

November 27, 1999

*Memorable  
experience*

Military Personnel Records  
9700 Page Avenue  
Saint Louis, Missouri 63132-5100

Dear Sir or Madam:

In July 1943, I was transferred from a P-47 training squadron in Westover Field, Massachusetts to the 384th B-17 Bomb Group in Pyote, Texas. In November, the 384th Bomb Group moved overseas to Grafton Underwood, England. I was a pilot in the 544th Squadron. On our 13th mission over Europe, our target was the German ball bearing complex in Stuttgart. We were flying in tight formation due to a large concentration of enemy fighters over the Rhine River. As we approached the river, our number one engine ran away and we had to fetter it. We decided to carry on the mission instead of aborting. In order to stay with the bomb group on three engines, we had to use nearly full power. Ten minutes later, the number three engine quit. We had no chance of staying with the group or returning to our base in England. With a full bomb load on two engines, we asked the navigator for a compass heading to Switzerland, a neutral country. Then we jettisoned the bombs. As we fell out of formation, the Messerschmidt and Folke-Wulf fighters attacked. They had 20 millimeter cannons in their fighters against our 50 caliber machine guns. We were out-gunned. During the battle, we lost another engine. It was bail out time or die. We had no communication with the men in the back of the aircraft, so I volunteered to go back to see if the airmen were still alive. The other pilot, the bombardier, and the navigator slid out of the forward hatch. As I passed the engineer's station, which was vacant, I could see that there were no gunners at their stations. I continued over the walk between the open bomb doors and looked down at the snow covered ground which was an ominous, ugly view. I knew that I had to locate the tail gunner if he had not bailed out as the other crewmen had. As I passed the bomb bay, I saw Sergeant Moore, the tail gunner, coming out of the tail. He had remained at his post firing at the enemy while the other crew members had jumped ship. I beckoned for him to

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jump, but he hesitated. In the next instant, I heard the sound of machine fire penetrating our aircraft's skin. Suddenly, I felt as though someone had hit me in the head with a club. Blood streamed down my face. Moore jumped and I followed. While in free fall I found I could not see and wondered if I was going blind. I reached up with my hand and found my eyes were frozen shut due to the below zero temperature. I did not delay pulling the ripcord to prevent being shot in chute as we had been instructed, but I pulled it immediately. As I floated down, I could see in the distance "Old Five by Five" being used as target practice by the German pilots. She was hurtling down, spewing smoke and fire. As a last gesture of defiance, she landed in the center of a town with a terrific explosion. We learned the town's name was New Ulm. I floated to earth and was met by two German farmers with shotguns. They took me to a nearby farmhouse. The lady washed my wound. I looked at the calendar and noted that it was February 25, 1944. Soon the Wehrmacht soldiers arrived and marched me to their barracks. On the way, they stopped and aimed their rifles at me and demanded my bomber jacket. I protested but to no avail. After all, they had rifles and now they had my jacket. At their barracks in town, a doctor probed my wound for metal fragments. He said I was very lucky and bandaged my head. I was taken by train to the Interrogation Center in Oberusol, Frankfurt, which took two days. There I was subject to intense interrogation and two weeks in solitary confinement before traveling with a number of other men to Stalag Luft I in Barth, Germany. This took four days in a crowded forty-and-eight boxcar with little food, water, or space. In May of 1945, we were liberated by Soviet troops.

I gave no thought to a Purple Heart until much later when I applied to the Veteran's Administration for treatment. The VA awarded me a rating, which included 10% for a scar, due to my head wound which is still evident.

Sincerely,

Warren F. Donovan  
Lt. Col. Ret.

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