



San Diego Chapter 1 Member Biography

Carl Lavelli

On Jan. 25, 1945 I was flying a P.47 Thunderbolt on my fourteenth mission out of Pisa Italy carrying two 500 pound bombs and eight 50 caliber machine guns on a bombing and strafing mission over northern Italy.

Our target was a bridge east of Milano. After arming our bombs we proceeded on our dive bomb runs. After the bomb run my flight leader called me on the radio that one of my bombs was hung up in the rack under my right wing and advised me to make another run to shake it off. It actually took three more violent runs, push overs, pull ups, twists, turns, and skids to shake it loose. Very thankful! because I could not have landed that plane with a live bomb hanging under my right wing.

We then proceeded to fly around looking for targets of opportunity. We very shortly ran into 40 millimeter flak. I was flying number four in a flight of four and it seemed the black clouds, (exploding shells or flak) were mostly above me so I dove and almost immediately lost sight of the rest of the flight.



I flew around at tree top level calling my flight leader several times and never received a reply. I found out later they were receiving me but I was getting no reply so apparently the flak had shot out my radio receiver.

Finally I spotted my flight through a hole in the clouds at about 10,000 feet so I started a climb to join them. In about a 15 degree bank to the left and in a climbing turn I could not see to the right as that wing blocked out my view on that side, besides I was looking left and straight up at my buddies above me.

The first thing I saw were little white clouds with a flash of fire in the center and then the black clouds all around me, (20 & 40 millimeter flak). Then a loud

explosion right under me and the engine died immediately, then just black smoke and fire.

I immediately started my bailout procedure, undoing the oxygen mask, seat belts and shoulder harness, at the same time with a throat microphone I was calling my flight, I said, Driftwood red 4, I've been hit, I'm on fire and I'm bailing out, out! By now with the stick in my lap to reduce the air speed I unplugged my microphone and pulled the canopy release, well, it didn't release so, tried opening it by hand but as hard as I could pull it only partly opened. I went out anyway, out the right side but my parachute hung up in the canopy and left me hanging.

I kicked and pushed as hard as I could to get away from that airplane and soon a big gush of wind, and I was free. I immediately pulled the rip cord, and with it still in my hand I looked at the end of it I thought, Oh Shit, I broke it. Then a terrific jerk as the chute opened and I only remember 1 1/2, 180 degree swings and hit the ground on my heels, bottom and back. When I woke up my chute was billowing in the



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wind so I pulled the bottom cords and dumped it, by now two German soldiers were almost on me and what seemed like thousands of Italian civilians.

I had landed in a bare field with a little snow on the ground, in a manufacturing area very near the Milano airport.

The soldiers stuck a rifle in my back and ordered me to walk. We only went about 100 yards to a barbed wire enclosed compound which was their camp. Once inside I was immediately searched and stripped of all my belongings, including my 45 caliber automatic pistol in a shoulder holster under my left arm. I did get to keep my wedding ring, shirt and pants. My A-2 leather flying jacket they took and gave me an Italian army overcoat which in the end turned out to be a godsend as it got awfully cold in Germany.

From there I walked to the control tower, not more than a mile, at the Milano airport. On the way over a dike, I could see black smoke, which was my airplane burning. I started to climb the dike for a better look but my guards ordered me back. That night I was fed a slice of bread and a bowl of

boiled white rice that was brought in by an Italian woman, which I hardly ate. I then found out I could, for the first time, use my Piemonte, Italian dialect to talk and understand the language.

Italy had at that time 10 separate provinces, each with their own dialect, and by now I was far enough North to communicate in Italian as my folks were from North of Tarino at the foot of the alps.

Later that evening the German Captain of the flak battery came in, with a form for me to sign that I was shot down by his guns. In as much as our orders were to give name, rank, and serial number only, I refused, but through interpretation by the Italian woman he told me that I was shot down between 50 and 75 meters high. I have wished many times since I had signed it and possibly later communicated with him to confirm that as a fact.

The Captain also brought me a half loaf of bread and about a six inch chunk of Italian Salami.

Listening to the Italian woman's tales of shortages of everything I gave

her my bread and salami, little realizing that that was almost all the food

I would get on my way to Germany and prison Camps.

By now though, I was so happy to be alive and except for a sore tail bone, I felt so good nobody or anything could make me mad.

The next morning I was driven in a little Fiat 4 or 5 miles northwest to a large 3 story hotel or motel that was a German barracks. That night, in my own room and a guard at the door, I was fed a boiled potato and some more boiled rice, which by now I was hungry enough to eat, and had a good two nights sleep in a comfortable bed.

The next morning I was put on a large German flatbed truck with six soldiers and driven back to Milan. I was riding in the cab and as we were approaching Milan I noticed all the civilians were running and evacuating the street in front of us, I immediately looked up and saw two P-47 Thunderbolts still up about 6 or 8 thousand feet, I immediately pointed up and said, stop this truck, lets get out of



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here. Soon the driver did stop and we all jumped out.

By now the first plane was on his final approach, diving straight at us, so I jumped in the gutter and lay as flat as I could in the water and a little snow, the eight 50 caliber machine guns all converging on the truck and ricocheting off the concrete highway made a terrific three second bang. As soon as the first plane stopped shooting I jumped up and started to run down the highway, my guard was chasing me and yelling halt, halt, I just looked back and waving him to me kept running around a block wall only 30 or 40 yards away. Before I got there the second plane started shooting but now I was safe. My guard a little behind caught a bullet through his overcoat tails, and one in the palm of his hand.

The truck had holes through the bed and a bunch through the cab but it would still run. I was taken into town and assigned a new guard.

That night I was put on a bus going east to Verona. On the way two English Mosquito light bombers spotted us and the driver pulled over between two

rows of tall trees and although they flew over us twice they apparently couldn't see us in the dark and did not shoot. As they emptied the bus I again ran and jumped into a deep gutter this time and got good and wet. With snow on the ground I was shivering and very cold but in the bus was a small steam boiler at the rear using wood chips for fuel and the bus was running on the steam produced from the boiler. An indication they were short of fuel from the continuous bombing of refineries by heavy bombers and transportation by fighter bombers.

At Verona I was interrogated by German army personal to which I gave name, rank, and serial number, only. Of course, probably by the markings on my plane or our radio communication, they already knew my base, group number, squadron number, and commanding officers.

That night I was put on a passenger train, mostly soldiers, and was taken north through the Brenner pass and into Germany.

I had dive bombed railway bridges on three missions in the Brenner pass but this was night time so I couldn't see anything. I also now had

another guard who could speak some English and the first thing he told me was "lets have a good trip but if you try to get away I will have to shoot", well his burp gun looked pretty vicious so I decided to go along. Besides by now I could see that with all the equipment and supplies we had and they had almost nothing, the war couldn't last much longer.

We did stop and get off at some stations and at one he bought me a glass of beer, but by now I was getting pretty hungry and began to realize the bread and salami I gave away was to last me all the way to Germany.

We rode the train all the next day and night and arrived at Frankfurt Germany about night time the next day. I was put in a very small room about 6X9 feet with only a bunk and a 5 gallon bucket almost full of human waste, for the night.

At least it was two floors down from street level and warm.

The next morning I was driven North about 30 miles to Wetzlar to what looked like a prison, with barbed wire and gun towers, there I was placed in a small cell about 6X8 feet again, just a



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wooden bunk with no mattress and a 5 gallon bucket in the corner. This turned out to be 10 days of solitary confinement. A glass of water and half slice of bread mornings with a cup of soup and half slice of bread for dinner. After about 3 days I started scratching marks in the wall with my finger nails to keep track of the days. There was no one to talk to, solid concrete walls, high ceilings and a small window much to high to reach. The door was solid with just a small opening for the guards to hand in food and water.

After 10 days I was taken to be interrogated by a civilian which was really a farce as all he wanted to know was what would happen to them after the war, especially from Russians on the Eastern front. About all I could say was, retreat as fast as you can to the west, surrender to the Americans and English to which he said, "I wish it were that easy." That was the end of the interrogation.

What a waste after 10 days of solitary confinement. He did tell me , was leaving that night to my permanent P.O. W. Camp.

It was a day and two nights, some by train, some by truck, and some by bus, and we arrived at Nurnburg, Stalag III - early afternoon.

This was a large prisoner of war Camp with high fences and gun towers at each corner. One story wood barracks with triple deck bunks, all wood with 1X6 wood slats to lay on and no mattress or pillow.

There was a pot belly stove but no firewood, also for the first 3 days we had no blankets and with snow outside it was cold. There were two bunks, tight together on the sides, with a 3 foot space between every other bunk.

Four of us were assigned to my aisle; Jim Bayless, B-17 Pilot, Jim's navigator Brodt (pronounced Brot), Ed Palovich a P-38 and P-47 pilot, and me. I think Jim Brodt, and I came in the same time. Ed Palovich and I had bailed out of our planes but Jim Bayless B-17 wasn't on fire so he decided to crash land in what he thought was a green farm field. It turned out there were tree trunks left that ripped up the bottom of his plane and injured some of his crew, none seriously, so he must have done a good job on that

emergency wheels up landing.

First thing I wanted to know was "when do we eat"? As I hadn't had any food in two days. I was told we would get soup that night at the soup kitchen but I had to have my own container, so when you only own a wedding ring where do you get a container? I was told, out behind the barracks is an old German dump, a hole in the ground that had been covered over. Dig in that by hand and find a wine bottle, so out we went and each found a small bottle, we washed them out with a mixture of dirt and water and much shaking.

Then we went in the barracks and the old timers there had strings long enough to tie around the bottle below the neck, which they rolled in shoe wax from previous Red Cross parcels and then set the wax on fire. When the wax had burned out they poured on cold water and the top snapped off. Things were really looking a little better. I had company and I was going to get a small bottle of soup. Problem was when we got in line that night in the snow and they poured in the hot soup, my bottle broke. And it was yet another day



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with nothing to eat. But live and learn, from that day on I put the bottle under my armpit while standing in line and had no more trouble.

Once a week we were given a loaf of bread to divide among 8 of us, this was quite a project. Palovich had found a piece of flat iron which by rubbing on a brick he had made a knife. He cut the bread into thin slices and divided into 8 stacks, then we pulled straws to see who got which stack.

Each morning we were called out in front of the barracks for roll call and again about dark and then to the soup kitchen for our bottle of potato soup.

After about 3 days a truck came in with wadded up blankets and we were lined up and given 1 each. It turned out some were muddy and some were bloody and probably averaged about 3/4 of a blanket each.

In my barracks we were all air crew, all officers, mostly American, then English, Canadian, and Australians. We had no duties and nothing to do and with the cold we just laid around. Our conversations were always the good food at home and being cold. Broght was Jewish and always afraid he

would be called out of our formation, so he was pretty quiet most of the time.

Our latrines were out behind every third barracks, a building about 6X10 feet with a big hole in the ground and a wood 2X6 to sit on. We never had any paper to use at any time during captivity.

On February 20, 1945 we were given a letter form, kriege letter, so we could write home and let our wives and friends know how we were as we had all been reported missing in action. Actually it was 2 letters each and I sent mine to my wife and one to my room-mates in Italy.

After about 3 weeks we were treated to a real show that lifted our spirits for a while. One thousand B-17 bombers came over and were dropping bombs on the railroad yards and manufacturing area of Nuremberg about 2 miles north of us. They came over about middle of the morning in groups of 12 with the whole group dropping bombs at the same time off the lead bombardier.

Someone had a watch and we timed this at 3 1/2 hours from start to finish. Of course the Germans sent up a lot of flak, it was flak, 40

and 80 millimeter for 10 minutes and then fighter airplanes for 10 minutes, this allowed their gun barrels to cool and lasted the whole time. We didn't count the bombers destroyed but there were many. Some just glided down, some with wings or tails shot off and many burning; of course there were also a lot of parachutes coming down for those lucky enough to survive. After clearing the target and passed the flak area the B-17s made a 180 degree turn towards home and flew right over our P.O.W. Camp. I remember Jim Bayless, being a B-17 pilot was a little worried that some bombs could be held up in the bomb bay and they would kick them out over us but it didn't happen.

That same night the fireworks show of all time. About 100 English heavy bombers came over. First they dropped their flares to light up the target and the rest dropped their bombs into the fire. They also lost a lot of planes. The German used the same procedures, 10 minutes of flak and 10 minutes of fighter planes. At night with the bombers coming down in big balls of fire and the target on the



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ground all burning, it was like day and it seemed as if parachutes and some planes were falling right into the fire.

After that it was back to the same routine, nothing to do. Jim Bayless picked up a bad cold so both being cold we decided to share our blankets and sleep together in my bottom bunk. This did help some but it was still cold at night.

By now it had been about 6 weeks with very little food and we are beginning to worry about the possibility of starving. We know the Germans transportation system was all "kaput", their favorite word for saying everything's broken. And even if they had food, which we found later they did not, they would have a hard time getting it to us.

Our medics at the barrack, we called a hospital, advised us to drink lots of water and we could survive for several months, so that's what we did.

Jim Bayless was now developing pneumonia so he was taken to the hospital. A few days later Palovich was able to somehow get to see Jim, and advised us he was doing somewhat better and

would be returning in a few days.

In the meantime we received a Red Cross food parcel, to be again divided among 8 of us. The parcel contained, according to a Red Cross bulletin from my files, which I believe to be pretty accurate: Total weight including wrapping and container was 11 pounds:

milk, whole powdered 16 oz. cheese, processed American 8 oz. oleo margarine with added vitamin A 16 oz. beef, corned 12 oz. pork luncheon meat 12 oz. liver paste 6 oz. tuna or salmon 8 oz. prunes or raisins 15 oz. biscuits U.S. Army type H2 7 oz. chocolate bar, ration 08 oz. coffee, soluble 2 oz. salt and pepper 2 oz. jam 6 oz. multivitamin tablets 16 tablets sugar, lumps 8 oz. 4 or 5 packs of cigarettes soap 4 oz.

We again divided everything into 8 piles and drew straws for each pile. I asked that Jim be included as one of the 8 as he was expected back and would still probably be sick, weak and as much in need of food as the rest of us. All were willing, so I collected and kept Jim's share. All the items that were pliable we mixed together and rolled into one ball. That afternoon we finally had a little food, but we

didn't know how long or if ever we would get another parcel. Needless to say our spirits were increased considerably and I remember saying, "listen fella's", and as we listened to those around, instead of how cold it was and talking about food we wished we had. Everyone was talking about wives and girl friends with even a joke or a little sex thrown in.

Jim came back from the hospital after 10 days and was feeling much better, but very weak.

Then we were notified we were to evacuate this camp. Those who were able, were to walk and the sick and injured could go by train. We tried to tell Jim to take the train but there was no way he would agree. He was determined to stay with me and walk the best he could.

We decided to walk back and forth in front of the barracks to see how he would do and maybe build some strength. The first two days he had his arm around my shoulder, but did much better later and was able to go it alone.

They then brought us 2 pieces of Limburger cheese each, factory wrapped and round, about 2 oz. each. It was moldy and slimy, but I



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loved it. Jim and Ed also managed to eat theirs. But a lot of men couldn't go it, which for me was terrific, because I could trade one cigarette for a piece of cheese.

Some of our men were by now trading wedding rings or class rings to the enlisted men across the fence, for a few slices of bread. Some enlisted men were sent out on work details and if the Germans expected any work, they also had to feed them. So occasionally they would come back with a slice of bread or potato in their pockets. We officers were not allowed to work according to the Geneva Convention and the Germans mostly lived up to it. I guess it was, no work no food, and they really didn't have enough for themselves.

About April 1st, we were told we were leaving; we were lined up 4 abreast and started walking. We carried our blanket and what little food we had, wrapped in the blanket on our backs. This was the start of about 22 days of walking, living off the land as best we could.

Of course we walked pretty slow with lots of breaks but Jim just couldn't keep up so

we would just sit beside the road and rest awhile.

Early afternoon the first day we noticed some prisoners leaving the formation and walking towards a nearby barn, so we just followed and found a hayloft with loose hay and we lay on that and covered over with more hay. Turned out to be the softest, warmest bed we had in our 3 1/2 months of captivity.

That night we had a good rest and the next day Jim was keeping up a little better and also we were pulled over to a barn and lined up one at a time for a hot shower. We removed our clothes on the way in and were allowed 30 seconds each under the shower which was the first shower we had in 2 1/2 months.

The next few days were pretty uneventful, just walked, wished we had more food, slept beside the road and sleep we did whenever allowed. One day it rained and they marched us late into the night, that night we really slept good even in the rain.

Jim is still not well but getting stronger every day and not complaining, he was a pretty tough Texan.

By now with others joining us from different camps, we were still 4 abreast and stretched out for at least 20 miles. We were kept on secondary roads with only a few guards to be seen all day but they had dogs running along between guards that we saw pretty often. I guess we could have easily escaped, but no one tried as we knew the war was about over.

One afternoon we did get into town at a railroad station and were put in box cars and locked up. We were so crowded there was hardly a place to sit and of course the same old 5 gallon bucket in the corner.

The bucket filled rapidly and got to be quite a mess at that corner, but Jim and I were at the other end. That night the train stopped at a station and we were let out for a breath of fresh air. The first thing we did was drop our pants and relieved ourselves right there. They did clean up the mess a little and bring in a new bucket.

Next morning we were let out and started our walk again. One night we stopped at another barn and the farmer had a big kettle with a steam boiler he used to cook potatoes for his cows.



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We were lined up and given one potato each, then another line, and a glass of milk. I never drank milk, so I gave mine to Jim.

About the 10th day we came upon a convoy of American GI trucks with Swiss army drivers and were given our second and last Red Cross parcel. This time to be divided among 4 of us.

After that one day while walking, we went by a bare plowed field. By now the snow was gone but there were dirt mounds in the field. I knew there must be potatoes or something in those mounds, that were stored there to keep from freezing for the winter. I couldn't see any guards or dogs so we went out and started digging, under the dirt were sugar beets. We made a pouch with our blankets and took probably 15 pounds each. By now the farmer and his wife were there, dragging us back by our belts, but there was no way we were leaving without our beets. The beets didn't taste very good but if they were good for cows, they had to be good for us, so we all ate a bunch.

The next day in the pine trees just above the road, a

lone German soldier was pointing to a wheelbarrow.

He wanted to trade. Jim agreed we could use it for our sugar beets and pack, so I traded him 4 cigarettes for it. We put our packs in and took turns pushing it, but with an iron wheel, it wasn't really that much better than packs.

The following night we again stayed at a barn and this time I found some wheat they were using for chicken feed. Jim and I took what we could and put it in our pockets. We found an old tin can and with a few sticks and matches from our Red Cross parcel built our first fire. Of course we put in too much wheat and as it cooked the small can kept running over. So we would take some off with a flat stick and eat it as the balance cooked, cooked some more.

We never did get it cooked because we ran out of sticks for a fire but we ate it all anyway. The rest we ate raw a little at a time as we walked.

Our share of the Red Cross parcel was gone by now but with the sugar beets and wheat we were finally putting something in our stomachs.

The next day we were approaching a small town and an old German spotted our wheelbarrow and said "that's mine", he started emptying our stuff out onto the road and Jim kept saying no, and putting our stuff back in the wheelbarrow. I watched this for a while and I think I had my first laugh, as I could see Jim was now fighting back, so he must be feeling pretty good. I told Jim to let him have it as I didn't really like pushing it anyway and the farmer pushed it away.

We again put our belongings in our blankets and carried them on our backs.

The next day was a good day, we could hear the big guns off in the distance west of us and things were looking up.

The following day, must have been about April 25, we arrived at a permanent camp at Moosberg. This was a very large camp with the same barracks and bunks we had at Nuremberg. Here there were all allied nationalities, all mixed up, and very crowded. Other camps had all been walking too, the same as us, to keep ahead of our advancing armies.



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This was to be our last stop. We didn't get a bunk but actually the floor was about as good and we had a roof over us again.

The next day by some miracle we met Ed Palovich again. He had been there three days and somehow had a little bread and potatoes which he shared with us. Again there was no food, no soup, just what little we had in our packs.

I think we were there 2 or 3 days, when early one morning the shooting started at the town of Moosberg, about a mile east, big guns and rifle or machine gun fire.

I managed to climb on top of a barracks somehow to see the show. Actually I didn't see much, the shooting lasted about a half hour and in about an hour the German flag came down from the tower and our good old American flag went up.

In less than another hour tanks were coming up the dirt road to our camp. Our guards by now were throwing their rifles and burp guns over the fences to us and waiting to be captured.

About the time the tanks were coming in the gate rifle fire started in another section of our camp. We found out later, it was the

SS troopers shooting their own guards to try to make them fight.

I was still sitting on the roof of a barracks near the gate and a bullet hit the fascia board between my legs, so, decided it was time to leave and look for cover.

The tanks by now must have been at German headquarters and all shooting stopped.

It was now April 29 and we just knew a bunch of army trucks would come along with food. Actually after the tanks left no American soldiers or trucks ever came to our camp, so here we were in the same situation as before except we were free.

It was Patton's third army that liberated us. They were moving so fast they had outrun their own supplies, so we were left to shift for ourselves a while longer.

Some of the prisoners were walking to town and some came back with a little food, so Jim and I walked in the second day. We found all businesses and homes locked up by then, except one open door leading downstairs. We walked down and found it was a wine cellar, with thousands of bottles of wine and one German civilian. He told us

to take what we wanted, but please don't break anything.

We took 3 bottles each so we had a ball for a couple of days.

In about 4 or 5 days the Americans came in and told us we would be flown out in a C-47 or D.C. 3, our twin engine cargo and passenger planes, to France. Jim Palovich and I were lucky and were one of the first to be flown out to Camp Lucky Strike at Le Havre, France.

The first thing they did was open our shirts and pants and spray us front and back with D.D.T. Then it was the mess hall and something to eat. We were fed 5 small meals a day to stretch our stomachs out slowly.

We then lined up for clothes, new underwear, shirt and pants, all enlisted men's uniforms, and mine were big but at least new. Then it was to the shower and our first real shower in over 3 1/2 months, felt terrific.

We were there I think 5 or 6 days, we could have gone to town but we didn't want to miss any of that good food or a chance for a ride home. I was called out first, so Jim, Ed, and I became separated and I was put on a large passenger ship with



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thousands of us prisoners aboard.

We took the northern route home, passed England and on to Boston and Camp Miles Standish. From there it was a train ride to Camp Beale in northern California for a couple of days, arriving June 11, 1945.

From there it was home to San Diego and a 60 day leave.

My wife Elda, met me at the station and I had wheels again. It was mostly rest and recreation and civilian clothes as my military shirt and pants had come all the way from France. I did, in the next 60 days buy some uniforms at Camp Callan, which is now Torrey Pines golf course. My roommate in Italy had packed my belongings in my footlocker and B-4 bag, but they never did arrive.

I then received orders from the Army Air Corps, which was its designation then. It became the Air Force later, after War II. I reported to the Del Mar Hotel in Santa Monica for interviews and reassignment.

This turned out to be one of my finest vacations for a week, with my wife again accompanying me. We were

allowed our pick of several Airfields to report to.

Several of us decided on Aloe Air Field at Victoria, Texas. We arrived on about August 20th. By now Germany had surrendered on May 7, 1945, and Japan surrendered August 14, 1945.

We didn't have much to do at Aloe, so I shot a lot of skeet, was given my physical and placed back on flight status so I could draw flight pay. Aloe had pretty much become a separation center with both wars over and everybody coming home.

I had applied for a permanent commission and was promoted to 1st lieutenant but I decided to join the long separation lines and was separated from service October 27, 1945.