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Featured Articles

From American Airman to Polish Infantryman 14

Memories from St. Lawrence Island, Alaska 21

The 387th Bomb Group in WWII 32



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From American Airman to Polish Infantryman

by **ALFRED R. LEA**

Dedicated to the Polish 34th Infantry Regiment, Armii Krajowej AK (Home Army)

On June 21, 1944, our B-17G bomber, *The BTO in the ETO* took part in a top secret mission code named *Frantic II*. As part of the 452nd Bomb Group, 45th Bombardment Wing, we were to join an armada of 2,500 planes in the first shuttle bombing raid from Eighth Air Force bases in England to the *Frantic Joe* bases at Poltava, Piryatin, and Mirgorod in the Soviet Union. The second leg was from the Soviet Union to Italy with the third leg from Italy to England, all three missions hitting continental targets.

As we approached Berlin, a force of 114 B-17 Flying Fortresses including ours, and 70 P-51 Mustangs peeled off from the huge formation and headed south to bomb the Ruhland Elsterwerda synthetic petroleum plants in Lower Silesia. Completing that, we turned eastward toward the Soviet Union. The Luftwaffe sent up a Heinkel He 177 Greif bomber to shadow our flight from a safe distance.

About 85 miles east of Warsaw, near Biala Podlaska, we were attacked by Messerschmitt Bf 109s. Our plane was in the "tail end Charlie" spot of the lower element. The *BTO* shuddered under the impact of machine gun and cannon fire coming from 10 o'clock low. The German curled under our left wing so close, the folds of his white scarf were discernible. He hit our left inboard engine, and the explosion blew out the inboard fuel tank. It hung down like a huge flap. We went into a flat spin with the airspeed approaching redline. The command, "Bail Out! Bail Out!" crackling over the intercom, accompanied by the blaring klaxon alarm horn, told us we weren't going home.

I pulled on the latch for the forward escape hatch as well as the hinge pins' emergency release, but the door was jammed. I lunged with my full weight and the door fell out and me part way with it. My chest pack chute hung up on the frame. If I had let go then I probably would have become entangled in the twin guns of the underside ball turret. The bombardier, Joe Baker, saw my plight and helped me climb back into the plane. A very brief discussion ensued as to who should go first, and I dived out head first. I tumbled head over heels, delaying my opening of the chute because we had been briefed that the Luftwaffe was shooting men hanging in their chutes. Extending my hands over my head and doubling up my legs stopped the gyrations. The earth was approaching rapidly. It was time to open the chute. I pulled the D ring and nothing happened! I glanced down and the pilot chute flaps were still closed. My guess—rotten bungee cords.

With eager hands, I clawed the flaps open and threw out the pilot chute. A tremendous jerk against the tight harness straps signaled the main chute opening, and not a moment too soon either. Upturned faces were becoming distinguishable and the sight of Wehrmacht trucks loaded with riflemen gave me thoughts that for me the war was over and the rest would be spent in a POW camp. A rough landing momentarily knocked the wind out of me, but I was rudely jolted to reality when a Bf 109 strafed the clearing where I had landed. Joe Baker landed some 300 yards away and we both rushed to a nearby forest where we buried our chutes.



EVASION AND REUNION

A nearby ripe grain field offered a vantage point from which to survey the very flat countryside. About a mile northeast was the small hamlet of Swory clustered around a modest church. In the nearby vicinity were three elderly couples reaping the rye with ancient crooked handled scythes.

The question of what to do next suddenly became clear as one of the elderly farmers started walking toward us with the scythe slung over his shoulder. He had a slight limp and looked straight ahead, never indicating that he saw us. As he got closer, it was obvious that the gait was a disguise, that he was nudging a bottle of water for us with his foot. We soon discovered the reason for his caution. There was a German patrol about a half mile distant. He left the water for us without missing a step.

As soon as the soldiers disappeared, we headed for a farmhouse across the road. As we neared the road, we heard a truck coming around a curve to the west. We ducked in a culvert under the road, just as the truck stopped right above us. We could hear the soldiers talking. Strangely, they did not even look at the culvert and soon drove away toward Swory.

We ran to the farmhouse as soon as the patrol was out of sight. A friendly elderly man answered our cautious knock. We conversed, using our escape kit language translating cards. He fed us rye bread, clabber milk and raw eggs from his very humble larder. Suddenly, eight men wearing German uniforms appeared from behind his small barn, armed with rifles and pistols. Five deployed as perimeter lookouts watching both Swory and the opposite direction. My anxiety was relieved when I noticed the red and white swallow-tailed pennants stitched on their collars — Poland's national colors.

Upon identifying us as Americans, they indicated that we should follow them into the nearby woods. Joe was hesitant until one of them retorted, "Niemcy" (Germans) and pointed at two truckloads of German troops heading our way from Swory.

Their commandant, clad in Polish Army field gear, was obviously a capable and take charge officer. He spoke to us very decisively, brandishing his German Schmeisser machine pistol. Although we didn't understand Polish, we knew the discussion was ended and we best head for the woods to the north.

As we raced towards the woods, we were joined by more combatants hiding in the grain field. Inside the fringe of the outer trees, we discovered a horse drawn wooden four wheeled cart carrying a heavy German water cooled machine gun tended by a driver, ammo loader and gunner.

A hurried march of half an hour brought us to several log cabins alongside the almost invisible path. Young girls brought us flowers bound with red and white ribbons. We were offered rye bread, milk and water to quench our thirst and a rousing cheer assured us that we were among friends.

We resumed the march and at about 6:00 p.m. came to a small village where we were reunited with five more members of our crew. We also learned that Bill Cabaniss, Arnold Shumate and Jack White had been captured by the Germans. Bill was severely wounded and someone jumped with Bill to pull his ripcord, and then fell free to open his own chute. We seven felt lucky to be picked up by the Poles.

Pilot Louis Hernandez was last to bail out after trying with all his strength to steady *BTO* while the others jumped. When the copilot, Tom Madden, jumped, that task became impossible. A sudden jerk of the steering yoke had pulled Louis' right arm out of its shoulder socket. He was in very severe pain.

As darkness settled, a civilian arrived. He was a doctor, and he walked five miles to help out. He looked about sixty-five. The Germans had confiscated his medical supplies long ago, but this did not affect his skills. He gave Louis a shot of vodka and a piece of wood to clench in his teeth. With that, he made him lie down with his head against a tree stump. He put one foot against his ear, the other in his armpit, and with superhuman strength popped the arm back into its socket with a sickening sound.

JOINING THE POLISH HOME ARMY

Around a visually shielded campfire, we learned who our Samaritans were. Serving as our interpreter was a sergeant by the pseudonym of Dreadnaught. Nobody ever used or let be known their given name in order to protect their family and friends from recrimination and/or physical reprisal. The unit was the 34th Infantry Regiment, Armii Krajowej (AK) Polish Home Army. Its commandant, code named Zenon, led about 200 men including 20 splendid cavalry troopers with unbelievably well trained mounts. Additionally, an invaluable asset, were three women combat nurses serving full time.

When they rescued Hernandez, the women carefully retrieved his parachute and Mae West (life jacket). We later discovered that they meticulously went over all these items, cutting yards of silk from which to make clothing and other necessities. They even unraveled the seam stitching to recover the thread for surgical sutures. Medical supplies were scarce, but their ingenuity was a constant source of amazement.



Horse-drawn heavy machine gun units of the 34th Infantry Regiment, AK.

That first night in the village we witnessed a steady drone of Luftwaffe twin engine bombers heading west to Poltava. They numbered at least 200 planes. We stopped counting and started to pray that our forces had been alerted. Months later, we learned that this was one of the most devastating losses suffered by the USAAF. Night fighters and anti aircraft artillery promised by the Soviets were non existent and they refused to allow USAAF fighters to rise in self-defense. Illuminating the field with flares, the Germans found our planes aligned in rows and proceeded to destroy 44 of the 72 Flying Fortresses, damaging 26 others, and destroying 15 P-51 escorts. Adding further insult to injury, 450,000 gallons of fuel were also ignited.

The Polish civilian hospitals found wartime shortages a huge obstacle in providing basic care for the populace. They did, however, provide many clandestine treatments to the more seriously wounded AK troops using the subterfuge that they were farmers.

It was at this time that we learned of the death of P-51 pilot Lt Frank Sibbett of the 4th Fighter Wing. He was shot down trying to prevent Bf 109s from strafing our men in their chutes. For three days, the staff at the hospital in Miedzyrzecz tried valiantly to save his life, but he died from his burns and wounds. In defiance of the German occupiers, he was buried in the local cemetery with full military honors. His grave was marked with a carved wooden cross bearing a four-bladed propeller.

Except for the rifles and pistols salvaged from the 1939 attack by the Germans and Soviets, most AK military equipment had been "requisitioned" from German and/ or Soviet sources or was dropped or flown in at night

on clandestine grass airstrips by RAF and Polish pilots flying Douglas C-47 Dakotas or Westland Lysanders.

Contact was maintained with the Polish government in exile in London by a radio transmitter provided by the RAF, complete with operator. A bicycle with a generator mounted on it provided electricity to power the set or served as transportation as required. Messages were coded and brief as practical to avoid detection and location by German range and direction finders.

The news of our recovery by the 34th Infantry Regiment AK was sent to London, complete with our names, ranks and serial numbers within 24 hours of our unplanned arrival on Polish soil.

The AK headquarters conducted the war at every level. Money problems were alleviated by possessing the occupation general government currency printing plates, paper and inks. Identification papers were at hand, with stockpiles of stolen German Kennkarte ID forms supported by legal stamps and seals.

INFANTRY COMBAT

On June 30th, we experienced our first firefight. That night we stopped at a small farmhouse and had just started to eat when a cyclist/sentry alerted us that Gestapo agents and a detachment of Mongolian troops, apparently recruited during the German drive into the Caucasus, were approaching the area. We made it to the nearest rye field when the Gestapo opened fire on us. Zenon jumped up with his machine gun, a German Spandau, and fired several quick volleys. Four Germans were killed outright and a fifth tumbled down. The rest beat a hasty retreat.

The respite gave us a chance to move into the nearby forest where the rest of the force of 200 men was assembled. The Germans returned with about 500 men, light field guns and a tank. The battle lasted for five hours before the Germans retreated, leaving 48 dead and many more wounded.

A few days later, thirty of us including all seven Americans, moved out on a day's march to a sizable farm on a hill overlooking a Luftwaffe base in the valley below. We reconnoitered the area as we watched Junkers Ju 88 twin engine bombers come and go long into the night. The next morning a Polish Air Force major arrived. He couldn't speak English, but he had an armful of operation and tech



manuals for the Junkers Ju 88. Through Dreadnaught, he explained that some Polish civilians had access to the field, and, with their help, they had enough forces to capture the field at night and hold it until we stole two planes and flew them to England.

The manuals were very adequate, and I mentally prepared charts to fly via Gdynia, the Baltic Sea, across Denmark and on to England. However, the more we thought about it, we realized that the Poles would take tremendous losses in lives to free seven Americans, and the plan was dropped.

Usually, we Americans were spread out amongst the regimental units. Due to the shortage of weapons, we were assigned basic labor tasks in support of the troops. This scattering assured less attention to our presence. The heat was on the Germans to capture us dead or alive. A cash reward had been posted and the Axis radio portrayed us as bandits and rapists.

In spite of all this, there were moments of levity. When the cavalymen learned that Hernandez was from El Paso, Texas, they dubbed him Cowboy and offered him a horse to ride. With his sore arm, he volunteered me in his place. It was a big mistake riding bareback clad only in my GI undershorts with only a loose rope bridle. The horse didn't understand English commands and soon stripped me from his back by use of some thorny plum tree branches. For all my daring, I was assigned to a single horse-drawn four wheeled wooden farm cart to haul around ammo and weapons. At other times, I served as an extra pair of eyes and ears for a sniper/guard.

The AK used a methodical protection system involving concentric bands of lookouts and sentinels around their

perimeters at all times. Outermost, were inconspicuous men posing as civilian bicyclists. To their rear were other bicyclists and/or cavalymen; all relaying signals or carrying messages quickly to Zenon and his adjutant, continually updating German whereabouts and strength. Attack, ambush or withdrawal plans were constantly updated.

The favored means of getting supplies was to attack German truck convoys. The method was to select an ambush site with a forest on one side and a rye field on the other side. When the convoy came down the road, the Poles would openly attack from the forest, disabling the lead truck and the last truck. The Germans would immediately take cover in the rye field and be caught in a crossfire. Disposing of the enemy, the Poles would remove the supplies, weapons and ammo, set the trucks on fire and disappear into the forest. At times, prisoners would be taken in these actions. Prisoners that were regular army usually would be released that evening. However, if they were Gestapo or Secret Police, they would be executed since they were involved in the brutal killing of innocent civilians.

German reprisals for civilians aiding the AK and the Yanks were swift and brutal. We were helped by several elderly couples and their grandchildren wards. Soon after our departure, the Germans arrived, locked them in their houses and burned them alive as the German troops stood off efforts of the neighbors to rescue them. This is what they called Culture Europa.

FIREWORKS AND THE FOURTH OF JULY

A new clay-like plastic explosive, complete with instructions, had been brought in by the RAF. After conducting a very convincing test, it was decided to use it on a mixed freight/passenger train scheduled to pass nearby. A team was selected for the operation, and I felt lucky to be a part of it. I had lost my outer boots when I bailed out, and the thin shoes I landed with had worn out miles ago. It took several weeks to acquire German boots that would fit me. My bare feet had gotten as tough as shoe leather so that was how I went on the raid.

Departure was under cover of darkness, allowing arrival at daybreak to secure the ambush site and to watch for the railway guards known to investigate the right of way ahead of the train. They were thorough, checking both



Catholic field mass held with the 34th Infantry Regiment, AK, and local firemen in German occupied territory with an Eighth AF parachute draped over the altar.



rails and ties. As they disappeared down the track and out of sight, we hurried from our hiding place and securely packed the plastic against the rail webs, nicely concealed from above by the rail head. An ear to the rail (just like in the Western cowboy movies) told us that our prey was approaching. We rushed back to the edge of the woods and waited.

Soon it came with three German riflemen perched on the European style front bolster. Two snipers took careful aim and fired simultaneously. In a blinding flash, the rails were blown from under the steam locomotive, sending engine and cars flying in all directions. Instantly, the squad retreated down a narrow footpath leading into the forest, running as fast as we could. We knew this derailment would bring Germans from every direction.

However, the huge forest hid our movement for many hours. At about 11:00 p.m. we reached a gravel road skirting the trees. Quietly, we hurried, grateful for the darkness. The scout ahead signaled a halt. We grouped cautiously and looked at a dimly lit house of a large dairy farm. The farmyard was empty and the barn was shrouded in silent darkness. Guttural Germanic voices and laughter belied the Wehrmacht guards that were playing cards inside and were unaware of our presence.

Our assistant cook was in the raiding party. He called a meeting. Men were posted to cover the house, some to watch the road in both directions. Two men, armed with machine pistols, headed for the barn, entered cautiously and came out leading a milk cow. Miraculously, the cow remained silent. How lucky could we get?

The cow was led into a small woods and carefully butchered. The men shouldered the cuts of meat, and we continued to hurry along the road. We finally entered the forest again and fell asleep. We had run and/or marched nearly 45 miles in some 14 hours. The score: one train, one cow, no men lost and me with two very sore feet.

The next morning we were rudely awakened and told to clean our uniforms and weapons and to wash up and shave on the double. One of the combatants came up with some soap and water and gave us a shave and clipped our hair a little. Hernandez asked, "What's going on?" They said, "Don't you know? It's the Fourth of July. This is American Independence Day!" So there in this little village of ten or twelve houses with Gestapo headquarters only a few miles away, we celebrated with a parade as the 34th Infantry Regiment, AK, passed in review, their weapons gleaming, followed by the local fire brigade with their glistening brass helmets.

The chaplain held a mass and a blessing. Zenon made a speech reflecting on our common desire for freedom, and the celebration began. Vodka and a keg of requisitioned German beer was shared among rousing cheers, salutes and toasts. The festivities halted abruptly when lookouts advised that a Gestapo Opel sedan was approaching under protection of a white flag.

Zenon, the picture of military poise and protocol, approached the car, coolly appraising the occupants. The Gestapo leader, a Colonel Mueller, told him that they would give cash awards and pardons to the 34th Regiment if they would work with the Germans. Obviously, they were not aware of our presence. Zenon, totally enraged, slapped him across the face and ordered their staff car burned. The three occupants were forced to walk back. Since we were only a segment of the regiment, we had to disappear back into the forest fast.

SOVIETS AND REPATRIATION

During the next nine days, the unit traveled west to the Soviet lines. Every day, we could see German planes fly overhead. Many of these flew quite low. The Germans were flying Junkers Ju 52s with red crosses painted on the sides. The Poles called them Meat Wagons because they would bring back the wounded from the Russian Front. However, it was always assumed that they carried fresh troops and supplies to the front.

The Poles developed an effective tactic to combat these low flying planes. The transports were referred to as the Morning Express since they normally operated just after dawn. Within the unit were several Polish cavalrymen with the most beautifully trained horses I have ever seen. The horsemen would ride out and hide in hedgerows or under trees. As the planes came overhead, they would ride out and riddle the underside of the cockpit with machine pistols. In the forty days we spent with them, we witnessed them shoot down four planes.

On July 14th, the Soviets captured the Polish city of Wilno and the Poles increased their attacks on the retreating Germans. While fighting in what was our final battle together, I sustained an injury which later earned me a Purple Heart. It wasn't very heroic, really. I was assigned to drive an ammunition wagon which consisted of an old four wheel, horse drawn farm wagon with one horse. At the outbreak, we started to head into a swamp that was part of the Pripet Marshes. On our way in, we ran into a retreating group of Germans. Their point troops assumed that we were Soviets and, in the ensuing fracas, we had to retreat over some broken terrain. With machine gun fire over my head, I jumped off and started to run alongside the wagon. Somewhere, I stumbled, fell under the horse and he stepped on my leg and fractured it. Luckily, it was



Members of the 34th Infantry Regiment, AK. Combat nurse Maria (third from left) was recognized as a national heroine for her valor in the service of Poland.

just a hairline fracture, but it started to swell up like a balloon. I thought it was just badly bruised so I didn't stop running.

The German force of about 3,000, thinking we were a major Soviet unit, started to relentlessly force us into a shrinking perimeter. Some of the combatants told us that they would never allow the Germans to take us alive. Suddenly, we heard a lot of artillery and a ring of explosions all around us. The Germans pulled out and left us.

On the afternoon of July 27th, after many days of unbelievable events with retreating Germans and advancing Soviets, the 34th Infantry Regiment, AK, met the Soviets. Their colonel came to see us and was taken aback when Zenon introduced us in flawless Russian. He agreed to notify his headquarters and expedite our return to England. The next day a Soviet major escorted us, Zenon, Dreadnaught and an aide from Polish AK Headquarters to his headquarters several miles away.

The transaction that took place was totally odd. Zenon, fully aware of Soviet treachery, insisted that they fill out and sign seven individual receipts in triplicate, complete with name, rank, serial number and a statement of our good health. The original went to AK Headquarters in Warsaw, a copy to the 34th Regimental District and one for the Soviets.

On July 30th, we had to say farewell to the Poles. How do you tell someone that you owe them so very much? We

couldn't. We finally just shook hands, saluted and left.

We were driven to a recently seized Luftwaffe air strip, and from there we were flown in a Soviet-built C-47 to Poltava. When we were unceremoniously dumped off from the taxiing airplane at the USAAF base, the GIs in the operations tent stared in disbelief at these seven men clad in a combination of various AAF issue and civilian clothing.

All procedures to identify us were momentarily interrupted by crackling on the Ops radio. A P-38 Lightning pilot, coming in from Italy, was requesting a straight in landing. His wingman was shot down over occupied territory. He landed, picked him up and had him sitting in his lap.

It turned out that the pilot was a classmate of our copilot, Tom Madden.

Within a few days, we were returned to our base at Deopham Green in England. The debriefing with Intelligence took over six hours. Our detailed account of our experiences from bailing out of a crippled B-17 on June 21, 1944, until we returned to Poltava on July 30, 1944, was beyond parallel in the European Theater. We concluded the narrative of our report with the following statement, "If we worked the rest of our lives for the Poles, regardless of the dangers and hazards involved, we should never be able to repay what they did for us." 🇺🇸

Alfred Lea first applied as an Aviation cadet in 1939. However, his employment at various defense facilities as an architect, pattern maker, and mold loft manager resulted in priority deferments. In March 1943 he was called up to active duty in San Antonio, Texas. Three decades later he joined the Confederate Air Force as a navigator for the B-17 named the Texas Raiders. On his first ride, it wasn't until he landed that, ironically, he realized the date was June 21, 1974, the 30th anniversary of his being shot down over Poland. Alfred Lea passed away in 2005.

[Ed. note: We are indebted to Ed Rusinek, editor of the North American Aviation Retirees Bulletin for this story.]