

My Life as a Prisoner of War

Editor's note: This story was submitted by George's widow, Mrs. Jean Pastre Montgomery.

My Life in the Army Air Corps

I had just completed playing basketball for Pasadena Junior College. We had won the Metropolitan Conference Championship when I received my "Greetings" from the President of the United States. This was the 2nd of January 1943 and on January 15th I was inducted into the Army. I took the week of inactive service which was offered to me, so it was on January 22nd that I entered into active service. I left Los Angeles and was taken to Arlington, California, near Riverside, where I received more shots and my Army uniform. It was pouring down rain when I arrived, and we were issued sheets and blankets which had to be carried over a ladder which was used as a walkway to the newly constructed barracks where I was to spend my few days at this camp. Luckily for me, I made it O.K. but the two recruits in front of me both slipped off and fell headlong down the ditch into the mud. Needless to say the sheets and blankets followed the two unhappy recruits.



Following the tests which were given at Arlington, it was decided I would make a good radio operator, and so I was put into the Army Air Corps and then was shipped to Fresno, California, to take my basic training. I road up on the bus with actor Freddie Bartholomew and found him to be quite a regular guy. It was hotter than blazes there and to say the least, I didn't enjoy it a bit. Out of the six weeks I was there in basic training, three of them were spent in quarantine due to measles. I began my preliminary radio training and then it was time to be shipped out to Sioux Falls, South Dakota, where I was to spend six months in training for radio operator mechanic job.

It all began in Feb. 1944. We had finished our phase training at Alexandria, LA, and were in Grand Island, Nebraska, awaiting our plane which we were to fly overseas. The day arrived when we received our ship so we took off for Rescue Isle, Maine. We alighted there amidst a flurry of snow and below freezing temperatures. After two days we took off for Goosebay, Labrador where we landed just in time to miss a big snow storm. We were detained there for nine weeks awaiting clear weather which would allow us to take off again. While waiting for good weather we made the best of it by bowling, playing ping pong and by playing many records from operas. Believe it or not we got quite a kick out of it.

The pilot, Lt. Zapinski and the copilot Lt. Widosh invited two of us noncoms to have a tussle in the snow banks with them. Peter Kudriavetz and I took them on with little trouble. We soon had their faces buried in the snow. We repeated this operation many times before we let them up. That's really getting an officer down eh? What? We had a good time there in Labrador but we soon left as the weather had cleared enough for a take off.

We left there and took off for Prestwick, Scotland. The trip was uneventful but as we neared our destination the field was closed in by clouds, so I used my radio set and brought us into Nutts Corner, Ireland. We stayed there one night. The enlisted men of the crew went out of camp in a taxi and visited a local pub (bar to you) just to try their beer. It wasn't bad, so the boys said. I hadn't drank (sic) before so I couldn't be a judge of that.

We flew to England in a C-47 the next day. Here I went through a radio refresher course for ten days after which I was sent to my base. It was the 381st Bomb Group, 532nd Bomb Squadron. The day I arrived one of our planes came back from a mission with the waist shot out of it. The crew members who were alive bailed out over the base, and then the pilot took the ship out over the North Sea and bailed out. The ship had been too badly damaged to try and land it on the field.

It was Easter when our crew was scheduled for its first mission. We went in very good spirits. The night before our squadron had a party celebrating its 100th mission, we stayed up very late that night. I managed to hook a case of orange juice and lug it back to our barracks for the boys to drink. Most everyone was drinking beer so it wasn't missed.

Well the next day dawned and we arose around 2 A.M. for our first mission over Europe. We were all set to take when a few hours later our mission was scrubbed (called off for you civilians).

It was >insert date< when we made our first mission. It was to >insert place<. We were all kind of excited and kept watching out the window all through the mission. However no fighters came that day. It would have been too bad for them if they had as our fighter escort was just waiting for a chance to tangle with the Luftwaffe. The flak came up at us over the target. I had the radio room door open to check the bombs and make sure they all dropped when the bombardier, Lt. Van Buskirk, released them. I was quite anxious as the flak was bursting at our altitude and was going through the wings of the ship. I was eagerly awaiting "Bombs Away" when suddenly the ship rose a little. The bombs had been released and just as they started on their way down a piece of flak came up through the bomb bay. Was I ever glad the bombs had dropped. We got back off that mission with about 12 flak holes in the ship. We were only ship that got hit in our squadron that day.

Our second mission was to >date< on >place<. Our third mission was to >place< on the >date<. Our fourth mission was to Eschwege, Germany, on April 19th, 1944.

Our fifth mission was to Calais, France, on April 20th, 1944. We had just crossed the English Channel and were over France, when they opened up a terrific barrage of flak. Our plane was hit so much that it sounded like a hail storm. The copilot, Lt. Widosh, was shot in the arm. Immediately after that I was also shot in the same arm and in the same place. My bombardier, Lt. Van Buskirk, was hit in the leg just after I was hit. All three of us were from California, I guess they didn't like us California Boys. To continue with the mission, we finally dropped our bombs and proceeded back towards the English Channel. The flak again hit our plane, knocking one engine out and shooting a prop off another engine. This propeller just missed the tail of our ship when it flew off. Having just two engines left, we proceeded to toss out guns, ammunition, radio equipment, flak suits and everything else that could lighten the ship. I radioed an S.O.S. for the air-sea rescue to pick up, which they did. To my amazement my radio worked after having the calibration dial shot off and two other flak holes in it. I then switched radio transmitter frequency and called our base to have an ambulance waiting for us. Pete Kudriavets was flying waist that day along with Webb the engineer, Shorty Wilson the ball gunner, and Donald Harness the tail gunner. We made it to our base and set her down. We counted the flak holes and there were over four hundred of them. The copilot and I were sent to a hospital to get our arms sewed up. We received the purple heart while in the hospital. It sure was a beautiful medal. After a month we were released to go back to duty where the copilot and I again joined our crew. They had put in eight missions without us. During the missions made while I was in the hospital, they came back twice with just three engines. Our pilot received the nickname of Three Engine Zapinski. From then on the whole base knew use the men of the Three Engine Zapinski crew.

My 6th, 7th, and 8th missions were to >place< on the >date<. My 9th mission was over >place< on the >date<.

My 10th mission was over Dessar, Germany, on the 30th of May 1944. This was our crew's last mission. We were attacked by a large band of German fighters who knocked us out of formation. Then after being knocked out of formation eight German fighters came in on us. I shot down a Messerschmidt 410 and the tail gunner got one along with the ball turret gunner. We got three of them before we had

This is the Zapinski crew & aircraft info for May 30, 1944.
B-17G #44-6025 (VE-P) "So What?", see MACR 5235

P	Lt. Leonard E. Zapinski	POW	Chicago, IL
CP	2Lt Othmer G. Widosh	POW	Los Angeles, CA
N	2Lt David P. Fuller	POW	Fidley, OH
B	2Lt Robert (NMI) Van Buskirk	POW	San Diego, CA
TT	T/Sgt William E. Webb	POW	Cove Spring, FL
RO	S/Sgt George J. Pastre	POW	Pasedna, CA
BT	S/Sgt James E. Wilson	POW	Hillsboro, OR
RW	S/Sgt Hamilton B. Harper	POW	Winston Salem, NC
TG	S/Sgt Donald A. Harness	POW	Eureka, MO

to abandon ship. The ship had caught on fire and the pilot dove the ship to try and put it out, but to no avail. He gave the orders to bail out when I was transferring fuel from the radio room. I never heard the order so when I went back to the waist and saw Harper and Shorty pulling off the waist door and getting ready to bail out. I didn't know what to think. They jumped out so I began to wonder what was up - so I jumped out after them. I was the last man to leave the plane. The ship exploded about two minutes after I bailed out and pulled my rip cord.

It was 11:20 A.M. when I bailed out. My descent to the ground seemed very slow and a M.E. 109 came so close to me that the prop wash nearly dumped my chute. When I was about two hundred yards from the ground, two civilians started shooting at me with their rifles. Luckily they missed me and just as soon as I hit the ground, I pulled off my chute and ran towards a forest which was near by. I ran right smack into a bunch of Jerry soldiers who were hunting for me. I was glad to see them as they protected me from the civilians. They led me to a small village and into a house. There sitting on a bench was Harper, my waist gunner, and Shorty Wilson, my ball gunner. Harper had sprained his knee, so I ask the Frau if she would fix it for him. She said she would and went and brought back a solution for him to soak his foot in. His pain was relieved and the swelling went down quite a bit. I thanked the lady for helping him. I could speak some German as I had take it in school.

We left the house around 7 P.M. and drove in a scout car to a nearby village where we picked up Harness, our tail gunner. We then drove to another village and picked up a copilot who was from our base. He had been captured by civilians and was pretty well beaten up. I did what first aid work I could do for him under the circumstances.

We then road to a German airfield where we spent the night in prison cells. The next morning a young German guard came in and gave us some black bread and a pot of tea. I just about choked on this bread. I later learned to like it, and many a time wished I had more of it.

I talked the young guard into letting me visit my crew members. He agreed to it, so he let me out of my cell. To my surprise the copilot, navigator, David Fuller, and the bombardier were there in cells next to us. I visited all of them and asked the guard if I could stay with the copilot as he had a broken ankle. He let me stay with him 'til noon time. I also talked the guard into getting us some good food. He let me go up to the mess hall after the Jerries had eaten. We had a delicious bowl of soup. That was the best meal I had in Germany.

We left the airfield that evening on a bus which took us to the train station. We spent most of the night waiting for trains. The civilians gave us threatening glances as they passed by. We had to carry the copilot by crossing our arms and making a seat for him. I sure got tired as we had to go up and down so many stairs at the train stations. My arm was still a little weak from flak, as I just had the stitches out a week before we were shot down.

We finally reached the interrogation center where we were thrown into different cells with eleven or more men. There was only room for ten chairs in the cell so we took turns standing up all night. Some of the boys were about dying for a smoke. A lieutenant in my cell found a little straw and smoked that. I think he was about ready for the nut house.

The next day I was brought upstairs to be interrogated. The interrogator asked me all the usual questions about our base. I was only allowed to tell him my name, rank and serial number. He wanted me to sign my name at the bottom of the interrogation page, but I refused. He said that my crew members had signed theirs, so I asked him to let me see their signatures. He showed me Shorty Wilson's signature. I told him it was a forgery. He said it wasn't. I think asked him to bring in Shorty, and I would ask Shorty if he had signed it. He refused to do this. I later found that I was right and that he had forged Shorty's name.

Addition from Jean - "George told me that when he was interrogated they knew where he lived, went to school and trained in the Air Corps. The one thing they did not know was that he had special training in code that he was to use to send messages if taken as a prisoner. He did use the code when he supposedly wrote home to his parents. It scared him to do it because he felt it was such an obvious code. He reported troop movements he could see from the camp."

We then were taken from the interrogation place and sent to Wetzlar where I saw my pilot for the first time since I had bailed out. Wetzlar was a transient camp used to give the boys a shower and a Red Cross kit with clothes and razors, etc. My officers left that day for their camp.

We left the next day for ours. We were put on boxcars and given a Red Cross food parcel for two men which was to last three days. One half the boxcar was occupied by 4 German guards while thirty of us occupied the other half. We couldn't hardly find room to sit down to sit down in the car. After three days of this semi-torture we arrived at our destination. We then were searched again. They cut open our tobacco, shaving soap, and other brand new packages saying that we might be hiding something in them. We managed to bring in a compass with us even though they did search us.

Web, our Engineer, had been able to escape for two days. He had ridden a horse he borrowed, but had been caught going through a small village, when he stopped to ask him some questions. He couldn't speak German, so he was caught. He arrived at our camp about a week later.

We were some of the first arrivals at the camp so we had it quite rough for awhile. Our rooms were quite small with two decker bunks in them. We had sixteen men in the room at first but a few months later we had twenty-four men. We had triple decker bunks then. The top man would be hot as heck, while the man on the lower bunk would be cold.

We arrived there June 9th (three days after D-Day) and I never saw so darned much rain in my life. We had seven stools and two tables which were used by us for eating and recreation, which consisted of playing nothing whatever. We had no equipment at all, and a few of the boys unraveled a wool sweater which the Red Cross had given us. We used these for baseballs. We had no pencils or paper to use for games.

Our meals went like this: For breakfast we would get a cup of Jerry coffee. It wasn't any good but it was better than nothing, so we drank it.

For noon chow we would send a man from our room to the mess hall where he would sweat out the line and then get his cabbage. He then would bring it back to the room and divide it into sixteen equal parts, and I do mean equal. If one man stood when it came his turn to dish out the food he would let you stand short if you had shorted him before.

For supper we always had one cup of potatoes apiece. That was how the food ran for a month.

Then came a great day. The Red Cross had managed to get us food parcels. The really pepped up the boys. From then on for a few months Red Cross came pretty regularly. Then it dropped to a little, and we went on half rations, then quarter and then up to half again. Then about three months later we were on full parcels again. Then it dropped to a half then to a quarter, and there it stayed 'til December when we received a full parcel again. For Christmas we received a special food parcel which was really swell.

Then in January we went on half rations again, and in February we left the camp taking one parcel with us as we left. We received one and a half more parcels in the next two months while we were marching over four hundred miles of German roads. While on the march we received no breakfast - no lunch - and approximately three or four boiled potatoes a night. They allowed us very little water.

The bread situation was as follows: We received a sixth of a loaf, then it was cut to a seventh of a loaf. This amounted to about two slices a day. In December and January we had very little bread as the Jerries didn't have it. When we went on the march we received a very little bread also. That was the food situation in camp on the march.

As for treatment in camp it wasn't too bad. We had only to stand two roll calls a day but these took an hour as the Germans would usually mess up the count.

The worst treatment came when another camp was evacuated to ours. They ran the boys from the train station three miles to our camp. The fellows who couldn't keep up were bit by the dogs and bayoneted by the soldiers. These boys were badly wounded when they arrived at camp. I sure felt like doing something to the Germans for this, but I couldn't under the circumstances. They would court martial us for the slightest thing we did and stick us in solitaire where the food rations were REALLY low.

Dear folks, Mon. Dec. 25, 1944

It is just about Tuesday now and Christmas is just about over. I've had a very nice Christmas too under these circumstances. The Germans extended us a few privileges for the holidays, and I really appreciated it. The Red Cross parcel was really swell. It contained turkey, candy, nuts, plum pudding, sausage, deviled ham, honey, gum, dates, cherries, cheese, butter, fig bars, bouillon cubes, tobacco & pipe, and other things. Nice parcel eh? We have our room decorated, very nice, too. We also has a Christmas show and this afternoon we had communion service at church. Tell Dad I'm very proud of him for being baptized. My bible study lecture came off very well too. I'm in good health and hope you both are too. I received your second letter and am awaiting the pictures and parcel you are sending. Tell all hello for me. Your loving son, George.

- Letter written by George to his parents.

During Christmas we were allowed to stay out 'til midnight. This was the first time we had been able to be out after dark since our arrival at camp. But right after Christmas they came in and they had a shake down in our barracks. About 10 P.M. they came in and tore down all the pictures we had on the wall and all the decorations we had made were torn down. Our bedding was all torn apart with the excelsior all over the floor. They dumped our Christmas food parcels on the floor along with our clothing the Red Cross had given us. The whole room was a mess when they finished an hour later. They turned out the lights and walked out of the barracks, leaving us to stand up all night without a place to sleep. It was very cold too and many boys caught bad colds from this shakedown.

Jean adds "George told me that he ate the entire Christmas parcel before the shakedown - most of the prisoners lost their parcels."

For bathing facilities we had two pans which were used also for dishes. Once every two weeks we would get one pitcher of hot water for two men to take a bath with. The lice and fleas were our constant companions all the time we were in camp and on the march. We couldn't get rid of them at all.

Jean adds "George told of the sewage removal method - a honey wagon. When we were travelling in Germany in 1962 - he was able to point one out to me."

The Y.M.C.A got us a supply of musical instruments and a bunch of books. This made camp life a whole lot better. We had a show every Saturday after that put on by the boys in camp. Some were very good and the boys would get lots of laughs from it. This ended all too soon though as we left the camp in February to start our long march across the back roads of Germany. The Russians had advanced to close to us so the Jerries evacuated our camp.

We used to kid the Germans by talking among ourselves about the tunnels we were digging under our barracks. Of course we didn't have any at all, but the Germans would hear us talking about them, and they would come into the barracks and check all the flooring to see where we were digging. We really got a laugh out of that.

Jean adds "George had an ocarina [a simple wind instrument typically having an oval body with finger holes and a projecting mouthpiece] and amused the other prisoners by playing 'We Heil, we Heil, right in the Furher's face.' One of the guards always tapped his foot to the music - luckily he didn't know the words."

The only thing we had to do was stand formation twice a day while they tried to count us. They were always miscounting so we usually stood there for an hour while they counted us over again.

This was our life in camp. About two weeks before I was liberated, the P-51s would be flying above as we marched along the roads of Germany. Often they would dive down on us, strafing us. They didn't know we were POWs so down they came, again and again. One evening when we had just pulled into a bar for the night, four P-51s came zooming down letting go with their guns. I made it to a wood pile and lay flat on the ground. After they had passed us, I looked up to find a trembling German guard laying on top of me. On top of the German was my waist gunner Harper. I guess we all thought of getting to that spot at the same time. I just happened to be first. A pig which was about twenty feet from us was killed by bullets.

We were nearing the Elbe River near Lineberry when I decided on a way to get freed. There was a sick bunch leaving that night for a small town named Melbeck, where they would stay in a barn until they were well enough to march on. I became sicker than I really was that night and went with them. I came quite near to dying that night. I was climbing up a ladder in the barn when I couldn't breathe. I fell backwards to the floor gasping for breath. I had talked to a Russian on a farm the night before, and he told me that the British tanks were only two days behind, so I knew if I could just stop marching for two days I would be liberated. This came true on April 18th, 1945, the tanks took over the town freeing a lot of us boys.

The next day they took us in a truck to Celle, Germany, where they flew us in a C-47 to Brussels, Belgium. I stayed in a hospital there for two days just resting and eating like a horse. I fell asleep in a tub and also slept on the floor. Then I was flown from Brussels to Cirencester, England, where I stayed three weeks getting fat again. I had lost fifty pounds on the march by the time I left England I had gained back thirty of it.

From England I was flown to Prestwick, Scotland, where I stayed two days awaiting a C-54 which was to fly me home to the States. We left Scotland on May the 19th and stopped off in Iceland for a meal and then flew on to Newfoundland where we had another good meal. From there we landed at La Guardia Field N.Y. at 6 A.M. It was sure a beautiful day, and I was really happy to be back in the states again on this hike.

We had two Major Generals flying back with us and our priority was higher than theirs so they had to sit on the floor of the plane most of the way home. Such class !!

I left Mitchell Field, NY, on Monday and flew on a C-47 to New Orleans, LA, where we spent the night. The next day we took off and arrived on El Paso, Texas, where we stayed the second night. The next day at noon I landed at Los Angeles Municipal Airport. From there I was taken to Birmingham General Hospital. That is where I wrote this story.

Now that you have heard my story I hope you have enjoyed reading it as much as I have enjoyed writing it for you.

George Pastre

Jean's Postlogue - After Birmingham, George went to a Rest and Recreation hotel in Santa Monica, CA. They wanted him to return to active duty until the end of the war, which was very close at hand. Ever resourceful he talked them into letting him take a life saving test - swimming to and from their raft. He was able to finish out his wartime service as a lifeguard at that hotel.

He entered Occidental College in February 1946. I met him shortly after that. We were engaged that summer, married on August 24, 1947. We had sixteen years of a happy marriage that was blessed with two children, Alan and Polly. George taught in the Los Angeles City School District for thirteen years and for the Department of Defense in France for two years. Our family had returned from our wonderful two years in France three months before George was killed in an automobile accident on October 26, 1963.

A very important part of his prisoner of war experience was his profound faith in God. He gave several sermons to the other prisoners. He decided to pursue the ministry when he returned home. This was modified when he decided to reach children by teaching.

God's Gifts

*Looking at nature this Sunday morn,
I found a new joy being born,
A joy which hitherto was unknown
But now is manifest and is shown.
The trees, the flowers and birds so gay
I could sit and admire all the day
They tell me of God's love for man
By showing their beauty, as only they can.
These gifts of God we thank him for,
They bring us happiness and open a door,
A door which shows what God can do
If we will but look as He wants us to.*

By George James Pastre

This poem was the beginning of my 1963 Christmas Letter. The letter ended "George was truly unique; a wonderful Christian man, the kind who passes this way too seldom."

Life

*Oh Lord, the gift of life,
Which though hast given to me
Has taught me always to listen
And your wondrous world to see.
To listen to the song of the birds,
The roaring of the seas,
To seek the beauty of thy hands,
They beauteous coloring of the trees.
To listen to they words of life,
Which lessens sorrow's pain,
And makes it easier for us all,
They world of love regain.*

By George James Pastre

Discharged - November 2, 1945

AAF Separation Base - Santa Ana, CA

Length of Service - Continental U.S.A. 1 yr. 6 mos. 18 days,

Foreign Service - 1 yr. 2 mons. 23 days

-Submitted by George's widow, Mrs. Jean Pastre Montgomery.