

Chapter 2

Survival

Well before daylight on 11 January 1944, bomber crews all over England were being briefed for a maximum effort that was expected to send out the greatest number of bombers ever at this point in the war. Missions are usually planned with the expectation that most squadrons and groups will have a normal percentage of planes remaining on the ground for repairs or to fill in if some planes abort at take-off. When an M.E. (or maximum effort) is called for, every base is expected to send out all flyable planes.

Three primary targets had been selected. More than 700 bombers were expected to participate in the day's mission. In addition to the exceptionally large number of bombers, fighters were scheduled to provide cover and protection. When the fighters flew cover, they usually flew a few thousand feet above the bomber formations looking for enemy fighters. They could then either shoot down the enemy fighters or chase them away from our bomber formations. These little friends above were a welcome sight to the bomber crews. The bomber formations contained an awesome amount of firepower, but against enemy fighters it was of a defensive nature, not the offensive weapon that our fight escort was.

The targets that had been selected were Oschersleben, Brunswick, and Halberstadt. The only thing that was uncertain was the weather for later in the day. This was the day for the 358th Squadron to lead our 303rd Bomb Group, which was putting up 60 planes. The 303rd was leading the First Division of the Eighth Air Force. Flying the lead plane of the 303rd, the old Eight Ball, was Brig. Gen. Robert F. Travis and Lt. Col. William R. Calhoun of the

41st Combat Wing. The mission would be flown as if Berlin was the target. Then about 100 miles from Berlin the formation would turn to the real target, Oschersleben, and make its bomb run.

Take-off and assembly went as planned. As we entered the air space over the continent, the flak began to appear as expected and the German fighters came up to press their attack. The fight was on! Then came a recall on the mission. Weather was moving in quickly on England. Our fighters would be unable to get off in large numbers as expected, to provide the intended support. In addition, our bombers returning to England later in the day would experience very hazardous landing conditions.

Not wanting to appear as if they were being turned back by the German fighters, the lead bomb groups, which were already under attack, continued on to their targets. The statistics taken from the *Mighty Eighth War Diary* by Roger A. Freeman show that the First Bomber Division, of which the 303rd was a part, reported as follows:

291 B-17 bombers were dispatched, 42 bombers did not return. Three that did return were damaged beyond economical repair and an additional 125 B-17 bombers were damaged. Ten men in the returning bombers had been killed and 29 were wounded. 430 men of the division were missing in action.

Of the 60 bombers dispatched that day from the 303rd Bomb Group, 10 did not return and 109 men were missing in action.

Life magazine, dated 24 January 1944, page 28, gave a very reliable report on the day's activities including artist conceptions of the battle. It reported:

One of the great air battles of history took place last week. In full daylight some 700 heavy bombers of the U.S. Eighth Air Force fought their way 300 miles into northwest Germany. Their main targets were the three fighter-plane factories near Brunswick but the apparent direction of the attack toward Berlin, 100 miles away, brought hundreds of Nazi interceptors up for a three-hour running battle from the Zuider See to the edge of Berlin's defenses and back again.

Screened by clouds for the middle part of the trip, the Fortresses and the Liberators met their heaviest opposition as they approached the target area. Fanning out, the formations went after the airplane plant at Oschersleben which assembles half the FW-190s made in Germany, after the Messerschmitt 110 factory at Brunswick and after a factory at Halberstadt that builds wings for Ju-88s. Some groups, hunting targets of opportunity, struck at the crowded freight yards at Bielefeld while scattered others may have ranged to Berlin itself. The tonnages of bombs dropped were not immediately announced.

The desperate Luftwaffe opened its full bag of defensive tricks, some new, some improved. German fighters met the U.S. planes with smokescreens, rocket barrages and "saturation" attacks. Large formations of Me-110s carrying twice their regular rocket load, fired salvos into the leading bomber flights. When rocket fire split open the tight U.S. defensive formations, Me-110s, and FW-190s followed up with ferocious close attacks.

Our planes used a new trick, too, a shuttling fighter cover that gave maximum protection. Lightning and Thunderbolts took the bombers most of the way to the target. There the heavies met a fresh group of fighters, long-range Mustangs, that guarded them halfway home. On the last leg of the trip back, RAF Spitfires gave

cover. It was the longest escort job yet for the newly improved Mustangs.

In spite of our protecting fighters, the German interceptors pressed their attacks relentlessly, often coming within 75 feet of the bombers before turning away. The heavies closed the gaps in their formations and kept on for England. Sixty U.S. bombers and five U.S. fighters were lost. The 1200-odd planes that did get back reported 152 German fighters destroyed. The number of Germans shot down by the planes that didn't return will never be known.

From The Mighty Eighth War Diary we learned that the First, Second, and Third Bomb Divisions dispatched a total of 663 bombers. Sixty did not return, 4 were damaged beyond economical repair, and 179 others were damaged. Ten men in returning bombers were dead, 34 were wounded, and 606 were missing in action. Totals on our fighter-planes were 592 dispatched, 5 did not return, 3 planes were not repaired, and 6 were damaged. Two men were killed and three were missing in action. (Our First Division, although supplying less than one-half the bombers, 291 of 663, suffered more than two-thirds of the losses with 440 men killed or MIA of the 616 total that were killed or missing.)

Losses took place on both sides and the damage inflicted on the Germans was an important statistic. The Mighty Eighth War Diary reveals our reported claims for 11 January 1944 were as follows:

| Reports from - - | bomber crews | fighter pilots |
|---------------------------------|---------------------|-----------------------|
| enemy aircraft destroyed | 228 | 31 |
| probably destroyed | 60 | 12 |
| damaged | 98 | 16 |

Although claims from the returning bomber crews were not as accurate as those of the camera carrying fighters, and may have involved some duplication, there wasn't any accurate way to determine the number of enemy aircraft destroyed or damaged by the bomber crews that did not return.

The severity and length of the actual air battle is best reflected in the total rounds of 50 caliber ammunition expended by the bombers of the 303 rd. Bomb Group. On 11 January 1944, the returning bombers had used 52, 670 rounds of ammo. Plus, the planes that did not return had started with 31, 835 rounds. There is no record of how many of those rounds were actually fired. On 19 other missions in a 60 day period, the maximum rounds of ammo expended on a single mission was 17, 325 on January 4, plus 7000 rounds in the planes that did return.

Early in the fight our number three engine was shot out. Sitting in the cockpit, the engines were numbered from left to right. The number two engine is closest to the pilot on his left and the number three engine is on his right and nearest the co-pilot's position. Both engine number two and three are referred to as the inboard engines. Continued operation of the engines one and four, referred to as the outboard engines, usually provides better control of the plane, and the flight characteristics are better. However, the loss of any engine obviously restricts operational capabilities. Therefore, we found it necessary to cut some corners on the triangle flown near the target so that we could drop our bombs and stay close to the formation.

Shortly after leaving the target area, our number two engine was hit. With both engines number two and three feathered to reduce drag, we were attracting German fighters. We needed all the overhead protection we could get, so we started sacrificing altitude to maintain air speed and stay under our formation, which was flying at 23,000 feet. Bombers going down in flames and German fighters

being shot out of the sky became a common sight. A few friendly fighters did arrive to give support, but the number was small. They had been affected by the weather and their dog fights.

As we entered the airspace over the Netherlands on our return, we could see low clouds moving in and obscuring our view of the ground. At this point we had given up about 8,000 feet of altitude for enough speed to keep up with the formation above us. However, with 15,000 feet of altitude and two good engines, we believed we would safely survive the battle which had now lasted for at least two and one-half hours. The navigator kept up with our position and had just reported that we were east of Amsterdam, probably over the Zuider Zee, when we suffered another attack, and fire started in the area of our number two gas tank. Pilot Watson issued the bail-out order and rang the bell to abandon our burning plane. It appeared to be the only logical thing to do before the gas tank blew up and took us spinning, as we had seen so many others do that day.

When I went below to bail out from my assigned exit for such an emergency, I was surprised to find that the bombardier had not already jumped. The pilot would be the last to leave from that exit. When I inquired of the bombardier, “Are you OK, or have you been shot?” He assured me that he was all right and said, “I’ll jump after you.” This he did. The navigator and flight engineer had preceded me out that exit as we had practiced on the ground many times. Other members used the side exit to the rear of the plane.

You can practice an emergency exit from a plane on the ground, but you don’t practice a real jump without actually leaving the aircraft. This was our first – the ultimate test to see if we could mentally and physically execute what we had learned from lectures and briefings.

My number one goal of flying 25 missions, so that I could return to the States, had just been shattered. It was

time to try for goal number two: to make a safe jump, avoid capture and escape. At this point, I was glad I had attended briefings on escape and a recent lecture by a British paratrooper. Certain instructions were now clear: "Don't worry about a falling sensation." "Delay the opening of your parachute as long as possible to decrease the chance of being seen and to increase the opportunity for evading capture."

Before leaving my seat to jump, I noted our altitude was 15,000 feet and I estimated the strata of clouds below to be about 3,000 feet. As I went out of the escape hatch, I used the same method I was accustomed to using on the ground. I sat down on the edge of the escape hatch with my feet outside and made a feet-first exit. But, instead of my feet being on the ground, the airstream of the plane was tumbling me like a ball. The paratrooper had told us to expect that, and said it could be stopped by fully extending one's arm and legs and becoming somewhat rigid. When I did this, my tumbling stopped and I found myself in control. There was no falling sensation. Except for seeing the plane above going away, and the clouds below coming up to meet me, this passing through the air at 120 mph gave the feeling of being blown upward. There was only the noise of the wind. The roar of the plane's engines and the rattle of the guns were gone.

True to myself, I waited until entering the clouds before pulling my ripcord. The parachute opened with a jerk! I looked down to see that my shoes were still on and at almost the same instant came out below the cloud cover. The silence was intense; all was calm. At first glance, I could only see water. Then I spotted a dike, and when I realized that my descent would take me into the water, I remembered another suggestion from the paratrooper: "If you want to steer your parachute, pull the shroud lines down in the direction you want to go." I did this until I was afraid that the chute might collapse, and thus for a moment,

I relaxed my hold. But realizing that the pull on the shroud lines was essential, I renewed my grasp and was able to hit the side of the dike on firm ground. My first phase of survival had been totally successful.

If I were going to evade capture I had to destroy the evidence of my landing and find a place to hide. The water seemed to be the best place to dispose of the parachute, so I quickly removed my life vest, then my parachute harness, and rolled them all together. When I threw the bundle into the water, it floated some and began sinking much too slowly to suit me. I took off the warm flying boots I had on over my shoes, filled them with water, and tossed them on top of the parachute. Everything sank out of sight. I took time to look around and as I did, I saw other members of my crew in their billowy white chutes slowly floating out of the overcast that was within 500 feet of the ground. As they descended into the water on either side of the dike, I realized I had extended my free fall closer to the ground than I had intended, but it was for the best.

The narrow strip of dry land I'd been able to land on was between the Zuider Zee with its big dike, and the Kingsmeer Lake below it. Even though people knew about where I'd thrown my parachute in the lake, it was never found.

I heard the motors of the boats being started to pick my crew members out of the water, so that they could be taken prisoners. The delayed opening of my parachute had put me on the ground well ahead of my crew, and I had hoped that it also meant I had landed without being seen by the Germans.

As I started looking for a hiding place, I could see a farmhouse in the distance across a body of water, with people outside watching. I only had two directions I could go, and both were along the dike. At that moment a man riding a bicycle came up alongside the dike and pointed the direction for me to run. And run I did. In a few hundred

yards I came upon a field of grass. It was closely grazed and offered no protection, but the shallow drainage ditches would, so I ran out into the field to one of the ditches and lay down in two or three inches of water. My olive-drab flight suit blended with the grass on either side of the ditch, and I was not easily seen. If I had gone in the opposite direction along the dike, I would have been in the village of Durgerdam and captured. My first contact was OK.

January in Holland is not a good time to be lying in water. The air temperature was just above freezing, and the water was about the same. It would be impossible to tolerate having most of one's body submerged in such cold water for very long, but I found I could withstand it by assuming a prone position that kept most of my body dry.

It was then about 2:00 p.m. and darkness would come early. I decided to lie still and wait for darkness in spite of having seen people at the farmhouse watching me as I hid. If they were not friendly, there was no way I would avoid capture in such open territory. I had to hope for the best. While I lay and waited, a thousand thoughts must have gone through my mind, but the recurring questions were: What would happen to my crew members? Could I ever escape? What would my folks think when they got the telegram -- Missing in Action? Would the people who saw me hide help me or report me? And, where and when will I try to go from here? Would I catch my death of cold lying here wet and cold in January?

To each question I tried to offer a rational answer and maintain my composure. As I lay there I mentally reviewed the contents of my escape kit, which was a plastic box about three inches by four inches and one-inch thick. I carried it zipped in the leg pocket of my flying suit. It contained some folding money from Germany and Holland, two-silk maps made in great detail, a small compass, some chocolate, adhesive tape, matches, benzedrine and halazone tablets, and a water bag. All of these items could be helpful

to me, but I would need much more, and I was very aware of that.

About 4:30 p.m., before I thought it was dark enough to travel, I saw a man wearing wooden shoes starting to search in my area. It was evident he knew that I was there somewhere. When he was about 30 yards away, he began a soft friendly whistle, so I raised my head enough to catch his eye and returned immediately to my fully prone position. The man came near and asked one question, “American?” I replied, “Yes,” and he motioned for me to remain still. Then this man, about five-feet, nine-inches tall and dressed in working clothes, returned to a point near the farmhouse. He came back to me promptly and indicated that I should follow him as he started toward the farmstead. It felt good to stretch my cold, wet body. We had only gone a few hundred yards when there were dogs barking and some commotion in the farmyard. I responded to my guide’s hand signal to hit the deck, and found myself lying on grass covered with about one inch of water, which we had been walking in. I realized the value of the wooden shoes for keeping the feet dry.

In a few minutes my guide got an all clear signal and had me up following him at a distance of ten to 15 yards. We proceeded to the barnyard and into the barn where the cows were housed adjacent to the house and being milked. From the milk barn he opened the door into the kitchen, and I followed closely behind. There were no lights on, and only a small amount of daylight remained, which meant we would soon be under the cover of darkness. It was years later that I learned this was the Schouten farm. I also learned that the young man who escorted me was not a Schouten and had a brother who voluntarily joined the German Army. Much like our Civil War, it was not unusual for different members of a family to support opposite sides.

Once I was inside the kitchen, my guide went to another part of the house apparently to maintain a look-out, and left

me in care of an older man who was seated at the kitchen table., I believe the women of the house were assisting with the chores and the milking, so there were just the two of us there together. I didn't know his identity, or his true place in this whole picture, but this older man spoke excellent English. He had me remove my shoes, socks, outer flight suit, and the heavy electrically heated suit I had on. The suits and socks were placed in the oven to dry. I was provided with warm milk and some excellent cheese between slices of a very, coarse and dry bread. I'm confident they gave me the best they could provide, but it was immediately evident by the bread that the German confiscation of food in Holland had already reached into the countryside.

While I sat there eating and waiting for my clothes to dry, the gentlemen proceeded to confirm in his own mind that I was an American. Then came the sales pitch on why I should surrender to the Germans. "The Red Cross is getting food to the prison camps. It would reduce the danger to people like ourselves who run great risk in trying to help you. The war can't last too much longer. The chances of escaping are very slim." -- and so it went. After more than an hour I began to lose my patience, at which time I stood up and said, "I will not surrender!" If you can't help me, please don't stand in my way: I'll proceed on my own." I began recovering my socks and outer flying suit from the oven. The heavy electrically heated flying suit was still very wet, so I left it. In response, the gentlemen said, "We will help you." This obviously had been a testing session. They did not want to risk their lives for a person who did not strongly believe in his ability to evade capture.

I was directed out of the kitchen to two young men who had apparently been waiting in the milk barn to help me if I passed the test. They walked me to a location some 500 yards from the house and rowed me in a boat across a small

canal to an enclosed shed about 25 feet square, sitting in the pasture field.

The shed was filled with hay and cattle. It was not easily accessible from the road because of the canal, but it was a location I could have reached by myself without assistance from the local people. As the young men bade me farewell and said they would be back before daylight, I was confident that if the Germans should find me, I could deny having had any help and be convincing about it.

Left to myself for the night, I was glad for my farm background and an understanding of cattle. Being with cattle calls for calmness to avoid disturbance. It was cold outside, and my shoes were still wet and cold to my feet. The body heat of the cattle helped to warm the small shed, and as I lay down in the manger near them I pulled some loose hay over me. Then being reasonably comfortable, except for my feet, I decided to remove my shoes and put my feet against the side of the heifer lying near the manger. Her body was better than an old fashioned bed warmer, providing enough comfort for me to get some sleep. And the heifer didn't seem to mind.

Early the next morning, well before daylight, the two young men returned as promised and took me back across the small canal, then through the fields to a country road which we followed into a small village. I believe it was their mother who gave me breakfast. It was a good way to start the day. The weather, which had created problems for us the day before, was now giving me an advantage. It was still dark and very foggy when we left the house and walked a short distance to a rowboat that was used to take me to a small island. There I was placed in a vacant but small house-like building and told they would return for me after dark that night.

There was some comfort in being such an isolated place. Even so, I stayed low and kept away from the windows.

I had placed my life in the hands of strangers who I knew were risking their lives to help me. The least I could do was to cooperate to the fullest.

As midday approached the fog had lifted, but the overcast remained. Finally the quiet was interrupted with the squeak of oars in their locks. I peeked out a window to see what was happening and saw a man get out of his boat and pull it on to the shore far enough to keep it safe. He then retrieved something from the boat and headed for my location. It was evident that he knew I was there. He approached a side window and I moved toward it. Then I raised it in response to his motions. He handed me a small warm bowl and reached inside his jacket to bring out a bottle of milk and an apple. He then retreated from the building and proceeded to cut some weeds while I ate a delicious meal. The warm bowl contained a small piece of roast beef with cooked carrots and potatoes.

When I had finished eating, I returned to the open window and the man came over to retrieve the bowl and bottle. I thanked him several times and watched him return to his boat and row away. I believe it was the only time I ever saw that gentleman, who had just risked his life to bring me a meal that I'm confident contained a week's ration of meat.

As I reclined on the floor waiting for darkness and the return of my young friends, I realized that I had survived the air battle, my parachute jump, and the first 24 crucial hours. My future was now in the hands of strangers who were befriending me at great personal risk to themselves, their families, and friends. Greater love hath no man than these people had already shown and there was much more to come.

I have never been able to learn the names of all the people who helped me during those first 30 hours, and I probably never will. However, a map supplied to me by Ida Kuipers-Bakker apparently traces my moves during those

early hours in Holland. It had all occurred near the village of Durgerdam.

Piet Schouten was a farmer and the first person putting himself and his family at risk to help me. We were all fortunate that I was hidden in the cow shed in the field, because the Germans searched the house that night, but not the shed. They returned the next day and again searched the farmstead.

When we returned to the area in 1983, the house had burned and had been rebuilt. Piet Schouten and his family no longer lived there. It was as if my presence there in 1944 had been blotted out so that no one would know. On the surface it was a well-kept secret.

In 1985 we again returned to Durgerdam. Good fortune led us to the home of Jurr Bakker. This talented man, young at 78, was spending his days before a window that looks out on the street and across to the ships sailing on the Zuider Zee. While he painted and carved with unusual skill, his thoughts often took him back to World War II and his submarine duty in the Dutch Navy.

Mr. Bakker was not in Durgerdam when I passed that way in 1944, but his keen mind and natural instinct for details had permitted him to learn about those days. When we told him I had bailed out and landed nearby, he was immediately able to tell us where I had been hidden and it confirmed what I had remembered. His comment then summed up the people and their attitude when he said, “You didn’t think anyone knew you were hidden there on the island, but they all knew” – a secret well kept to protect the active participants of a real-life threatening drama. Similar acts of silence were certain to have occurred several times while I passed through The Netherlands, Belgium, and France, helping me and others evade capture.

Before we parted from Mr. Bakker and his visiting daughter, Ida C. Kuipers-Bakker, a number of people had been told by phone that their American had returned. It was

as if the whole community still takes pride in the action of those individuals who had helped me, and I was a living symbol of their efforts in the darkest of days. To remember my return visit, I have my own wooden shoes carved personally by Mr. Bakker. We also have a painting of the island where I was hidden and a cloth tote bag that was decorated with one of his paintings. Our entire experience at Durgerdam in 1985 served to emphasize the character of Christian people possessed with brotherly love.

The epilogue to this book will cover the experiences on return visits to Durgerdam, but this is where some of the unknown names should be revealed. We learned that the man who first interrogated me at the Schouten farm was a reporter who left Germany to live in Holland. His name was Erik Wolff and he proved his loyalty to Holland before the people of the resistance accepted him. After the war, he was rewarded with a Dutch citizenship. Thanks to the efforts of men from the resistance. His son Peiter became a school teacher at Durgerdam. Contacts with Peiter brought us in touch with Wiet Abercrombie who was a leader in the local resistance. He knew the people who were helping me, but was never in direct contact with me. He informs us that the two young men who helped me were Aart and Siemon Schouten. Wiet also identified Siem Schouten as the man who brought lunch to me on the island.