

CHAPTER III
SHOT DOWN & CAPTURED
[June 22, 1943]

We were awakened the next morning, June 22, 1943, at 0300 hours by an orderly from Grp. HQ., and told that briefing would be at 0500 hours. The Big One was really on.

After our combat breakfast of real fried eggs instead of the powdered type, we pedaled to Group Operations for briefing. Our target was a General Motors plant in Antwerp, Belgium. Only two Groups would participate in this raid, ours and the 384th. We would act as a diversion for a larger force that would hit a target in the Ruhr Valley at Huls, Germany. We would supposedly have a large escort of Spitfires to fight off the heavy concentration of enemy fighters that were expected. We would be flying at 28,000 feet. The ceiling for the B-17's was about 32,000. The fighters could go a little higher than this, but without pressured cabins, as they now have, the human body couldn't take any more than 32,000. The "bends" would develop, much the same as a deep sea diver experiences, only directly the opposite. In the air the internal body pressure is much greater than the outside pressure, while under water the outside pressure is much greater than the body pressure resulting in ruptured blood vessels and other nasty unhealthy things.

We took off at 0600 hours in a dense fog. At about 6,000 feet we broke through into the blue sky, and circled to rendezvous with the rest of our Group. This was a beautiful sight. The thick layer of snow white clouds beneath us and every two minutes a B-17 would suddenly pop through. After forming up, we started circling and climbing to reach the planned altitude. Here we would join up with the other Group and swing into our combat formation. After picking up our fighter escort we would be on our merry way to rain death and destruction on the unfortunates below. It was always very cold at this altitude, from 20 to 40 degrees below zero. Most of us wore the heavy sheepskin lined flying suits, although we did all have the electric suit which was very comfortable and warm. There was the risk that the electric system should be knocked out by flak or gremlins and you would find yourself in a pair of blue Long Johns. Pat Henry, the ball-turret gunner and Art Jones, the tail-gunner were the only ones of the crew that used this suit. The sheepskin was much too bulky in the turret, and very uncomfortable in the tail position. Our Group, being the latest arrival in England, drew the "Purple Heart Corner". We would undoubtedly catch more flak than the other Group, because we were in the tail-end and flying lower.

After forming, we waited for our escort of Spits. None showed,

so calling the base we were told that they would pick us up later over the Channel. At about mid-channel we test fired our guns to be sure that they were not froze up, and still no escort. In a few minutes the flak started bursting around us from the German gunboats in the Channel. Near misses would rock the aircraft around, making formation flying difficult. The Germans used 88 milimeter anti-aircraft guns, that were calculated to be the most versatile gun of the war. Soon the fighters appeared, flying above us as they should be but instead of pacing along with us, they pulled ahead. Suddenly we realized they were German ME-109's, instead of our Spitfire escort. These two planes were similar in silhouette, and from a distance were difficult to distinguish. There was no doubt who they were when they started peeling off and their wings lit up as they opened fire, diving and twisting through the formation of B-17's. I couldn't concentrate on shooting at them as I was watching for our target through the wispy clouds. The plane was jumping around from the flak and shaking and shivering as our twin .50's were fired. Finally the target appeared and after opening the bomb-bay doors we swung into the bomb-run. This was not like a practice run, bursts of flak kept appearing in the telescope, and the plane was bouncing around so that I had trouble just hanging on to the sight, let alone sighting in on the target. Finally I had the range and drift killed and the cross-hairs riding on the target, I could relax now. Laying my hand on the "close bomb-bay doors" switch, I waited for the bomb release point. Just as the red light went off to signal "Bombs Away", and before I could flip the close doors switch, there was a big explosion. Hot metal flew all around us and the plane went up trying to turn over. I was thrown away from the instrument panel and unable to close the bomb-bay doors. My face and right hand was stinging and burning from the hot flak that had peppered me. One eye felt like a hot baseball was stuck in it and I couldn't open it to see. It turned out to be a small piece of flak in the lower eye lid.

When the pilots got the plane under control again, we could see the formation disappearing in the distance. Some were trailing smoke and one was going down. Then the Luftwaffe hit us, one after the other. The flak had let up some, as they knew their fighters would move in for the kill. I tried to close the bomb-bay doors to reduce our drag, but nothing happened. The controls were dead. The 88 that got us must have come in the bomb-bay between the two strings of bombs and exploded just a split second after the bombs were away. A little sooner and we would have been blown all over the sky. Neither Griff nor I had snapped our chute packs onto the harness on our chests so unless we could sprout wings in a hurry we would have had a rapid descent to the ground. Makes me wonder just how many airmen died for not wearing their chutes all the time. Many, many planes blew up in mid-air, just as ours could easily have done. Two engines were on fire and the fighters continued to strafe us. The plane had lost so much power that we were just mushing almost straight down. Earl decided that it was useless to try to keep flying so gave the order to bail out. I found one chute pack and handed it back to Griff. Mine wasn't so easy to

find. It had dropped into a nest of oxygen bottles under the pilot compartment. By the time I had retrieved it, Griff had given up trying to open the nose escape hatch so was making his way to the bomb-bay to bail out. He was hit and knocked down but he said he could open his chute so Bill helped him up and out he went.

The nose escape hatch was rigged with the hinges toward the front of the plane so to open it in flight, one had to overcome the wind pressure. To use the emergency opening, the hinge pins were pulled out dropping the door open and the wind would blow it away. I tried to pull the pins as Griff had done, but they wouldn't budge. Starting to feel faint from lack of oxygen I didn't think I could make it to the bomb-bay so slid out feet first forcing the door open against the air stream. My shoulder strap got caught on the door handle and I couldn't slip it loose. I couldn't keep my legs together and was swinging from one side to the other just in front of the open bomb-bay doors. It was obvious that if I slipped loose while straddling one of the doors I would be neatly sliced into two bloody pieces. Finally I worked the strap loose and slid along the inside of the right hand door. Feeling that I was going to pass out, I immediately pulled the rip-cord and was hanging in space. I could see many chutes below me and watching the plane going down I saw one more open just seconds before the big flash of fire as "Iron Gut Gert", crashed and burned. Earl said later that he only swung once after his chute popped open and he hit the ground.

I realized that the war was over for me unless I could avoid capture. I must evade the Germans and get into Spain, a neutral country, thence on to England. One American with the assistance of the French under-ground had already accomplished this. He was promoted to Captain, awarded the Distinguished Service Cross, [the second highest medal], and toured the flying schools in the U.S. telling the trainees how to escape if shot down.

My day-dreams were rudely interrupted by a ME-109 bearing straight at me. I thought he was going to open fire, so started swinging to give him a moving target. Just before we collided, he pulled up and his prop wash nearly dumped my chute. He continued to circle me as I descended. At some point I started hearing voices shouting from below. Looking down I could see a small cluster of houses and a group of people watching my descent. I had no idea what country I was about to visit. Could be Germany, Belgium, Holland or France. I would assume it to be Germany and hostile until proved otherwise. Getting nearer the ground I could make out dikes around various fields so correctly guessed it to be Holland.

My ME-109 escort had given up following me which was an immense relief. I was going to land a short distance from the crowd with a field and dike between us, so started planning my escape. There were a few isolated trees here and there and a large canal with a thick growth of cat-tails along the sides. This would give me good temporary cover I thought. Experimenting with my chute cords, I found that I could steer it to some extent so tried to make my landing as far away from my audience as possible. Now I could see that I was going to land in what looked like a field of cabbage

with two or three small fields between myself and the crowd. One second I was high enough to see all over the country side, then glancing down I hit the ground. I found out later that my impact with this small chute was about the same as a thirty foot free-fall. If I tumbled as we were instructed to do, I would surely break my fool neck. If I landed flat footed I'd probably break both legs. So-----only having time for one more fleeting thought, I flung myself backwards. This was probably the best I could do because of the back pad of sponge rubber that would protect my back to some extent. Immediately I felt a flashing pain down my back and thought, "My God, I've broken my back and am paralyzed". There was no wind so my chute didn't drag me, it just crumpled around me. How long I lay there afraid to move I don't know. It seemed like ten minutes, but was more likely about two seconds. I found that I could move okay despite the pain. Rolling into an irrigation ditch about two feet deep, I pulled my parachute in with me and stuffed it into the mud in the bottom of the ditch. The farmer had very thoughtfully just mowed the ditch banks and long weeds lay across the top partially concealing me. Shedding my Mae West and sheep-skin flight clothes and boots I was down to a gray sweat shirt, sun-tan pants, brown oxfords with a buckle strap and OD gabardine flight suit. The OD cover-alls were a dead give-away so I crammed them into the mud also. I sure didn't look much like a Dutch farmer. Now to start my clever escape tactics. Opening the sealed escape packet from the back pad, I was slightly surprised to find a jungle machete, great for cutting a path through a jungle, but of little use in Europe. Equally as useful were some fish hooks, a small knife to clean the fish, a first aid kit with sulfa powder and ointment, a compass, a rubber water bag and purification pills and a sack of Benzadrine tablets. Another packet we carried in a cover-all pocket, yielded a stack of French francs, a map of France, three cigarettes with matches and a chocolate D-bar. This packet was issued prior to a mission and was supposed to relate to the country we would be flying over and possibly shot down in. Reading the instructions on the Bennies I found that I could take one every eight hours for pain, so I quickly took two of them. Almost immediately I felt better and the situation didn't look so hopeless. Crawling down the ditch being careful to not disturb the weeds above me, I started moving away from the people I could still hear talking. Voices seemed to be coming closer rapidly, so I lay still for a minute. Two people walked by me going back in the direction from which I had just came. Hurrying all that I could, I kept crawling, changing direction when ever another ditch intersected, until I came to a larger head ditch. It was too wide to have the mowed weed cover, but did have some bushes growing on the side next to the dike. I followed the bushes until I came to a tree that would conceal me as I crossed over the top of the dike into another field. So doing I found myself in a rye field with the grain about three feet tall. I weaved myself through this field, being very careful to not break any of the stalks and leaving no trail. I then crossed over another dike and another grain field which I crossed as before, and came to the large canal

I had seen from the air. I thought that I must be at least a half a mile from the village and the curiosity seekers, and relatively safe for the moment. Snuggling down into the heavy cat-tails, I felt like smoking a cigarette but knew that the smoke would give away, so I just lay back and relaxed. I dozed off to sleep or just passed out, I don't know which, and was awakened by the friend 109 looking for me again. He hadn't seen me yet, so I pulled some cat-tails over me just before he flew directly overhead. Another pass or two and he was far enough away that I could move around without being seen. Wading across the canal I started up the side of the dike. When high enough to see where I had been, my heart almost stopped. The little fields were swarming with black uniforms which I knew to be the dreaded SS troops. They were walking abreast about ten feet apart with their pistols drawn and I knew they were not hunting rabbits. Feeling faint and hurting badly, I swallowed a couple more Bennies. It was now late afternoon and I remembered looking at my watch after my chute opened. It was 0900 hours then, so I must have been out for several hours. I took off down the canal, running when I could. The bottom was sandy and I wasn't leaving any tracks nor stirring up any mud. After about an hour I felt it was safe to rest and besides I was approaching another village. The canal ran under a bridge that seemed to have a lot of traffic with bicycles and people walking. It was nearly dark so I decided to just sit tight until after dark. Again I went to sleep and awoke to see several German Army trucks with the SS troops in them crossing the bridge. It was dark now so I guessed that they had given up the search until morning. Hurting again, I swallowed two more Bennies and felt good enough to travel all night. I had noticed that the people wore wooden shoes, so right away I knew that I was in Holland.

S-2 [Intelligence Officer], had told us about the underground in the occupied countries. They instructed us not to try to find them as it might make them suspicious, but to let them find us. I thought, now how are they going to find me if I stay hidden all the time. Changing my tactics, I boldly stepped out onto the road and crossed the bridge. I thought I should try to follow in the southwesterly direction by my compass which would take me away from the German saturated coastal area, and would eventually bring me into France and then over the mountains into Spain. A group of men were sitting in front of a house talking as I approached. As I walked past them, the talking stopped so I knew they had seen me and probably recognized me for what I was. Well, they know I'm here, now it's their move I thought. Being very hungry, I couldn't force myself to go by one house. There were many loaves of delicious looking bread stacked in the window as if it might be for sale. Maybe if I act dumb, and offer to pay for a loaf with French francs, they will give me one. I tapped on the door and it was immediately opened as if they were expecting me. A middle aged woman and a teen-age girl greeted me. They were speaking Dutch but I caught the words "Yank fliieger", so I nodded yes. I was hustled into a back room and set at a table. They piled it high with sliced bread, butter and marmalade, and hot tea to wash it

down with. They were asking me something about Queen Wilhemina, whose picture was on the wall. I think she was in Canada at that time, having gone there when the Germans occupied Holland. The man checked my dog-tags and repeated my name over and over, as if trying to memorize it. That was just what he was doing, as I would find out later. I think now would be a good time to include some letters written by this family to Griff's folks regarding my visit. After the war Griffith's folks hired an investigator to try to find out what had happened to Griff, and he made contact with this family and others.

"Dear Family"

A few days ago I received your letter. I shall you as much as possible. There has been a flyer to my house. His tags showed his name was Hoover but we are sorry we could not speak with him. He did not understand us, and we not him, that was a pity. I gave him food and something to drink, but I do not know his address nor his home address and Army address. But I know one was killed by the Germans, one was drowned in the big water north of Ternheusen because his parachute did not open and two others were also in the water but they were picked up by a boat. The one who was killed was carried away but I do not know where they have bury him. I warned the police at Ternheusen and they have been here and they promised they will do everything to find out what ever they can about the master of the plane. You wrote about Mr. de Seyker, he has been here last winter for the investigation and he had a picture of the Lieutenant. I have a document [a distinction] because of the help offered to that flyer Hoover. That was indeed a dangerous thing to do because the Germans passed our house looking for him, but I was glad I could save him out of the hands of the enemy. The police at Taamslag will write you as soon as they know anything. I hope they can find out something so that you can send good tidings to his Mother. I cannot tell you more though I wish I could because I sympathize with his Mother, who is worrying about her only child. If I hear something I will inform you immediately.

With Greetings

K den Engelsman"

Mrs Griffith sent me a copy of this letter, so I put a parcel together of things I was sure would be scarce or non-existent in Holland at that time, and wrote the family Engelsman a letter. Here is the reply:

Miss Margaretha den
Engelsman
Kwahkel B 140
Taamslag Zeeland
Nederland

Dear Family,

A few days ago we did received your very nice packet. We were pleased to get it. You see it was a long time in coming, but the principle matter is that we received it at last. I thank you again. Raisons, we cannot buy it hear, end sugar, coffee and thea on coupons. With Easter we did eating raison bread. How are you all?

and how are your baby? I hope it is all oke. We are all well. It's a very long time ago since you live hear. I always do remember it. When you was at me home I could not speak the English language, but after it I have learn it, but it is not yet so good. But I hope you do understand me.

If you coming here you ask us to sleep you could well sleeping here but we were afraid for the German soldiers.

We had never more heard from you again. You can understanding that we were anxiously by to you. I hope you write us again, how your adventure after them is passed away and when you are going to your home at America. We have had from the President of the United States of America General Eisenhower, a document that you can reading on the next pagins.

I'm the sole daughter end I have no brother. I'm 22 years old and I have a lovely boy-friend, we will be married this year. But it's not so easy to buy our dressing and fit up a house. I will close now, and we thank you again fore anyting.

Many Greetins from all of here
Fam K der Englesman

I hope you will write me soon again
Margaretha

THE PRESIDENT
OF THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

Has directed me to express to KRYN DEN ENGELSMAN the gratitude and appreciation of the people of America for gallant service in assisting the escape of Allied soldiers from the enemy

Dwight D. Eisenhower
General of the Army, Commanding General United Forces, European Theater.

This letter to Mrs. Griffith after receiving a package with dress material for a wedding dress.

Miss Margaretha den
Engelsman
Kwakkal B 140
Taamslag Zeeland [Z2]
Nederland

Dear Famelie Griffith

I thank you very much for the nice dress received a few days ago. I can't tell you how delighted we were to receive it. It is very lovely of you, we thank you again. We did receive it in the morning and at evening I had made a dress for myself. I'm the daughter. am 22 years old. I have not brother end not sister. My Mother she would write you but she can't write the English language. My written is not so good. Just I did learn it of the English soldiers when she were in Holland. Every night she would be sitting by the fire. It was very cold in the barak. I hope you can understand me well. I can't write me English good, Did you not yet hear of your son. It's very sorry for you all. We have seen the

photo of your son from the policeman, He looks very lovely and very young. Was he married? We hope he come back again to you all, but when he is dead we hope he is to Jesus, then he is more happy than we all.

Please give Mr. Hoover our best regards, also we hope we receive a few lines of him someday. Also we hope your write a letter to us. The weather here has turned about nice now. I hope you are having some sunshine there too.

I will close now. I will thank you all again, for the lovely things you sent us. Best regards from Marjoy end my Mother end my Father.

The following are letters received by the Griffith's regarding the investigation of Griff's death.

CITY POLICE REPORT--of Terneuzen

Investigation of the missing Navigator

In connection with your appeal to start investigation concerning the missing navigator, Lt. Geo. Paul Griffith, AAF Serial #0738839, Bomb Group 381, Sqd. 532. I have the pleasure to acquaint your honor with the following results:

"It is known to me that on about June of 1943 in the neighborhood of Margarethahaven and Kampersheck villages belong to the town of Zaamslag, some parachutists had landed. Peter Dieleman, a farmer living in Zaamslag Kampersheck C 158 who related the following story".

"About June 1943 in the forenoon [the date I cannot remember] I saw, in the Eendracht Polder, two parachutes coming down. One of which was taken prisoner, by the on the watch German Patrol, while the other went into hiding in a field of rye. I would not be able to recognize that person because I was 220 yards away from their landing place. Neither can I tell what became of the escaped man, but I heard later that somewhere in the neighborhood of Zaamslag-veer. a parachutist had be noticed. On January 1946, I heard the following incident told me by different people. I investigated the rumour [it happened at Zaamslag-veer] Kryn Den Engelsman, an agriculturally labourer, living in Zaamslag Kwakkel B 140 who related the following".

"In the month of June 1943, in the evening around nine o'clock, I do not know the day precisely, arrived an unknown man at my door. I could not understand as he spoke only English. With gestures he explained to me so that he was hungry. After the man had eat and given something to drink, did he depart in the direction of Zaamslag. As I nor my family are able to speak English we were not able to comprehend him, but I had to do with a parachutist. In his possession was an identification card with the name L. Hoover. The picture you showed me I have to report, does not show any resemblance with the man who knocked at my door."

The investigation which I tried in every direction did not give me any results concerning the missing Griffith.

This report is now finished, closed and signed by me.

Terneuzen Jan 20, 1946

The Undersheriff
A de Teyter

Police Department of Terneuzen
No. 74

Reply to the letter of 14-1-46 on the inquiry about Lt. Griffith
To the Mayor of the city of Lochem;

I herby return to you the letter of Mrs. Geo. Griffith, dated
3-1-46, also a photo of her son Lt. Griffith, navigator of an
wrecked American bomber. May I notify you the ordered investigation
in this or surrounding communities has not shown any trace of the
bombing plane of Lt. Griffith.

Enclosed please find our report.

In the middle of June some American planes were shot down in
Hack and Philippine. But on the first of the crew had jumped from
the burning plane. One of them was taken prisoner by the Germans.
what became of the others is not known. In the second accident one
was killed, one wounded, and eight taken prisoner.

The other surrounding communities named Axel, Zaamslag, St.
Jansteen, Yzendyke, Burvliet and Clinge could not throw any light
on the affair, except the headwatchman, Van der Sande of Clinge,
who on occasion served the great cause by smuggling Allied flyers
over the border, although the name Griffith does not sound familiar
to him at all. He thought he might have aided someone of that crew
and that this man might be able to give some information. His
address is Lt. Lawrence Jance Kelly, 263 East Cote Lane, Santo
Usorow, London.

Lidd Jisec
Mr. C Hark

Dear Mrs. Someren

We have received your letter this morning. You ask if we would
write you back immediately. Yes, of course we will. We were glad
to hear from you. What a pity Mrs. Griffith didn't hear anything
about her son. I really feel much compassion for her. I also have
one child and try to imagine what it must be for her never to hear
about her son. I have a daughter who is 22 years old. As soon as
hear something about Mrs. G's son, I shall let you know. In regard
to the soldier who was killed by the Germans, I have not seen it
myself, but it is true because everyone here knows that the people
who live close to the Schelde where it happened were affected by
the fact that someone was entangled in his parachute and so close
to the bank of the river was killed by the Germans, people were so
angry when they saw that, but what could they do? Nothing at that
time could we. I havn't seen it myself because my house is about
twenty minutes walking from the Schelde. Who the soldier was I
don't know, but I went to that vicinity and ask for information.
They told me the dead body was removed by a farmer to Zaamslag. The
farmer had told that he was not a tall boy and he was rather
corpulant [fat]. I am very sorry I can't give any more information