



[<< back >>](#)

Tuesday, February 22, 1944 - 386th **Bomb Group Mission Number 110:**

Captain Lehman was awakened by Major Thornton at 0400 hours, about thirty minutes later they along with all lead and deputy lead officers met in the intelligence room. Walls of the room were covered with charts, many had colored pins stuck into them. The target for today and route was laid out along with red circles indicating known flak batteries. Numbers showed how many enemy aircraft and type that could be expected on this trip.

Lead Bombardier Lehman voiced his disapproval to an S-2 Officer about the wisdom of attacking the same target for the third day in a row; the target selection prevailed! After completion of the pre-briefing all joined other early risers in the officers mess for their breakfast, which for the most part consisted of coffee and lots of cigarettes. Within the hour all scheduled flight crews made their way to the briefing room.

What a way to celebrate George Washington's Birthday - we are going back to Gilze Rijen, Holland for a third time in as many days! The author was on all of them, and would be on this one as well. Briefing commenced at 0745 hours as Field Order Number 208 directed the 386th Bomb Group to attack the airdrome at Gilze Rijen. Our Group is scheduled to supply fifty-one aircraft, the 322nd Bomb Group will follow us with sixteen bombers. Fighter escort will be as yesterday, RAF Spitfires.

We will have a mixed bomb load on this one; The 552nd and 553rd Squadrons will carry thirty bombs per ship, all 100 pounders. The 554th Squadron has eight ships carrying 100 pounders and six ships loaded with ten each of the 250 pound size. All ships in the 555th Squadron will carry 250 pounders. The 250 pounders have instantaneous fuses and 1/100th second delay tail fuses. The 100 pounders have instantaneous fuses only.

The 322nd Group will rendezvous with us on assembly line, The Naze at 6,000 feet. We will leave The Naze at Zero Hour minus eighteen minutes. Fighter rendezvous will occur at 51 degrees 40 minutes north, 03 degrees 25 minutes east at 11,500 feet, Zero Hour plus ten minutes. Aiming points are listed as 116049, 093063, and 083052 on illustration S54/7. The 322nd will have aiming point 060049 on illustration S54/7. If the information sounds familiar, and well it should, we flew this very same route for the past two days!

Major Thornton will lead the entire formation, Captain Dewhurst will lead the second eighteen. Lieutenant Purdy will head up the third box of fourteen ships, his box will have a lead flight and a high flight only.

Communications for today are as follows: Bombers to fighters, VHF Channel B. Bomber call sign on VHF is Buckshot One. Fighter VHF call sign is Dunlop and Fighter Ground Station call sign is Greenship. Contact with the 322nd Bomb Group on VHF Channel B. Splasher Beacons in use are: 4A, 5B, 6C, 7D, 8E, 9F, 10G, 11H, and 16I. Emergency homing to Martlesham Heath on VHF Channel D, with call sign Recount. Homing to Earls Colne on VHF Channel D, with call sign Boskin. Air-Sea-Rescue is also on VHF Channel D. Gee information: Grade A, Eastern Wyoming for entire mission.

The flak situation is pretty much the same as in the past for this area. The Islands of Schouwen, Walcheren, and Tolen have weak and inaccurate heavy type flak; likewise at Haamstede and

Colijnsplaat on Nord Beveland. Bergen-op-Zoom is known to have heavy type predictor control flak, its reported to be weak and inaccurate. Woensdrecht has sixteen heavy guns with predictor control, from our own experience we know it to be moderate to intense, and fairly accurate at our altitude. The area of Flushing Harbor is reported to be defended by at least four, four-gun heavy type positions. One unoccupied heavy four-gun position has also been reported.

Weather conditions for today's mission are as follows: Home Field, will have six-tenths stratocumulus with a base of 2500 feet and tops to 4500 feet, increasing to solid cover at the English Coast and extending to mid-channel. Overcast cirrus above at mid-channel, low occasionally broken to three-tenths clear remainder of way to Dutch Coast with-visibility about five miles. You can expect two-tenths to three-tenths stratocumulus in the target area, and visibility of some thirty miles along with some high cirrus to the east. The route back will be similar to the route out, high overcast, four-tenths stratocumulus and an altocumulus deck base of 12,000 feet with visibility of one mile in haze at home base.

At 0830 hours flight crews were being unloaded at their assigned aircraft. One pilot, Lieutenant Scott was surprised to find "MISS MARY" 131650 AN-O was not ready to fly, that would leave an open spot in number five position of the high flight in the second eighteen. He tried to hook a ride with Lieutenant Young flying "MISS FORTUNE II" 134885 AN-M. That ship developed a technical problem and did not take off, thus another open spot in number two position of the high flight in the second eighteen.

Formation leader Major Thornton lifted "CRESCENDO" 131644 YA-C off the runway at 0911 hours. His co-pilot Lieutenant Eugene Anderson pulled up the landing gear lever and awaited the signal from his pilot to haul up the flaps as well. This process was repeated over and over until all of the B-26's had cleared the airfield and began forming up over Great Dunmow. Because the weather prediction included snow clouds at 8,000 feet, Lieutenant Charles Taylor lead navigator for the formation remained at his "GEE Box" in the navigator compartment. Captain Lehman was doing pilotage navigation from the nose of the plane, which in turn was confirmed by the navigator.

The navigator inquired if any B-26 formations had been sighted. The bombardier told him a lot of "Heavies" forming up and heading for Germany, but no B-26's in view. Tail gunner Staff Sergeant Melancon called on the intercom to inform the crew that a B-26 Group had just tagged on to the rear of their formation. Rendezvous had been accomplished over The Naze and the formation headed out over the North Sea. About mid-point all of the bomber gunners began the usual test firing procedure. Presently the Spitfire escort began to appear on both sides and above the bomber formation.

The Donald E. Vincent crew flying in "BUZZ-N-BITCH II" 131953 RG-T were number two position of the high flight in the first box of eighteen ships. Tail gunner Staff Sergeant James D. Wilkie reported over intercom; a Spitfire jettisoned a fuel tank which appeared to be on fire. The plane dove straight down as the pilot bailed out, his chute was seen to open! This occurred just after the Spitfire escort test fired. Captain Sands crew flying "INCENDIARY MARY" 131768 YA-O in number four position in the flight of the first box estimated the incident taking place about ten miles off the Dutch Coast.

Lieutenant Michael's crew flying "SPARE PARTS" 131656 AN-H were in number two position, lead flight of the second box. They saw three German "E" Boats speeding out to pick up the downed fighter pilot. Captain Green's crew flying in "4 F" 131771 RU-R in number four of the lead flight in third box, noted the Spit pilot bailed out at 1043 hours over water at position 51 degrees 42 minutes north, 03 degrees 30 minutes east.

Light flak greeted the formation north of Tolen. It was slight in amount and inaccurate for position, probably being fired from barges. The formation took up a heading for the I.P. at Roosendaal. The entire area was snow covered which made the observation of a long train very easy as it left Roosendaal heading directly south to Antwerp. Some of the Spitfire cover swung approximately twelve miles south of the I.P. and found themselves being entertained vigorously by 88mm flak

gunners in the vicinity of Brecht. All of their throttles advanced as one in their effort to clear the area in a hurry!

The bombers arrived at the I.P. and noted the marshalling yards at Roosendaal were most active. The German ground gunners were active as well. However their 88mm flak fire was slight and inaccurate. Major Thornton was at his assigned altitude of 11,500 feet as he maneuvered his lead flight just south of Breda in preparation for the bomb run into the target at Gilze Rijen.

Captain Leman picks up the narration: "The pilot asked me if I could see it; I couldn't, then he pointed the ship's nose at it, I saw the runway. It was hard to see as it snowed about thirty minutes earlier. The pilot crabbed the airplane into the wind, it was not to be more than a thirty second bomb run. In about fifteen seconds I heard the co-pilot saying, "Flak at 1 o'clock, nine o'clock, in fact all around us!" All at once we swerved, I heard the pilot say, "Feather that right engine." I knew we had been hit. I glanced at the altimeter; we were losing altitude and the air speed had decreased. I glanced at the bomb sight, we still had a few seconds to go. I hurriedly put in arbitrary corrections; then "bombs away!"

The navigator had already gone back to his compartment as he is suppose to do during an emergency. I closed the bomb bay doors; turn off the switches and started telling the pilot to turn. I saw shadows on the Plexiglas, my first thought was, we are on fire. I leaned forward to look out at the engines. The right engine was feathered; the propeller was nearly stopped. It was cutting the sun's rays and that is what I had seen, I sat back." End of Captain Leman's narration for the moment.

Time was 1104 hours, **Staff Sergeant Samuel Melancon** in his tail gun position watched as bombs cascaded from the other aircraft following them. At this point the author flying with the Lieutenant Vincent crew, number two position of the high flight, lead box. I Just happened to glance at our right wing between the flap and the wing root area, from the top turret it is quite visible. In an instant several jagged stalagmites appeared on top wing metal skin as many fragments of flak burst through from the underside of our right wing. Having seen more than enough flak bursting near our right side — I turned my head to the left and looked down on the lead flight of Major Thornton. Lieutenant Popovici's voice came over our intercom with the phrase, "Bombs away!" A slight buoyancy was felt throughout our ship as the bombs released.

The bombs from the first box of eighteen planes covered the fuel and ammunition storage area of the west boundary, and extending across the west end of the runway along with hits on a building in airdrome headquarters. Other hits ran along beside the north-south runway, across a road and a railroad track to the north.

Major Thornton initiated the prescribed left turn off the target as high velocity fragments of flak ripped through the bomb bay of "LADY FROM HADES" 131685 YA-L, she was piloted by Lieutenant Richard Porter, control cables were apparently damaged as he lost rudder control. He was flying as number three man off the left wing of the Major, but could not stay inside the left turn of his leader because of the flak damage to his ship. His only option was to slam his throttles forward and haul back on the control wheel and try to clear the Major's plane.

I could hardly believe my eyes as the two planes collided, Lieutenant Porter's right hand propeller disintegrated Major Thornton's rudder leaving only the vertical fin intact. The errant aircraft's nose smashed down on top of the lead plane's aft fuselage where the rudder had been. The sudden downward force of the collision caused the tail gunner to be struck on the head by the ceiling of the ship's tail compartment leaving him in a dazed condition, but still aware of the persistent ringing of the alarm bell signaling immediate bail out!

The two aircraft separated as Major Thornton skillfully fought for control to keep the ship going straight and wings level. Our high flight was in a left turn about two hundred feet or so above him. I could see his right propeller feathered and that he had lost his rudder. Number three aircraft was down to about 7,000 feet and under control a short way north of Breda, three chutes were seen as crew members bailed out. Lieutenant Noble Gregory sustained severe chin lacerations when struck by the receiver section of his 50 caliber flexible nose gun. It had been wrenched from its normally

stowed position when the two aircraft collided. Meanwhile aerial engineer Staff Sergeant Norman Bell had vacated his top turret position and pulled his groggy tail gunner into the waist section telling him their plane was going down! The three men in the aft section lost no time getting out of the stricken plane!

Captain Lehman picks up the narration: "Then all of a sudden something happened, we started upward, I was forced against the back of my seat. Then we went into a dive, my flak suit fell forward, I could see the snow below. I thought we were going into a spin. Oh God save us, I said. The pilot pulled her out and leveled off. I grabbed my maps and started telling the pilot which way to go. Airplanes were going by us, finally I looked back and didn't see anyone. It dawned on me that we were in serious trouble. I crawled back to the co-pilot seat, I thought I left my maps in the nose and started to go get them. I was going to do the navigating, no I couldn't take the chance; I looked around and noted everyone except the pilot and navigator had bailed out already!

My pilot was looking out of his side window trying to avoid hitting anyone. I tapped him on the shoulder and asked him if he was going to bail out. He said he was and for me to go on. I went to the radio room to get my chute pack. We carried eight seat dingy in case we bailed out over water. Through all of the violent maneuvering my parachute was mixed up in the pile, for a moment I wondered if I had one at all. I found it, snapped it on and crawled into the bomb bay, sat on the catwalk and waited for my pilot to turn around. When he did, I waved to him to come on, he shook his head yes and I rolled out.

I planned to delay pulling my rip cord since some of the planes behind us might run into my canopy; also I would hit the ground sooner. I bailed out about 10,000 feet, I looked down, and rolled into a spin. I stuck out my arm, then my leg to try to create drag and maybe I would quit spinning and start falling straight. Well something happened and I slowed down. I looked down at the ground, I figured I was half way down. I thought this to be a good place; so saying, Lord I hope it opens and pulling the rip cord at the same time - I looked up and saw my open canopy. I don't know what I did with the rip cord.

Looking down I tried to figure which way I was drifting; where the target was etc. Then I heard shots, I thought the Germans were shooting at me. I got hold of my shroud lines and pulled one way and then the another. I read somewhere that I could slip my chute by doing this, but I was swinging like a pendulum and I was afraid I would spill my canopy and that would be all. So again I stuck my legs and arms to create drag.

I was about 1500 feet up and I could see approximately where I would land. I planned which way I would run. I was going to land near a fence. There was a surface wind 25 m.p.h. and I was afraid of being dragged so I slipped my chute and fell in the trees next to the fence. I held my legs and arms straight with one hand over my face, and through the limbs I went. I was hanging about eight to ten feet from the ground. I pulled the buckles and dropped to the ground. I pulled off my Mae West, looked around, crossed the fence and started running! End of Captain Lehman's narration.

What happened in the next few moments can only be a matter of the author's conjecture, and some information from an eye witness on the ground. Major Thornton lifted the lock lever on his seat belt and unbuckled with the intent of bailing out. However because he had no rudder he was holding a good bit of aileron to keep the wings level. He made a move to get out of his seat and the ship began to roll as he let go of the control wheel. This precluded the notion of getting out of his pilot seat and getting into the nose well before the plane would roll over on its back. He could not rebuckle his seat belt because that is a two handed task, and he could not let go of the wheel that long. He elected to fly "CRESCENDO" down using minimum power on the left engine and controlling air speed with his elevator. The twenty-four year old Texan began his flying career in 1941 with Pan American Airways, and to date had well over 2,000 hours in his log book. He was a superb pilot and a master of the Martin B-26 to which the following will attest.

A witness on the ground saw the plane lining up on a clearing located between rows of trees; the wheels were up, the plane had no rudder, and both propellers were stopped. The plane touched down gently and slid along on its belly at a good rate of speed on top of the snow covering. It came

to an abrupt stop against a clump of trees. The 555th Squadron Commander was seen to climb out of the cockpit hatch, walk not more than one hundred feet from the aircraft, and then fell over dead! A Dutch Policeman stated the pilot probably struck his head on the instrument panel or other aircraft structure, thus sustaining a massive head injury when he was catapulted out of his seat when striking the trees.

Second box leader Captain Dewhurst flying "DINAH MIGHT" 131576 AN-Z and third box leader Lieutenant Purdy flying "LETHAL LADY" 131646 RU-C were unleashing their bomb loads. Bombs from one flight of six ships hit the landing area of the airfield just east of the station headquarters.

Staff Sergeant Alfred Dumas reported from his tail gun position on Lieutenant Petrey's Crew as seeing an airman waving at them as the man hung in his open parachute at 1108 hours. Three other men in chutes were seen in front and to the right of the formation at about 10,000 feet. An aircraft shelter in the southwest dispersal area received hits on a blast wall and damaged a twin engine aircraft in the shelter. Two fires flared up in the southwest fuel and ammo dump area. The first fire was near the refueling station and the second one was across to the west. One large aircraft shelter in the southwest dispersal area appeared to have its camouflaged netting destroyed. Flak being fired from the target area at the second and third boxes was considerably less accurate and not as intense as the flak the first box of eighteen encountered on their run to the target.

Staff Sergeant Norman Bell came down in his parachute near Oosterhout, just north of Gilze Rijen. Staff Sergeant Melancon delayed opening his chute as long as possible, he did not see any other chute during his descent. He was drifting near a small village as he came to earth, just missing a telephone wire prior to plopping into a field. He approached a farmer working in the field, he told the airman to dig deep into a nearby haystack, which he did with gusto for fear the German soldiers would come by and jab the haystack with pitchforks!

Lieutenant Gregory spotted eleven open chutes as he drifted down over enemy occupied territory after bailing out of his ship, "LADY FROM HADES." His badly cut chin was causing him discomfort; he landed hard and immediately compounded his medical problem when he fractured a vertebra. He hid himself as best he could until darkness came. His pilot, Lieutenant Porter did not come down nearby, but the bombardier learned later that his pilot had broken a leg during his parachute landing.

The formation had completed its turn off the target and was homeward bound. Twenty miles from the enemy coast a solid cloud bank was noted along with some wispy cirrus off to the east. Two barrage balloons were observed flying between 2,000 and 3,000 feet over Dordrecht, also some balloons over Rotterdam. A number of vehicles were seen near St. Annaland and much marine activity in Oosterschelde waters consisting of three medium size ships, one tug, two barges, and three fast small boats.

Some planes in the formation salvoed a total of forty-six 100 pound bombs into the North Sea because of bomb rack malfunctions over the target. The weather began to turn sour as they neared the coast of England. A few pilots had to loosen up their formation flying because it became difficult to see due to snow flurries and icing on some windshields. The first man landed at Great Dunmow at 1208 hours, a steady stream of crews entered the interrogation room to report results of the mission. Two aircraft were lost over the target, fourteen men were listed as MIA and seventeen aircraft received battle damage.

Sixty-seven and a half tons of bombs were released on the target with results rated as good. Three aircraft landed at Manston, the emergency landing strip. A plane by the name of "PERKATORY" 131627 YA-Q flown by Lieutenant Eldridge, Lieutenant Morr took in "SPAM-BERGER" 131970 YA-F, and Lieutenant Dunlap with a ship called "HELL'S-A-POPPIN" 131987 YA-G.

A large number of complaints were registered by the returning crews; such as weather was impossible for formation flying on the way back to base. Canvas partition in tail gunner position is a useless hindrance, should be taken out. Makes it impossible to get out of the tail compartment with a chute on. Bomb load was too light. Want flak helmets for entire crew. Waist gunner on

Lieutenant crew froze his feet because of no boots, he required medical attention, get Supply on the ball! Other gunners requested warmer gloves and boots, too cold in back of ship. One gunner said he would buy his own! Others were late for briefing because of long line at breakfast. Lieutenant Stout reported having a spent cartridge case smashing through the Plexiglas nose of his ship while flying in number seven position in the lead flight of the third box.

Listing of crew members shot down:

The Thornton crew: Major Charles V. Thornton, Captain Theodore Leman, First Lieutenants Eugene Anderson and Charles R. Taylor. Tech Sergeant William B. Harris, Staff Sergeants Norman L. Bell and Samuel J. Melancon, Sergeant Jasper O. Stensrud.

The Porter Crew:

First Lieutenant Richard S. Porter, Second Lieutenants William A Bailey and Noble Gregory. Staff Sergeants John T. Doyle and Fred C. Suden, and Sergeant Edward J. Morrissey.

Meanwhile back on the Continent, the desperate quest for freedom persisted. Soon after landing, Staff Sergeant Bell made contact with a Dutch Underground member by the name of A.V. Tiel who gave him some civilian clothes, and instructed him how to reach Belgium walking only by night. On the evening of the fifth day he was picked up by a Belgian. One of the Underground members who aided him was a Belgian man named John Castremanne. On the morning of March 1, 1944 Norman Bell's welfare was taken over by another Belgian Underground member; Anne Brusselmans until September 3rd, 1944. During that period of time she had fifty-four American airmen hid out in various spots in Brussels. The men were moved from one location to another at various times to avoid German intervention.

Tail gunner Melancon was still burrowed in his haystack; after dark his Dutch benefactor returned with civilian clothes for him. There was also food, hot milk and dark bread and honey. He spent his first night in the haystack, it was very cold, perhaps five degrees below zero. The man returned the next morning to point out a direction for him to travel.

However there was no food for him this time and he was thankful to still have his escape kit with its high energy food. He walk for some time down a road and eventually entered a small village. Very few persons were to be seen as he walked along. A German soldier came into view walking toward him on the other side of the street. His pulse quickened as the German crossed over to his side about a quarter block away, continuing to walk toward him. The soldier walked right up to him and came to attention, he spoke with a fast and furious voice, and pointing down the street. The airman did not understand the language, but he got the drift the German was telling him not to go down this street because it led to a restricted area, maybe a flak battery installation or some such thing. The soldier was looking at him eyeball to eyeball, so he simply shrugged his shoulders and said, "Okay!" The instant he said that a cold chill went up his spine, he realized he had made a slip of the tongue! The German showed no sign of surprise at the remark; so he nodded to him and turned around and retraced his footsteps in the direction whence he came, going around the first corner reached.

He continued walking in that direction until he was out into the country again. He was to learn later that the term "Okay" was used freely by both the Dutch and the Germans. A man and a boy were cutting wood just off to the side of the road. He walked over to them saying he was an American and could they help him. The Dutchman told the boy to stay there with the airman while he checked to see if the roadway was clear of enemy troops. Soon the man waved to them to come on. After walking some distance he was taken to a farm house where a young man about nineteen years old could speak English. This was to be his home for the next fifteen days. This was a welcome relief because his hands, feet and legs were in bad shape due to the wet snow and cold weather. He was moved from place to place via a bicycle and was given a false passport listing him as a painter by trade and a deaf mute!

Eventually he was taken to Brussels in an area called Strombeek, where he lived for five and a half months with a family of three who had a daughter near his age. Her father was a beer salesman. The

family was fairly well to do; but food supply was scarce, however they shared all they could obtain with the grateful evades. Most of the Underground people he came in contact with used numbers as opposed to names.

Captain Lehman continued running west; away from the general target area across a quarter mile wide field, making his way to a wooded section. A farmer's dog stood looking at him, the farmer called the dog, but he stood fast - finally the airman walked toward the Dutchman and showed him his phrase card. The man said he could not help him. Though tired he ran on only to discover that he was still wearing his heavy flying boots, promptly discarding them in a ditch he ran on another two miles.

Near exhaustion he was ready to hide, a likely spot was noted about 200 yards south across a meadow, he made for it. Suddenly two rifle carrying German soldiers loomed some 200 yards or so west of him! They were walking south and looking into the trees to the west. He threw himself into a small ditch and covered up with snow. Soon a small airplane was seen circling overhead, obviously searching for the thirteen downed airmen.

The snow was wet and cold against his body, after a bit he ate the candy bar handed out after briefing. Afterward he lit up a cigarette, blowing the smoke into a hole under the snow; feeling contented for awhile, he then had another smoke. About 1800 hours he was extremely cold, lit up a cigarette while trying to figure out what to do next. An hour later he eased up on one elbow to look around, it was just too cold, hence something had to be done.

In the dim light he could make out a house and a haystack about 350 yards away. Upon reaching there he tried to dig into the haystack, it was frozen so he gave and knocked on the door of the house. A ten year old boy came to the door and asked him in. The Captain told the lad to get his father. The man came and was asked if he could assist him. Yes, yes said Brocder Albirtus as he grabbed up some black muffins and gave them to the American. Putting on his wooden shoes he said, "Come!" He walked very fast, his wooden shoes (called klompen) made such a clatter on the frozen ground, he took them off and ran in his heavy socks. The airman could barely keep up with him; about twenty minutes later they were at a large monastery where Padre Mutzenuekers gave him a blanket and led him to the fireplace to warm.

He was given black bread and coffee substitute. The warmth began to return to his body as the Priest asked him many questions. At one point his eyes nearly popped out as he saw the Captain's two packs of Camels. He said that it was a long time since he had a Camel and suggested a trade with his cigarettes - what a trade! He was given civilian clothes as they talked. Soon two boys came to the monastery with three bicycles, one of the boy's name was Anton Kramer. The airman was to ride a bicycle with them to the next village. Two German soldiers were riding on bicycles toward them as they crossed over a bridge at the entrance to the village, the Germans paid them no heed.

Presently the cyclists were at the door of Doctor Sluyter in Oosterhout. A man let them in and said, "We have a comrade of yours inside." He hurried in and saw the doctor working on a tall man with a bloody face. The Captain asked who he was, the man said, "My name is Noble Gregory, I was the bombardier in the ship that collided with yours!"

The doctor put some clamps on his jaw and then taped over them. About a half hour later the doctor and another man took them to a house some fifteen minutes walk away. They were housed in an attic, staying with the Kramer family for a week.

February 29th (leap Year) a policeman came for them with a motorcycle and a sidecar. The Captain rode in the toe of the sidecar and Lieutenant Gregory sat in the seat, he was covered with a canvas because of the cold weather. No Germans stopped them on their thirty mile trip to Sprang-Capelle. They stayed at the home of Leo Kuysten, he was also known by the code name of "Pieter Peuter!" They were at his place until March 18th when they left with fake passports at 1100 hours for a four mile trek to a village where they would take a train to Dordrecht, some 100 miles northwest. At that point they would board a train to carry them to Maastricht located in the southwest part of Holland. While waiting at the station they saw a German pilot in a very snappy uniform standing just a few feet from them.

En route to Maastricht the train passed by the airdrome at Gilze Rijen. Damage from the 386th bombing raid of February 22nd had been repaired for the most part! Sometime later their guides had them situated on a slow train rolling toward the Belgian border town of Vise, which was a point of entry in that area. The Hollander guides aided them in the crossing and bid them good by. They walked down a road where Belgian guides were to pick them up. Captain Leman was told later that he was the 21st American to cross at this point.

A woman and her daughter stepped from the side of the road, they were the Belgian contacts. They walked about two miles, then stopped for coffee. They continued on another five miles to the home of an elderly man, in a few minutes the women left. The man told the airmen he wished they would quit helping Americans because he thought the Gestapo knew she was helping Americans and they were about to catch her! Thirty minutes later they were moved to the home of a doctor's widow. Her husband had been killed by the Germans in Holland during a medical convention there. The men stayed at her home three days while awaiting Belgian passports. They moved to Liege, a college town. Captain Lehman was listed on his passport as a professor at the college. A man and woman guide took them to a large house where they were fed bread and butter, sat by the fireplace and smoked Camels and Lucky strikes supplied by their host.

Outside they could see German soldiers going back and forth like ants. While there they met two American Lieutenants named Schultz and Dargan. They had been there a few days and briefed the newcomers on what to expect. The woman of the house showed them where they could take a bath, and then washed their clothes in the meantime.

After a week in Liege they were moved to the outskirts of town to stay at the two family home of Joseph and Hubert Boussa. Whenever the heavy bombers flew a raid into Germany a nearby anti-aircraft battery would open up and literally shake the house! The escape plan seemed to stall; they were told the old route was no good, a link in France had been broken. There was a new plan to get to Switzerland, but nobody has tried it.

The 386th guys volunteered to be the first! Arrangements were made, French passports were supplied, all was ready to move out the next day which was Good Friday. Thursday night Joseph's niece, a beautiful nineteen year old brought a bottle of wine.

The men had taken a bath in a wash tub and then checked over their route on their maps the night before, all felt good and were ready to travel. Joseph's niece ate breakfast with them, and left thirty minutes later. She cried saying she thought so much of the Americans! With a paper bag full of bread they were off to the train depot. Joseph and Hubert would be their guides all the way through to Switzerland. Four more Americans joined them at the railroad station, two of whom were Schultz and Dargan. Each guide would take three to look after on this risky journey through enemy occupied land!

The route took them from Liege, Belgium through Namur and to Chimay, a small town near the French border where they would change trains. However they arrived too late to catch the train, so they walked until dark, and spent a cold night hiding in the woods along a highway. German motorcycle and bicycle patrols were active on the road until midnight. At 0500 hours they began a five mile walk to an inn where they bought their breakfast consisting of bread and coffee. At this point it was about a mile or so to the French border which was crossed with no difficulty. The evades discarded the Belgian passports and brought forth from the lining of their clothes, French passports. The next town was Rocroy, located a few miles south where they would catch a bus to the town of Charleville. This was not to be; they were told upon arrival in Rocroy no buses were running in France between Good Friday and Easter Sunday. The decision was made to walk the eighteen or twenty miles to Charleville.

Immediately upon arrival there an air raid siren sounded, townspeople and German soldiers were scurrying about. The group split up, Leman and Gregory began walking toward some houses. The streets were plotted out in the pattern of a wagon wheel. The doorways of the buildings were inset, Gregory was feeling both weak and tired so he sat down in doorway and rested his face in his hands. Lehman was across the street standing in a doorway as he saw a German soldier approach.

The German looked over at Gregory as Lehman turned and looked up into the sky as if watching for airplanes to fly over. The soldier saw this and did likewise, in doing so he passed by them without saying a word.

A bit later they ran across Schultz and Dargan, all were to meet at the railroad station the next morning. The Underground people provided places to stay for the night. 0600 hours found them on a train with their guides, Schulz and Dargan were missing as the train left for Sedan and Metz. They saw the Siegfried Line and a lot of damage to buildings on the way to Nancy where the train pulled in a little past 0800 hours on Easter Sunday April 9, 1944. They had several near misses with German patrols while in the city, and spending a restless cold night in a schoolhouse there.

Just after 0600 hours they were at the depot to board a train for Belfort, some two hours distant. From there a bus ride to Montbelliard; then a walk to Blamont, the last French town before crossing the border to Porrentruy, Switzerland. There were some tense moments with a French policeman who stopped them on the road. He had been in a German prison camp for three years, he had been freed to do police work for the Germans. The two Americans along with both Belgians were taken into his house where he questioned them at length. Finally satisfied that they really were Americans on the run, he gave them wine, potato salad, and bread to eat. They asked for water to drink, he said, "Wine is better!" At long last he gave them water, by this time eight more policemen joined the party, all asked when the "Invasion" would take place.

It was decided the best chance to cross the border was to go back to the village they had just left. The guides took them back, time was 1700 hours. After a loud squabble with a woman café proprietor who did not believe they were Americans; another woman was summoned who could speak English. She had lived for a time before the war in the state of California. They were told the Germans changed the guard at 2000 hours. Joseph and Hubert would take them near the border, then they would be on their own. About this time Lieutenant Dargan showed up to join them. The guides kissed them all and wished them God's help in a safe crossing.

They ran in the desired direction for some thirty minutes until sighting a marker with an "F" on one side and an "S" on the other. They had reached the border but continued to run on, if caught here by the Swiss Guard they would be thrown back into France. About fifteen minutes later they slowed to a walk as they entered a Swiss village around 2100 hours. All stopped a minute or so and each spoke a few words of thanks to God for his help and mercy. A girl saw them and took them to her home. The lady of the house began setting the table and frying eggs, they had wine and fresh white bread, it was unbelievable. She gave them more wine and then served cake. The local police were called and took the men to a hotel for a hot bath and bed for the night. They could also send a telegram to their folks in the United States telling them they were safe in a neutral country.

Three weeks later found them in Bern to meet with the U.S. Consulate, while there Captain Lehman was able to locate his uncle who lived nearby. General Patton's Army swept passed Switzerland which by a previous agreement would allow allied military persons to be returned to their home country. The Captain returned for a day's visit to Great Dunmow in September 1944, then back to London for interrogation. While there he ran across his engineer Norman Bell, and his tail gunner **Samuel Melancon**, both had been hiding out in Belgium all of that time.

The author and his radioman Robert O'Kane having returned to the Group from a two month stay in the States were having coffee and donuts downstairs at Rainbow Corner located in Piccadilly Circus in London. Much to our surprise in walked Samuel Melancon and his radioman William Harris. The last time we saw them was when their plane was falling out of the sky over Holland. After enthusiastic hand shakes they went on to tell us the many things that had happened to them since that fateful day! They returned to the U.S.A. - O'Kane and I returned to our base and resumed flying our second tour of air combat!

Chester P. Klier
Historian, 386th Bomb Group



555th Squadron Commander Major Charles V. Thornton in his plane "Crescendo" 131644 RG-C going down over Gilze Rijen, Holland, February 22, 1944. Right engine is feathered, was knocked out by flak on bomb run. After bomb release his number 3 wingman Lieutenant Richard Porter flying in a ship named "Lady from Hades 131685 YA-J lost rudder control due to flak damage; as the Major turned left off the target his wingmen could not turn with him. His right hand propeller tore off his leader's rudder leaving only the vertical fin intact as viewed by Chester Klier flying in number 2 position of the high flight. Black shadow near insignia at trailing edge of left wing was caused by vertical fin.

(386th Bomb Group WWII)



Boxted Air Base, England - August 1943.

Aircraft: Crescendo 131644 RG-C

The Thornton crew from left to right:

Back Row: Theodore Lehman, B/N; Charles V. Thornton, Pilot; Eugene Anderson, C/P. Front Row: William Harris, R/G; Norman Bell, E/G; **Samual Melancon**, A/G. Ground crew member shown under plane is unknown. This aircraft

was credited with one FW-190 shot down by Staff Sergeant Myron O. McKim, July 30, 1943 on the 386th Bomb Groups Mission Number One. At the time of this photo the aircraft had completed 5 missions, plus one diversionary mission indicated by the duck symbol. Later this crew and aircraft transferred from 552nd Squadron to the 555th when Thornton became the CO of the Squadron.

 [B26.COM](#)

[Guest Book](#)

[Pages & Links](#)
