

1
DITCHING IN THE NORTH SEA
By anonymous Stalag 17B gunner

It was a fateful September morn, September 3rd to be exact. The time was approximately eleven o'clock when I made my last landing in a B17 bomber as a free man. It was a rough landing; in fact it might be called a crash landing. For B17's aren't made to land in water. But all that is another story.

All ten of the crew came through the "ditching" alive. The bombardier received a cut in his head but aside from his injury, the rest of us were in good condition aside from a few bruises and strained mental states. We were all soaking wet but the sun was shining so we didn't notice the dampness of our clothing so much.

We picked up the emergency radio and tied the two dingies together. About this time two Spitfires circled and wagged their wings. Our spirits were high despite the ordeal we had gone through. We knew in our minds that the British Air-Sea rescue would come by evening. After all we had gotten an SOS of before we hit the water and now two British ships had circled us and had probably sent in our position. Shouldn't our spirits be high.

Now we settled down to prepare for the wait. Making sure our boats were fastened together tightly, inflating the boats, taking stock of our rations, and figuring our plan of waiting, our rations weren't plentiful but we could sustain life for quite a while. We could see the French coast faintly outlined on the horizon behind us and the navigator figured we were about 75 miles as a fish might swim to England on the opposite horizon. We thought it might simplify the rescuers problem of finding us if we paddled toward England.

We started paddling but we didn't seem to accomplish anything but just kept heading into the waves, some which insisted upon dampening the wide side of the boat. Shortly after noon the sun became clouded over. With the waning of the warm sunshine, so waned our spirits. A slight wind came up which made us cold because our clothing hadn't had enough time to dry in the sunshine. We talked of what we were going to do when we got back to England. London was never going to see itself painted so red as we intended to paint it. As the afternoon hurried on we became more anxious. We saw P51's heading for enemy territory way north of our position. They didn't see our flares, they were too far away. Several other times we saw planes circling on the horizon toward England. We imagined they were looking for us. We had difficulty some times distinguishing birds from airplanes. Twice that afternoon we also saw the top portion of a fast boat just over the horizon. By this time our flares were beginning to be used up. As night grew near we were cussing the British air-sea rescue and resigned ourselves to miserable, uncomfortable cold night spent in cramped damp dingies. During the afternoon we had gotten the emergency radio operating. We must have cranked a lot of SOS's.

As dusk started to come on two planes appeared from the French coast. They began circling nearer. Soon we recognized them as Focke-Wulf 190's. All hopes of seeing England again disappeared. The German planes finally found us, buzzed us a couple of times, tipped their wings when we waived, then headed back toward France. After dark we heard the sound of a motor launch and saw the occasional flash of a searchlight on a moving boat. We were all miserable, chilled to the bone and hungry. The boat circled for some time, circling closer and closer. Finally we realized the jig was up and flashed our blinker light toward them. They turned their searchlight on us and came up closer.

They had all kinds of artillery trained on us and were hollering all kinds of stuff that was strictly foreign to our ears. The only thing that we could understand was "Kommen sie hier!" As long as we had no other pressing engagements we stayed where we were and let them throw us a rope. I guess I was the first one on the boat. I found out I couldn't walk without help. I stumbled about like a drunk. They took me on the opposite side of the boat and made me sit down on the deck. After the others had been brought on board and our dingies had been pulled on, they guided us toward the front of the boat, through a door and down into a small room. No rough-stuff, just politeness.

When we were all below, the injured were bandaged and we were given blankets. We were certainly cold, but it was warm down there. The guard gave us cigarettes and tobacco with papers. Of course I was left out with all that kindness and good will.

He told us we would be in port in three quarters of an hour. The port was Le Havre.

We were right on time. We were guided to the deck again where we saw quite a reception committee. They all had guns. One came on board and asked in very good English if any of us were injured. We pointed out our casualties. Then he asked how long we had been in the water. Our answer was "Nix Vershteh". In our estimation this was military information. He just laughed knowing darn well we understood. We were marched out to the dock where an ambulance waited. We received our first surprise by finding it was an English ambulance captured during Germany's more victorious days. We were taken to a hospital where the injured were bandaged again and we all had our temperatures taken with thermometers that were placed under our arms. They registered Centigrade. "My!" I thought "what backward people" Some hot liquid- that was supposed to be imitation coffee or tea, was brought in with some bread. We couldn't eat or drink much despite the fact that we hadn't eaten since close to four o'clock that morning and it was then close to midnight.

After we had finished our business, we were taken out again and this time to some kind of an orderly room or headquarters. It was there that we were interrogated and searched. We became terribly sleepy now that we were in a warm room and some of the mental anxiety of the dingie had disappeared. They asked our name rank and serial and tried to get some other information that was strictly military. They took my watch, pencils and other stuff I had in my pockets. After they had finished, we were piled back into trucks and returned to the hospital. They had more hot liquid, more bread, and more sausage. We ate more enthusiastically this time.

We were given sheets and were shown our individual beds. The beds had good springs and mattresses with plenty of blankets. We took off our clothes and hung them on the banisters in the hall to dry. Then to bed. It was about five o'clock. Twenty-seven hours without any sleep and after what we had gone through-we were thoroughly fatigued. Oh! Sweet peaceful sleep.

I was awakened the afternoon of the fourth by voices, womens voices. "Hmm", I thought, "Nurses." Presently I heard someone come in the room. I opened one eye slightly and saw not a nurse, but a civilian girl. One of the other occupants was awakened by her and soup was placed on his bedside table. Then two more girls came in and I also received my soup. It looked good and tasted good. It was packed with vegetables and contained some meat. If this was an example of how I was going to be fed, I was going to be satisfied.

It was about 2:30 by the time I had finished eating. All our clothes had been taken outside to dry in the sunshine. The girls, which turned out to be French girls, would bring them in as soon as they had dried. When we had dressed, we ate some more of the bread and sausages that we had left over from the night before. After shaving and washing, I felt like a man with a new lease on life.-I guess I have.--

The German guards were very friendly and treated us very well. I tried to talk with some of them with my limited German, but couldn't gather much. The French girls were nice. I knew no French to converse with them, but

"Kamerad." They understood that and thoroughly agreed by showing the "V" for victory sign. They tried to give the impression that they didn't like the Germans.

Some civilians had gathered in some trees that bordered the hospital yard. One of the guards, that was the loudest, started hollering at them. The Germans thought it was a great joke. I could see that France is a bullied nation. Germany was laughing now, but they would be laughing at the point of a gun.

About 5:30 we were taken out into trucks. Guards piled in behind us and we headed for the railroad station. It seemed that we had turned every corner in the city before we stopped in front of the station. We were marched through a modern station to a waiting train. We got on a car which was very modern and got into a first class compartment. We were really riding in style. They had us split up so that there were five of us in the compartment with two guards. I had begun to notice that all Germans had a gun at all times. Very unlike Americans, we enjoyed the ride considering our circumstances.

The railroad followed a canal for a good distance. It seems that we were headed for Paris. It was dark when we arrived in the Paris station. We would all be in Paris under different circumstances. After all Paris was a famous place.

We were taken from the train to a waiting bus. Four more Americans joined us. One was an officer who was badly burned, the other three were unhurt. The bus wound through the darkened streets. We didn't see very much that made us believe we were in Paris except there were lovers strolling the streets arm in arm.

The bus took us to another station where the people would have hidden or helped us to hide if we could have slipped our guards. The train was not as modern as the last, but then beggars can't be choosers. This time we pulled guards who were going home on leave. One was a fellow 33 years old, the other was 19. The older fellow was sweating profusely. He explained that he had been drinking.-Reason enough.

Shortly before the train left, two young officers came on the train and introduced themselves as pilots on FockeWulf 190's. They further introduced themselves as members of the famous "Abbeville Kids" squadron. They could speak a little English laboriously but took pride in this accomplishment. When he heard we were on a B17, he put his hands to head and said guns were like flashlights. He also remarked on the guns at a long range. He asked us what we thought of the FW. We praised it. He said our "Thunderbird"- Thunderbolt was "sehr schneller" with the accent on schneller. The Spitfire also came into his praises. He pointed to a small bandage on his head and told us a B17 had shot him down the day before. He didn't seem to mind though. He asked us if we were thirsty and sent one of the guards out for something to drink. He gave us cigarettes also. Before they had taken their leave, they prided themselves with knowing two american tunes. They were "Sleepers creepers" and "Alexanders regtime bendt." Yes Sir, they were great guys, and we were fighting guys like them.

The train left Paris about eleven-thirty. I conversed with the older German for a long time. He was a pretty good duck! He gave us some pears and offered us sandwiches. He showed us a picture of his wife and three children, and denounce the war and was anxious to go home and stay. He said our destination was Frankfort, Germany. I finally went to sleep. I woke up several times and found the two guards asleep. The younger guard seemed to think my shoulder was soft because he used it as a pillow for half the night. Even with those two sleeping, there was always someone stirring in the corridor outside the compartments. It was a very cold and uncomfortable night- my second night as a German prisoner.

Dawn finally came. I was stiff and cold. I certainly wasn't riding in the style an American soldier is accustomed to. The younger German guard seemed to be comfortable, the older German was as stiff as I was though. I inquired as to when we would arrive in Frankfort and I was told at eleven o'clock. The morning wore on and we were now traveling in Germany.

People now were standing in the corridor outside of our compartments. I realized that the passenger space was just as acute as in England and the USA, if not more so. It was Sunday and all of the civilians were dresses in their best bib and tucker. I noticed one big-rather on the avoir-du-poise side- feather merchant that had a topcoat on, that resembled the American type of tailoring. After quite a while and much staring on my part, he spoke. At first I didn't understand him because I expected him to speak German and he was speaking English. We struck up quite a conversation. It turned out that he was an American citizen, who had been caught by the war. He was an engineer for Barrett's in Chicago. He was here building a large steel plant near Berlin. He said his home was in Chicago. It was certainly a sensation to see someone from so near my home. He said his home in Berlin had had the windows out of it three times by bombs. I didn't say I was sorry.

In Frankfort we were taken off the train. I could see there were more of us than left Paris. There were about fifty in all. There were even three Free-French fliers. After parading around in front of the civilians in the station, they put us on another train. We rode about two hours and got off in a small town. There we had to wait for the electric interurban cars that would take us to our destination. Finally it came and we rode through the countryside until we came to a small whistle-stop which was our destination.

We were marched about a block to where a long low building stood inside a double barbed wire fence enclosure. All you could hear was hollering of the prisoners, and the guards trying to drown them out. I saw guys going out in small groups to the shack that I presumed was a latrine.

Our names were taken outside the fence and we were turned over by our guards to new ones. The guards that brought us there, shook hands with us and took their leave. We were then taken inside the enclosure one at a time. I was the last one to go in. Once inside the building, I had to strip off and my clothes was searched, then I was assigned to a room.

There were five fellows already in the room which measured approximately six by twelve feet. There was one bed with slats that held up a straw mattress that was covered by two light blankets. Besides this, there was a table in one corner by the one barred window that allowed the sun to enter the room. There was a small glass vase on the table. Beside the table there was a stool. In the corner near the door was a small pot already filled with urine.

There was one American other than myself in the room. The other four fellows were British. Two of the British had been shot down the night before on a raid in Berlin. One of these two had bruises all over his wrists from chains. One of his thumbs had no feeling. The other two Britishers had been shot down a little longer. One fellow was a pilot on a Halifax. He had crashed his plane in Holland and he had gotten into the underground there. The underground had smuggled him into France where he had stayed almost a month and a half. While he was there, he had learned French, and bided his time until an opportunity would come to get to Spain. Finally he was taken with 20 other fellows to a hotel room to await a departure to safety. Two hours after they arrived in the hotel, the Gestapo came in and took them prisoner. This fellow spent a most undelightful two weeks in the Paris prison. The remaining Britisher had almost died from exposure after spending six days on the North Sea in a dinghy. He had been a hospital for almost a week and he was still very weak.

I was in time for evening chow which consisted of two thin slices of bread with a thin coating of margarine between them. The small glass vase was filled with imitation tea or coffee. A most unpalatable supper.

The guards were, on average, not a very good lot. Maybe it was the prisoners fault, but they certainly didn't mind pushing the prisoners around. The guards seemed to begrudge the necessities of the latrine. After much pounding on the door, they might come to see what you wanted. When you did get out, they hurried you so that you hardly had time to finish your business.

As the evening wore on, the guards seemed to get rougher. One of the Englishmen had gas on his stomach and had the urgency to go to the latrine quite often. The head guard was very irritable and at one of the answers to our insistent knock, he opens the door and commenced hollering in German about our making so much noise. He refused the gaseous Englishman the necessity of the latrine and turned to leave. The Englishman turned-thinking he had left and allowed a circumnavigated belch to pass. The guard heard it and thought it was aimed at him for he turned around and roared and bellered and thereupon swung the butt of his rifle. The blow glanced off the Englishman against the wall. Then the Englishman turned red with rage, not thinking he had done anything wrong, and would have made for the guard but for the physical restraint of two of his countrymen who pulled him into the chair on the opposite end of the room. The guard fumed and frothed like a mad dog and pulled a round into the chamber of his gun, then released the safety. I do not know what stopped him to this day.

During this whole episode, I was petrified. I did not know until the whole thing was over what had caused the outburst. I was scared. That was not the only show of violence by this same guard. In a neighboring room, my radio operator was confined also in the same predicament. He had been knocking on his door and hollering "hunger!" The guard arrived just as he began one of his knocking pleas. Whereupon the guard threw the door open, grabbed my radioman and threw him against the wall and began brandishing his moral persuader again.

These episodes made me realize my predicament was going to be no safer than combat. In fact combat had not really ended. Later in the evening they took our shoes and we prepared to retire for the night. The other American and the Englishman, who was still suffering from exposure, took the bed and one blanket while the rest of us laid the remaining blanket on the floor for us to sleep on. Little did I realize, the floor was as soft as any bed I was to have later on. There wasn't much room for turning in your sleep. I certainly could have more if I had been able to keep warm. God knows, I was tired enough!

Morning came with its sunshine. It was gratifying to have some warmth. Breakfast finally came. Two thin slices of bread with a lubrication of jam between the slices, with some hot ersatz tea. At least we thought it was supposed to be tea.

The morning passed quickly with conversation and noon brought dinner consisting of one bowl of potatoes and barley soup. Not too good, but hot. The day being Sunday, we spent the afternoon watching the people parade by in their Sunday finery, getting a Sunday walk.

Just before evening show time, I was called out of the room and was marched out of the enclosure across the road to where an officer sat. He was very friendly. After taking a form with a red cross on it, he proceeded to advise me it was his job to establish me as a prisoner of war and in doing that he would have to ask some questions from which he could realize I wasn't a spy. The form he would fill in so my relatives could be informed I was still living. I gave him my army serial number, my name and my rank, but he didn't stop there; he insisted upon knowing my group and squadron, the target of the mission I was on, then he wanted to know the positions of the crew. The first he finally pointed out to me, the second he guessed wrong on, and the last he had all screwed up. Finally he started inquiring into my family, after realizing they were none of his business. He finally dismissed me. During the interview I helped myself to some of the candy he had. Very good!

I was the first to be interrogated, therefore I had to wait till they had all done their quota. About dusk they had around 25 fellows. We were then marched to the much heard of Dulag Luft.

Dulag-Luft is the reception center for all Allied Air Corps prisoners. At the time I was there, there were three barracks, one containing enlisted men, one containing officers, the last being the messhall. The barracks were divided up into rooms with double tier bunks with straw mattresses. One corner of the rooms contained a small stove. The barracks had a small washroom, a shower room, and a latrine. The mess hall was run on bulk red cross supplies by Englishmen and a few GI's. They put out five meals a day, two of which were heavy meals, and three meals constituted of broth, or a beverage with bread and jam or honey, or just biscuits. The meals were morale builders as well as strength builders. Since most of the fellows hadn't eaten a decent meal in days and in many cases weeks.

We were processed before entering Dulag and our fingerprints taken. Afterward we were taken inside the main enclosure of Dulag. We were met by an Englishman who gave us a package of French cigarettes a piece. This was a most welcome innovation for most since we hadn't been allowed to or mainly had no cigarettes to smoke. My innovation came when we were shown the mess hall was and I received the first really good tasting food since I left England. It was made up of a hot broth and a cracker but it tasted like a steak dinner to my hungry stomach.

Life for us is far too short,
To spend in trivial sorrow;
For the deepest wound
That bleeds today,
Will be a scar tomorrow.
by Perry K Smith