

STICHTING WINGS TO VICTORY

AIRWAR MUSEUM / AIRMEN MEMORIAL ZEELAND



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Dear Cousin

Ralph Miller recalls dramatic story of ill-fated Lady Liberty, a Flying Fortress shot down in flames over Holland as he piloted her 13 th. mission.

Allentown, Pa. November 14, 1943

Dear Cousin Ralph:

We were all so happy to learn that you were alive and well, God has certainly been with you.

We are hoping and praying that this terrible war will not go on much longer.

Everything is pretty much the same at home. By the way, did you know that the old Crabapple tree is dead? It's a shame. However, the New Mexico peach is alive and hearty. I know you remember little Doanld McGowan, he was drowned last August 19, while playing with his toy airplane. His body washed ashore.

Ralph, you will recall that I had a collection of ten silver coins which I treasured very much. These coins were misplaced and we can account for only four of them. I thought you might know something of the missing ones, if so, please try to write me of them. We are most anxious.

May God bless you and keep you.

Your loving cousins Mary and Mary Ellen.

I received this letter in March 1944, a letter that I answered immediately, as there were anxious people awaiting my reply. But before you can understand it or reply, I must tell you a true story. This story in some respects is similar to a few other wartime stories of miracle and tragedy that were never publicly told as the reporters, foreign correspondents and public relation officers were not there to know of them.

It began at Boise in January 1943, when my bomber crew was assigned to me, three officers (all 2nd.lieutenants) and six enlisted men (all sergeants). From this starting point we were to go through three months of intensive combat phase training, then on to combat against Germany.

My officers were lieutenants John Meade (co-pilot), Donald J.McGowan (navigator) and Joseph McGinley (bombardier). Each officer was fresh from training school, having graduated just the previous month. I also was pretty fresh myself as it had been less than 10 months since I had first stepped into an airplane of any kind. Now I was 1st.pilot and plane commander of a 4-engined B-17, with a crew of my own.

Meade, McGinley, McGowan and Miller – it is easy to see that there wasn't much time in those days to any personalities before placing them together on a crew but just threw the dart at the alphabetical roster, but after all, these were critical times and the Luftwaffe was still going strong.

Sergeants Bynum Crabtree (mechanic gunner), Fulton F. John (radioman-gunner), Edgar G.Lott (waist gunner), B. Johnson, later replaced by Bill Crough (waist gunner), All Miller (belly turret gunner) and Emil Radosevich or Rudy or Jones for short (tail gunner) were the rest of the crew.

I was never hard with my officers and men. From the beginning, I had repeatedly made only one little remark to them: I don't want to be an iron pants; let's do what's right and do what we are told; let's be friends. We simply will carry out the missions without any unnecessary heroism and then go home.

I know this has the markings of a bad commander and many times it will not work, but these were good men who respected and appreciated friendship and tolerance towards each other and I never had to ask for to respect the other's position.

We adapted ourselves very quickly to each other, flying day and night in bitter cold, blackest black and rough turbulent Rocky Mountain air. Together we had ground school, gunnery practice, skeet, lectures and physical training. We were also together to eat and sleep and to spend many wonderful off-duty hours in town. Our adaptations to each other soon turned into solid friendships and from friendships to one of the strongest bonds that I have seen between men.

After Boise there was Casper and more of the same, 20 below zero, 10 foot snowdrifts and 45 m.p.h. winds but there were also warm hotels, beautiful night clubs and bars for our pleasure when we were on pass. Days and nights of this work and play made the weeks and as spring was barely sticking her head over the peaks of the Rockies, off we went to wind-blown, sand-blasted Smoky Hill (Kansas).

Here we were to take final proficiency tests, get our new B-17 and then wing our merry selves across the North Atlantic to England and combat.

Combat – This was a word that had been on our lips for months. We had laughed and joked about it, now at this initial jumping-off place it hardly seemed a reality but it certainly did not stop our fun.

Each now experienced opened a door to a wealth of adventure for this little group that seemed to have a remarkable zest for living, gaiety and comradeship, a zest that made these adventures more adventurous.

There was the first leg to Presque Isle (Maine), then briefings and preparations for the second, third and fourth to Labrador, Greenland, Iceland and Scotland. These gave us the normal fears of the things that we would soon be doing, but we never failed to enjoy the moment, whether in Greenland, Scotland or Labrador. Our eagerness might compare with that enjoyed by a group of friends on a long vacation together, and we reached the pinnacle of those experiences on our first trip into London.

On we went, a few weeks just outside London attending lectures on the newest combat tactics and then to our permanent group in the Midlands of England.

In May we were assigned to the 364th.Squadron, 305th. Bomb Group at Chelveston. Many are familiar with the type of missions that we flew; high, cold and fearsome missions for everyone involved with the Flak, fighters, roaring machineguns and innumerable fighters and bombers going down in flames and pieces. We were getting better as each mission passed; all crew members were shooting straighter and I was flying better formation. Seven, eight, nine, ten, Paris, Norway, Kiel and Hanover, and we returned only twice with holes of battle in our ship. We were approaching a point from where we could see the promised land of 25 completed, then finis and they would all be past and only memories.

August 19, 1943

All crew members were at their places in the ship waiting for the tower's instruction to taxi out for take-off, the target was Brussels. All morning we had waited and it was now early afternoon. Weather ships had been reporting Brussels covered with clouds. We might have to take our secondary target, an airfield on the coast of Flushing. Meade and I were chatting in the pilot seats when the order came to taxi.

John, I certainly am happy to have this milk-run for the 13th. mission, I said, it's so soothing to the nerves to have our fighters all the way, I don't mind the Flak if we don't have to look at those fighters!

John agreed but expressed his non-belief in superstition. Just two days before we had returned safely from one of the greatest air battles ever fought; the first twin raids on Schweinfurt and Regensburg.

All set, down the runway and throttling up to join the squadron in formation now seemed like old stuff, a new confidence had been born in us. Squadron joined with Group, Group with Wing and as Wing joined with other Wings we were high over England, 21,000 feet, heading straight for Brussels. What a rosy feeling it was to look out and see our own fighters dancing all around us and knowing that they would be there all the way. We did not expect to fire a single shot; they even sent a photographer along in the ship next to ours to get a picture of our bombs coming out.

Many ground officers of the Group that had been able to talk operations into a ride, had crowded into the planes as five of these and they would receive an Air Medal.

Flushing Island

Brussels was covered by clouds and we saw the Wing in front turning left toward Flushing Island. Boy, what a milk run, not an enemy fighter in sight! Then only a few minutes passed before we saw the bombs dropping from the Wings far in front. In hardly any time McGinley on intercom: bomb bay doors open! Moments later: I.P. two minutes to target. Then Rudy in the tail: Flak, two bursts six o'clock level. Then McGinley again: 30 seconds to target!

At this moment, over the roar of the engines and in spite of the fact that my steel helmet pressed hard against my earphones, I heard a thunderous explosion, I did not think of it for at the same moment the plane lurched upward and as automatic as formation flying can be I threw the wheel and stick forward, they were as limp as anybody's dish rag.

As I realized that I had no control, the ship flopped into a vertical dive. All engines sounded as if they were running away, the screams of the dive sounded like a mess of wild cats. I jerked the throttles back, nothing happened; I tried to hit the alarm bell, I couldn't move; the wheel and stick were pushing against me and the speed on the dive had me pasted to the seat like the paper on the wall.

Five, six, seven seconds stung there, helplessly watching the ground come up. What a shock to realize that you had just had it, not just watching someone else as it had been before. What a ghastly, sickening feeling to have time to realize that you would be dead in a few seconds. Then all thoughts stopped.

I opened my eyes with the sudden realization that I was alive. I couldn't believe it as I had a vivid picture on those last frightening seconds. I took time for the peaceful quiet to impress me and I realized that I was in a car with two Luftwaffe guards, an officer and a driver. My wet clothes, open parachute and half inflated life preserver were under my feet. I was dressed in a strange type fatigue suit and had heavy bandages on my head. I began to feel severe cuts there. My left ankle was sprained and there were wounds on my legs. What happened, how am I alive, where is the rest of my crew? It was to be a long time before I had the answers to all of these questions.

I asked for a cigarette and the officer obliged: Are you English, he asked. No, American, I said. Are you a pilot? Yes I answered. Are you a fighter or a bomber pilot, he enquired. I am not allowed to answer that, I said. He enquired further: What happened to your airplane? I would like to ask you the same thing. How did I get here? He smiled as if I was well aware of what had happened and said: Some people took you from the sea, you came in your parachute but you have been unconscious for a long time.

I can only estimate that it had been about six hours since I had known anything, as the long twilight of central Europe was now becoming dusky.

That night I was placed in a small clean jail cell, and I could think of nothing but What happened, how am I alive and what is the fate of the others?

The next morning as I was being led from my cell, there was Radosevich; he had been in the same jail. Rudy, I yelled, as I grabbed his hand and shook it, what happened to us ? Mastering the understatement, Rudy said: I was at my tail gun and heard the explosion of Flak. I looked toward the front of the ship and there was no front of the ship there, so I opened the escape door and bailed out.

I knew then what had happened. The third burst of Flak had exploded directly in our ship, cutting it in half.

Later in prison camp, where I was to spend nearly two years, I began to solve the second mystery! How am I alive? As other unfortunate crews arrived from my group, they told me of watching us “get it” and of the exceptional pictures of the ship going down in two pieces.

The photographer did not catch our bombs dropping that day but he photographed our Lady Liberty in pieces. Many Americans have seen the pictures; they were published nationally in 1944.

In talking with eye witnesses and studying these pictures, I am sure now that the speed of the dive caused the ship to desintegrate, throwing me through part of it. Miraculously something caught my chute, opening it, as also is the case of my half-inflated life preserver. The third mystery – What happened to the others? – stood for a long time. I had learned early that Sgt. Crabtree’s body had been recovered and at the war’s end, Rudy and I knew that we were the only survivors.

This is my reply to Cousin Mary and Mary Ellen (they were really sisters of Lt. McGinley). The coins were the crew members. The Crabapple was Lt. McGowan and the New Mexico peach was Rudy.

Stalag Luft III
Sagan Germany
March 20, 1944

Dear Cousin Mary and Mary Ellen:

Your letter arrived this week, the significance was clearly understood. I have had several letters from my mother asking of the coin collection. The reason I don’t know anything of the missing coins is, if you remember, the last time I handled them, I was in a sort of a stupor.

You might say I was unconscious at the time. It seemed as if I was just blown through the top of the house and didn’t know anything for several hours, but I really don’t have any coins here.

I was sorry to hear about little Don, I thought very highly of him. We are still doing about the same, reading, studying and cooking. Life gets pretty dull sometimes. The trees will be getting green again soon.

By the way, I knew of the old Crabapple tree all along, also of the New Mexico peach.

Mary, don’t give up completely on the lost coins, they were the finest of any collection in the world. I hope and pray that spring will bring some sunshine to you and others.

Sincerely, my love

Ralph

Ralph Miller died 29 January 1975