

Personal account by Norman Phillips (1996)
Navigator of the Liberator "Ginger" (crashed on 26th August 1944)



The Officer of the Day woke us at 4:00 A.M. I was surprised to see it was Sammy Agin, an old friend from my early school days back in The Bronx.

We have to get together some time and compare notes from the old days. Maybe tonight when I get back from this mission." "Sure, why not."

In the briefing room the operations officer uncovered the map. Target for the day is I.G. Farbenindustrie at Ludwigshafen. Lots of moans and groans from the men assembled. It was going to be a rough day and probably for some of us our last trip.

The sky over the English Channel was brilliant that morning. I took a moment to admire it and marvel at its beauty.

Flying in our formation, just to our right was Peppmeier. He had a new navigator with him that morning. Herb Rubin was flying with him as Navigator. Herb was originally Shaffer's Bombardier but he wanted to fly as Navigator. So he passed a flight check and was flying with Peppmeier. It was his first mission as a Navigator.

In his place on our ship was Jack Maxwell. He had been working as a ground mechanic and decided that he wanted to fly combat. It was his first mission.

They both lost their lives that day. Maxwell at the hands of his German captors in Saarbrücken and Rubin in a crash landing in Holland.

As we approached Ludwigshafen the flak came up to meet us. It was very heavy almost from the very start, and the AA batteries had our range.

The bursts were thick and very close. I saw one burst right off my starboard. I can't understand, how we didn't get any shrapnel from that shot.

The bomb run from the Initial Point to Target was supposed to be about five minutes. I always thought it was much too long. It gave the AA gunners plenty of time to line us up as a perfect target.

The call finally came over the intercom; "Bombs Away", and almost at the same instant our ship took a direct hit and we went into a steep dive. I was pinned against a bulkhead and couldn't move. We were going straight down.

It never occurred to me at the time that in another moment we were all going to be blown to bits in a fiery crash. Those nightmares came later when the excitement was ended.

Shaffer was fighting to pull the plane out of its dive. and finally managed to level out at about 10,000 feet. We had dropped 13,000 feet in only a few moments, and we now had only one engine to keep us airborne, but luckily we were out of the Ludwigshafen flak area.

We limped along toward the west, losing altitude all the way. I can remember seeing Kaiserslautern off our starboard wing.

My map showed flak areas around Metz and around Saarbrücken. I tried to give Shaffer a heading that would steer us between the two areas, but with just one engine running it was hard enough to just maintain straight and level flight, but we continued to lose altitude at a steady rate.

Then we saw #1 engine, on the port side, kick over. No doubt, all three of them, Shaffer, Lesko, and Wyatt, had been hard at work trying to get one more engine running.

We all let out a cheer to see that engine turn over, and the prop start spinning. But we were at 3000 feet, and almost at the same instant a burst of flak came up at us. We were an easy target for any gunners now and there was no sense in waiting for the plane to be hit again.

Shatter gave the order, " Bail Out". I crawled up to the flight deck and jumped through the bomb bay doors. I saw other parachutes floating down as I came down.

I fell into a thick woodland area and my chute hung me up in some high branches.

I pulled myself up to the tree trunk and released my harness straps - a moment before I had a firm grip on the tree trunk and immediately I slid down the trunk like it was a greased pole, and landed smack into the ground. The impact knocked me unconscious for about 15 minutes. When I woke up my back hurt badly and I started wandering aimlessly, when I heard, someone call my name. I looked up and saw George Lesko still hanging from his chute. He had landed much like myself, except that he couldn't free himself as easily as I did. We got him out of his harness and he dropped to the ground.

We didn't get very far. A patrol came through the woods and. we were easily taken prisoner.

Lesko wore his gold 'bar on his flight suit. My Flight Officer bar did not mean as much to them. So they were happy to announce that they had taken two prisoners and. one of them was an officer. They said, "For you, the war is now over". Not at all true. Life as a Prisoner of War is very much a part of the war.

Lesko and I were both brought in together. Our captors, as I remember, were mostly very young boys in their early teens [Hitler Youths and teenage anti-aircraft gunners].

We were kept separately in a small building [Wehrmacht office in Gersweiler near Saarbrücken, near former sports field, today new housing development] and. after a short time one German soldier told me that they had found. Albert Lang and were bringing him in. His leg was broken. Later that day the three of us were driven to the city jail in Saarbrücken. In my cell

there were a few old copies of the 'Volkischer Beobachter', where I learned, a little about German war propaganda. I also learned about lice.

After 3 or 4 days a detail from the Luftwaffe came down to transport us to the interrogation center at Oberursel, We now had a fourth prisoner in our group. A Canadian airman named. Brown was with us.

Lesko and I had. to carry Lang on the stretcher at every transfer point. We must have changed, trains 4 or times, at least.

I remember one changeover at Mannheim and one at Frankfurt We also spent a few hours in an air raid. shelter along with the natives. Luckily they didn't take much notice of us.

At the interrogation center they confirmed that my pilot was Vince Shatter) but they wouldn't say where he was or whether or not he was a prisoner. I found, myself hoping that he was evading capture somewhere in France.

The next day I was shipped to Dulag Luft for de-lousing and. clean clothes issue. And a day later I was shipped to Stalag Luft III at Sagan. On this last trip we were a pretty sizeable group. And. I settled down to life in a P.O.V. camp.

As the war approached its final days, Lang found. me at Stalag VIIA in Moosburg, His leg was healed and. he was walking again. He told me that Shatter, Wyatt, and. the gunners were all dead.. I assumed that they were killed, by flak or some other action or accident. I didn't learn until almost 50 years later that they had been 'executed' by their captors. [Correction: Staton got drowned when he fell with his chute into the Saar River.] It was a heart wrenching experience to hear the story, and I've often asked, myself 'why them? why not me?'. I have no answer.

They were all good. men who didn't deserve death at such a young age. There were many who died. at such an early point in their lives. But each man's life is precious to himself alone and large numbers lose their meaning when each is one of the many numbered..

Accordingly, we, once again, remember these men, not as numbers of a larger number, 'but as men who lived, and loved and were loved, and. had. a heart and soul all. their own.

Vince Shaffer of Ohio
Chuck Wyatt of Oklahoma
Jack Maxwell of Tennessee
Jack Staton of West Virginia
Ted. Zemonek of West Virginia
Will Fetterhoff of West Virginia

Their lives were precious to us and. our memory of them is everlasting.