

Chapter 17

The Faith of Family and Friends

At my base, I had an opportunity to catch up on the news about friends and learn about activities. First I learned we had lost 109 men the day I bailed out. Up until then I was the only one who had succeeded in evading and returning to the base. During our air battle, it had appeared doubtful that there could be any survivors from several of the planes that blew up that day, though there had been a report of one or more survivors off every crew except one. The reports were coming through the International Red Cross regarding men who had become prisoners of war. Our 303rd Bomb Group had been awarded a Presidential Citation for extraordinary heroism, determination, and esprit de corps in action against the enemy for that day, 11 January 1944.

Most of the men I knew were no longer around the base. A few had completed their missions and returned to the states, but 11 January and the mission that followed had taken their toll. The strain showed in the faces of the men who had been flying missions more frequently in preparation for, and now in support of, the invasion. I asked if I should volunteer to back on operations. I felt better, and I was more rested than most of the men. The answer was, "No!" At least two risks were involved if we should be shot down again and captured. With a crew of ten men we could all experience severe treatment in an effort to learn about my escape. Also, in the best interest of those who had helped me, I could not risk the possibility of giving out information under torture. My records, like those of most evaders, were marked for no further duty in a war zone outside the continental United States.

While at the base, Jack Watson and I made one local flight. Flying out over the Channel for a look at the invasion was not possible: returning pilots reported weather was preventing them from seeing the ocean or the front lines. I did view some of the photos that had been taken from planes in the groups, and they were impressive. The photo lab and intelligence were kind enough to let me have pictures of our plane which had appeared in the paper, *Stars and Stripes*. The pictures showed how the plane had been damaged and was foamed down to put out the fire after Watson had landed it at the coast. It was a bit unnerving to learn they had recovered an unexploded 20mm shell from under the pilot's seat. Our lives would be very uncertain if that shell had exploded, so I am grateful that German manufacturing was not perfect!

When I visited the Squadron Mail Room to see if I had any mail, I was in for a great surprise. From the day I went down until I learned I was in a neutral country and would be returning, my mail had been stamped "Missing in Action," and returned to sender. A number of letters for me had arrived during the last month. As the mail clerk handed them to me, he remarked about the faith of some people and how he would stamp letters to be returned to the sender only to have them followed by a new supply. In my case, this had gone on for months. When I returned home, this was confirmed by a stack of letters which my mother had written to me – one every week – and which had been returned.

When I was at the Air Base near Topeka, Kansas, before going to England in early November 1943, my brother, Floyd, a Navy pilot, was home on his way to a new assignment in the States. We discussed the risks which we both knew existed in combat flying. I had expressed my confidence in being able to make my 25 missions or escape if shot down. I asked for his support in keeping the spirits up at home if I was ever reported "Missing in Action." I

expected to walk out and return. We already had another brother, John, who was crew chief on the ground with the Air Force in India. He had been out of the United States since November 1941 and it had required a lot of faith to endure the long periods when the family did not hear from him.

Our mother had the kind of faith that gave her the strength to take in stride when our youngest brother, Maynard, signed up to become a bombardier on B-29's. He was later sent to Tinian, in the Marianas Islands, and flew mission to Japan. Mother's faith was so great she helped Dad keep his chin up during the worst days with four sons in the service. All of us had duty in war zones outside the United States. We all came home safely and saw our parents proudly displaying the emblem in the window with four stars on it.

After my visit to the base at Molesworth, I returned to London to receive both my travel and promotion orders. Then I got a flight from London to Prestwick, Scotland, where I remained overnight. London had been quiet while I was there, but the first buzz bombs hit London the night I was at Prestwick. I was glad to be on my way to the United States and a visit with my parents at home.

Where I had been and how I had escaped was classified as "Secret" information. That made for some interesting incidents with friends who knew I had been missing. Some would stare as though they might be seeing a ghost. Other would start asking all kinds of questions. I would just make some comment about bailing out of a burning plane and getting back. Then I would change the subject.

When I called a friend in St. Louis with whom I had previously worked, he wanted to know where I was calling from. We chuckled over that question several times as the years passed. It had been as if he was expecting me to answer either "Heaven" or "Hell," and he wasn't sure which.

I had always understood that it was possible to escape from or evade the enemy's grasp, but the odds were never talked about. I have since learned that of the fliers reported as "Missing In Action" over western Europe, about one half became prisoners of war. About one half of the MIAs were later reported "Killed in Action." Only about one out of every 100 of us fliers reported as MIAs escaped or evaded capture and returned. We have just cause to be thankful for what we were able to achieve and to appreciate the faith of those who prayed and waited.