



San Diego Chapter 1 Member Biography

Herb Klossner

Herb was born on a farm in Rice Lake, Wisconsin on May 7th, 1924. He graduated from High School in Eau Claire, Wisconsin in May of 1942, and enlisted in the Army Air Corps on October 23., 1942. He went to basic training in Miami Beach, then to College Training Detachment at North Carolina State in Raleigh where he met his future wife Janie. From there it was on to Nashville, Tennessee where he was given a battery of physical and mental tests, and a more thorough physical exam to determine whether he was best suited to be a Pilot, Navigator, Bombardier or sent on to become some other member of a bomber crew if he "washed out".

He was assigned to Navigation School at Monroe, Louisiana. Between Primary and Advanced Navigation School, he went to Gunnery School at Ft. Myers, Florida. He graduated as a Second Lieutenant on April 8th, 1944 and was assigned to a B-24 bomber crew at Davis-Monthan Field in Tucson, Arizona. When the crew finished their training, they took a train to Fort Patrick Henry, New Jersey and from there were put on a refitted Cruise ship with 89 other bomber crews. The ship sailed to Jamaica to pick up 900 British troops, then took two weeks to reach port in Naples, Italy. Herb's Bomber Crew was assigned to the 724th



Squadron, 451st Bomb Group at the Castellucia Air Base near Foggia, Italy. They flew their first mission on July 26, 1944, to bomb an oil refinery in Albania. Most of the bombing missions were to bomb oil refineries, oil storage facilities, aircraft and tank factories, and gun emplacements. They bombed coastal gun emplacements in Southern France to support the Invasion on August 15th. On August 17th the target was the Ploesti Oil Fields, the most heavily protected target in range of the 451 st. There were hundreds of anti-aircraft guns on the ground, and the German fighters were just waiting for the bombers to approach the area. The Crew survived their first mission over Ploesti, but the next one would be different.

It started before even reaching the target when the Number three engine shut down. They had to drop their bombs harmlessly on the Romanian countryside in order to stay up with the formation. If you did not

stay up with the formation you became a sitting duck for the German fighters. As a result, they flew the rest of the mission over the target with empty bombays. Over the target the number four engine was hit by flak and shut down. There were numerous other flak hits but no one was injured.

With two engines gone it was now impossible to keep up with Group and they soon found themselves alone and "sitting ducks" for any German fighter who happened by. They were 600 miles from base and losing altitude. There was only a slight chance they would make it and everything had to be perfect. The Pilot had to conserve what gas was left, The Flight Engineer had to transfer gas from the dead engines efficiently, and Herb's Navigation Skills had to set the right course to follow. There were no second chances! The pilot ordered the crew to throw everything out that was not welded down. That included the guns and the ammo, and their personal gear.

Somebody must have been watching over them that day because they made it to the base dead on. The pilot dropped the landing gear and started the landing but the right tire had been hit and it was flat! It was now impossible to hold the runway with two engines gone and a flat tire. The plane skidded off the runway, over a drainage ditch that took the rest of the landing gear off, and slid on it's belly for about 200 yards



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before coming to a halt. The crew jumped out any hatch that was open and ran away from the wreck that was now on fire. All ten members were quickly accounted for and no one was injured.

Three days later they were back to the routine of bombing other designated targets.

Their 15th Mission on August 23rd to bomb the Markersdorf Airdrome near Vienna seemed like a milk run after what they had recently been through. They had just flown through a cloud bank and had reached 20,000 feet when all hell broke loose. Following them through the clouds was a squadron of German FW190s. The B-24 could not stand the onslaught of 20 mm canon fire. Burning engines and inoperable controls forced the Crew to bailout. All ten crew members escaped the aircraft safely.

The Co-pilot and the tail gunner were murdered on the ground by an SS officer who was subsequently found guilty of the crime at the Nurenburg Trials. The other eight members were sent to various Prison Camps across Germany. Herb was captured the next day in the mountain side village of Murzzusclagh, Austria, and was put in a local jail cell. That night the Radio Operator for the crew was put in the cell with him. The next day they were put in the back of an open truck with an armed guard and taken to a cell in the Hans Udet Airdrome near

Vienna where they stayed for eight days.

Many Austrian hated the Germans and were friendly to the Americans. One such Austrian was the Cook who made sure Herb and Ken got more than enough to eat. They were visited several times by a very young German bomber crew member who asked a lot of questions about America and had a love of American music. When asked why he wasn't flying he replied that they had no petrol. Apparently the strategy of bombing the oil facilities was paying off.

Herb and an armed guard got on a street car to ride through Vienna to the train station. The train went to Frankfort, Germany. Herb was one of about a dozen other POW, that had to wait on a platform for a train to take them to Oberusel, a POW processing center. Frankfort had been heavily bombed by the Eight Air Force from England and the civilians were very hostile. A crowd of civilians had gathered around the POWs on the platform and attack them just as the train pulled in. The last two guys on were beaten with umbrellas, fists and anything that was available and had to be rescued by the guards.

At Oberusel the standard procedure was solitary confinement and interrogation. The interrogator was very fluent in American English and began asking questions about the Airbase, the crew and crew's

mission. The only information Herb would give him was his name, rank and serial number.

After three days of intense interrogation and not receiving any information, the interrogator turned to a bookcase behind his chair and pulled out an orange loose leaf binder about two inches thick with 724 written in block letters on the cover. He said he was only looking for confirmation of the information he already had. He then opened the binder to the K page and began to recite Herb's life history.

He knew who his parents were, his schooling, the date he enlisted, the places he had trained, and all his crew members. They must have had people gleaning this information from local newspapers all over the US.

The next trip was a train ride with many other POWs to a permanent camp at Barth, Germany, on the Baltic sea called Stalag Luft I. Along the way, they witnessed a night bombing of Frankfort by the British Royal Air Force {RAF}. They themselves were sitting in a marshaling yard at Giesen, Germany, when the Eight Air Force bombed it. The guards left the train and headed for a bomb shelter but left the POW,s locked in the train. They were very fortunate that day. The nearest bomb struck about 100 yards from their train, but the noise of the exploding bombs and the shock wave they produced were horrendous. The



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train was undamaged and after the track damage was repaired, the journey to Stalag I continued.

Upon arrival at Stalag I, the POW.s were deloused, given a shower, issued 2 blankets, a knife, a fork, a spoon, a bowl and assigned to a barracks. Herb was assigned to Room 3, Block 10, in North Compound II.

Stalag I was an Air Officers camp of about 10,000 POW,s. They were Polish, French, Russian, and a few other ethnic groups, but the majority of the prisoners were English and American. There were four compounds, West, North I, North II, and North III. There were eventually 20 men living in Herb,s room.

The Compound was surrounded by two parallel fences, eight feet high and strung with miles of barbed wire. Between the fences was filled with rolls of barb wire entanglements. Thirty feet inside the fence was another barbed wire "warning fence" about two feet high. If anyone stepped over this fence he would be immediately shot by one of the guards in the six towers that surrounded the compound.

The new POWs were met by Colonel Spicer who was the American in charge of Compound II. He reminded them that for them the war was not over, and it was their duty to harass their captures in anyway they could to make their lives more miserable. He certainly

took his own advise and several weeks later he was thrown in the brig and threatened with a death penalty.

There were many opportunities to harass the Germans. Many of the guards had just come of the Russian Front. To their commanders being a guard at a prison camp was R and R. The POWs would watch from the gate into the Compound while the guards were lined up for inspection prior to entering the compound for roll call. When they were ready to march the POWs would all shout on cue,"Ruskie come". They were still so jittery from battling the Russians that some would break rank and head for the woods.

There were two roll calls a day, where the guards would line up the POW s in rows of equal numbers, then count the rows for the final count. Easy, right? Except there were always POWs who "forgot" which row they were supposed to be in and kept jumping from one row to another, screwing up the count. Not really serious stuff but annoying enough to keep prolonging the roll calls and irritating the hell out of the Hauptman in charge.

When the lights came on at night, the windows were always shuttered to prevent light from escaping. When the lights were eventually turned off the rooms were full of stale smoke and body odors, so the shutters were pulled back and the

windows opened wide to air the rooms out.

There was one sadistic guard who patrolled the grounds with a German Shepherd, and waited until the windows were open and a crowd gathered around catching some fresh air. He would then send the dog at the window. The dog would put his paws on the sill, stick his head in the window and bark like crazy, scaring the hell out of anybody close to him. The POWs decided to do something about it. They lined the sill with upright razor blades and sprinkled the area with generous amounts of pepper.

That night when the dog jumped on the window sills his paws were cut on the blades, he got a nose full of pepper and never came close to another open window after that experience. Their pepper ration was cut, but Germans could not take away the razor blades because they had a no beards policy.

The food was mostly supplied by the International Red Cross. In theory each man was to receive one parcel of food per week. The one big problem with that system was that the distribution was left to the Germans. It seemed that they distributed the parcel in direct proportion as to how the War was going. The distribution stopped after the Battle of the Bulge started and did not resume until March 27th, when General Patton cranked up his tanks and took off.



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During those three months, the only food supplied to the POWs was an ersatz bread made with very little flour and sawdust, rutabagas, a few bad potatoes, and an occasional piece of meat from an ox that had the misfortune of getting in the way of a 20 mm cannon round. When the food parcels were finally released, the POWs pigged out and for two days, almost everyone was sick or had diarrhea.

When the Russians started their push from the East, the Germans started to evacuate some of the POW camps ahead of the Russians. Two of Herb's crew members were evacuated from an Eastern camp and were forced to march to Stalag J. On the night of April 30, 1945, the Germans abandoned Stalag I and disappeared, leaving the camp in the hands of the POWs. The Russians arrived the next day.

There are many stories to tell during the wait to be evacuated by the Americans. Here is one.

After several days passed without a rescue party, Herb and Don Kelly, one of his Crew Members, decided to walk out of camp and head for Paris. Being young and dumb, they didn't think about the fact that there was a whole lot of fighting still going on to the West. They hooked up with a two Russian non-coms, who traveled on a horse drawn wagon. They also picked up three French

prisoners and spent the next 4 days and nights with this crew.

The Russians eventually hooked up with their outfit and they all split up. Herb and Don hit the road again and on May 8, 1945, they reached the British Line at Lubeck, just in time for a HUGE celebration of the end of the War in Europe.

The following day the plans for Paris evaporated when the British MPs, apparently under orders to protect wandering POWs, "captured" Herb and Don, put them on a British Lancaster Bomber, and were flown to a base in England. They spent several days at the base Hospital, getting medical checkup, before moving on.

Herb was sent to a house in the Knightsbridge section of London and it would be 45 years before he would see Don Kelly again. Herb was given a complete new set of uniform clothes and billeted in the Washington House, on Basil Street.

Returning POWs that flew out of England, were returned to their bases for processing. POWs from Italy had no records and were interrogated to prove that they were for real.

After the Army accepted you as one of theirs you were given 50 Pounds. London was not exactly Paris. but it was one hell of a city, and Herb wanted to see it all. The 50 Pounds didn't last very long, and it would be two weeks before the Army would give him another 50. However,

the Red Cross made small loans available, enough for Herb to visit Scotland, and roam around London.

On July 9, 1945, Herb received orders to report to Liverpool for passage to the USA. The ship was a Liberty ship, and after 12 uneventful days at sea the ship pulled into New York Harbor and the troops were transferred to Camp Kilmer.

The next day they were put on a troop train headed for Minneapolis. After a very eventful 6 Hour stop in Chicago, the train pulled into Minneapolis on July 25th, 1945, and Herb was back home, two and a half years after the great adventure began.

In December, Herb enrolled at the University of Minnesota as a Civil Engineering student, under the GI Bill. Herb and Janie Durant were married in March, 1946 in Raleigh, North Carolina.

He graduated in June, 1949, with a Bachelor of Science Degree in Civil Engineering and took his first job with the City of Milwaukee, Wisconsin, where his two sons, David and Paul were born. From there he moved on to Montgomery County, Maryland to become the Chief Engineer in charge of Design and Construction of Highways and Parking Garages. In 1968 he became the County Engineer and later the Director of Transportation. For Hennepin County, Minnesota. He retired in 1988.



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During his career he received several awards and participated in a number of Professional Technical Societies.

1972 National Society of Professional Engineers
Government Professional Development Award

1973 President Minnesota Section of the American Society of Civil Engineers

1974 One of Top Ten Public Officials in US and Canada

1974 Appeared on the cover of the August Public Works magazine

1976 President of Minnesota Society of Engineers and Surveyors

1977 President of Transportation Officials Division of American Road and Transportation Builders Association

1979 President National Association of County Engineers

1984 Recipient of ARTBA "Ralph R. Bartlesmeyer Award

1989 Zone III Government Civil Engineer of the Year Award

Janie died in 1980. Herb was remarried to Mariana Olson in 1981. After his retirement in 1988 he and Mariana hit the road as full time RVers and traveled extensively through out the US and Canada and spent many winters in Mexico.