September 14, 2000

Dear Greg,

In the last issue of the 392nd quarterly news letter, you had requested stories from former POWs. Course my story is not of being in a POW camp, but a capture of short duration. Didn't know if you would be interested in it, but decided to send it anyway.

I never told my children or wife much about my time in the airforce and my wife kept "buging" me to write some of my stories. She said when I was gone the children would be have nothing to tell the grandchildren.

In 1988, I had surgery and the doctor confined me to the house for 3 weeks, so one morning, about 2 a.m. when I could not sleep, I sat down at the typewriter and wrote about the "Wesel" mission. Our crew had one other bad mission, but nothing like this one.

First Sergeant Chief Peter Loncke, of the Belgium Air Force, who has a hobby of looking for aircraft that crashed in the vicinity during WW II, wrote in the 2nd Air Division Journal last year asking for information on airplane "E 709" that was shotdown on the Wesel mission. Since I was flying co-pilot on the mission, I answered his letter.

Since my letter to him, we have written back and forth, talked on the phone and exchanged pictures. He found the crash site, with the help of Germans in the area, sent me pictures of the field where we crashed, pictures of the building Jack and I were held, and a piece of metal that he said came from the crash site.

. Hope that this finds you and your family well, and give my regards to your father.

Sincerely,

Jim

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Wesel, Germany

The day was March 23, 1945, and I had just finished my evening meal. Jack (Jack Hummel. Pilot), Rus (Russell Chadwick, Bombardier), Barney (Barney Knudson, Navigator), and I (Jim Reynolds, Co-pilot), left the mess hall and walked back by the Squadron bulletin board to see if our crew was scheduled to fly next day. All of the crew was listed to fly a mission, except Rus Chadwick.

We found out that personnel had been restricted to base, which meant something special was in the works for next day.

When we are flying a mission, we are awakened around 3 am; however, this day, March 24th, we were allowed to sleep a little later. We were awakened around 5:15 am, got dressed and headed to the mess hall for breakfast, then on to the briefing room to find out the target for today.

When the curtain was pulled back to reveal the map of Europe, we learned that the mission and target for the day would be Wesel, Germany. To our suprise, we would not be flying high altitude dropping bombs, but would be dropping supplies from 250 feet to paratroopers, and glider troops that had landed behind the German lines early that morning.

The crew would be Herbert Finney (engineer-top turret gunner), Ellis Morse (nose turret gunner-toggler), James Deaton (radio operator), Paul Keagle (assistant engineer-waist gunner), Elmer Milchack (armorer-waist gunner), Hollis Powell (tail turret gunner), Jack, Barney and me. Since we were not on a bombing mission, Russell Chadwick, bombardier, would not be flying with us.

Our squadron put up seven aircraft to fly with the 491st Bomb Group. At briefing for the mission, we were told there would be little or no resistance from the Germans and that our drop area should be secure.

We took off and flew at an altitude of around 500 feet over England, across the channel, and over France to our destination Wesel, Germany.

We were flying formation and our lead airplane was to drop down to around 250 feet when we entered the drop zone. The supplies we were carrying were enclosed in "pods" and hung on racks in the bombay of the airplane, like bombs. Each pod had a parachute attached to it and a static line was attached to the parachute and to the bomb rack. When the pods were dropped, the static line attached to the airplane would pull the parachute open and break the "free fall" of the pod. After the pods were dropped, someone from the crew would go into the bombay and pull the static lines, attached to the bomb rack, back into the airplane so the bombay doors could be closed. Since there is little space walking the "catwalk" in the bombay, the person pulling the static line back into the bombay could not wear a parachute.

The formation would enter the "supply run drop", our bombay doors would be opened, and our nose turret gunner and toggler, Ellis Morse, would watch the lead airplane and flip the salvo switch when the lead airplane's supplies started to drop.

As we approached the drop area, we found that there was considerable smoke or haze covering the area. We began getting a little small arms fire during the supply drop run, for we could hear it hitting the plane. Our radio operator, James Deaton, stood at the entrance of the bombay, waiting for the drop, so he could enter and pull in the static lines. We made our drop, James entered the bombay and that is when we started receiving intense ground fire from, what we later learned to be, 20 and 30 millimeter shells. Jack was flying the plane at the time, and I kept glancing at the instrument panel for any signs of engine trouble. Shells kept hitting the aircraft, and I suddenly noticed fire coming from the number 3 engine. I hollered at Jack and told him engine number 3 was on fire and I was going to shut it down. All of the switches were on my side of the cockpit. I feathered the the engine, cut off the gasoline supply to that engine, closed the cowling flaps, and cut the electrical switches. The fire continued to burn. Jack hollered that number 2 engine had been hit and the oil pressure was dropping. At the time we made the drop, we had slowed our air speed, and with 2 engines out at this speed, we could not gain altitude. Jack used what air speed we had to pull the airplane up to around 500 feet and hit the alarm bell button for everyone to "bail out". He and I both knew there was no way we could get out before the plane crashed. I remember saying a short prayer, "Lord, it is all up to you now." Jack picked out the first field he could find, which also contained the remains of some gliders, so we could make a controlled crash. The fire in the number 3 engine continued to burn and just before we crashed, Jack hollered for me to get on the rudders with him, so I never saw the fire in number 3 engine go out. (I did not know it had gone out until 1985, when at a reunion in Wichita, Kansas, Paul Keagle told me he saw the fire go out from the waist window).

I have no recollection of the crash after the airplane touched down, so I must have been knocked out for a few seconds. The first thing I remember was Jack asking me if I was hurt. I replied, "I didn't get a scratch" and he replied "oh, yes you did." I then realized blood was running down in my face and the front of my flight suit was bloody.

The crash had torn a large hole in the plane on my side of the cockpit. I crawled out through it and Jack followed. We stood about 20 feet from the plane and examined each other's wounds. Jack had a bad cut on the back of his head that was bleeding, and I had a bad cut on my forehead that was still bleeding. As we stood there, we notice the ground kicking up about us and heard gun fire, but did not realize we were being shot at. Guess we were groggy from the licks that caused our head wounds.

As we stood examining our wounds, we heard voices coming from behind and realized, for the first time, that the crew had not "bailed out". We saw Hollis Powell, Paul Keagle, and Herb Finney standing beside what remained of the plane. We noticed Elmer Milchak was leaning out the waist window. They had all been in the back of the plane. Usually, Herb Finney would have been on the flight deck with Jack and me, since he is the flight engineer. but for some reason he was in the back, and fortunate for him, for it is doubtful if he would have survived the crash, since the top turret fell just where he would have been standing.

We were getting rifle fire from soldiers that were shooting and walking toward us. There was also a German "tiger" tank about 50 yards from us. The firing stopped after one of the crew opened a parachute and waved it at the Germans that were shooting at us.

We walked over to the crew and found out that Elmer Milchak had been killed as he was coming out the waist window of the plane. He was the first one out after the crash. Our concern then was about Barney Knudson and Ellis Morse, who were in the nose of the plane, for we knew there was no way they could have survived the crash. Also, James Deaton, who had been standing in the bombay getting the static lines in after the drop.

About this time, the Germans soldiers arrived and Elmer's body was removed from the plane, for there was still danger the fire would catch up and the plane would burn, which it did after we got away. The best we could determine, the 3 missing crewman, James Deaton, Bernard Knudson, and Ellis Morris were not in the plane. Before the soldiers led us away, I said the 23rd Psalm over Elmer Milchack's body.

The German soldiers that captured us led us across a field to a farm house that was about 200 yards from where we crashed. We went into a room where there were several soldiers, but they did not seem to notice us. After a few minutes, a soldier came over to me and told me to follow him. He led me into a room where there were two soldiers. I found out one was a Captain and one was a Corporal in the German army. The Corporal did the talking. First he wanted to know my name, etc. I gave him my name, rank and army serial number. An aunt of mine had given me a small Bible with the metal shield which I carried in the breast pocket of my flight suit. While I was being interrogated by the Corporal, the Captain took the Bible out of my pocket and sat reading it. The Corporal wanted to know if I spoke German, I said no. He then asked if I spoke French - I said no. He then asked what language I spoke - I said only English. He then said, "You are an officer in the American army and can speak only one language, and I am a Corporal in the German army and can speak 5 languages fluently." He then asked, "What do American schools teach?" He kept asking questions for about five minutes, and I kept giving name, rank and serial number. Finally he said, "We have ways of making people talk". After he said that, the Captain put the Bible back in my pocket and spoke to to the Corporal in German. The Corporal left, and the Captain spoke to me in English and said,

"Lieutenant, he is not going to harm you." Shortly after the Corporal left, a German soldier came into the room and the Captain spoke to him in German. The Captain then said to me,"Go with this soldier. I am sorry that we do not have a doctor to attend your wounds, but we have a medic and he will treat them." I followed the soldier down a hall into a room filled with wounded German soldiers and other soldiers. I estimate that there were about 30 or 40 wounded. The room seemed to be a partial basement, for the bottom of the windows was about even with the ground outside. Also in the room were soldiers rushing about using radio equipment. One soldier was riding a stationary bicycle with a generator attached providing electricity to operate the radios.

A young medic, who spoke excellant English, and very talkative treated my wounds. I estimated him to be about 18 or 19 years old and told me if he was captured he wanted to be sent to the United States. After about 20 minutes, Jack was also brought into the room and the same medic treated his wounds.

We had been in the room about 4 hours, and we could hear the gun-fire from the battle going on outside. We noticed they were starting a fire in a large metal barrel in the room and throwing papers, etc in the fire. Jack and I looked at each other and wondered what was going to happen to us. After a short time, the officer in charge came over and asked how we had been treated. We told him as well as could be expected. He then told us they were pulling out and we would be left with the German wounded, and he asked that we tell the American soldiers that we had not been mistreated, and to please look after the German wounded. We advised him that we would. (Jack and I both agreed we thought the Germans addressed the officer as General.)

After about 30 minutes, Jack and I heard the Americans talking in the house. I called out "There are G.I.'s in here." I had seen too many movies where they threw a handgrenade in the room before checking it out. The American paratroopers entered and the first thing the Colonel wanted to know was how we had been treated. We told him we had not been abused and relayed the request the German officer had made about his wounded. We were rescued by Company "E", 513th Parachute Infantry.

When the 5 of us were captured, we were all taken to the farm house, but Jack and I were separated from Herb, Paul and Hollis. We did not know what had happened to them until we were rescued. They had been held in an outlying building on the farm and were also rescued by the same paratroopers that rescued us. They had not been injured in the crash or harmed by the Germans. .

A paratrooper took us back to their base camp (or whatever they called it) and we found Ellis. He and Barney had been in the nose of the plane, and heard the alarm button ring. Barney "bailed out" first and Ellis, who was in the nose turret, followed him. We couldn't have been over 500 feet altitude when Ellis "bailed out". He told us his "chute" poped open, and he hit the ground. This left only Barney and James Deaton unaccounted for, and we hoped that they had gotten out of the plane o.k., however, we were never able to find out anything about them before we left the area.

After giving us some "C rations" to eat, we were each given a rifle and were advised we were behind German lines and they could counter attack. We spent the night in a "fox hole" hoping and praying that there would be no attack, for no telling who we might have shot. When we left England, I had not planned on spending the night so had only my flight clothes. Early in the morning I was about to freeze. Probably the loss of blood help to chill me. A medic slipped into the "fox hole" and wanted to know how I was doing. I told him how cold I was and he produced a quart of whiskey. He told me to take a big drink and it would warm me. Not being a drinking man, it took my breath away, and I started to cough. He covered my mouth with his hand and I thought I was going to die. The night was clear, with plenty of stars, and when I started to cough, I expect it could be heard for miles and miles. We were just lucky it did not bring any gun fire from the Germans. We got no sleep that night.

During the night, the American artillery started to fire from across the Rhine River and we could see the refelection on the sky-line. We could hear the shells passing overhead and hitting several miles away, and we were all praying that none of them fell short.

The next morning we met with the commander of the 513th paratrooper infantry, which was the group that rescued us, and he advised they were pushing on into Germany, and we could stay with them or walk back to the Rhine River. He stated that he thought the road to the Rhine was free of German soldiers, but couldn't be sure. We had our rifles and headed west toward the Rhine River. We followed a road that led through a forest (which I found out was the Diersfordter forest). Just as we were coming out of the forest, I saw an American paratrooper officer I thought was a General and later on in the book by Gerard M. Devlin titled "Paratrooper", it mentioned that General Ridgeway entered the Diersfordter forest, after getting a ride across the Rhine River in a small British boat. We arrived at the Rhine River and found the British Army being ferred across, so we were able to get a ride on their return trip.

After crossing the Rhine River, we went in search of American troops. After finding them, and having an examination by a medical officer, I was advised to go to a hospital to have my wounds attended to, since the one on my head had become infected. Jack and the others got a ride to an airbase for transportation to England, and I entered an ambulance with other "walking wounded" and was taken to the 108 evacuation hospital.

To my best recollection, it was about 10 pm before I got on the medical table, since there were many severely wounded ahead of me. An X-ray revealed I had a broken nose along with the head wounds that had become infected. The day after the crash every bone and muscle in my body hurt. I spent the night in the hospital and next morning was asked to censor mail some of the soldiers had written home. I did, and later on in the day the doctor in charge of the hospital visited. He was from Georgia and before his military service had held a private pilots license. He did not get many pilots so wanted to talk flying a few minutes. He also told me I was to be discharged that day, and I

could go back through channels, which would take about a month to get back to England, or he could discharge me and let me get back to England on my own. The Chaplain also visited and advised me if I wanted to go back to England on my own, he would lend me his "jeep" and a driver to take me to 9th Army Headquarters. The doctor presented me with my "Purple Heart" medal and the "jeep" driver and I left for 9th Army Headquarters..

We arrived at a small town (don't remember the name) where the 9th Army was staying. Since the driver did not know where to take me, he left me at the town square. Shortly after he left, two M.P. soldiers in another "jeep" pulled up and wanted to know why I was in a combat zone without a helmet, which was a violation of some General's order. I explained and the M.P's. took me to the Provost Marshall's office and I again explanied what had happened. The Provost Marshall, a Major, made arrangements for me to accompany the dispatches, which are sent to Brussels, Belgium each day. I spent the night with two soldiers and was awakened around 4 a.m. for my trip to Brussels. I think it was around 9 a.m. when we arrived.

The soldiers left me at the main gate of an American airbase in Brussels, and I was driven to the flight line. I reported to the Officer of the Day and again explained what had happened to me. The officer made arrangements for me to get a flight on a C-47 cargo plane leaving for England that day. I boarded the C-47 and rode on the flight deck with the two pilots. We landed at my airbase around 5 pm. I got out of the plane, thanked the pilots, and headed for the mess hall for my evening meal.

It was hard to believe, but in the last 81 hours I had flown from England to Germany, been shot down, wounded, captured, rescued, hospitalized, hitchhiked across part of Germany, Belgium and on to England

The rest of the story: We found out several weeks later that Barney's body had been found, but we never found out if his "chute" did not open or if he was killed trying to evade capture. As far as I know, James Deaton's body was never found. Some months after the war was over, and I had been discharged, I received a letter from the War Department stating his body had never been found and could I add anything to what they already knew. I could only tell the approximate location of the crash. One of the crew said they did not think James had his "dog tags" on, which would make it hard to identify him. Several years ago, Hollis Powell wrote of his experience on the Wesel mission and it was published in the 2nd Air Division quarterly news letter. A paratrooper, who had been in the 513th, read the account and contacted Hollis. He said that they had seen someone fall out of a plane. One of the troopers went over and checked and the person was dead, so we assume, since James did not have his "chute" on in the bombay, he was shot and fell out, for he was not found in the remains of the burned airplane.

As I mentioned earlier there were 7 airplanes from our squadron on the mission and three of us got shot down, two were shot up but,

managed to make it back to England and the other two received no damage. Also, the book "Paratrooper" telling about this mission, stated that 22 C-46 aircraft, carrying paratroopers, were lost. No paratroopers were killed, since they parachuted out before the airplanes went down, but the crews of all 22 C-46s were lost.

The book "Parataroopers" tell about the 513th rescuing 3 airman who were held in a "makeshift jail", and I believe it was our three crewman, Hollis, Herbert, and Paul. I am told that the book "Geronimo" tells the same story and tells of rescuing 2 airman from a basement, which would probably be Jack and me.