

# **My Father in World War II**

by Robert H. Penoyer

I THINK IT IS IMPORTANT TO DESCRIBE MY FATHER'S EXPERIENCES IN WORLD WAR II. THEY WERE REMARKABLE. HIS EXPERIENCES WERE WRITTEN DOWN NOWHERE ELSE, BUT THEY DESERVED TO BE. TO ME, FINDING OUT ABOUT THEM WAS A REVELATION. THE INFORMATION I RELATE HERE IS THE COMBINATION OF MY MEMORY FROM HIS DESCRIPTIONS MADE DURING MY CHILDHOOD, DESCRIPTIONS FROM MY MOTHER, AND INFORMATION I HAVE BEEN ABLE TO GATHER FROM THIRD-PARTY SOURCES. BEFORE THE RESEARCH THAT RESULTED IN THIS ACCOUNT, I HAD KNOWN VERY LITTLE OF HIS WAR EXPERIENCES. WHILE HE WAS ALIVE, HE LIMITED HIS DESCRIPTIONS OF THOSE EXPERIENCES. HE HAD BEEN A PRISONER OF WAR. WHEN HE WAS LIBERATED FROM CAPTIVITY AND DEBRIEFED BY AMERICAN MILITARY PERSONNEL, HE SWORE NOT TO DISCLOSE THE DETAILS OF HIS TWO ESCAPES. HE RESPECTED THIS OATH FOR THE REST OF HIS LIFE, REFUSING TO ANSWER CERTAIN OF MY QUESTIONS. HOWEVER, BY WAY OF THE RESEARCH CONDUCTED THUS FAR, I HAVE BEEN ABLE TO ANSWER SOME OF THOSE LINGERING QUESTIONS. STILL, TOO MANY DETAILS ARE MISSING. I PRESENT HERE WHAT I KNOW AS WELL AND AS COMPLETELY AS I AM ABLE.

## **DRAFTED**

My father, Harold E. Penoyer, entered the U.S. Army on March 17, 1942 at Fort Custer, Michigan, less than a month before his 24<sup>th</sup> birthday. He had been drafted shortly after America's entry into the War. He was living at 5801 Cass Avenue in Detroit, Michigan when he was drafted.<sup>1</sup> His serial number was 36175983. He received his basic training at Jefferson Barracks, Missouri.<sup>2</sup> He took training as a Radio Operator and as a Gunner. Because the gunner training had meant an automatic increase in rank, he volunteered for it; it also guaranteed he would be put into combat. His Army Air Forces Radio Operator training was at Scott Field, Illinois.<sup>3</sup> His Aerial Gunner training took place at Harlingen, Texas.<sup>4</sup> Following training, he was assigned to an aircrew.

## **TO NORTH AFRICA AND THE WAR**

After the aircrew had trained together, they picked up a new airplane in Salina, Kansas, and transported it to North Africa. This was the route that was taken:<sup>5</sup>

In January, 1943, the air crew went to Salina, Kansas, where they picked up a brand new Boeing B-17F. The air crew embarked from Morrison Field, West Palm Beach, Florida, on February 4, 1943, flew to Boringuen, Puerto Rico, then to Atkinson Field,

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<sup>1</sup> This address was from his discharge records. Another address, 5735 Cass Avenue, can be found in the *99th Bomb Group Historical Society Newsletter*, September 1988, p. 24. My father told me he had moved down the street and, as a result, his draft notice was mailed to the wrong address. I do not know which of the two addresses was the one from which he entered the Army.

<sup>2</sup> From medical report dated April 9, 1942, indicating acute tonsillitis.

<sup>3</sup> From honorable discharge.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> The itinerary was taken from 99th BGHS *Newsletter*, March 1984, pp. 6-9.

Georgetown, British Guyana, to Belem, Brazil, then to Natal on the east coast of Brazil. Then, bracing themselves for their first transoceanic flight, they flew to Yumдум Field, Bathurst, Cambia, Africa, arriving on February 11, 1943. The flight over the Atlantic took 11 hours, 45 minutes and covered a distance of 1852 miles. From Bathurst, they flew to Marrakech, Morocco. From Marrakech they flew to La Senia Base, Oran, Algeria. Finally, they flew to Navarin Field, Algeria, arriving March 25, 1943.

Dad was now part of the 348th Squadron, 99th Bombardment Group (Heavy), stationed in North Africa at Navarin Field, Algeria. Navarin was a few miles north of the town of St. Arnaud, today called El Eulma. St. Arnaud (El Eulma) is located 16 miles east of Sétif and 55 miles WSW of Constantine.

The composition of the crew changed from time to time, but this was the configuration on the final mission:

**The Crew of Aircraft 229486—The Devane Crew<sup>6</sup>**

Rank	Name	Assignment	Home of Record	Total Missions
1 <sup>st</sup> Lt	Martin J. Devane	Pilot	Norwood, OH	25
2 <sup>nd</sup> Lt	Howard L. Freeburg	Copilot	Walnut Grove, MN	24
2 <sup>nd</sup> Lt	Edward B. Drueding	Navigator	Philadelphia, PA	30
2 <sup>nd</sup> Lt	Sanford V. Lavine*	Bombardier	S. Syracuse, NY	31
TSgt	William I. Craton	Engineer, Top Turret Gunner	Dallas, GA	26
TSgt	Harold E. Penoyer	Radio Operator, Left Waist Gunner	Flint, MI	21
SSgt	Frank A. Curley	Ball Turret Gunner	Jersey City, NJ	26
SSgt	James A. Harold	Right Waist Gunner	Cresskill, NJ	17
SSgt	Harold A. Yorton	Tail Gunner	Fond du Lac, WI	26
Sgt	Louis A. Snitkin	Gunner	Brooklyn, NY	21

\* Sanford V. Lavine was normally part of the crew of aircraft 223178<sup>7</sup>

### THE EXPERIENCE IN NORTH AFRICA

While in Algeria, my father and his buddies found and kept a scrawny mutt of a dog that they named Dirty Gertie from Bizerte. Bizerte is a town at the northern tip of Tunisia. The name of the dog might suggest that they were stationed in Tunisia; however, the 99th Bomb Group was not moved to Tunisia until sometime after my father's final mission.<sup>8</sup> The dog's name was apparently taken from *Dirty Gertie from Bizerte*, the name of a ditty that the solders sang.<sup>9,10</sup>

<sup>6</sup> Per notes received from Warren B. Whitmore in December, 1994. Mr. Whitmore had been the commander of the 348<sup>th</sup> Squadron from its founding until his 50<sup>th</sup> mission on September 7, 1943.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> My father was shot down on his 21st mission, the 99th's 41st mission. Per *5th Bomb Wing—History of Aircraft Assigned*, Revised 1992, p. 106, the 99th moved to Oudna Field, Tunisia, between its 60th mission on August 1, 1943, and its 61st mission on August 6, 1943.

<sup>9</sup> Per a letter from Dick Drain, 99th BGHS historian, dated August 10, 1994.

<sup>10</sup> There was a B-17 with "nose art" using the name *Dirty Gertie*. This aircraft, tail number 25143, was originally assigned to the 352<sup>nd</sup> Squadron of the 301<sup>st</sup> Bomb Group. After crashing in Sicily and being repaired, it was assigned to the 99<sup>th</sup> Bomb Group in November 1943. This information is from *5th Bomb Wing—History of Aircraft Assigned*, Revised 1992, p. 117.

On April 9, 1943, Dad sustained second-degree burns to his left hand and first-degree burns to his face when a stove exploded.<sup>11</sup> He apparently missed duty for a short time because of these injuries.<sup>12</sup>

Dad's aircraft was shot up several times.<sup>13</sup> On May 18, 1943, in one such instance, the Number 2 engine and a tire were shot up during a raid on Trapani, Sicily.<sup>14</sup> On that occasion, the aircraft made a forced landing at Bizerte, Tunisia. The 348th Squadron escorted it there.<sup>15</sup>

### A DAY OF TERROR

A terrible drama unfolded on July 5, 1943. By the time the day ended, five crewmembers would be dead; one would be hospitalized with severe head wounds, a bullet wound to the leg, and other injuries to the body; another would be crippled for life; two others would be hospitalized for their wounds. All five of the survivors would be prisoners of war.

It was on July 5, 1943 that Dad's B-17 was shot down during a bombing raid on the airdrome at Gerbini, Sicily.<sup>16</sup>

Briefly, the path of the mission of July 5, 1943 was as follows.<sup>17</sup>

Take off from Navarin Field (0807 hours<sup>18</sup>). Go to 6000 feet at Chateaudun, Algeria, at 0830 hours. Go to 10,000 feet at Hammamet, Algeria, at 0952 hours. Pass 30 miles north of Valleta, Malta, at 22,000 feet at 1102 hours. Go to Punta Secca, Sicily, then to

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<sup>11</sup> From Veterans Administration records. The date was the day after his 25<sup>th</sup> birthday.

<sup>12</sup> He was transferred to the 35<sup>th</sup> Station Hospital per Veterans Administration records.

<sup>13</sup> Per an audiotape received by me from William I. Craton, Engineer and Top Turret Gunner on my father's crew, on October 4, 1994.

<sup>14</sup> Date of raid and damage description per 99th BGHS *Newsletter*, May 1984, p. 7. Target per *5th Bomb Wing—History of Aircraft Assigned*, Revised 1992, p. 105.

<sup>15</sup> The forced landing and escort is mentioned in the 99th BGHS *Newsletter*, May 1984, p. 7. The damage to the aircraft and the forced landing were also reported by William I. Craton per an audiotape received by me from him on October 4, 1994. Mr. Craton and another crewmember stayed behind to help repair the plane while my father and the rest of the crew were returned to Navarin Field, Algeria. Mr. Craton also reported that the forced landing occurred one day after Bizerte was taken from the Germans. According to *The Software Toolworks Multimedia Encyclopedia* (CD-ROM, 1992 Edition, Version 1.5, Subject Item: World War II), Bizerte was liberated on May 7, 1943. According to *5th Bomb Wing—History of Aircraft Assigned*, Revised 1992, p. 105, the 99th Bomb Group did not fly on May 8, 1943; however, a mission to Palermo is listed for May 9, 1943; this may have been the date to which William I. Craton was referring. Note that because p. 7 of the May 1984, issue of the 99th BGHS *Newsletter* gives the date of the forced landing at Bizerte as May 18, **not** May 8 or 9; there is probably an error in Mr. Craton's narrative.

<sup>16</sup> This was the headquarters of Luftwaffe Air Division III, per the 99th BGHS *Newsletter*, November 1982, p. 3. The cited reference states that this Luftwaffe division was "one of the top Nazi fighter commands in all of Europe."

<sup>17</sup> This narrative is derived from the Operations Orders, Mission for 5 July 1943, 99th BGHS *Newsletter*, November 1986, p. 15. The times given apparently represent planned, rather than actual, times.

<sup>18</sup> Actual takeoff time per 99th BGHS *Newsletter*, May 1984, p. 16.

Raddusa, Sicily (Initial Point). Turn toward Gerbini, Sicily, and attack at 1130 hours.  
The axis of attack for the 99th was 105 degrees.

The Devane crew was in the last three-plane element in the second wave as depicted in the following chart.<sup>19</sup>

**BATTLE ORDER  
CHART OF FORMATION OVER TARGET**

UPTHEGROVE

HUGO      BLISS      ASPEGREN

MATHEW    EBBERS    BURREL

LIPPMAN<sup>20</sup> SHIELDS    HAGER    COVERT  
(230129)

MOSELY    BANKHEAD

STUART

ORANGE

MITCHELL    WAS    THISTLEWOOD

NORRIS      BUCK      ELLIOTT

WINDRUM<sup>21</sup> W.C. DAVIS<sup>22</sup> CASTO<sup>23</sup> **A.E. DAVIS<sup>24</sup>**  
(229472)    (225842)    (229857)    **(229483)**

**GRAHAM DEVANE<sup>25</sup>**  
**(229492)    (229486)**

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<sup>19</sup> 99th BGHS *Newsletter*, November 1986, p. 17. The names used in this chart are the names of the pilots of the respective aircraft.

<sup>20</sup> This aircraft contained SSgt. Noble Duncan, Top Turret Gunner, 346th Squadron, who wrote to me. Number in parentheses is the tail number of the aircraft.

<sup>21</sup> See the narrative in 99<sup>th</sup> BGHS *Newsletter*, May 1998, p. 10. A brief description of the battle is provided with details not previously described.

<sup>22</sup> This aircraft contained SSgt. Rex G. Youngblood and SSgt. Falvey G. Haynes. Youngblood filed a statement entitled *Eyewitness Account of Missing Aircraft No. 42-29486*, which is contained in MACR 1133. This statement describes the circumstances of the downing of the A.E. Davis, Graham, and Devane aircraft. Haynes was an eyewitness to the explosion of my father's aircraft, 229486, per an annotation in MACR 1133 (an X typed in a particular column). (The referent *Haynes* pages of MACR 1133 can be identified by the handwritten *1133* in the upper right corner of one page and *98B* in the upper right corner of the other. These two pages are duplicates except for handwritten notations on each.) Number in parentheses is the tail number of the aircraft.

<sup>23</sup> This aircraft contained Benjamin F. Warmer III. As per Footnote 22 regarding Falvey G. Haynes, he was an eyewitness to the explosion of my father's aircraft per an annotation in MACR 1133 on the same pages as the Haynes annotation. See Footnote 48 regarding Warmer. Number in parentheses is the tail number of Warmer's aircraft.

<sup>24</sup> This aircraft and both of the trailing aircraft were the three B-17s shot down during the raid over Gerbini. Numbers in parentheses are the tail numbers of each aircraft.

<sup>25</sup> My father's aircraft. Number in parenthesis is the tail number of the aircraft.

The last element was also the lowest and, therefore, the most vulnerable.<sup>26</sup> All three of the aircraft in that element were lost.

Gerbini is located about 13 miles WSW of Catania, a coastal town. The raid was the first of five on the German/Italian airdrome near Gerbini. (The other raids were July 6, 7, 8, and 10.<sup>27</sup>) These raids were made in preparation for the invasion of Sicily, which began July 10.

### *The Drama Aboard the B-17*

During the raid, the 27 B-17s encountered *more than 100 enemy fighters!* The fighters consisted of Me-109s, FW-190s, and Ma-202s. The sky was so filled with enemy fighters that TSgt. William I. Craton, Engineer and Top Turret Gunner, reported shooting down a fighter he wasn't even aiming at; it simply flew through his line of fire.<sup>28</sup>

Early in the attack, three of the B-17's engines were knocked out. By the time the fighting aboard the plane was about over, only one engine was still running. With only one engine, the plane couldn't maintain its required speed, and it got separated from the rest of the group.

During combat, my father always used the left waist gun position. Sgt. Louis Snitkin, Gunner, was assigned to the radio operator's gun position. On the fatal flight my father was hit in the legs by shrapnel.<sup>29</sup> The shrapnel knocked him down. As he sat on the floor, pieces of shrapnel pierced the skin of the fuselage along a line just over his head. He got back up and continued firing. He was hit in the legs by shrapnel a second time and again knocked down.<sup>30</sup>

At the end, two fighters attacked the B-17 from the right rear. TSgt. Craton got one of them. The other one did the final damage as it shot up the bomb bay, setting it on fire. Because oxygen was kept there, and was apparently leaking into the aircraft, the fire, in the words of TSgt. Craton, "burned bright and hot." Since they had not yet reached the target, the bombs were still there. It was apparent to everyone that they had to bail out, but with the fire and with the bombs still in place, it was impossible to use the bomb bay for that purpose.

Five crewmembers were located in front of the bomb bay. These were the pilot, copilot, navigator, bombardier, and the top turret gunner. Five were located behind the bomb bay. These were the radio operator (my dad, who was manning the left waist gun), the right waist gunner, the tail gunner, the ball turret gunner, and the gunner assigned to the gun at the radio operator's position.

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<sup>26</sup> Per an audiotape received from William I. Craton on October 4, 1994.

<sup>27</sup> 99th BGHS *Newsletter*, May 1984, pp. 16-17.

<sup>28</sup> Op. cit., Craton audiotape.

<sup>29</sup> Per Veterans Administration, *Report of Physical Examination*, March 2, 1946, the wounds were "Gun shot wound—left thigh, right thigh and left leg."

<sup>30</sup> My father told me about being hit by shrapnel, getting back up, and being hit again.

Those in front of the bomb bay were lined up waiting for each to bail out through the front crew hatch. The navigator got out but the bombardier, copilot, and pilot never made it. All were killed when the plane exploded. The pilot had intended to be the last one out.<sup>31</sup>

The top turret gunner was driven headfirst through the roof of the aircraft when it exploded. He suffered very serious wounds to his head. His head wounds were so severe, in fact, that he lost his memory for several months while he was hospitalized in Italy as a POW.<sup>32</sup>

When SSgt. James A. "Jay" Harold, Right Waist Gunner, bailed out of the aircraft, his parachute became snagged on the right horizontal stabilizer<sup>33</sup>. Though he desperately tried to free himself, he failed. He was pulled to his death as the aft section of the aircraft plummeted to Earth.<sup>34</sup>

Before the plane exploded, my father crawled to the door at the rear, starboard side of the aircraft where SSgt. Frank A. Curley, ball turret gunner, was struggling to get the door open. Dad removed the door's hinge pins and succeeded in opening the door.<sup>35</sup> Either by himself or with the help of other crewmen, Dad threw the ball turret gunner out the door.<sup>36</sup> SSgt. Curley had been injured too badly to exit the aircraft without help. He was so badly injured, in fact, that shortly after his capture by the Germans, he was exchanged for a badly wounded German prisoner held by the Allies. Frank A. Curley survived but remained a paraplegic.

My father fell into unconsciousness due to his wounds after leaving the aircraft. While still unconscious, he was taken into captivity. He ended up in a Red Cross hospital on Sicily.<sup>37</sup> I don't know the location of that hospital.<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> Op. cit., Craton audiotape.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

<sup>33</sup> The horizontal stabilizer is the small wing at the back of most airplanes.

<sup>34</sup> Op. cit., Craton audiotape.

<sup>35</sup> As told to me by my father. NOTE: The door's hinge pins were made to be readily removed.

<sup>36</sup> Op. cit., Craton audiotape. My father related this story to William I. Craton when they encountered each other at Stalag 17B.

<sup>37</sup> The fact that it was a Red Cross hospital is attested to by *Veteran's Application for Pension or Compensation*, dated September 10, 1945.

<sup>38</sup> John Finnegan (Graham crew) was hospitalized at Noto, Sicily, per 99th BGHS *Newsletter*, July 1984, p. 4. David Fleming and Allen Huckabee (both A.E. Davis crew) were hospitalized at Ragusa, Sicily, per 99th BGHS *Newsletter*, September 1988, p. 38. The A.E. Davis aircraft (tail number 229483) crashed at Comiso, Sicily, per a casualty report completed by Vincent E. Shank (A.E. Davis crew) and contained in MACR 1133. Allan J. Ewoldt, Robert W. Mills, Carson K. Logan, and Frank M. Esposito (all of the A.E. Davis crew) were buried at Scicli, Sicily, per V.E. Shank in MACR 1133. William I. Craton (Devane crew) reported that he parachuted right into the target area amid the fire and smoke, per an audiotape received from him on October 4, 1994. Edward B. Drueding (Devane crew) told his wife he thought he was parachuting into a volcano. However, he landed in a field where he was taken prisoner, per a letter from his widow, Margaret M. Cattie, to me dated September 17, 1994. This suggests he landed in the same area as William I. Craton.

The navigator was injured by his parachute and ended up being hospitalized on Sicily at the same location where my father had been taken.<sup>39</sup>

As if his severe head wounds and other wounds to the body weren't enough injury to one man, enemy fighters shot at the top turret gunner while he was descending with his parachute. One round hit him in the leg. In an effort to prevent further attacks, he feigned death. The ruse apparently worked.<sup>40</sup>

This raid marked the first of two in which the 99th Bomb Group earned a Distinguished Unit Citation. It had been my father's 21st mission.<sup>41</sup>

This is the official report of the combat over Sicily on July 5, 1943:<sup>42</sup>

5 July 1943

SUPPLEMENTAL DETAILED REPORT ON ENEMY TACTICS AND AERIAL  
BOMBING ENEMY TACTICS

Notary<sup>43</sup> group of Underwears<sup>44</sup> was attacked at a base altitude of 21,000, about 15 minutes before reaching the target, Gerbini A/D [airdrome]. At least 100 E/As [enemy aircraft] participated in the attack. In the attacking force were Me-109s, FW-190s, Ma-202s. The 202s were painted pea green. Some of the 109s had yellow noses and yellow wing tips. Some of the A/C [aircraft] (unidentified) had white strips painted around the fuselage, just behind the cockpit. In some instances, the E/A attacked in formation, line-a-stern, from 10 to 2 o'clock. After firing at one element, the formation dove under and fired at the second. The E/As zoomed over this element and came in again on another element from the front. Another attack came from 12 o'clock by sixteen fighters. Shortly before reaching the Underwear, the formation split into two flights and the two flights then attacked from three and nine o'clock. Still another type of attack came when six to eight E/As rode far out with the formation. They would peel off and hit the formation from 12 to 3 o'clock in rapid succession, all attacks appeared to be designed to split up the formation.

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<sup>39</sup> Refer to Footnote 53 for details.

<sup>40</sup> Op. cit., Craton audiotape.

<sup>41</sup> Per records provided to me by Warren B. Whitmore, my father's Commanding Officer, in a letter dated July 11, 1994. (Mr. Whitmore's date is in error. The actual date was *December* 11, 1994. The error might have been due to Mr. Whitmore's admitted memory problems.)

<sup>42</sup> 99th BGHS *Newsletter*, November 1986, pp. 16-17. This narrative is as accurate a transcription of the referent text as possible. Words in brackets, [ ], were added by me for clarity. Some corrections of typographical errors were included; these include corrections of spelling errors and capitalization only. The text in italics was emphasized by me.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 15. This is the name from the intelligence report given to the "Unit" of the raid; i.e., "Notary" is the 99th Bombardment Group.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 15. This is the code word from the intelligence report used to represent "B-17"; i.e., the blank space labeled "Type A/C" is filled in with "Underwear". Clearly, the type of aircraft was actually B-17 so that "Underwear" is B-17.

Three Underwears of the Notary group were lost over the target and during the turn off the target. *One exploded in midair.*<sup>45</sup> A second crash landed on a beach on the east coast and was on fire when E/As dove at the blazing aircraft and machine gunned it. A third Underwear was last seen headed toward the sea with smoke and flame streaming from it.<sup>46</sup> Five members bailed out from the two ships.<sup>47</sup>

E/As followed the jumpers down and made passes at them, firing continuously. There were four ME-109s in this attack on the chutists. Unconfirmed reports were that two of the chutes were seen to catch fire. At times the attackers came so close they almost rammed the Underwears. Preliminary survey shows that the Notary group shot down at least 30 E/As and possibly 45. Combat claims are being investigated. One crew claimed 13 E/As.<sup>48</sup>

### HOSPITALIZATION AND CAPTIVITY

During his hospital stay on Sicily, my father could see smoke rising from Mt. Etna. The area near the hospital was bombed regularly by American and British bombers. American bombers attacked during the days and British bombers attacked during the nights. As each bombing raid began, hospital personnel carried my father on a stretcher, down one or more flights of stairs, to a basement, cellar, or bomb shelter. On one such occasion they almost dropped him. Following that near accident, he refused to be moved during bombing raids. His decision made him vulnerable whenever the bombs fell. (My mother reports that, while I was a baby, a formation of B-17s thundered over our house in Detroit. My father stood at the back door and watched the planes fly past. She said that his knees literally shook. Clearly, his experience at the Sicilian hospital had taken its toll.)

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<sup>45</sup> This was Dad's aircraft, though, at first, I did not believe this to be the case. In an audiotape received on October 4, 1994, from William I. Craton, Engineer & Top Turret Gunner on my father's aircraft, the plane exploded prior to reaching the target. The explosion of my father's aircraft is confirmed by a written statement by SSgt. Rex G. Youngblood (tail gunner on W.C. Davis crew, aircraft 225842) found in a missing aircrew report (MACR 1133) and by a report by Edward B. Drueding (navigator on Devane crew) to his wife per a letter from his widow, Margaret M. Cattie, to me, dated December 3, 1994. My recollection of my father's story was that the aircraft was losing altitude as it flew out to sea. Note that in a *Registration of RAMP*, filled out by my father upon his liberation in 1945, he reported that he was captured at Catania, not Gerbini. However, the confusion of the moment may have led to confusion about the details of the downing of the plane. At the time of Mr. Craton's verbal narrative, he was the last living member of the crew. Mr. Craton also said that during the Gerbini raid my father's aircraft was responsible for shooting down 11 enemy fighters: 5 by SSgt. Harold A. Yorton, Tail Gunner; 4 by TSgt. William I. Craton, Top Turret Gunner; **2 by TSgt. Harold E. Penoyer**, left waist gunner. (Though my father was the radio operator, he always used the left waist gun during combat.)

<sup>46</sup> Based upon my recollection of my father's description to me, this was apparently my father's aircraft. However, this was *not* my father's aircraft; see Footnote 45 concerning William I. Craton.

<sup>47</sup> My father was originally believed by me to be among those who bailed out per this description. However, see Footnote 45 concerning William I. Craton.

<sup>48</sup> This was the aircraft on which SSgt. Benjamin F. Warmer III, right waist gunner, Casto crew, shot down seven enemy aircraft that day to become the first and only enlisted man air ace in Air Force history (per 99th BGHS *Newsletter*, September 1988, p. 38). He later shot down two more enemy aircraft on another mission and one more on still another mission. Sergeant Warmer was awarded the Distinguished Service Cross and given a commission for his feats. He died of a massive heart attack at the age of 63 on December 6, 1977. He was cremated and is buried at Bellevue Cemetery (Section E, Lot 74), Ontario, California.



My father's leg wounds oozed puss. Beyond bed rest, he received no treatment. However, when he could be moved he was removed from the hospital and taken by boat to the Italian mainland. He was wearing pajamas at the time. Following his movement to the mainland, I have only sparse knowledge of his whereabouts and experiences.<sup>49</sup>

### PRISONER OF WAR

Dad was reported to be in Italian hands on August 2, 1943.<sup>50</sup> He was reported to have been held at Stalag 7A near Moosburg, Germany, on January 9, 1944.<sup>51</sup> Moosburg is located about 70 miles NNE of Trieste, Italy, and about 160 miles SE of Munich, Germany. (Moosburg is identified on some maps as *Moosburg in Kärnten*.) He was present at Stalag 17B near Krems, Austria, on April 18, 1944, where he was Prisoner 105 988.<sup>52</sup> (In German, Krems is *Krems an der Donau*, i.e., Krems on the Danube.) Krems is located about 38 miles WNW of Vienna.

There is a very good possibility that, while in Italian hands, my father was held at Aversa, Italy, near Naples.<sup>53</sup> It is likely, also, that he was taken from Aversa to Sulmona, Italy. One of his two escapes might have occurred at Sulmona.<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>49</sup> Per Veterans Administration, *Report of Physical Examination*, March 2, 1946, he was hospitalized for "one month" after being captured. Since the invasion of Sicily occurred on July 10, only five days after his capture, and he was moved before then, it appears that he remained hospitalized on the mainland for the remainder of the one-month period. The hospitalization would have ended in early August. This is consistent with his reported movement by prisoner train on August 31, 1943; see Footnote 53 regarding Lt. Drueding on a prisoner train.

<sup>50</sup> Per a letter from the International Committee of the Red Cross, dated April 14, 1995.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.* His presence there is also confirmed by my father's stories to me, a report by William I. Craton who said that my father probably arrived there in late 1944—after the Italian family had cared him for. A mug shot in my possession shows my father as a prisoner with *XVIIIB* written on a small blackboard. My father told me that, during a prisoner march, a German soldier pointed out to him the castle where Richard I (Lionheart) of England was held captive. Richard was held in a castle at Dürnstein, Austria, located about five miles west of Krems, on the north shore of the Danube.

<sup>53</sup> I interpret from handwritten notes on the back of a photograph of my father's crew that my father was in the same Sicilian hospital with his navigator, 1st Lt. Edward B. Drueding. The navigator's widow, Margaret M. Cattie, in a letter dated September 17, 1994, has informed me that she twice received a letter from her husband from Campo Consentramento - P.G. No. 66 PM 3400 during August 1943. This concentration camp was identified to me as Aversa, Italy, by a communication from Marco Giubbilei, dated April 2, 1995. In a casualty report, my father indicated that he last saw Lt. Drueding on a prisoner train on August 31, 1943. I surmise from this that my father and the lieutenant were together from the Gerbini mission on July 5 until August 31, 1943; hence, I conclude my father was at Aversa.

<sup>54</sup> Records from the Veterans Administration dated January 5, 1962, indicate my father escaped from an Italian POW camp on September 14, 1943. A letter from Vincent Shank, dated March 21, 1995, explains that an Italian enlisted men's POW camp at Sulmona was evacuated by all enlisted men following the Italian capitulation of September 8, 1943. William I. Craton (see other footnotes regarding him) has informed me that my father told him that all of the POWs simply ran off from his camp after the Italians surrendered. The correlation of these details—if there is a correlation—suggests my father was at Sulmona. In the referent letter from V. Shank, he informs me that PG 21 at Chieti, Italy, was a POW camp for officers. Given the relative locations of Aversa, Sulmona, and Chieti, it is completely plausible that my

## *The Farmhouse*

During his captivity, Dad escaped twice but was recaptured each time. During one of his escapes he suffered from hepatitis. Being very sick, he took refuge in an Italian barn. The family there found him and took him either to a room on the second floor or to the attic of their house. They even went to town to get *their* doctor and brought him back to treat my father. Dad might have stayed with the Italian family for a month or two.<sup>55</sup>

The couple there had two daughters. It was the job of the wife and daughters to make their pasta by hand. The pasta was made by hand-cranking a machine. The women could barely manage the task. Feeling sorry for them, and feeling indebted to them, Dad offered to help the women turn the crank. At first, he was too weak to do this, but he did help when he regained some of his strength. On one such occasion, the husband returned to the house and became very angry that my father was performing work when he was supposed to be sick.

One day a stranger approached the farmhouse. Seeing him, Dad ran and hid in the barn. The man told the family that if they knew of any escaped POWs, there would be a meeting at a river a few days hence where the men would be taken to safety. My father stayed in the barn for quite a long time after the man left. One of the daughters, while appearing to perform her normal chores, slowly worked her way to the barn where she informed him that he could safely leave the barn.

Dad made the decision to be at the river at the appointed time. He was physically well enough to travel by this time. He felt very grateful to the family that had cared for him for so long. (It must have been several months.) Their generosity was all the more poignant because of the risk that their care of an escaped POW posed to the whole family. But Dad had nothing of value to give the family to express his gratitude. For want of anything better, he gave the husband his overcoat.

When he arrived at the river, several other escaped POWs were already there. While they waited, a distinguished looking man rode up to the opposite shore of the river on horseback and spoke to them with a distinctly British accent. This event made my father suspicious. (He probably felt that too many people knew about the upcoming “rescue.”) After the man on the horse had left, Dad announced that he thought something was

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father and Lt. Drueding were moved together by train (see Footnote 53) from Aversa to Sulmona, where my father and the other enlisted POWs on the train were dropped off, and the train then continued to Chieti, where the officers were dropped off. Hence, Sulmona appears to be a place where my father was held as a POW and as a place where he escaped.

<sup>55</sup> Hepatitis A is associated with unsanitary conditions such as fecal-contaminated drinking water. Germination requires two to six weeks. Symptoms typically last one to two months. The cause, symptoms (described to me by my father), and timing of hepatitis A symptoms appear to make this disease the likely type of hepatitis that my father contracted. Regarding timing, my father was taken captive on July 5, escaped on September 14, and was a POW at Stalag 7A near Moosburg, Germany the following January; thus, he had time to contract the disease, experience symptoms, encounter the Italian family, be free of the disease, and be in German hands. The time line fits.

wrong. He said he was leaving, and invited anyone who felt the same to go with him. Apparently, several did.

My father told my mother that he would one day like to return to visit that family. He never did. Nor did he tell my mother the name of the family or their location.<sup>56</sup>

Dad was recaptured following both of his escapes. He refused to tell me how he was able to escape because he had promised he would tell no one.

### EVACUATION OF STALAG 17B AND THE MARCH WEST<sup>57</sup>

On April 6, 1945, the POWs at Stalag 17B were told to prepare to evacuate. The Russians were rumored to be 30 miles from Krems. It rained heavily on April 7, so the POWs were not moved on that day. On April 8, Dad's birthday, the POWs were ordered out of the camp. All of those able to walk were evacuated by noon.<sup>58</sup> They were organized into eight groups of 500 each and marched west along the Danube with a few miles between groups. The routine was 50 minutes of march and 10 minutes of rest—sometimes.

My father told me that during the march, a German soldier pointed out to him the castle where Richard I of England was held captive.<sup>59</sup>

After three days, the POWs were given a 24-hour rest. By this time the POWs had heard that the Russians had bombed Krems, though none of the American prisoners left behind was injured despite a few bombs landing in the prison camp.

The prisoners had Red Cross packages delivered to them from time to time. The prisoners were also required/allowed to beg food from homes along the way.<sup>60</sup> The German guards were also short of food and sometimes the POWs would share their food with them.

By April 12 the POWs were nearing Linz along the Danube. "From April 21<sup>st</sup> on it rained, sleeted, and even snowed."

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<sup>56</sup> The entire story about the Italian family was related to me by my mother in August 1994.

<sup>57</sup> This section relies heavily upon a small book titled *Kriegie Memories*. "Kriegie" is how the prisoners sometimes referred to themselves; it comes from the German word *Kriegsgefangen*, i.e., prisoner of war. The book was written by a former POW at Stalag 17B, Ben Phelper (Stalag 17B prisoner 113204,) whose intended readers were those who had been POWs at that camp. It is filled with photographs of Stalag 17B and the march west. The copy I have is a photocopy that was very generously provided to me by Mr. Phelper via Robert Nori as the result of a letter I wrote to Mr. Nori. Mr. Nori was Stalag 17B prisoner 106208; he had been Radio Operator on aircraft 232062 of the 416<sup>th</sup> Squadron of the 99<sup>th</sup> Bomb Group, piloted by Joseph Moffitt. The Moffitt crew was shot down during a raid on Steyr, Austria on April 2, 1944.

<sup>58</sup> Per <http://www.b24.net/pow/stalag17.htm>, those who were left behind were liberated by the Russians on May 9.

<sup>59</sup> Richard (Lionheart) was held in a castle at Dürnstein, Austria, located about five miles west of Krems on the north shore of the Danube. Richard had been captured in 1192 on his return from the Third Crusade by Duke Leopold of Austria, his sworn enemy. The ruins of that castle are all that remain today.

<sup>60</sup> Op. cit., Craton audiotape.

On April 25, the POWs arrived at Ranshofen, a small town immediately southwest of Braunau, Hitler's birthplace. They had marched 281 miles.<sup>61</sup> They were still in Austria, just across the River Inn from Germany. The POWs built shelters out of whatever was available: barbed wire, bark stripped from trees in the area, logs, etc. They fashioned shelters, latrines, a hospital, and then tables. By May 1<sup>st</sup> they had built huts, log cabins, lean-tos, and wigwams.

Hitler committed suicide on April 30.

### LIBERATION

One POW<sup>62</sup> reports that on May 2<sup>nd</sup> at 6:30 p.m., an American captain walked into the camp carrying a .45. Seeing him, the American POWs cheered wildly. The captain told the POWs that they were no longer prisoners but were again American soldiers.

The next day, May 3<sup>rd</sup>, four jeeps full of U.S. soldiers arrived with an American colonel in charge. They took the 205 German guards as prisoners.<sup>63</sup> Other soldiers of the same unit followed shortly. After months for some, and years for others, the American airmen were finally free.

Dad reported that he was liberated from captivity on May 3<sup>rd</sup> 1945, by units of General George Patton's Third Army.<sup>65,66</sup>

The German high command surrendered to Gen. Eisenhower at his headquarters on May 7.<sup>67</sup> The formal German surrender took place on May 8.

The former POWs were flown to France by C-47 on May 9.<sup>68</sup> My father told me that his pilot, apparently celebrating the Victory in Europe, flew the C-47 under a bridge. Dad was very angry: he had survived combat, had escaped and been recaptured without being killed, had survived hepatitis, had survived nearly two years of prison camps, survived the march from Krems, and here he was aboard a plane whose pilot was carelessly risking everyone's life by flying under a bridge!

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<sup>61</sup> Per <http://www.b24.net/pow/stalag17.htm>.

<sup>62</sup> Ben Phelper in his book, *Kriegie Memories*. See footnote a few notes above.

<sup>63</sup> Per <http://www.b24.net/pow/stalag17.htm>, there were three jeeps carrying six soldiers of the 13<sup>th</sup> Armored Division. Note: The 13<sup>th</sup> Armored was part of Patton's 3<sup>rd</sup> Army.

<sup>64</sup> This date is per a *Registration of RAMP*, filled out by my father after his liberation in May 1945.

<sup>65</sup> My father told me that it was Patton's army.

<sup>66</sup> According to *Crusade in Europe*, by Dwight D. Eisenhower, Doubleday & Co., Garden City, New York, 1948, p. 417, the 11th Armored Division of the XII Corps, of Patton's Third Army captured Linz, Austria on May 5, having traveled across and along the Danube. It is very possible this was the unit that liberated my father since they captured Linz two days after my father's own reported date of liberation.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 426.

<sup>68</sup> Per <http://www.b24.net/pow/stalag17.htm>.

Dad eventually reached Camp Lucky Strike near Le Havre, France.<sup>69,70</sup>

Following combat, and nearly two years of captivity, Dad departed Europe for home on June 2, 1945, arriving in the United States on June 11, 1945.<sup>71</sup> He was honorably discharged at Fort McPherson, Georgia, on September 4, 1945.<sup>72</sup>

### EPILOG

Among the mementos my father had from his capture and captivity were three of significance. Images of each of these items, plus others, are provided at the end of this presentation:

1. Mug shots taken of him by the Germans at Stalag 17B and dated “Jan. ‘44”. He was, understandably, very serious-looking, with a sore on his face due to malnutrition. (See page 16.)
2. A hand-drawn map containing concentric circles indicating distances from his prison camp near Krems (the site of Stalag 17B) at the center. There are a number of towns marked across the map. (See page 18.)
3. The MIA telegram sent to his parents dated August 3, 1943. (See page 19.)

Though my father refused to tell me how he came into possession of the mug shots, a third-party source has informed me that many American POWs got their mug shots when the German guards abandoned the camp after finding out that the Russian Army was on its way.

My father also refused to tell me how he was able to draw the map. However, I have found out that the prisoners would receive packages from “home,” sometimes from people they didn’t know. The packages might include board games or baseballs. The POWs discovered that if they took the board games apart, there were maps, guides, or money in them. They found that baseballs had compasses in them.<sup>73</sup>

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<sup>69</sup> Dad kept a letter that had this letterhead: Headquarters, Camp Lucky Strike, Northern District, NBS, Com Z, ETO.

<sup>70</sup> Op. cit., *Crusade in Europe*, p. 420, cites Le Havre as the location of Camp Lucky Strike.

<sup>71</sup> From honorable discharge.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid.

<sup>73</sup> William I. Craton provided the information about the provision of maps, guides, money, and compasses.

A personal note: I cannot help recalling the movie *The Great Escape* (1963), a true story in which a group of primarily British airmen plots an escape from a German POW camp.<sup>74</sup> The character played by Steve McQueen escapes multiple times. He is recaptured and put into solitary confinement each time. As he enters the solitary confinement cell, another prisoner hands him his baseball glove and a baseball. Once in the cell, McQueen's character confidently settles down to a ritual of bouncing the baseball off the floor and wall of his cell. Now that I know that baseballs contained compasses to facilitate escapes, I have to wonder: *How many WWII veterans sat in darkened movie theaters watching that movie, knowing the significance of McQueen's baseball—while their families and the rest of us missed its poignancy entirely?*

This is the text of the Distinguished Unit Citation for the mission of July 5, 1943:<sup>75</sup>

For outstanding performance of duty in armed conflict with the enemy on 5 July 1943. When it was necessary to neutralize Sicilian based fighters immediately prior to the invasion, the 99th Bombardment Group was called to furnish twenty-four (24) B-17 type aircraft to attack with fragmentation bombs and destroy enemy fighters and installations on the south half of the main airfield at Gerbini. As twenty-seven (27) Fortresses of the 99th Bombardment Group neared the target, they were attacked by an estimated one hundred (100) enemy aircraft consisting of ME-109s, FW-190s, and Macchi 202s which made persistent aggressive and determined attacks from all angles, singularly and in groups, in a furious attempt to break up the bomber formation. Returning the fire with devastating effect, the 99th Bombardment Group successfully penetrated the enemy defenses and dropped three thousand, two hundred, and forty (3,240) fragmentation bombs, covering the assigned target so completely that twenty (20) out of twenty-eight (28) enemy fighters on the ground were destroyed and many installations including hangars, fuel supplies, and ammunition dumps were severely damaged.

During the battle with enemy fighters in the air which continued before, during, and after the bombing run, the Fortresses of the 99th Bombardment Group took a terrific toll of the enemy planes. Officially approved claims consisted of thirty-eight (38) fighters destroyed, eleven (11) probably destroyed, and one (1) damaged, against the loss of three (3) bombers. The destruction of seventy (70) enemy fighters by this group in a single mission was a serious blow to the defenses of Sicily, and played a major part in setting the stage for the invasion five (5) days later.

By the courage, heroism, and determination of the air crews, together with the professional skill and devotion to duty of the ground personnel, the officers and men of the 99th Bombardment Group have upheld the highest traditions of the Military Service, thereby reflecting great credit upon themselves and the Armed Forces of the United States of America.

By Command of Major General Twining

During the War my father reached the rank of Technical Sergeant and was awarded a Purple Heart, an Air Medal with four oak leaf clusters, a European African Middle Eastern Theatre Ribbon with three bronze stars, and a Prisoner of War Medal.<sup>76</sup> He flew 21 combat missions. The 99th Bomb Group received a Distinguished Unit Citation for the mission on which he was wounded and captured. He survived two years in Italian and

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<sup>74</sup> The movie depicts the true account of the great escape from Stalag Luft III, near Sagan, now Zagan, Poland.

<sup>75</sup> 99th BGHS *Newsletter*, February 1994.

<sup>76</sup> The Prisoner of War Medal was awarded to my father by the Department of the Air Force on March 13, 1995 following my request contained in a letter dated August 26, 1994.

German prison camps, escaping twice. Dad died November 30, 1978 at the age of 60 from complications due to lung cancer. He is buried at Palm Valley View Memorial Park near Las Vegas, Nevada.<sup>77</sup>

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<sup>77</sup> 7600 S. Eastern Avenue, Las Vegas, Nevada, 89123.

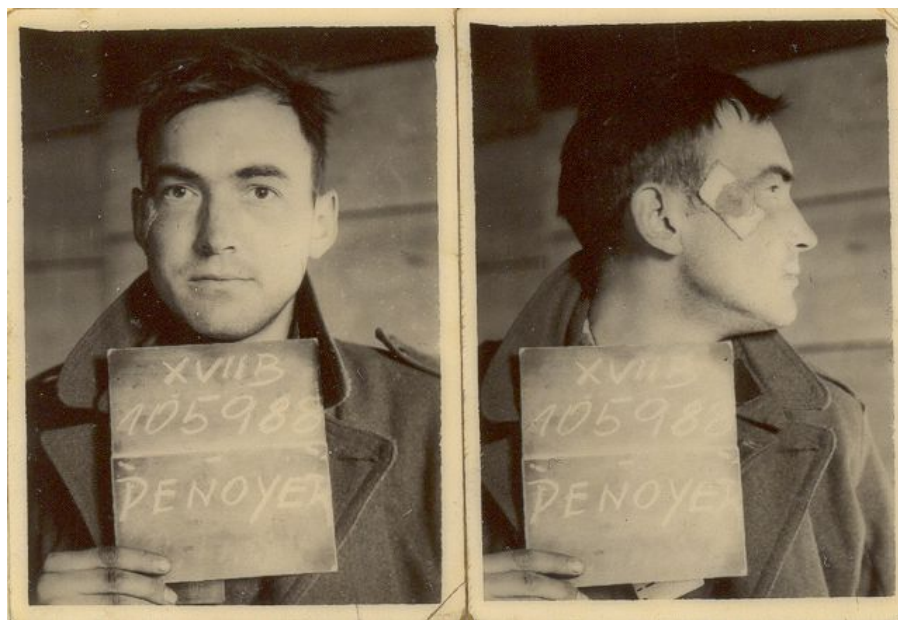
## Some Pictures



**Dad, 1977. This image is the most recent available. It was his driver license picture taken in 1977. He died in November 1978.**



**Dad, 1943. This picture is from the crew picture that was taken at Morrison Field, Florida, in January 1943.**



**Dad, 1944. These mug shots were taken at Stalag 17B, probably in April 1944.**



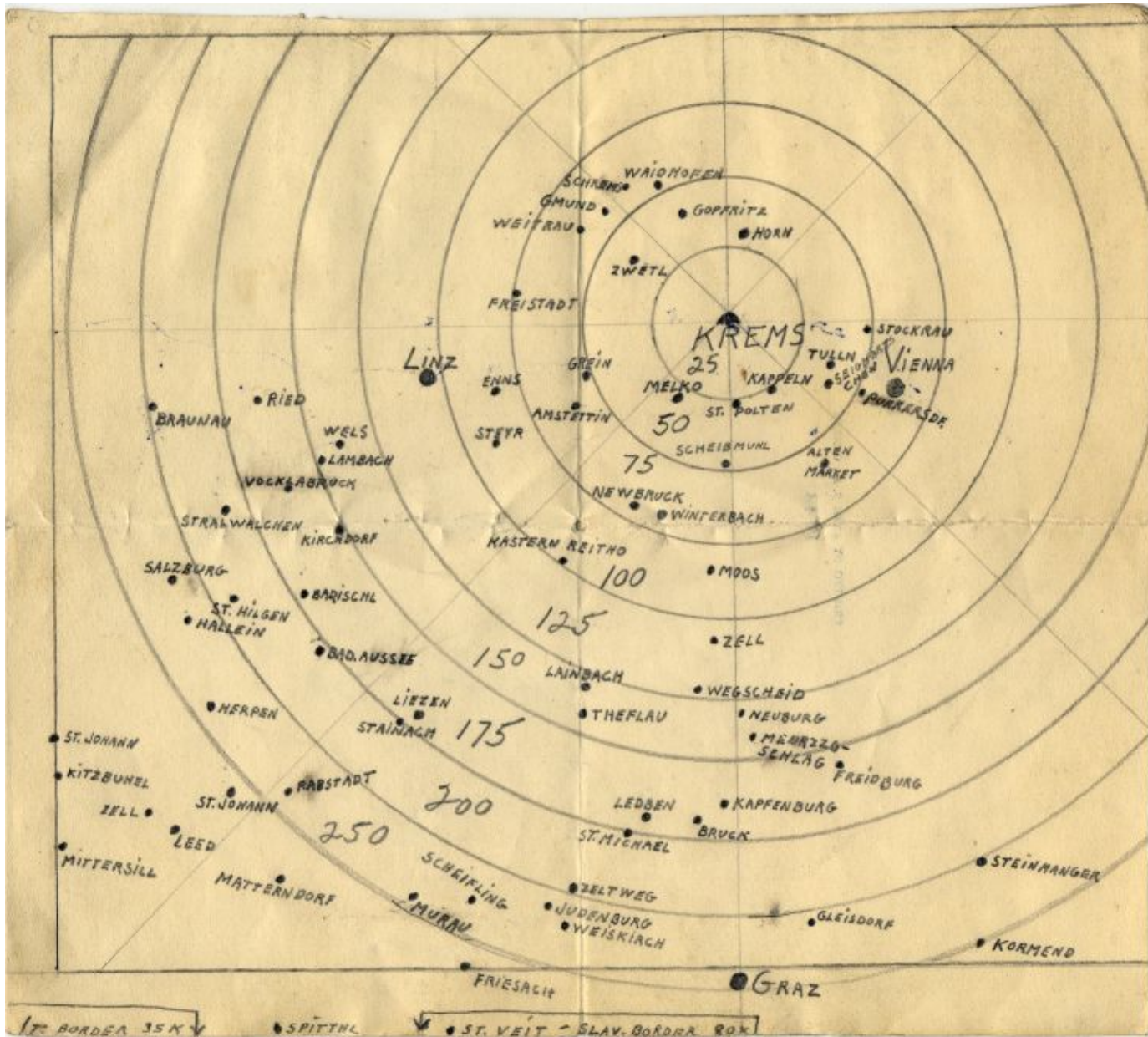


**THE CREW OF AIRCRAFT 42-29486, MORRISON FIELD, FLORIDA, JANUARY 1943**

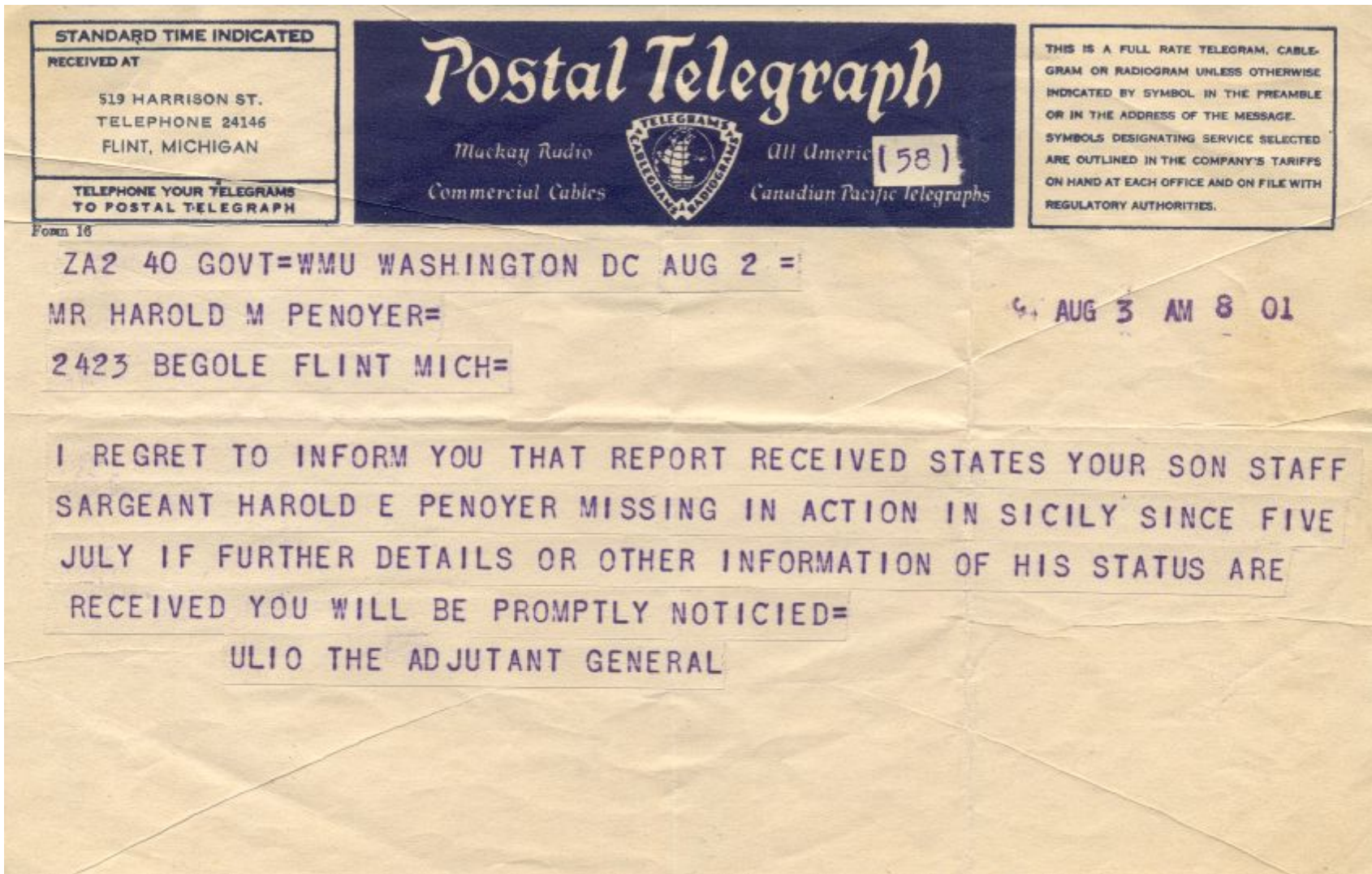
**Front row left to right: 1<sup>st</sup> Lt. Edward B. Drueding, Navigator (wounded at Gerbini); 1<sup>st</sup> Lt. Martin J. Devane, Pilot (killed at Gerbini); 2<sup>nd</sup> Lt. Howard L. Freeburg, Copilot (killed at Gerbini); 2<sup>nd</sup> Lt. George J. Doyle, Bombardier (not on Gerbini flight).**

**Second row left to right: TSgt. William I. Craton, Engineer and Top Turret Gunner (severely wounded at Gerbini); SSgt. Harold A. Yorton, Tail Gunner (not wounded); TSgt. Harold E. Penoyer, Radio Operator and Left Waist Gunner (wounded at Gerbini); SSgt. James A. Harold, Right Waist Gunner (killed at Gerbini); SSgt. Frank A. Curley, Ball Turret Gunner (severely wounded at Gerbini).**

**Not shown: 2<sup>nd</sup> Lt. Sanford V. "Sammy" Lavine, Bombardier (killed at Gerbini); Sgt. Louis A. Snitkin, Gunner (killed at Gerbini).**



The escape map. Krems, the site of Stalag 17B near the Danube River in Austria is highlighted. This image is about 85% of full scale.



The MIA telegram received by my grandparents. The image is about 95% of full size.