



San Diego Chapter 1 Member Biography

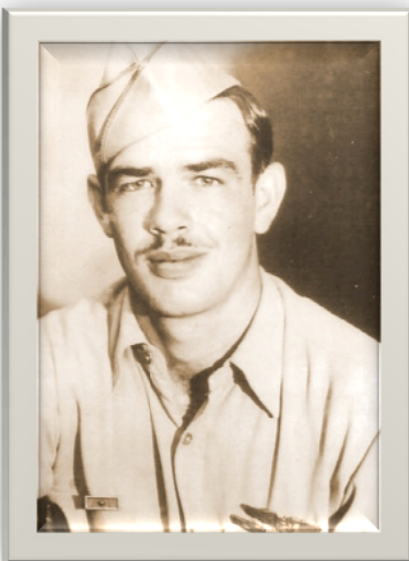
Carl Heimaster

**Crew 6, 724th Squadron,
451st Bm0b Group, 49th
Wing, 15th AF, USAAF**

At the Induction Center at St. Louis, the usual batteries of tests were given where I was found to be in excellent health, mentally strong, and as a hobby enjoyed hunting, the Army decided that the Air Force was the place for me.

Basic training at Miami Beach was very minimal, just the usual close order drill, cleaning a rifle that had no ammunition and had never been fired, but most of all how to obey orders! A decision was made by the Army that I was to enter a flying status, and they sent me to Denver Colo. to study armament i.e. bombs, how they worked, Fuses and how they were activated to detonate the bombs.

Passing this phase I was sent to Laredo Texas for Gunnery School. We were taught to shoot all types of hand-guns, rifles, machine guns at stationary and moving targets. This Missouri country boy had never flown in an airplane so when I was told that the next part of our training would be firing at a target being towed by another plane, I was petrified!! The plane was a single engine, two seater, I was fitted with a seat type



parachute with a safety strap through the harness, riding in the rear seat facing the rear with a machine gun which had stops to prevent me from shooting the tail off our plane!!! To compound my apprehension the gunner before had become air sick all over the rear seat, this didn't do a thing to settle my stomach!!

The Air Force was building the 15th Air Force to be stationed in Italy. Several Groups were in the process of being assembled in different areas of the United States. I was sent to Wendover Utah to be part of the 451st. Bomb Group of which there were 4 Squadrons of 10 planes with 4 officers and 6 enlisted men in each plane. My crew was formed and we were given a B-24 which we named the American Beauty....What a great crew!! The Pilot and I were the only members that were raised West of the

Mississippi, the others from NY, Penn., Ohio we bonded together like family.

The Corps of Engineers had preceded us to Italy and had built an air strip of steel matting, along with all the support building, ammo storage, and fuel depot to conduct our missions of destruction on the enemy. It didn't take long to get started. The middle of January 1944 saw us in the air doing what we had been trained to do. Help Destroy The Machine of War .

Our days became a blur, delivering our bombs for two days, resting one then repeat. Targets of rail- yards where box cars, oil cars, troop carriers all would fall victim to our bombs. Often our targets would be the oil rich fields of the Balkans- our greatest danger would come not in the form of fighter planes but the anti-aircraft fire called Flak .

The shells would burst all around us sending flying pieces of steel in every direction, sometimes direct hits on a plane, or maybe a small piece the size of a walnut tearing through the plane not caring whether it hit man or machine. Such was the case with our plane, American Beauty, on June 23 1944. A piece of shrapnel severed an oil line on the left side, number 1 engine, all oil was lost so it had to be shut down. This created an



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extra load for number 2 engine and after 20 minutes it also failed.

When your plane is losing altitude and you are unable to climb to clear a mountain range, we had no choice but to abandon our American Beauty to her fate in the side of a mountain, while we had no choice but to parachute to earth. THUS BEGINS ANOTHER SAGA!!!

Our pilot called on our intercom to bail out starting from the rear forward and being the tail-gunner I was the first one to hit the silk. My parachute caught in the top of some trees and I had to stand on tip-toe to reach the ground. I traveled down a dry creek bed, turned around a point and there stood a group of German soldiers!! I was a Prisoner of War...After 41 missions my fighting war was over, but now mental war would begin. That evening our entire crew was crowded into a root cellar where we discussed our injuries and wondered at our fate. Some time during the night our nose-gunner Joe Klubert either was taken or he left on his own but the next morning they, the Germans, told us that Joe was shot while trying to escape. We do know that he had an injured ankle but we never saw him again so we never knew his fate.

The next stop of our rail journey was Budapest, Hungary a gathering place for all captured air-men on

their way to a P.O.W. camp in northern Germany. We were placed in solitary confinement for a week, with greasy hot water for breakfast, a bowl of soup and a piece of bread for lunch, the dinner soup was a little thicker. Their reason for this confinement was to question us one at a time about a new night fighter that was appearing in the skies, which of course being on a bomber we knew absolutely nothing about. It was while I was in solitary that I realized that it was the 4th of July!! Happy birthday America!

Now our box-car was attached to several others and we were now a P.O.W. Troop Train. We moved rather swiftly North with out any other stops, potatoes, bread, and water was provided us while confined to our car. Personal hygiene were conducted through a partially opened door while on the move, exercise was allowed before the evening meal then back in the car to a bed of straw with 20 or 30 others, and we sped through the night. We arrived at our destination sometime in the latter days of July. We were met there with the usual escort but this time they had Canines, I mean big angry, snapping, snarling, biting dogs!! The guards would ease off their leashes enough for the dogs to bite the unfortunate ones in the buttocks, needless to say we were glad to get into the safety of our

barbed wire enclosure. The official name of our camp was Stalag(prison) Luft(air) 4. The camp was laid out in a square divided into quarters, in each quarter there were 13 barracks a cooking building (not to be confused with kitchen) where potatoes were cooked with some times meat of an unknown origin.

Time hung heavy on our hands but it also passes so quickly. Thanksgiving passed then Christmas arrived and with it we could hear heavy artillery to the East of us and knew that the Russians were pushing the Germans back. Tension mounted inside the camp as to our fate and our guards were nervous also as to their fate.

Those prisoners who had trouble walking from wounds suffered in battle were transported to another camp where medical attention was better. Each time a group left camp we wondered where they were going and what was to be their destination. Up until now we thought we were prisoners of war but now we could see that we were also Pawns of war. Starting the last week of January our camp started its evacuation, I left camp the 2nd of February, we each carried what we thought we could carry and or what we would need. Of course we were not told where we were going or how long the walk would be therefore almost



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every one discarded items that we thought we would need only to find the pace of the evacuation was so fast and we were so out of shape that after eight miles we were down to the bare essentials, Our blankets, and food nothing else.

On May the 1st we were told that soon we would be liberated of course this rumor was ignored but sure enough on May the 2nd at 9:30 AM a British Tank Corp came down the road!!!! After 333 days of incarceration, walking more than 600 miles in three months, we were free!!!

A near-by Army Post gave us a shower, a tooth brush, clean clothing, new shoes, good food, none of which we had had for the three months of walking and de-lousing what a relief to be rid of the lice!!! (Through the years I have never wasted food and am amazed at the food on the shelves of our super market, which so few people appreciate).

The rest of May is rather a blur as we were moved from one base to another, always moving westerly toward the debarkation point called " Camp Lucky Strike" along the west coast of France. Here our time was spent eating high protein foods, steaks, ice cream, candy, milk shakes and sleeping. The Army was trying to get some weight on our skinny bones. I

had lost 40 pounds, and, except for bleeding gums, was in pretty good shape physically. Mentally, I don't know to this day whether it has affected my life. I would like to think that it has not .

The latter part of May we were placed aboard a freighter that had been modified with hammocks and lots of food to return to America. Our previous crossing with our air plane took 10 hours, to again cross the Atlantic it took 14 days but we didn't care we were going HOME!!!!!!

The Army base at New Port News, Va. was overwhelmed with returning solders, to lighten the crunch we received a 90 day furlough and sent on our way. The trip home to the Ozarks was so calm, quiet, and peaceful without the worry or concern, where our next meal was coming from or when!! Upon arrival at Lebanon, Mo. I met my High School Math teacher. We had a joyous reunion right there in the Greyhound Bus station!! Because I did not know when I would be arriving home I was unable to notify my family and since we didn't have a telephone, I ask the ole math teacher, Mr. Peterson if he knew some one who could drive me the 11 miles home. No he said I'll do it myself so he called his substitute to fill in for him at the station and away we went!!

He started honking the horn some distance from the house and I think the folks guessed or knew what was happening because they were there in the yard when we drove up.

HOME SWEET HOME but the home-coming wasn't complete! My war time sweetheart, Mary, lived in Kansas City 200 miles away, arrangements had to be made through the Ration Board to get enough gas stamps to allow us to drive up to see her. We were still at war with Japan and the critical items were still being rationed (i.e. gas, tires, sugar, coffee, and other things) plus a 35 MPH speed limit!!! I called her when we were in town to let her know I was on my way, the phone lines were wet with tears of joy from both of us. The trip took one of the slowest 8 hours I ever spent but at last we were united; married July 9th 1945 and spent the next 50 years loving each other until she slipped away from me in 1995.

In June of 1999, after years of loneliness, I met my current Love, Patricia, who became my wife in 2003. We are having years of happiness together!