

FIRE OVER THE ALPS:

LET'S GET THE HELL OUT OF HERE

BY

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This is one of the few stories of a little-known chapter in WWII history that has been neglected and somewhat distorted in the pages of wartime history. It is the story of Americans and Allied troops caught in the web of war in the middle of Nazi Europe. I am sure there were RU men interested in this all but forgotten episode of that war. It must be a part of the historical record of WWII.

The bomb pattern was good and I saw our bombs hit the runways, blow up enemy fighters and set many fires.

However, something was wrong. We did not keep up with the formation and were a target for the enemy fighters and flak that filled the skies.

German fighters were now closing in on us for the kill. "They're coming after us!" I shouted into the intercom. "Let's get the hell out of here."

In advance of D-Day, the U.S. 8th Air Force flew many missions to soften up German airfields, military sites and troop concentrations. On the morning of April 13, 1944 my crew left Shipdham Air Base in England for Augsburg, Germany, to destroy the Luftwaffe air base and its experimental ME 262 jet fighter facilities. The date April 13, 1944.

I was the tail gunner and radio operator for a B-24 Liberator assigned to the 67th Squadron, 44th Bomber Group, known as The Flying Eightballs. Our pilot was Lt. Rockford "Rocky" C. Griffith, an exceptional flyer who had already won the Silver Star for bringing our heavily damaged plane back from a mission to Norway.

Hours later, a massive formation of American bombers converged on the Lechfeld air base near Dachau south of Augsburg, in extreme southern Germany. We were deep inside Nazi-occupied Europe and about 700 miles from our bases in England. At first we ran into heavy flak and, closing in on Augsburg, a swarming attack by some of Hitler's best fighter *staffels*. In a fierce firefight over the target area, our B-24 was hit in the fuel supply and limped out of German air space in the direction of the Swiss border. Pursued in enemy fighters we headed for the snowy peaks of the Alps.

There had been reports of civilian mobs beating American air crews and we had been warned not to come down in German territory. The crew voted to divert to Swiss territory and Lt. Griffith asked me to send a coded emergency message. I sent the message, even though we were supposed to maintain radio silence. The last the formation saw of us we were heading toward Switzerland with a steady stream of fuel coming out of our tanks. They thought an explosion would blow us to bits. As we neared the border three or four bursts of flak hit us, one wounding

our waist gunner, Sgt. Jack Harmon, and narrowly missing me in the radio section. Lt. Griffith put us into a steep dive to the left and down. Just at that second four more bursts of flak hit where we had been. The flak gunners had gotten our range and altitude. We feared the next barrage would take us down for good. It was touch and go and death or capture waited at the final turn.

We crossed the shores of Lake Constance at 15,000 feet in a downward spiral vectoring in on the Swiss base at Dubendorf north of Zürich. It was going to be a bumpy landing and we knew it. As we crossed Lac de Constance we were hit again by flak just as our navigator, Ralph Jackson, announced on the intercom we had crossed into so-called neutral territory.

Many American bombers crashed in Swiss territory in lakes, rivers, and in the rugged mountains of the Alps. Many Swiss saw our flaming bombers in the sky and over the Alps. Sixty-two American aircrew men died in battle damaged bombers coming down in Swiss territory.

The Swiss told of bombers crashing and breaking up into flaming wreckage or exploded over the mountains. Sixty years later wreckage is still being found some of it buried in the Swiss earth. There is a cottage industry to find these downed bombers in the Swiss mountains and lakes.

Even to this day the Swiss are digging up wreckage of American bombers in mountains or pulling them out of alpine lakes. Some of the wreckage is in the Swiss Air Force Museum at Dubendorf. The Swiss could not keep their neutral status surrounded on all sides by the war.

Even 50 years later the Swiss are digging up the wreckage of American bombers and pulling them out of lakes. Some old enough tell stories of seeing the bombers on fire struggle over the mountains, the valleys and crash. Over the years more Swiss became engaged in collecting these artifacts and some are in the Swiss Air Force Museum at Dubendorf.

However, our desperate race that April day in 1944 was to beat the pursuing German fighters to the border. They were after us to finish is off.

It was a race of life and death for us.

In Swiss air space we were met by Swiss ME 109 fighters who pointed their noses at us and came in close to make sure we were not going to bomb the Swiss cities. This was right after the American bombing of Schaffhausen, Switzerland, on April 1, 1944, and the Swiss were very nervous about bombers entering their air space. Allied bombers did drop bombs on Swiss cities, among them Zürich and Basle as well as along the Swiss border.

As we neared the main Swiss Air Force base at Dubendorf we were escorted by fighters. However, since we were still not sure if we were actually in Swiss territory, I went back into the rear to flip the detonator switch on the IFF, secret radar, and blow it up. This caused a loud explosion we feared would set off a fire. But we were very low on fuel at this point.

On landing our B24 sheared off a lot of low trees and ran out of runway. I lowered myself out of the bomb bays to find myself surrounded by armed soldiers who looked like German troops. I said to myself, we must have made a mistake and come down in Germany after all. We will be prisoners of war.

I started to walk away from the aircraft. A soldier came up behind me and touched me in the back with his automatic rifle. I stopped, raised my hands and gave up. We learned then that Jack Harmon had been wounded in the hand by a piece of flak and we joked that he would get the Purple Heart for wounds inflicted by Swiss gunners.

We were taken to a base operations headquarters under armed guard and interrogated by Swiss military intelligence for what we knew of the bombing of Schaffhausen for about seven hours, but we answered only with our name, rank and serial number.

Girls from the neighborhood around the base lined up on their bicycles and shouted to us to set up dates with them. We gestured back and forth for some time trying to communicate, they in German and we in English. I figured that all Swiss girls were anxious to meet Americans. Later we learned that some of the girls were informants for the Germans. In Dubendorf we were confined in the playground of a school building. We slept on straw for three days, and once again Swiss girls tried to talk to us through the school gate.

We were taken to a base mess hall, the cleanest I have ever seen. Lt. Griffith said as we sat down to eat, "Now act like gentlemen, and eat correctly and make a good impression." I do not know why he said this, but I assume he thought they were looking to us for information.

After a few days we were taken under armed guard to the main railroad station in Zürich and put on a train to Adelboden in the Alps. It was to be our home for the next several months. We saw for the first time the great fruit-laden stands at Zürich and knew that this must be Switzerland. It was quite a change after war-weary England.

As we marched through the station one or two Swiss civilians raised their hands in menacing gestures, but others showed the V for victory sign. Our guards were all young Swiss recruits and we wondered if they really knew how to shoot. Later we learned that all of them were expert shots and skiers and they made up the best ski troops in Europe.

There was another side of this story, one that influenced my entire life and made all the difference in a world of destruction, death, and the holocaust of the most tragic war in history.

At first we were in shock after all the planes we had seen blown up in the skies, the horror of combat flying, cheating death at high altitudes, the early morning takeoffs in the darkness, the loss of friends, and the dreary world of wartime England under siege. The contrast was overwhelming when we saw the breathtaking beauty of the mountains, peaceful villages and green high pastures of Switzerland. Yet, close at hand, a few miles over the border in Germany many were dying in the work camps and whole cities were being systematically destroyed.

To this day some critics claim that American aircrews diverted to Swiss territory to avoid combat but that is totally false. An official investigation by the Air Force following the war found not one case where an aircrew went down for no justified reasons in Switzerland. But you still hear the reports and they do a great disservice to the men who survived and those who died. The records of this investigation are open to all but it is apparent some people will never believe them.

One more point must be made to set the records straight. The Swiss government did get paid for all airmen in their country and for the rehab of the crippled bombers that came down in their territory. Many of the bombers were sent after repairs back to the U.K. and to Burtonwood in 1945-46.

Swiss banks held many assets of war victims for years after the war and it was not until an international movement was made that these banks agreed to recompense many survivors for their assets held for 50 years. This took many years and many claims that had to be adjudicated.

The air war did come to Swiss territory and skies and no country was able to avoid the impacts of total war.

There was good and evil mixed but the brave men of the Allied air crews deserve all the credit for surviving and some did not make it. It is to them I dedicate this story and to them I pay honor and tribute even 60 years later.

Sources: Swiss Internee Association
Bundes Archiv, Bern, Switzerland
Hans Stapfer, *Strangers in a Strange Land*
Dan Culler, *The Black Hole of Wauwilermoos*
The Dubendorf Aviation Museum
44th Bomb Group Veterans Association.

The author returned in 1987 and visited Adeboden, Wengen and Zurich. The Swiss Internee Association has more than 400 members and holds reunions. Robert A. Long of Lakewood, New Jersey is president. The association is collecting stories by former internees to preserve this part of the history of the WWII air war. Some day the full impartial story of Americans interned in Switzerland will emerge and the men who survived will tell that story in complete form.

Clark escaped in December 1944 by walking with guides over the mountains to the French border and crossing it to Annecy, France. He returned to his base and then to then U.S. in January 1945. He was discharged in October 1945.

Forrest S. Clark

PS—There are memorials to the Americans interned in Switzerland that can be seen today at the church in Adelboden and at Munsigen and Davos.

There is another at the memorial garden of the U.S. Air Force Museum at Wright Patterson Field, Dayton, Ohio. The internees have adopted a slogan "Everlasting Friends." I attest to the facts as I lived them in this story.

THIS IS ONE UNTOLD STORY OF WWII AVIATION AND A CHAPTER IN THAT WAR THAT HISTORY HAS LARGELY OVERLOOKED. THE MEN WHO LIVED IT ARE FEW AND GETTING FEWER AS TIMES PASSES. THE MEN OF THE 8TH AND 15TH AIR FORCES WHO COMPRISED MOST OF THE INTERNEES ARE DYING OFF FAST BUT THE MEMORIES LIVE ON IN THEIR STORIES. THEY ARE STORIES YOU WILL NOT FIND IN HISTORY BOOKS OR FILMS.

I was one of the founders of the Swiss Internee Assn in 1984-85 and the group has returned to Switzerland and re-visited the scene of their internment camps. Robert A. Long of Lakewood, NJ is president. I appreciate any contacts with RU men who may have.