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Honors Flight Essay
2/28/17

Solitaire: A Journey From MLB to POW

Ernest (“Ernie”) Frey knocked on his wife’s door in the Summer of 1945, disrupting her while she dressed for a funeral. This would be the first time he had seen her in over two years, as well as his first time meeting his child, Sherry, who was just one year and ten months old. On the 21st of July in 1944, Ernie’s family had received a telegram that informed them that he had been declared MIA (missing in action) after being shot down above Oschersleben, Germany, earlier that month. He was presumed dead. Almost one month later, on August 11, 1944, the family received another telegram communicating that he had been taken as a POW (prisoner of war) in Barth, Germany. After the camp had been liberated in late April, 1945, it took three months for Ernie to get home to his family. They never imagined they would see him again, and determined he had likely been killed in the Stalag Luft 1 prison camp, mainly because they never received any letters from him after he had been taken.

Before the war, and soon after graduating from Jackson High School in 1939, Ernie pursued his love for baseball, moving to Ohio to play for the Fostoria Red Birds in the Minor Leagues. During his season in 1941, he had acquired a batting average of .251--comparable to .266, which is the average for Major League Baseball players today. He was supposed to play for the Cleveland Indians in the Major Leagues, but gave up his promising career to enlist in the Army following the attacks on Pearl Harbor. Both of his brothers had already enlisted, and he felt a strong sense of duty toward his country: a feeling shared by many in his generation.

After enlisting in the Army Air Corps, Ernie left for basic training at San Angelo on March 14, 1943. After completing basic training, he was sent to Ballinger, Texas for flight school. Here, he became a flight cadet, learned the basics of flight, performed military drills, interior guard duty, and grew proficient in math, physics, code, navigation, and identification of aircraft and naval vessels. Ernie was a member of Class 44-A. Remaining in Texas, he was next sent to Lubbock for advanced pilot school. On January 7, 1944, he became a flying officer in the United States Army Air Corps. Soon after being transported to the Davis-Monthan Field in Tucson, Arizona, he was assigned to a flight crew and began to fly a B-24 in training missions. In his crew were: Staff Sergeant Stanley T. Scott, Jr. (an engineer), Sergeant Raymond C. Harmon, Second Lieutenant Alfred C. Bocksberger (the pilot), Sergeant Fred D. Spillman, Staff Sergeant James P. Burns (the radio operator), Staff Sergeant Warren K. O'Brien, Sergeant Richard L. Yant, Second Lieutenant Benard Degregorio (the bombardier), and Second Lieutenant Arthur G. Raisig (the navigator). Ernie Frey was the crew's copilot. During his time in Tucson, he grew so fond of flying the B-24 that he would later deem it, "The best plane that is in this war". After completing training missions, the crew was transmitted to Lincoln, Nebraska for overseas assignment. Some members of Class 44-A were deployed to the Pacific theater, while others, such as Ernie and his crew, were sent to serve in Europe. At Lincoln, they were assigned a specific B-24 to fly, and remained there for just under a week. Overall, they received only 36 weeks of training.

From Nebraska, the crew flew to Bangor, Maine, in May. The next day, they flew to Goose Bay and Labrador in Canada. Just a day later, they went on to Reykjavik, Iceland, across the North Atlantic. Navigator Raisig recounted the flight as particularly long, mainly due to poor weather conditions. This made it very hard to navigate, especially considering their equipment,

which he deemed unreliable. The very next day, the crew flew to England without incident. The plane which transported them from Nebraska to England was sent to an American bomber base that replaced planes destroyed in combat. Ernie and his crew spent about a week at the military camp in England before being flown to Ireland for two weeks of combat training. On the day the crew left for Ireland--June 6, 1944--they were informed just after takeoff of the landings of troops on the continent for a battle at Normandy, which would prove to be one of the bloodiest battles in history. The crew completed training in Ireland and flew back to England, where they would be assigned to the 492nd B.G. (battle group) in North Pickenham. Ernie was given very little time to become acquainted with the base and personnel before he began to fly in combat: the crew received their first mission around June 29, just over a week after arriving. During their first mission, they were sent to drop bombs over Magdeburg, Germany. They sustained over 200 holes in their plane from Flak (German anti-aircraft and anti-tank firearms, commonly called the German 88). Around the 4th of July, the crew left for their second mission. They were instructed to fly to France to bomb V-1 rocket installations (bunkers and launch pads built to produce, store, test, and launch V-1 flying "Buzz" bombs). Next, the crew proceeded to bomb submarine pens (U-boat bases) in Kiel, Germany. Unfortunately, the #3 engine caught fire during takeoff because the ground crew had neglected to replace the oil cap. This caused oil to spew out at the hot fire wall of the engine and burn. The plane could not maintain altitude with only the remaining three engines because it was fully loaded with bombs and gasoline, weighing it down. Because of this, they were cleared to return to the base. When landing, they came in "hot" and over-shot part of the runway. The plane went through a barbed-wire fence, across the bar-ditch, and finally stopped just short of a nearby forest. Fortunately, the incident did not injure any of the crew members. After the engine was shut down, and the propeller had been feathered

(meaning the angle of the blade had been increased to prevent drag by keeping the propellor pitch perpendicular to airflow, typically done after engine failure), the fire went out.

Despite this distressful episode, the crew was notified that they would fly another mission the next day. They received instructions to drop bombs on an aircraft manufacturing plant at Bernberg, Germany, and then head West back to England. However, as the bombs were dropped, German Focke-Wulf 190 fighters jumped their formation. The Germans approached from behind, two at a time, relentlessly firing 20mm cannons at the plane. While flying at around 22,000 feet, the #3 engine on the crew's plane had again caught fire, and communications were lost, preventing the crew members from talking to one another. The plane's bail out alarm was also shot out, and the plane soon began to spin with great force. Eight of the crew members, including Frey, jumped out of the plane, which crashed down near Oschersleben. Two crew members, one of whom was the pilot, Lieutenant Bocksberger, were killed in the collision. When the crew had decided that the plane would inevitably crash, and that they needed to jump in order to save their lives, Bocksberger refused to leave his plane. Ernie attempted to convince Bocksberger to jump with them, pleading with the pilot to spare himself, but was unable to succeed in his efforts. Ernie would later recount that this would follow him for the rest of his life.

After parachuting to the ground, Ernie endured beatings from civilians of a nearby village. When recounting this to members of his family, he always observed that he did not blame them: he was dropping bombs on their communities. Ernie was taken as a POW and sent to a transient camp for classification. Here, he found members of his crew, Lieutenant Degregorio and Lieutenant Raisig, whom he would remain with throughout his captivity. The three were issued some clothing and toiletries before being assigned to the North Compound 2, Stalag Luft I, in Barth, Germany.

Stalag Luft I held around 6,000 POWs, and consisted of three compounds. Ernie, Raisig, and Degregorio all stayed in the same barrack: one room with ten bunk beds and a small stove for heating and cooking. The Germans provided minor amounts of potatoes, cabbages, turnips, and bread, as well as rations prepared by hired help or Czech prisoners. However, the German provisions were inadequate for sustainability, and the soldiers relied heavily on food parcels sent by the International Red Cross (ICRC). The POWs ate twice a day, and prepared most of their meals themselves. Often, a barrack would pool their weekly food supply and the soldiers would take turns cooking and cleaning. They also grew small vegetable gardens that provided a very small amount of lettuce, radishes, beets, onions, and tomatoes. For the most part, the POWs found a way to manage, although food was scarce. However, after October of 1944, the German rations were gradually cut to only 800 calories, causing the POWs to rely almost solely on ICRC parcels. This caused heavy consequences during Fall and Winter of 1944, when the ICRC had to cut their rations in half because of a severe lack of supplies. In 1945, the ICRC was unable to send any parcels throughout the month of March. This aligned with more cuts made to the German ration, and the men became so weak that they would fall getting from their beds.

Fortunately though, the POWs were able to keep good health for most of their captivity. The camp had a 20 bed infirmary with two doctors, and a civilian dentist who visited weekly and was available for emergency situations. However, Stalag Luft I had remarkably poor sanitation, ventilation, and heating conditions. Although the soldiers traded shifts cleaning the facilities, conditions were hardly favorable. Inadequate heating in the cold weather, combined with the lack of ventilation caused many issues for the POWs. In part due to a rule that required prisoners to keep their windows shut at night, and in part due to the cold, many began to develop Upper

Respiratory Infections. The senior American Officer on site, Colonel Hatcher, protested so strongly to the conditions of the camp that he was transferred to Stalag Luft 3.

The camp had a mess hall, a theater built by the POWs, a classroom, a study room, and a special building set aside as a chapel, which held both Protestant and Catholic services. The soldiers often played sports for recreation, or put on music and skits in the theater. They also attended courses in history, engineering, math, music, literature, and languages. The POWs could also check out books of non-controversial subject from a library. Some sculpted with clay, or melted tin foil above the barrack stoves to create tin statues. Ernie kept a journal in which he wrote poetry, and worked with an architect who drew him plans for a future house for his family.

The German soldiers who ran the camp were often very strict. They enforced a rule that required all personnel to be inside when the “immediate warning” siren rang for German air raids. This resulted in the shooting of three prisoners in May, 1944. Another instance in March, 1945, caused the death of Lieutenant E.F. Wyman, and the wounding of a British soldier after they failed to respond to an air raid warning, although it was not heard by 95% of the men in the area. The German commandant also issued orders that authorized the guards to avenge what they deemed, “insults to German honor.” The guards often interpreted this very liberally, causing more shootings to occur. Other times, prisoners were confined to arrest-lock for minor infractions of German disciplinary regulations. In the arrest-lock, all ICRC parcels were prohibited, severely limiting food intake. This rule was eventually overturned. On occasion, the German guards inflicted mass punishments on entire barracks for just one soldier’s infraction of a rule.

Ernie, along with the rest of the camp, was liberated by the Russians on April 30, 1945. Raisig, Degregorio, and Ernie had remained in captivity for nine months. Originally, the

Germans contended that they would not relinquish control of the camp unless force was used. However, they eventually gave in once threatened with bloodshed. Just over a week later, on May 9th, the 8th Air Force flew the three to Rheims, France: the site where German troops had surrendered just the day before. Here they were returned to Allied control, issued clothing, showered, and fed. After this, they were driven in trucks to Camp Lucky Strike near LeHavre, France. The three were then separated, as they were placed in groups according to home state, and awaited Liberty Ships to return them to the United States.

Ernie spent around a year as a POW and awaiting transit back home. While the POWs were allowed to send mail from Stalag Luft I, none of his attempts to contact his family were successful. They had no idea that he had returned to the States. His family and wife were overwhelmed to have their son and husband returned to them, as well as shocked with the abruptness of his return, as they never imagined they would be reunited with him again.

Ernie never spoke much of his experiences at war. He always felt guilty for dropping bombs in Germany, especially because he bombed an area not far from the city where his grandfather had lived. He also feared that the bombs he dropped may have hit a school, or killed innocent people. After the war, he would never fly in a plane again. Ernie also continuously expressed to his family that he felt no heroism in being a prisoner of war, and refused to accept any credit for his remarkable service.

After the war, Ernie worked two jobs to support his family: one in a factory that manufactured grinding wheels, and often got as hot as 110 degrees in the summer, and another cleaning factory offices. He almost never called in sick. He had grown up during the Great Depression, and from this he learned the value of hard work. Although he would never be able to

fulfill his dream of becoming a Major League Baseball player, he never regretted enlisting in the Army.

In the years after he returned home, Ernie and Lola had three more children: one of whom is my Grandma. Because he never spoke of his time at war, none of his children, grand children, or even myself, were aware of the journey he had taken, or the great sacrifices he made. After hours of researching old records, as my great-grandpa's story began to piece together, I came across a poem he had written in captivity:

The minutes pass on sending hours on there [sic] way/ Together together to end this long day/ Surrounded again by walls bleak and bare/ That together with bars make this solitaire/ Another day laying in this dreary cell/ More lingering hours of solitary Hell/ My brain races on, thoughts pass through my mind/ That in days of freedom I must have been blind/ Blind to the beauty that God's gracious hand/ Molded and carved in my native land./ The crystal clear lakes, and deep inland seas/ Protected and surrounded by tall whispering trees/ The beauty of grassland, the vast rolling plains/ That blossom with flowers under cooling Spring rains/ The high ice-capped mountains, the sharp towering cliffs/ and the noisy snow water rushing.

The piece of writing, which he had entitled, "Solitaire," for the first time helped me truly understand and appreciate the heroic acts of the soldiers who have come before me, and who still fight today. They have quite literally relinquished their own freedom so that today, others could have their own: a brave sacrifice that so few are bold enough to make, and too many unintentionally take for granted.

Ernie died from leukemia at age 84. He is remembered by family and friends as quiet, humble, honest, and incredibly kind. Although he never accepted others' praise, the heroic acts of Ernie Frey, and all of those who have served our country, have allowed us to live in a better world today.

