

**A NARATION OF THE WW II EXPERIENCES OF 1<sup>st</sup> LIEUTENANT**  
**JOSEPH A. PETERBURS**

On the 7<sup>th</sup> of December 1941 I was a Divinity Student at the Salvatorian Seminary in St. Nazianz, Wisconsin. As I heard the news coming out of the loudspeakers in the gym that morning, I knew I would be leaving the seminary and joining the Armed Forces of the United States. I finished the semester at St. Nazianz and at 17 years old I applied for pilot training in the Navy. They turned me down! I heard that the Army Air Corps was accepting applications for Aviation Cadet Training, however, you had to be 18 years old and take a competitive examination. This I did on my 18<sup>th</sup> birthday on 25 November 1942 and passed the exam. I am sure that it was the academic discipline I acquired at the Seminary that enabled me to pass. I was particularly pleased by my accomplishment since less than 50 percent of those who took the test were accepted. I was sworn in by an Army Colonel friend of my dad's on the 30<sup>th</sup> of November 1942 with my Dad there looking as proud as he could be. After being sworn in, I was placed on deferred status until I was called up.

### **TRAINING**

On 23 January 1943 and I headed for Miami Beach, Florida for basic training. Basic was a breeze for me; the routine at the Seminary was much more arduous than basic. Our barracks were one of the plush beach front hotels and our training and exercise program was conducted on the beach. How tough could it get? One thing that was completely unexpected was the shots. We knew we were going to get a shot or two but nothing like that. Shortly after arrival, after getting settled in, we were directed to one of the large open conference rooms in the hotel. We were lined up in single file and at the end of the room was a double row of medics each with his syringe holding a long needle ready to strike. As our line passed through the gauntlet, we were jabbed with the needle first the right arm, then the left until we exited the line with 10 to 12 jabs. It was an experience that I don't think any of us were prepared for.

From Basic Training I was sent to a College Training Detachment at Clemson College, Clemson, South Carolina. Apparently, the Air Corps decided to expose those of us who had not been to college to the college environment. We were mixed in with the college students for classes but had our own dorms. Basically, it was like the ROTC program. I was at Clemson for 3 months (March-May) and then off to Nashville, Tennessee. Nashville was the Southeast Air Commands Classification Center. There your psychomotor and psychological ability and traits were tested to determine whether you were suited for pilot, navigator, or bombardier training. The wash out rate at Nashville was high. I believe it was about 25% for the group I came with. As it turned out I was selected for pilot training.

From Nashville I was sent to Maxwell Field, Montgomery, Alabama. Maxwell was ground school; aeronautical courses, flying dynamics, Morse Code, navigation and lots of physical training. The obstacle course was really tough and although I was in excellent shape the 5 mile cross country runs in the heat of the summer almost did me in. While at Maxwell I received word that my brother Paul, a Machinist Mate 1<sup>st</sup> Class, in the Navy was killed in action (KIA). He was a crew member on the USS Plymouth (a sub chaser). On 5 August 1943 while escorting a convoy off the coast of North Carolina his ship was torpedoed. The German submarine U566 torpedoed her and of the 180+ member crew only 85 survived. Paul was 20 years old. I was devastated.

From Maxwell I went to Douglas Field, Georgia for Primary Flight Training in the PT-17 Steerman. My instructor was a civilian probably in his mid-40's name of "Stumpy" Cadle. He was an outstanding pilot from the old school. Flying since he was a kid. He was a no nonsense instructor demanding excellence in every technique and maneuver. He taught me everything he knew from takeoff to landing and everything in between. The Steerman was notorious for its ground loop characteristic during landing. Unless you were executing an almost perfect landing the wing could dip and touch the ground and spin the aircraft out of control. Fortunately, I did not succumb to it. It was really a thrill to fly in the open cockpit of a bi-plane and to get the planes feel in the seat of your pants. I could just imagine how the WWI pilots felt in their aircraft. We did do some dog fighting WWI style, but the emphasis was learning the basics, the rest would come later. The maneuverability of the Steerman was fantastic and I enjoyed the aerobatics and never had to barf inside or out of the cockpit. I enjoyed the planes' spin and aerobatic characteristics and became very proficient in doing them. "Stumpy" soloed me in a little less than seven hours and gave me some of the best training I would ever have. I received 65 hours in the Steerman and then off to Basic Flying Training at Cochran Field, Macon, Georgia. There we flew the BT-13 a good mono plane and a big step up from the PT-17. We were to get about 70 hours in the BT-13 but when we completed our training there was no room at the Advanced Flying Schools, so we were held back a class. We continued to get time in the BT-13 but now I was two classes behind from where I started i.e. Class 44D. We ended up with a lot of free time

during the month we were waiting to go to advanced. We went into town a lot and were able to see a lot of Macon, Georgia. For most of us, our time in the South was our first experience with segregation and we didn't like it. I almost got into trouble a couple of times for breaking the segregation rules.

Advanced Flying School was at Napier Field, Dothan, Alabama, where we flew the T-6 "Texan". I along with several of my buddies, Soleau, Skroback, Randal and Smith, were assigned to Squadron 7 and our flight instructor, Lt. Shepherd, was great. There we really started to get a feel for what our training had been all about. You were constantly evaluated on all aspects of your flying ability. There were no second chances – you screwed up and out you went.

We started to realize how exacting the rigors of combat would be and how the smallest mistake could cost lives. They were not going to pin wings on someone they were not sure of. Because of this atmosphere, advanced was a different and more challenging experience. I developed some lasting friendships there and we were all excited, anticipating our graduation and receiving our Wings. I think the most exciting time was a week or 10 days before graduation when we got our clothing allowance, \$250, to buy our uniforms. That's when it really started to hit home – I had achieved my objective – I was going to be acknowledged as a PILOT! Additionally, I was going to be commissioned a 2<sup>nd</sup> Lieutenant in the United States Army Air Corps. I graduated as a 2<sup>nd</sup> LT. fighter pilot on 15 April 1944 at 19 years old. After graduation we were given 10 days leave before going on to replacement combat pilot training.

### PRE-COMBAT

After leave I returned to Napier auxiliary Field Nr. 2. This was where we got our aerial gunnery and strafing training in the T-6. Although unintended we also got jungle survival training. The area we operated from was in a swamp; hot, humid and mosquito and snake infested. Our flight suits were continually dripping wet from sweat and it was a relief to get in the air, open the canopy and let the cool breeze engulf your entire body. After a couple of weeks, it was back to Napier where I checked out in the P-40N "Warhawk". We read the manual and got some cockpit familiarization time. To give us a feel for the lack of forward visibility, the long nose of the P-40 blocking your view, we received some practice landings from the rear seat of the T-6. We were then turned loose. I remember when I taxied out to the runway, I was scared crapless of that long nose sitting out there, hearing and feeling the awesome power of the engine. I lined up on the runway, advanced the throttle, hard rudder to compensate for the torque. I pulled back on the stick, airborne, raised the gear, and was soaring through the sky- what a thrill! I was 19 years old and flying a P-40, even though I had never driven a car. I got 10 hours in the P-40 at Napier. From Napier I went to Dale Mabry Field, Tallahassee, Florida where I received overseas indoctrination training. From Tallahassee it was Page Field, Fort Meyers, Florida. There we had the P-40N and we received it with mixed emotions. We loved its flying characteristics and of course we already had time in it, however, we knew it was becoming obsolete and that it was the P-51 we would probably end up with overseas. I believe there were four or five Replacement Training Units (RTUs) in Florida and all of them except for us had P-51s. We practiced combat tactics in dog fighting, strafing, aerial gunnery, dive bombing, smoke spraying and high and low altitude navigation. It was great sport when we came across some P-51s and got into a dog fight with them. It was strictly a matter of pilot skill. Since the P-51 had all around better capabilities when you splashed one with your P-40, you knew you were good. We also checked out in the A-24, a Navy Dive Bomber (SBD). It was primarily used for instrument training; however, we did get to fly it solo just for the fun of it and to simulate carrier landings. As a dive bomber it had large dive brakes and it was a lot of fun to fly. I got a little more than 40 hours in it.

One day I was having a dog fight with another P-40; I was on his tail in a tight left turn at about 25,000 feet right over a very large cumulous cloud. As I pulled in tighter on my turn my plane snapped, and I went into the thunderhead uncontrolled. I was really good at spin recovery, so I pulled the stick back into my gut and put in full left rudder. Looking at the needle, ball, and airspeed I could see I was in a self-induced spin. I then did normal spin recovery using needle, ball, and airspeed to control the bird after I stopped the spin. I came out of the thunderhead at about 7,000 feet in a 10 degree dive, wings level and going like hell. At that time, I was grateful to my primary instructor, "Stumpy," for doing such a thorough job of teaching me the basics of flying.

I lost two good friends at Page. Aerial gunnery practice was great sport but could be dangerous particularly if you hit the cable pulling the "rag" (target). If you hit the cable and the "rag" broke loose and you were too close, you could get wrapped in the target and there was no recovery. That's what happened to one of my friends. The other one stalled out during landing, lost control and went in nose first.

We were supposed to finish RTU by mid-August and get our overseas orders. For some reason it kept being delayed, however, we continued to fly, and they developed some ingenious activities for us. I left Page Field on October 10, 1944, headed for Dale

Mabry Field Tallahassee, Florida for overseas processing. While at Tallahassee I got my assignment to the 8<sup>th</sup> Air Force, England.

I did receive a ten day leave before departure that was scheduled for the 1<sup>st</sup> of November 1944 on the French liner Isle de France. While on leave I proposed to the love of my life, Josephine, and we spent all our time together. We both realized that we wanted to spend the rest of our lives together.

I headed for Fort Dix, New Jersey arriving on October 27<sup>th</sup>. After a couple of days of orientation/processing we boarded the Isle de France and departed on schedule. The trip on the Isle De France was uneventful except for the constant urping of the seasick troops and the crowded living conditions. Bunks were stacked two and three high and you needed to get out on deck with the fresh air often. Fortunately, we were not in a convoy and the ship was a fast one.

## COMBAT

I arrived in Scotland on 6<sup>th</sup> November 1944 having made an uneventful and fast crossing without a convoy. I was 19 years old, had acquired over 280 hours in the P-40N and was ready to go to war. We had a couple of days orientation and then unit assignments. six other pilots and I were assigned to the 20<sup>th</sup> Fighter Group, Kings Cliff, England. We got into a truck and headed south to our unit. Upon arrival I was assigned to the 55<sup>th</sup> Fighter Squadron. On the day I arrived at Kings Cliff we were entering the airfield on a road that passed by the end of the runway. We were stopped at the approach end of the runway watching a flight of P-51s land having returned from a combat mission. The last P-51 in the flight was on the final approach; his landing was hard with a big bounce, and we heard him push the throttle wide open. All of us in the truck (trained in P-40s and used to high torque) yelled NO! Sure enough the P-51 rolled to the left and went in upside down killing the pilot. A gruesome welcome to the unit. We learned later that they had just converted from P-38s to P-51s.

I was assigned to the 55<sup>th</sup> Fighter Squadron. With no time in the P-51 I proceeded with check out in a P-51B on 2 December 1944 and flew the B, C and D through 11 December. After 21 hours I was certified "combat ready" and assigned a D model that I flew during most of my missions. Of the 145 pilots that rotated through the 55<sup>th</sup> Squadron during the war 53 (37%) were shot down, 19 were POW's or evaded while 33 (23%) were killed. The combat tour changed from 270 combat hours to 300 hours during early 1945. As it turned out our group of seven had a 100% loss rate Lieutenants Nuno, H.B. Smith, and Soleau were killed in action, Lt Mark Smith was killed in training and Lt Stewart; Capt. Tracy and I were all shot down on 10 April 1945 and were prisoners of war.

The first couple of weeks after my arrival at Kings Cliffe were primarily occupied with administrative and functional activities like learning the layout of the Station, defensive procedures/rules ; there were still Luftwaffe intrusions and on one occasion the Group scrambled a flight against one), Squadron assignment, issuance of equipment and assignment of quarters.

The "quarters" consisted of a standard U S Army barracks. One small room at one end (assigned to the senior officer) an open bay and at the other end a communal latrine. I believe there were between 16 and 20 bunks with 8 to 10 on either side of the bay and about 5 feet between bunks. Your footlocker, that contained most of your valuables, was at the foot of the bunk and a standing wall locker at the head and side of the bunk. It sure was cozy and you got to know each other very well under these conditions.

There was a separate large building that held about 15 bathtubs. Showers were not in vogue then, particularly in England, so if you were lucky, you would be able to take a bath about once a week. I believe we had to schedule a bath way ahead of time and even then, it wasn't sure you would get it.

After a couple of weeks of getting settled we started to get our combat indoctrination training, we learned about the P-51, its characteristics and our tactics and procedures for escort, air to air combat and ground support/strafing missions. We reviewed the enemy terrain and its known defenses as well as the Luftwaffe's aircraft and their individual strengths and weaknesses, tactics, and locations.

After a week or so we started our check out in the P-51. It was the same routine we did in checking out in the P-40 i.e., read the manual, familiarize yourself with the cockpit, hop in, start the engine and off you go. After a couple of familiarization flights, we started to practice combat escort and ground attack formation flying, procedures and tactics. We did some navigation training a bit of aerobatics over the Wash. Separate from the actual flying training we did a lot of Link trainer instrument flying training. Link training was a continuing thing with a required 4 hours a month in the Link.

There was no gunnery involved in the training, however, fortunately during RTU we received all forms live aerial and ground gunnery, bombing and spraying as well as air to air dog fights with other P-51 and P-40 units while training in Florida.

I did my initial check out in the P-51B with most of my training time in the P-51C and then the P-51D. I can't remember any major differences in the models; however, I am sure there were. The B and C models that I flew were converted from the "raiser" back to what we called the "Spitfire" canopy. This was a bubble like the D models and provided superior visibility.

Our flying clothing was essentials. We were issued our helmet with Ox mask and goggles as well as a wool flying suit, leather flying jacket and wool gloves. Sometimes we would fly with our uniform under the flight suit. We wore our own civilian shoes (mostly oxfords), however some of us would buy our own boots. As far as leisure time there really wasn't much of it. My longest combat day was 9 hours and 45 minutes of combat flying (2 missions) and my average time per mission was 5.5 hours. Add to that 2 hours of prep time and 1.5 hours debrief time and the day is shot.

My first combat mission was on 12 December 1944. It was an escort mission for a large group of B-17s. I was in Blue flight flying number two position to the flight leader Lt. Planchak. Lt.'s Benedict and Kier took the number three and four positions. We rendezvoused with the bomber south of Brussels, escorted them to and from their targets in the Merseburg area. The mission was uneventful. During the next couple of weeks the weather was really bad. From 12 December to 27 December the group only flew on four days. This was during the period of the Battle of the Bulge. My second mission was on the 28<sup>th</sup> of December and then the 30<sup>th</sup>, and 31<sup>st</sup> of December then the 1<sup>st</sup> through the 7<sup>th</sup> of January 1945.

Living conditions were pretty good considering the times. Chow was good and we lived in open bay barracks. There would be a dance every couple of weeks; the girls come from a nearby town - Peterborough. Leisure time was spent gambling, playing cards, and writing letters. I became very proficient at bridge, had a RAF Flight Lieutenant as a regular partner, and we made a few bucks.

I flew my 11<sup>th</sup> mission on 14 January. The group was escorting several hundred bombers to targets near Magdeburg. I was in Red Flight with Capt. Fruechtenicht lead, Lt. Milian number two, and I was number three in a three ship flight. Approach to the target was via Berlin and as we were entering the Berlin area Major Nichols spotted several large gaggles (totaling 150+) of Me-109s and Fw-190s and called in a heads up. The 55<sup>th</sup> Squadron dropped tanks and attacked the enemy aircraft as they passed through the bomber formation. The sky was full of fighters' dog fighting, B-17 wings, engines, and debris falling as well as a sky full of parachutes. The falling parts were almost as dangerous as the enemy fighters. I engaged an Fw-190 head on. I could see his cannon fire blinking around his nose, and I responded with my six .50 caliber machine guns. I saw some hits, but he kept coming and so did I. We passed each other, head on, only yards apart. My flight leader Capt. Fruechtenicht was able to finish off the 190 after he passed under me. It was truly an exhilarating experience. That day our squadron destroyed 10.5 and damaged two enemy fighters. I think it appropriate for me at this time to express my complete admiration and awe of the bravery exhibited by the bomber pilots and their crews. Invariably they would proceed to their targets through flak you could walk on and the ferocity of enemy fighters that showed no mercy. Flying at around 150 knots they proceeded to their targets with comrades blowing up and spinning out of control on the left and right – but always on to the target. In my 49 missions I never saw a bomber waiver or be deterred from his mission. These men were and are the bravest of the brave and I only hoped that I could have come close to such courage.

My 13<sup>th</sup> mission came on 17 January 1945. We were to escort the bombers to targets around Altenbeken and Paderborn. My Dad was born in that area, and I had many relatives living there. After the bombers hit their targets our group, the second of two groups, was allowed to break off escort and hit targets of opportunity. I was in Black Flight with Lt Planchak lead, Lt Smith number two, Lt. Kier Number three and me, number four. Capt. Mansker, 55<sup>th</sup> Squadron lead, hit the deck in the Rheine area north of Munster. He destroyed a locomotive as did our flight. We also damaged a factory building. I damaged a high power electric distribution station and destroyed five railroad switching stations. While attacking the factory Lt. Planchak picked up some hits in his air scoop and started leaking coolant. He left the target and made it back to around Dusseldorf. He eventually bailed out, was captured, and interned as a POW. This was my second strafing mission, and I really loved it. After this mission I was given the nickname "The Strafing Kid".

Near the end of January, I noted that I was flying a lot of wing to the Group Leader. I asked my flight commander Bob Reimensneider if I was doing anything wrong. He said, "hell no they like the way you cover their 6 o'clock position." I asked Bob if there was any advancement doing that job – he said no. I then asked him to give me a chance at leading elements and then a

flight. He said OK. Shortly after I was made element leader, then assistant flight leader and was promptly promoted to 1<sup>st</sup>. Lt. less than 10 months after graduation. However, for some reason I continued to get a lot of "Wingman to the Group Lead" position

My 19<sup>th</sup> mission on the 14<sup>th</sup> of February was escorting bombers to Dresden. There were some 1300 bombers dropping incendiaries on the city. The bombs caused a fire storm that destroyed most of the city and its inhabitants. Escort to and from the target was uneventful except for heavy flak. With no enemy fighters to worry about our flight broke off escort and headed for the deck looking for targets of opportunity. Major Gotterdam was flight lead, I was number two and Jack Leon was number three. Number four had aborted the mission earlier. We came across a large German truck speeding down a side road and proceeded to attack it. We were at 10,000 feet and Gotterdam went into a steep turn and dive. Jack was in position to take over number two spot, so he did, and I rolled into the number three position. The dive was steep, and Jack was tucked in close\_behind lead, in fact, too close. I followed at normal interval and from my position I could see Gotterdam do a hard pull out almost going in. Jack was not so lucky, he plowed in at high speed his bird exploding on impact. I gave the truck a blast of my .50's and rejoined lead. We were in the air for 6 hours and 30 minutes. I still remember Jack going in as though it just occurred.

The 25<sup>th</sup> of February was a day I was not flying, however, three of my best buddies were. They were engaged in a fierce fight with Me-109s and Fw-190s. Lt. Horace B. Smith was hit by heavy ground fire, crashed and KIA. On the way home Lt. Raymond H. Soleau had engine trouble over the English Channel and had to bail out. He was never recovered. Ray and I had just returned from a three day R and R trip to London. Lt. Ken Pettit was in a dog fight with a large gaggle of Fw-190s and destroyed one. On this day two buddies were killed, and another got an enemy kill of his own.

On the 17<sup>th</sup> of March I flew my 32<sup>nd</sup> mission escorting the bombers to targets in the Leipzig area. I lost my oxygen as we were approaching the target area and had to get down below 10,000 feet and return to base. Although deep inside enemy territory I was allowed to return by myself. I was about 2/3 of the way out of Germany when I spotted a flight of four Fw-190s approaching me high and into my 5 o'clock position. My first instinct was to do a 180 and attack, knowing I would get all four of them. However, (I thought) maybe they are all German Aces; each with a hell of a lot more combat time than I had. So I took the better part of valor and ducked into some low stratus clouds. Dead reckoning it for about a half hour I made it back to the French coast. Broke out at the coast and made it to home plate without further incident.

My 36<sup>th</sup> and 37<sup>th</sup> missions were flown on the same day, 24 March. The allied Ground Forces initiated a major offensive across the lower Rhine near Nijmegen and Duisburg. Additionally, two Airborne Divisions, one American and one British were dropped across the Rhine. The air effort to support the operation was colossal. Thousands of fighters and bombers operated throughout the day supporting the ground forces. Our Group was assigned the two fold task of preventing enemy air from attacking our ground forces and keeping the enemy from supplying their divisions by rail and road. I was element lead in white flight on the 1<sup>st</sup> flight of the day. We took off at 0750 for a five hour and 10 minute mission during which we patrolled over the ground combat area. No enemy air or rolling stock was encountered. I flew again on the third mission of the day flying element lead in yellow flight. We took off at 1501 for a four hour and 35 minute mission. Jerry was really hiding they were nowhere to be found either in the air or on the ground.

I was assigned a bird of my own after about 10 missions (P-51D KI T) and by March I had flown most of my missions in it. During the last five or six missions in March it started giving me some trouble. It would cough and sputter and it took some fine tuning of the throttle and mixture controls to keep it purring. I would write it up and my Crew Chief would do his darndest to fix it but it kept recurring. The problem only occurred during cruise, and I had figured out the optimum settings so although alert to the problem I was not overly concerned flying it. On 26 March one of my best surviving friends, Lt. Ken Pettit, was assigned my aircraft for the day's mission. I was not flying that day so when I heard that Ken was flying my bird, I quickly got with him to give him a "heads up". I briefed him on the birds' peculiarities and settings he should use. I told him to be very careful and not to hesitate to abort if he felt the need. -- Ken did not return from this mission. Not because of enemy action but because the aircraft failed him.

The mission after action report read: *"We regret to report that Lt.. Kenneth L. Pettit of the 55<sup>th</sup> Squadron was killed while attempting a crash landing near Ipswich on the way home. His position was fixed by Air Sea Rescue as over the city and two minutes later he crashed a few miles north of Ipswich. He had reported that his engine was cutting out and it apparently failed altogether."*

I have always felt some guilt about this and think that there should have been something I could have done to prevent this useless and untimely death. Ken was 20 years old.

A couple of days later I was given another P-51D (KI B) SN: 44-12345 and immediately had my fiancé's name, "JOSEPHINE" emblazoned on the side of my canopy. I think I put her there because that was the closest, I could get her to me.

## LAST MISSION

On 10 April 1945 airfields throughout England were launching some 1300 B-17s and B-24s against targets in Germany. Targets included aircraft factories, ordinance depots and Me-262 bases in the Oranienburg, Berlin, Brandenburg-Briest and Magdeburg areas. The bombers were being escorted by 843 Mustangs (P-51s) and 62 Thunderbolts (P-47s). The 20<sup>th</sup> Fighter Groups assignment was to escort some 430 B-17s from the 1<sup>st</sup> Air Division whose targets were in the Oranienburg area. The 1<sup>st</sup> Air Division bombers were joined by 31 B-17s from the 398<sup>th</sup> Bomb Group led by Lt. Col. E. B. Daily. The bombers were all assembled and headed toward Germany and their targets at Oranienburg by 1205. An hour and 35 minutes later at 1341 the fighters of the 20<sup>th</sup> Fighter Group rendezvoused with their bombers over Osnabruck. One of Germany's top Aces with 206 confirmed aerial victories, Oberleutnant Walter Schuck, was Commander of 3/JG7; Me-262 turbojets operating out of Oranienburg. Through radio monitoring the Germans knew about this build up even before the bombers took off. At about the same time as the bombers left the English coast Walter Schuck was instructed to put his seven Me-262 pilots on cockpit alert.

The entire 1<sup>st</sup> Air Division was heading toward his airfield at Oranienburg along with about 290 P51s providing escort along with about 290 P51s providing escort. The whole airspace over Germany was dominated by Allied air. The bulk of the Luftwaffe had been diverted to the Eastern front to counteract the advancing Russians. About all that was left to defend Germany from the massive bombing attacks were a handful of Me-262s. In contrast to most of the other fifty-five Me 262s which scrambled against the American bombers, Schuck managed to hold his seven jet fighters together as they shot higher and higher into the blue sky from Oranienburg. Ground control guided them against a large mass of heavy bombers which approached Oranienburg from the northwest at an altitude of 25,000 feet. Schuck managed to evade the Mustangs which criss-crossed the sky and made a wide turn which placed him and his compatriots behind the mass of bombers. Then he attacked! Walter Schuck remembered the ruins in Hamburg when the nearest B-17 grew rapidly in size in front of his windscreen. He pressed the firing button. The 30mm cannons hammered, and in the next moment the whole giant tailfin of the bomber was dissolved by the exploding shells. Below, explosions and black billowing smoke showed that the bombs were falling over Oranienburg's aerodrome. Schuck had to pull up to avoid a collision as his Me-262 raced through the bomber formation. With his compatriots still in tow, Schuck aimed at the wing of a bomber in another formation. A quick burst of fire, and as Schuck pulled up to avoid a collision, he caught a glimpse of the B-17 going down in flames. It was the 303<sup>rd</sup> BG's B-17G Serial No. 44-8427, Call code "VK-E". It had been baptised Henn's Revenge in honour of the tail gunner Sergeant Thomas Henn – who had been severely injured by AAA shrapnel in January 1945. The pilot, 1/Lt Robert "Boss" Murray, was piloting the "ship" on its 22<sup>nd</sup> combat mission when 30mm shells slammed into the two right engines. *The Mission Narrative stated:*

*"An unexpected attack by six to eight ME-262s was encountered just after departing the target. 303<sup>rd</sup> gunners claimed two destroyed. Henn's Revenge was hit by the attacking Me-262s coming in on the tail. It burst into flames between the #3 and #4 engines, held course for a few seconds, peeled up, slid over and down to the right, through the formation, apparently out of control. Henn's Revenge exploded at 2,000 feet and broke up into two main parts and crashed in the small Gross Glasaow Lake between Gross Schonebeck and Liebenwalde 20 km northeast of the target Oranienburg and about 28 km north-northwest of Berlin. A wing and engines fell in the upper part of the lake and the tail and part of the fuselage came down in the lower part of the lake. The wreckage could be seen 50 to 150 feet from the shore."*

Seven of the crew members were immediately killed: Murray and his co-pilot 2/Lt Lawrence L. Fries, the navigator F/O Harold S. Smith, the Spot Jammer Sgt Gerald V. Atkinson, T/Sgt Theodore A. Bates, Sgt Nicholas Rodock, and turret gunner Sgt Robert P. Rennie. Staff Sergeant Vito J. Brunale and T/Sgt Carl O. Hammarlund managed to bail out, but only the former would survive. Hammarlund was shot to death by his German captors. As Schuck pulled up to avoid a collision, his Me 262 raced through the bomber formation. Sergeant Alan Morton, in the top turret of another B-17, froze when he saw the Me 262. "Me 262 at 5 o'clock, closing fast!" Morton yelled through the intercom as he flipped "On" "All" gun switches. Precisely at that same instant the entire Bomb Group formation was racked up hard left on its side turning off the target; desperately trying to slow down and slip behind them was this Me 262. Meanwhile, there was no way that Morton could react and turn his turret guns around on him. Finally, the Me 262 ended up sitting on the right-wing tip of Morton's B-17. The German and the American made eye contact for a full second, just 50 feet apart. Then the Me 262 increased speed and attacked another section of the bomber stream. Schuck and his Group

closed in on another formation of B-17s. Again, he aimed at the engines when he opened fire at one of the bombers. The impact of the 30mm cannons was terrible. The giant bomber immediately slopped over and went down. On the next attack 30mm cannons immediately set the bomber burning and then one of the wings was torn off, making this his fourth kill in succession.

2/Lt James W. McAfee's B-17 of 398<sup>th</sup> BG was only seconds away from the drop point, and already had the bomb bays open, when the Me 262s attacked. The 30mm cannon shells hit from astern, blew the tailfin apart, shredded the waist gunner Sgt Felix H Tichenor and tore an arm off the ball turret gunner Sgt Haskell Boyes. Staff Sergeant Frank E. Lewis remembers that he got a sight of "the horrible scene" where the waist gunner had been massacred by the cannon shells before he himself got out through the entrance hatch. Three other crew members managed to get out. The tail gunner Max W. Paxton came down safely in his parachute but was killed by German civilians. The whole airspace over Germany was dominated by Allied air. The bulk of the Luftwaffe had been diverted to the Eastern front to counteract the advancing Russians. About all that was left to defend Germany from the massive bombing attacks were a handful of Me-262s. ground. The pilot 2/Lt McAfee, his co-pilot 2/Lt Donald J. Jones, and Flight Engineer T/Sgt Arthur J. Roit went down with the plane and were killed on impact. Staff Sergeant Lewis and T/Sgt Paul Krup were luckier. After bailing out, they were captured by German troops.

Below, explosions and black billowing smoke showed that the bombs were falling over Oranienburg's aerodrome. Schuck had to pull up to avoid a collision as his Me-262 raced through the bomber formation. With his compatriots still in tow, Schuck aimed at the wing of a bomber in another formation. A quick burst of fire, and as Schuck pulled up to avoid a collision, he caught a glimpse of the B-17 going down in flames. It was the 303<sup>rd</sup> BG's B-17G Serial No. 44-8427, Call code "VK-E". It had been baptised Henn's Revenge in honour of the tail gunner Sergeant Thomas Henn – who had been severely injured by AAA shrapnel in January 1945. The pilot, 1/Lt Robert "Boss" Murray, was piloting the "ship" on its 22<sup>nd</sup> combat mission when 30mm shells slammed into the two right engines. The impact of Schuck's ravaging among the heavy bombers was devastating. In a short while four B-17s were blown out of the sky by Walter Schuck and one of his pilots destroyed a fifth during the same pass. Schuck now had accumulated 206 aerial victories!

This was my 49<sup>th</sup> mission and as it turned out, my last. The 55<sup>th</sup> Fighter Squadron had B Group with 24 "Mustangs" led by Capt. Riemensnider. I was in Black Flight with Capt. Cosgriff in the lead, Lt. Decker, number 2, Capt. Tracy "Dick" number 3 and me in the number 4 position. We took off at 1150 and rendezvoused with the bombers at 1341 over Osnabruck. All was going well to this point. The bombers visually bombed their targets at Oranienburg at 1438 with excellent results. Then all hell broke loose. A swarm of Me-262s came barreling at us. I had visually locked onto a Me-262 slicing through the formation I was escorting. I saw Schuck's cannon fire blow up his third B-17, then on to his fourth B-17, starting it afire. By this time, I had rolled over and started down at him. I had about a 5000 foot altitude advantage and with throttle wide open I was closing on him fast. As he came off his fourth kill, I pulled into his 6 o'clock position and let my .50 caliber machine guns blaze away. I got some good hits on his left wing /engine and saw some smoke. He went into a rolling turn to the right with me in hot pursuit and Tracy close behind. The jet headed down and as I lost my speed advantage; he pulled out of range disappearing into the low clouds.

Walter Schuck tells of how this mission ended for him:

*"Just when I had shot down the fourth bomber, I was attacked from the astern by a Mustang which came in from above. I noticed some hits in the left wing and turned to the right in a shallow dive with the Mustang pursuing me. I passed Berlin and after a while the left engine started to emit smoke. I then entered a low cloud bank and as I turned my head, I could see that I had managed to get away from the Mustang. With the engine starting to disintegrate I decided to bail out. My first attempt to get out failed. The air current was too strong. I pulled the stick and climbed from 1,500 metres to 1,800 metres. Then I grabbed the handle with both hands and with one foot I kicked the stick to one corner of the cockpit. The result was that the Me 262 tipped its nose and I was flung out of the cabin. Floating in the airspace, I entered a flat spin. As I rotated, my right arm extended in 90 degrees from the body, and the G forces were too strong to permit me to pull it back. Only by grabbing the sleeve of my leather jacket with my left hand was I able to pull back my right arm, so that I could pull the handle which enveloped the parachute. In the meantime, I had descended to only around 500 metres altitude. The jerk when the parachute unfolded above my head came only a few metres above the ground. Looking down I could see a field with a barbed wire fence which came closer and closer. Desperately, I kicked in the air and pulled the strings of the parachute. The parachute tipped over and I barely dived over the barbed wire. I flung my feet forward and violently hit the ground, spraining both ankles. Although I was in a state of shock, I quickly pulled the parachute*

*together. I had heard that the American fighter pilots would come down to strafe bailed out pilots, aiming at their white parachutes. Then I just lay down."*

I lost sight of the Me 262 as it entered the clouds and I then looked over my left wing and saw a German airfield loaded with all types of aircraft. Having lost visual contact with the Me 262 I figured that further pursuit would be fruitless, however, I did have in my sights lots of targets at the airfield, so I called to "Dick", "do you see what I see"? "Dick responded "yes", let's go"! So we descended to "cutting grass" level to gain some surprise. We did achieve surprise and our first strafing pass was a breeze with each of us destroying two aircraft. By the time we came around for a second pass, airfield defenses were up and deadly. On the second strafing pass we each destroyed another aircraft. On the third pass Tracy got hit just after destroying his fourth enemy aircraft. Tracy got a 20mm up the rear through the cockpit and into the engine. I saw a puff of smoke, engine fire, Tracy out, chute deployed and into a river. This all occurred in a matter of a few seconds at about 300 feet as "Dick" was coming off target. Being by myself, all the enemy guns were directed at me. On my fourth pass I destroyed a Ju 88 and set one of the 3 hangers afire. I also picked up a hit in the right wing, but it did not affect "Josephine's" performance. With all those aircraft still left I just couldn't pull myself away and decided to make one more pass. As I came in low and fast, I zeroed in on a 4 engine Fw 200 "Condor". My six .50 calibers raked the huge bird and it burst into a mass of flames. As I was coming in for the kill on the "Condor", I felt a thud and as I pulled off the target, I felt another thud and saw a flash in my engine. I continued my climb off target and was able to make it up to about 10,000 feet. By then the engine had overheated and was smoking. I started manipulating throttle, mixture and prop controls to get the best I could out of the engine at that time, I knew that "Josephine" had it and that I needed to decide which way to go; East toward the Russians or West toward the Americans? While deciding I called Captain Riemensnider, my Group leader and reported Tracy and my situation, claimed 4 e/a destroyed for Tracy as well my score of 5. As I was leaving the target area I could see a gaggle of P-51s headed toward the airfield to finish what Tracy and I had started. I decided to head West. We had been briefed that American forces were fighting in the Magdeburg area and figured they were less than 100 miles away.

### **CAPTURE/POW**

When I was about 15 miles from Magdeburg, I was down to about 1,000 feet and unstrapped to bail then I saw an Fw-190 coming into my 3 o'clock position. He was firing his guns and a volley of rockets and fortunately missed. By this time, I was descending below 500 feet, the aircraft was burning, and I was unable to keep it flying. I thought, "crap this is too low to bail out" and started looking for a place to belly it in, then I realized I was unstrapped and would kill myself bellying it, so I went over the side at about 300 feet. I went out the left side of the cockpit; I hit my right knee on the horizontal stabilizer; pulled the rip cord, chute opened, and I swung once and hit the ground – hard. After landing I noticed I had burns on my arms and legs and had hurt my ankles and back on impact. I knew I had to get up and survey the situation. I found myself in the middle of acres of farmland with nowhere to hide or take cover. I could immediately see the situation was hopeless and there was no way I was going to be able to avoid capture. In the distance I saw a crowd of about 10 people coming toward me. As the civilians came closer, I could see that they were hell bent on doing me in. At the same time, they reached me, a Luftwaffe sergeant stationed in the area came roaring up on his motorcycle, pulled out his gun and protected me. The sergeant agreed to let town officials bring me into town for questioning. As we arrived in town a lot of people, including children were crowding around to look. I was brought to an official looking house and placed in a room with five or six older men. One was the Burgermeister, and another was in a police uniform. His left hand was artificial, made of black leather. He pulled out his Lugar and wanted to shoot me on the spot. They questioned me and emptied the many pockets of my flight suit. I always carried a Rosary with me and upon seeing it they were astonished. How could this murderer of women and children be a Catholic? The questioning started to get rough, and an angry crowd was gathering outside so the Luftwaffe sergeant said that was enough questioning. He took me out of the building, put me on his motorcycle and headed toward the airfield he was stationed at. At the airfield I was put in a very small cell and went through about 6 hours of intense interrogation. Every night we had to go to the bomb shelter because of RAF night bombing raids. I felt very uncomfortable in the confined space of the bomb shelter with all the Germans staring at me. While at the airfield my jailor, a Luftwaffe sergeant, could speak a little English and I could speak a little German, so we were able to communicate quite well. He told me about the testing that was done there on new types of aircraft and how he thought the war was about over. His main concern was that I would give him a note saying he treated me fairly and I did. On my third day at the airfield, I was taken to the rail station where I was loaded in a boxcar that took me to Stalag 11. While waiting to be loaded a German Railroad employee told me about President Roosevelt's death the day before and gave me a shot of schnapps – wow! When I arrived at Stalag 11 the camp was practically empty. It had been going through evacuation because of advancing Allied Forces. I stayed there overnight and found out there were about 100 British enlisted troops still there. The next morning, we were all roused and started on a long march to the east. We were on a forced march for about ten days during which we were constantly under attack by patrolling Allied fighter aircraft. Of course, they did not know we were POW's. Our German guards were really ticked off at the fact that we had Red Cross parcels to sustain us, and they had black bread and water. They were usually able to get some substantial food when we spent the night at German



farms sleeping in the barn. We, too, were able to scrounge an egg or two. German Army vehicles were almost at a standstill. They were unable to maneuver because the roads were completely clogged by thousands of refugees on bikes, walking, pulling wagons etc., etc. It was complete pandemonium with thousands going east and thousands going west. German army personnel on motorcycles were scooting up and down the roads trying to establish some semblance of order but it was completely hopeless. We ended up at a POW camp at Luckenwalde. It was called Stalag 3 and was near Berlin. Most of the prisoners were Russian and Scandinavian and to my great surprise, Capt. Tracy and the B-17 crew members all shot down on 10 April. They all arrived at the camp shortly after being shot down. Tracy told me he landed in river, was OK, and remained there the entire time we were strafing the airfield. The Germans were taking pot shots at him while he was in the river, and he had to do a lot of maneuvering to avoid being hit. He said that on his last pass he was hit from the rear with a 20mm cannon shell that passed through the cockpit burning the seam of his flight suit and continued into the engine. He was wearing the proof of the story. After the Group left the airfield, they pulled him out and brought him to a building nearby. He was leaning on the building when, to his utter amazement here comes Herman Goring, mad as hell, yelling and cursing, pulling out his Luger, which he pointed at Tracy several times while calling him all sorts of names. Finally, they took 'Dick' away and brought him to Tempelhof Airport in Berlin. There he joined up with Sgts. Frank E. Lewis and Paul Krupp both of whom were crew on B-17s shot down on 10 April 1945. Sergeants Lewis and Krupp were crew on 2<sup>nd</sup> Lt. James W. McAfee's B-17 of the 398<sup>th</sup> BG. They were only seconds away from the drop point, and already had the bomb bays open, when a Me- 262 attacked. The 30mm cannon shells hit from astern, blew the tailfin apart, shredded the waist gunner Sgt. Felix H. Tichenor and tore an arm off the ball turret gunner, Sgt Haskell Boyes. Staff Sgt. Frank E. Lewis remembers that he got a sight of "the horrible scene" where the waist gunner had been massacred by the cannon shells before he himself got out through the entrance hatch. Three other crew members managed to get out. The tail gunner Max W. Paxton came down safely in his parachute but was killed by German civilians on the ground. The pilot 2<sup>nd</sup> Lt. McAfee, his co-pilot 2<sup>nd</sup> Lt. Donald J. Jones, and Flight Engineer Arthur J. Roit went down with the plane and were killed on impact. Staff Sgt. Lewis and T/Sgt Paul Krupp were lucky – after bailing out they were captured by German troops, who protected them from civilians. Lewis continues the story himself:

*"I was protected by three German soldiers from being killed by the civilians. They saved my life. Two of them took me into Berlin and Tempelhof airdrome. I was barefooted. My boots had slipped off when my chute opened, and I was left with my felt-electric socks which I quickly tore up running from the German civilians. I ended up cutting my feet badly and had to hobble around like I was walking on hot coals. The idea of me walking that way on the streets of Berlin and the subways must have looked insane. Two things struck me about Berlin - the utter destruction we had wrought on the city from our bombings, and going below to the subways, which were brightly lit and spotlessly clean. The contrast was surreal. In the subway, the Germans, mostly women, were hollering at me. 'Swine', I recognised, and words which I finally realised meant that I was a terror flier and a 'Chicago gangster'.*

*"At Tempelhof airdrome I was alone for several days before Captain Tracy, a P-51 pilot, showed up." The next day Tracy and I were put on a train and made the short trip to Stalag III at Luckenwalde. The prisoners there were mostly Russian and Scandinavian; there were no more than a handful of Americans, including SSgt Frank Lewis, TSgt Paul Krupp Lt. Stewart, Capt. Tracy, and Lt. Peterburs. About a week after Peterburs' arrival, the group, managed to escape. We joined a Soviet tank unit and spent the last days of the war fighting the Germans on the ground. About 3 days into the journey the group got separated and Peterburs was the only one that remained with the Russians."*

NOTE : Almost 60 years after their escape Peterburs and Lewis were reunited through the efforts of a German researcher from Oranienburg and remained close friends. Lewis told Peterburs that a couple of days after joining the Russians a US Army General visited the Russians in a helicopter and after the visit brought the four of them back with him in the "Chopper" and eventually returned them to their units. Peterburs had absolutely no knowledge of this and often wondered what happened to the rest of the group.

Tracy, Lewis, and Krupp (who could speak fluent Russian) had been planning an "escape" prior to my arrival. I went along with it. The plan was to go under the fence, security was practically non-existent, and work our way toward the Russians. Within about five miles we were able to join a Russian tank unit that was fighting its way west and north. The first town we arrived at after leaving Luckenwalde was Juterbug. It was a nice little town with some fine apartment complexes. I went with about 10 Russian soldiers into one of the apartments. It was furnished nice, and the Russians were making a big fuss about it. After a bit one of them cleared us all from the room, went to its center and let loose with his machine gun destroying everything in sight while laughing

his head off. I thought it weird but said nothing. After leaving Juterbug we headed north toward Wittenberg on the Elbe. We were preceded by Stromovick fighter planes doing close air support for the advancing Russian force. There were some fierce battles and a couple minor skirmishes we were involved in. Hundreds of dead German soldiers were lying where they fell on both sides of our column. The death and destruction in ground warfare was a real revelation to this "flyboy." The German civilians were terrified of the Russians and as soon as they discovered there were Americans in the group, they sought us out. They wanted us to stay in their homes and/or let them stay with us. A middle aged lady came up to me with her two beautiful daughters and begged me to stay with them. I said no but I did stay at their house and that protected them from rape and pillage for that night anyway. The Germans kept asking us why we were fighting with the Russian – didn't we know that we would be fighting them next? At one point during the journey, we stopped at a German farm. The Russians had slaughtered a cow, some poultry and a pig and were in the process of preparing a great feast. That evening we sat at a huge, improvised banquet table seating a couple a dozen people. We ate raw hamburger, steak, duck, pork, etc., etc, with lots of wine and vodka. There were continuous toasts before, during and after the meal. I had never consumed that much alcohol in my life nor have I since. There were Russian dances and singing and a real rough-house affair that was enjoyed by all. By the time we got to Wittenberg, the fighting was over. We were in open country by a bridge over the river Elbe when an American Infantry Patrol came across the river. They came over to make contact with the Russians and when they saw me they insisted that the Russians let me return with them, which they were reluctant to do. Anyway, I returned with the patrol to their headquarters at Halle, Germany. They were doing mop up operations, and I accompanied them on a couple of patrols. In a few days I took off on my own. After walking about five miles I came across a C-47 parked in an open grass field. The crew was picking up some ex-prisoners of the Germans. The prisoners were in white and black striped uniform and were emaciated – barely able to stand. They were going to Paris, and I thought, what's better than that. The flight crew agreed to take me along. When we arrived in Paris I was stamped, deloused, and put under official control. Also got some temporary clothes (my flight suit was a bit ripe by then) and some spending money. However, my wondering days were over.

I spent about three days in Paris then went to La Harve and Camp Lucky Strike, a POW redistribution center. Here I got debriefed and notifications were made to relatives and units of my return to duty. I was also provided with a decent uniform and some back pay. While at camp I bumped into Bill McGee who went down a couple of months before I did. I brought Bill up to date on what went on in the Squadron from the time he went down. Bill and I decided to try to get back to the 55th. There was an airfield near Le Havre, and we went by to see what was available. We were able to hop a ride on a B17 to England and Bill and I returned to our unit the 55th Sq. at Kings Cliff, unfortunately we were unable to stay because of our POW status. All good things come to an end so after a few days we headed back to London to see if we could hop a ride back to La Harve. After a couple of days in London Bill and I made it back to Camp Lucky Strike. I barely walked into the Camp, and they grabbed me threw me into a jeep and headed toward the port. My unit had already pulled out and was boarding the ship. By the time we reached the port the ship had already pulled out. They put me into a motorboat and brought me to the ship where they threw out a ladder and I climbed aboard. Things went so fast I didn't know what happened. The ship I was on was part of the last convoy to leave the European theater. For the most part the passengers were ex-POWs and were anxious to get home. It took eight days to reach New York arriving on 1 June 1945.

From 12 December 1944 to 10 April 1945, he flew 49 Combat Missions accumulating 267 Combat Hours destroying 5 enemy aircraft on the ground, 1 Me 262 jet in the air, damaging 1 FW 190 in the air as well as many ground and rail targets. He received the following WWII medals :Distinguished Flying Cross, Purple Heart, Air Medal with 5 Oak Leaves, Prisoner of War Medal, European Theater with 3 Battle Stars, American Campaign, and WW II Victory Medals.

### **HOME AND MARRIAGE**

From New York I went to Fort Sheridan, Illinois by train for processing. That took a couple of days then they gave me a 60 day rest and recuperation leave and I headed for Milwaukee, Josephine, marriage, and honeymoon. I got to Milwaukee on the 5<sup>th</sup> of June and the next week was taken up with a family reunion. We were married at Holy Assumption Catholic Church on 13 June 1945. Since I was not 21 years old, I had to get my mother's legal permission. We spent our first night at the Pfister Hotel in downtown Milwaukee. My brother George was my best man and he and his wife Helen drove us to Wisconsin Dells, our honeymoon location. I had been given a 60 day Rest and Recuperation leave that was extended to 90 days when the war ended in August. By mid-August we were starting to get a little anxious as to where and what my next duty assignment would be. Although Jo had agreed with my career choice, she had no idea of what was in store for a military wife and, in fact, neither did I. As it turned out we had a very rewarding 36+ years of active duty. I flew 76 missions in the F51D during the Korean war and served in Vietnam during Tet. We raised a family of four sons, and we retired in 1979 settling in Colorado Springs, Colorado.

### **Ep-i-logue**

In March 2004, the Swedish author Christer Bergstrom contacted me and wanted me to furnish him an account of my 49<sup>th</sup> mission on 10 April 1945. He was in the process of writing Walter Schuck's biography and wanted to compare it with Walter's account of events that day. After he read my account, he contacted me and said that both he and Walter are 100 percent sure that it was I who caused the damage to Walter's Me-262 resulting in his bail-out. I asked how they could be so certain. Christer wrote:

*"After the war, many attempts were made to identify the American fighter pilot who hit Schuck's Me-262 with machine gun fire. Several suggestions are based on the erroneous assumption that Schuck engaged the B-17's near Magdeburg, over eighty miles southwest of Oranienburg. However, it is clear that on this day, Schuck and his 3/JG7 operated from Oranienburg, and they engaged the 1<sup>st</sup> Air Division bombers that attacked Oranienburg."*

*"American fighter pilots claimed to have shot down no less than twenty Me-262s on this day - including three by pilots of the 20th FG. However, while none of these could apply to Schuck's aircraft, no other American fighter pilot than Peterburs appears to come into question for having shot down Schuck." "Peterburs' account, which he wrote without knowing anything about Walter Schuck, clearly describes the action of Walter Schuck. No other Me 262 pilot shot down several B-17s in a row over Oranienberg. The reason why no researcher previously has been able to identify Peterburs as the man who shot down Schuck is easily explained. Peterburs never reported that he shot down or even damaged a Me-262! In fact, it took almost sixty years before Peterburs even found out that he had shot down Walter Schuck."*

On the 18<sup>th</sup> of May 2005 Walter Schuck and Joe Peterburs met for the first time, in person, at Vista, California and became fast friends; enjoying each other's company at events in the US, Germany and England for the 10 years before Walter died in 2015.

Joseph A. Peterburs, Colonel, USAF  
Retired