

## Personal accounts

*by crewmembers of the Flying Fortress "Vassars Virgin"  
of pilot Charles G. Nashold  
crashed on 25 February 1944 near Laumesfeld/Lorraine*

### **Kay Vanda (1997)**

*Regular radio operator of Nashold crew  
(grounded on 25th February 1944 due to frostbite blisters in neck)*

I joined the Nashold crew in Pyote, Texas in July 1943. We finished our 1st Phase Training and moved to Alexandria, LA for our final training on B-17's. We picked up a new B-17 in Nebraska and flew it from Goose Bay to No. Ireland — a hairy trip with ice and running out of gas. We landed on a fighter strip in Ennskillen.

At Podington we were assigned to the oldest B-17 F in the squadron. The usual procedure, I suppose, for new crews. It was named and nose painted "Vassars Virgin" (a rare bird). Vassar was a women-only College in New York State at the time, now co-ed. We didn't name the old plane but we became the new operators. I don't know the serial number and we weren't given its past history, but here it was, a patched up, olive drab machine without a radio room hatch cover or covers for the waist positions.

The ground crew chief was proud of this old bird as he had tuned the engines superbly and even Nashold loved the quick response to the throttles. At one time in our early missions we were flying Tail End Charlie in our formation when the deputy lead turned back due to mechanical problems and Nashold said, "*Hang on*" and he poured on the gas, we ducked under the whole formation and came up next to the lead ship before anyone could adjust. The sight of that very old plane in deputy lead must have given them all a turn. Charles Nashold was a splendid pilot, maybe a little too daring for some. The instructor pilot at Alexandria, LA, after a final pilot check, said to me, "*If I were going into combat, I would like to have a man like Charles Nashold at the controls. He knows exactly what the plane can do and he's not afraid to do it.*" There were times after that conversation that I had a white knuckle grip on the radio table thinking was this plane up to the task.

Charles Nashold or "Nash" as his fellow officers called him, was from Jamestown, North Dakota. He didn't smoke, but one time I saw him stick an unlighted cigar in his mouth and walk around. Nash was a serious jazz buff and he lugged a big black suitcase filled with 78 rpm records with artists such as the Dorsey Brothers and Billie Holiday all the way to England. He invited us to his B.O.Q. Room to hear them. I heard him mention that he would like to become a Professional tennis player. He seemed to have the discipline necessary as well as the athletic build. He always hit the sack early before a mission. He loved to fly and he said he didn't know how well he could handle being a passenger crew member like us, hoping the driver knew what he was doing.

### **Frank W. Butler jr. (1997)**

*Bombardier*

My name is Fred W. Butler, former Bombardier on Lt. Nashold's crew when our B-17 aircraft was shot down on 25 February 1944. Our target for the day was the Messerschmitt factory near Augsburg. We had been running early and actually bombed about ten minutes before we

should have in order to coincide with drops on other targets. When we turned off the target, we passed directly over Saarbrücken and our aircraft # 623, also called "Vassar's Virgin", was hit by an anti-aircraft shell in the right wing disabling both engines on that side and causing us to lag from the formation. We were then attacked by a flight of Me-109's and they shot off our vertical stabilizer. Our Tail Gunner by the name of Tommy Rodman was severely wounded and the other crew members buckled his chute on and pushed him out of the aircraft. I later learned that he spent the remainder of the war in the hospital. As to the rest of the crew, Sgt. Earl Keller was killed in the ball turret when a 20mm shell fired by one of the 109's penetrated the plexiglas and exploded inside. I met the rest of the enlisted crew members later and know that they survived. As to the officers, the co-pilot was the first one out and I learned that he evaded capture and worked his way to Spain and later back to England. The navigator, George Fahlstrom was in the same prison camp as myself. The only information that I have on the pilot, Charles G. Nashold, is the fact that his body was shipped back to the United States after the war during PROJECT SUNSET.

Prior to the crew abandoning the aircraft, the pilot had lowered the landing gear and opened the bomb bay doors indicating to the attacking fighters that the B-17 was lost and the crew was bailing out. Then, when the navigator and I tried to open the front escape hatch, we found it jammed, so went back to the bomb bay where he straddled one side and I the other. I watched him go and, looked forward toward the pilot's compartment to see the pilot reach down to engage the autopilot. As he did that, the aircraft went into a violent turn to the right and centrifugal force threw me out. This must have happened at about 8,000 feet altitude. I can remember seeing another chute open above me as I was falling and thinking that it must be the pilot because he was the only, one left alive in the aircraft.

As I got closer to the ground, I noticed that I was falling toward a large plowed field and thought that I'd have a soft landing. But, as fate would have it, there was, a small grove of trees in the center and my parachute hung up between two trees and I was not able to reach either one in order to climb down. So, I just hung there with the one thought that I was an awful long way from home. Soon, a Me-109 buzzed me and later a few farmers with German soldiers came and cut me down. In the process, I lost my grip on the tree, fell and dislocated my left knee. They carried me to a local farm house owned by Francois Baly in Laumesfeld and I found that I had landed in Alsace-Lorraine between two towns called Haute Sierck and Laumesfeld. After being interrogated by a rather large German soldier on a motorcycle, I fell asleep from exhaustion and was rudely awakened by some Gestapo types: and bundled into a small auto and driven to a police station [in Waldweistroff] where I was put in a cell in the basement. Next morning, the constable's wife fed me some breakfast and then they carried me outside and put me on a flat-bed cart and drove me to a railroad station in Hargarten.

When the train came, I was put in one of the cars where I found the four enlisted men from my crew. We were transported to a German airfield at a place called Diedenhofen, which is now called Thionville, I think. Here, I was again interrogated and a Major showed me some photos that were taken from the only body on the crashed aircraft. It was Earl Keller. We were then put on another train and taken to a large city that I learned was Frankfurt am Main and then by street-car to a place called Oberursel where I ended in solitary confinement for about three days, being interrogated again and fed very little. From there we went by truck to Dulag Luft in Frankfurt and after about a week, were put in railroad boxcars for transport to a permanent location. We toured all over southern Germany and then up to Pomerania where we finally ended at Stalag Luft I near Barth on the Baltic Sea.

*In 1997 Fred Butler came for a short visit to the Baly home in Laumesfeld*