stove. Needing wood for this purpose the guard crushed the lid of the stolen box with his hobnailed boots. Inadvertently he cracked one of the glass containers therein, spreading acid chemical fumes inside the whole car. Curious, I got up to have a look at this strange stuff. Meanwhile the fire had been readied for ignition. Someone struck a match. There was a sudden burst of flame as the fumes took fire and in a few seconds the interior was covered with flames. A mad rush for the door ensued. Fortunately the door was ajar sufficient for the nearest individual, a guard, to grasp with his hands and tear open. I was next out impelled, though quite unnecessarily, by the surging mass of humanity, caught in the inferno. In a few frightening minutes the car was emptied of its contents. I suffered from little except fright, but a few were burned about the face and arms. Nearly everyone lost some item of food or clothing. The inside of the car was a shambles and it had to be removed from the train. We refugees were spread among the other already crowded cars as soon as the situation was brought under control. The results might have been tragic, save for two seemingly unimportant coincidences - that of the train being stationary and of the door being slightly ajar. I shudder to think what the result might have been, had the circumstances been otherwise!

What remained was mostly anticlimax. The rest of the evening I lay on the bottom of the new car, still sick and feverish. The next morning we had reached our destination and the painful ride was over. There was still considerable waiting and inconvenience in the town of Barth, Germany, before we were marched thru its streets to the destination camp, a short distance outside its limits. Thus it was that we reached Stalag Luft I, about noon of February 20, 1944.

#### FIRST DAY IN CAMP.

From a distance the prison camp looked not unlike an Army camp at home. The buildings looked substantial and the surroundings clean and well ordered. But also there was that ever present barbed wire, a constant detriment to a PW's peace of mind.

We were conducted into a totally deserted area and collected in a room of what is now Block 6. Here we received the customary search and a questioning, more or less as a "checking in" process. The day was long and I felt bad, but after a few hours we moved along to a shower and an issue of clothing. Here I dropped off at the hospital, where an English doctor in charge examined me. Then to the barracks, which were to become our home. A group of us had arranged to get a room together. Tom Heath and I were the first of our group to arrive and we found at that time all rooms occupied. A new room was opened for us however and Tom and I entered, thus establishing the address, which has remained to us until the present:

Room 2.  
Block 8.  
North Compound.  
Stalag Luft I.  
Barth, Germany.

Soon after the rest of the boys of our group arrived and chose a bed. Tom and I; Bernie and George took a corner bunk. Shortly "Stud" Tyler selected a spot across from us. (The remainder of the beds - 14 in all - later on were filled by odd arrivals, who were at that time strangers to us. They were: Ed Stanton, D.J. "Perry" Perolat, Bill "Body" Kalman, "Wild Bill" Summer, Dick Wong, M.T. Bianchi, and Paul Quillin). About 4 p.m. a hot and delicious meal of hot barley was served. Then soon after, I sunk into bed for the first decent sleep in more than three days".

Here, at the moment he has just "checked in" at Stalag Luft I, we must leave Joe Klingenberg. There are lots of pages more in his "Wartime Log", all full of interesting items about camp-life, but as said before, I must stop here, in order not to go beyond the set-up of this book, however tempting that may be.

So Ivo de Jong, a fellow-member of our Air-War Association found Klingenberg, but that wasn't all! Some time after that, he got the telephone-number of another crew-member, Peter Selvidge, the tailgunner.

He phoned him, but Selvidge immediately told Ivo, that he didn't like to be reminded of his crashlanding in Holland, as his recollections of that day and the period after it, were just bitter ones.

I wrote a letter to Herman Alesiani, telling him about Selvidge's reaction, leaving it to Herman, if he felt like calling his former buddy.

Soon the Alesianis wrote back, telling me, that Herman had had a long telephone-conversation with Selvidge, but the latter stood his ground, no contact! It's a great pity, but we can only respect his opinion.

In their same letter Herman and Pauline Alesiani gave me a new address: that of Antonio Elizondo, the left-waistgunner. On August 21st 1998 I wrote him a letter, but the weeks went by and no answer, so I began to consider this attempt in vain, but

at the end of October there was his answer. A great moment again! Elizondo was the sixth crew-member out of ten who had been found, thanks to the Alesianis. The delay of his answer was easily to be understood, as the address I had got was his sister's and she hadn't been at home for a long period, when my letter arrived. Elizondo's letter was non the worse enthusiastic and nice for it. His opening sentences were:

"Imagine my surprise upon receiving your letter, written on Aug. 21, 1998. It came to me like a bolt of lightning out of the sky. It was a very interesting and welcome letter".

He went on telling, that he hadn't thought of that eventful 4th of February 1944 in a long time, but that it was nice to hear from someone who is interested.

After this first letter we entered into a correspondence and in that way I got Tony Elizondo's story, which follows hereafter in his own words:

"I don't remember much of the happenings on the day of our crash-landing in Holland. About the only thing I do remember, is that my feet became trapped in the camera hatch. This was caused by my bouncing up upon the plane's first contact with the ground. When I came down, my feet landed in the camera hatch and were trapped in there by the compacted soil scooped up in the hatch while the plane skidded along the ground to a stop. I could not pull my feet out, one or two of my fellow crewmen pulled me out, I don't really recall who did.

I seem to remember it was snowing during the time we were trying to avoid capture. After being captured, myself and the tailgunner were taken to a hospital. He had I think a sprained ankle and I had a knee injury. After being examined, we were turned over to our captors.

From the hospital we were sent to Frankfurt, Dulag Luft, where I was put in solitary confinement. After that the crew was split up and sent to different camps.

Since my last letter to you I came across some notes that I had written to file a P.O.W.claim. These notes contain a list of dates and camps at which I was confined. The dates are not exact, but I think they are close enough:

Date.	Camp.
Febr. 6, 1944 - Febr. 12, 1944	Dulag Luft, Frankfurt.
Febr. 15, 1944 - July 18, 1944	Stalag Luft VI.
July 19, 1944 - Jan. 18, 1945	Stalag Luft IV.
Jan. 26, 1945 - May 13, 1945	Stalag Luft I.

The last camp I was in was an officers camp. I remember seeing and talking to one of the officers of my own crew there, Lt. Heath, the bombardier".

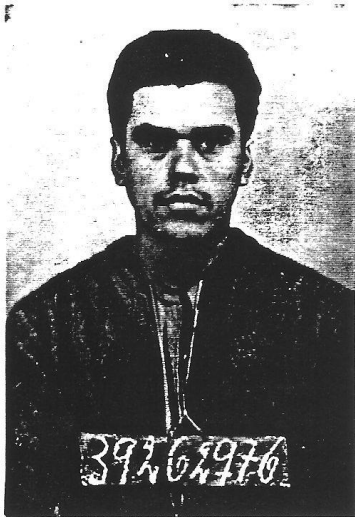
As for Tony Elizondo's remark aforesaid, there is a surprising note in Joe Klingenberg's "Wartime Log", in the journal he kept, where it says:

Febr. 7, 1944: 1500 evacuated Sergeants arrive from Heydekrug, E. Prussia.

Febr. 10, 1944: Sgt. Elizondo among Sergeants. Other crewmembers sent elsewhere.

From what went before, we know that the four officers were all in the same camp, they even shared the same room all through their POW-time. The six enlisted men however were in at least four different camps and apparently not together. Tony Elizondo thinks that maybe they were sent to the same camps, but placed into different compounds, fenced off from one another. He ends his story with the words: "I survived prison camp and came home in good health and in one piece. Thank God!".

After the war Tony Elizondo worked for the Los Angeles Police Department, from which position he retired as a Senior Equipment Mechanic. He is 76 now. He and his



S. Sgt. Antonio Elizondo , Febr. 1944 , POW-picture and Tony Elizondo and his wife Marie , taken around July 1945.



Tony and wife Marie , taken in Dec. 1994.

wife Marie have two sons and one daughter and they live in Montebello, near the City of Los Angeles.

With this "Final chapter" I think I can conclude the story about B-17 "Dolly" and her crew. Even with George Wilson's warning in my mind, that "perhaps one can never get to the real facts after so many years," it's with some confidence that I think that most of the puzzles I discussed in part 2, chapter 6, "Epilogue", have now been solved. Thanks to Joe Kligenberg's "Wartime Log" we may be pretty sure about the reality of most of the facts we were not convinced of up to now.

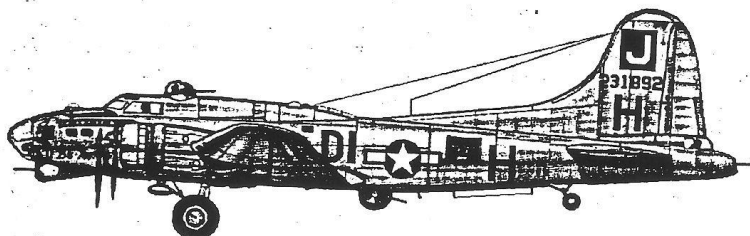
Some examples:

1. Contrary to my assumptions on page 30, part 1, Klingenberg knew exactly where they were, when flying over Holland just before the crash, and so did the other officers.  
For the gunners "Holland" may have been a surprise, because of their different tasks in isolated positions.
2. "Dolly" was hit by Flak twice: the first time near Cologne, the second time on her way back, not far from the German border.
3. The bombs were not dropped on target. Already in the target area the crew was forced (by losing altitude and speed) to salvo the bombs in the vicinity of Koblenz. This happened after they were hit by Flak the first time.

We leave it to the attentive reader to find the answers to more questions that might have arisen. I'm sure there will not be many.

I owe many thanks to Joe Klingenberg for his most valuable contribution and to Tony Elizondo, who, modest as his contribution may seem, provided me with some new, unknown and interesting facts.

Dronten, January 1999.



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