

The Last Mission: Byron Schlag's Story

It was a cool day in the spring of '45 that I stood numbly on a Luftwaffe base outside Giessen, Germany, with the cold barrel of a pistol against my head. I prayed for the Lord to save me as I anticipated the gun going off. The elderly and friendly German guard . . . who was to help me escape . . . was, instead, being forced to shoot me. After avoiding death once in a midair collision, I was certain that I was about to die.

It doesn't seem that long ago (although its been over fifty years) that I flew my ninth mission as a tailgunner on B-17 number 528 of the 711th Bomb Squadron, 477th Bomb Group, 8th Air Force. She was known as "Ol' Scrapiron," and we were off to bomb the marshalling yards at Holzwickede, northeast of Koblenz, Germany. It was supposed to be "pretty much a milk run," with meager flak and no enemy fighter action anticipated.

We had to make a second bomb run because the lead bombardier had sighted on the wrong target at the IP. After we had circled, we dropped our load from twenty-three thousand feet and turned to begin the trip home.

It had been a quiet mission, and I hadn't noticed anything unusual until the navigator reported that we were nearing Koblenz and the Rhine River. Suddenly, out of the corner of my eye, I saw pieces of aluminum flying by, including a large panel of engine cowling. Just as I pressed the intercom button to notify the pilot, I heard our engineer say "Pilot, look out . . .!"

At that instant, I experienced a horrifying crash as we were hit. Just before losing consciousness, I remember crying out, "Lord, help me!" Then, total oblivion set in.

Some time and several thousand feet later, I awoke. Although quite disoriented and dazed, I knew I was alive and falling. I had to get out! As I collected my thoughts, I discovered a belt of .50-caliber ammo around my neck. We must have rolled over for the belt to come out of the box beside me; I then realized that I was falling right-side-up in the tail of the bomber. I pulled off my helmet and flak suit, untangled myself from the ammo belt, and started for the tail's escape hatch. It appeared jammed and wouldn't open. I turned towards the waist door and saw only a circle of sky! The rest of the plane was gone! I now realized that I was floating down alone in the severed tail. (I eventually learned that we had been hit from above by another B-17 which had lost a wing from a direct hit by flak. That B-17 had gone out of control and collided with our plane, cutting it in two just behind me.) I always kept my parachute buckled on one side, and I quickly attached the loose ring to my harness, then crawled back to the edge of the opening, and hung my legs over the side. Below me, I saw what was left of our plane going down in a flat spin ahead of me. It soon crashed into a wooded area where the large trees stripped the wings as it impacted. At that moment, I was sure my entire crew had perished, including my best friend, Eddie Shibble, who had enlisted with me.



Schlag in living color
enlisted at the age of



A artists replication
Iron"

To Jump or Not to Jump?

As I had reservations about my chute's opening, I decided to pull the ripcord while I sat there on the edge of the tail section. If it popped open, it would pull me free of the fuselage. If it malfunctioned, I'd take my chances and ride the tail down. When I yanked the ripcord, the chute did open and pulled me out, but I was already so low that I swung up and back . . . just once . . . and quickly hit the ground.

Our training and briefings had conditioned us to believe it was our duty to escape, so I immediately got out of my harness and started to run away from the small valley where I had landed. As I ran to the top of a knoll, I was shot at by the Wehrmacht (German army), who were in the area. Clearing the hilltop, I was confronted by a German soldier riding a bike.

I'm probably lucky he was there; otherwise, I might have been killed by the irate civilians from a nearby village. (Intelligence had briefed us about known killings of parachuting airmen). After I had surrendered myself to him, the screaming civilians surrounding us began beating me. The soldier pushed me to the ground and lay over me, taking much of the beating himself. This hysteria abruptly halted with the arrival of a German officer. The officer and several soldiers escorted me to the town. While en route, they took me past the plane's tail section, sitting upright and undamaged with the rudder and stabilizer intact. It had floated down like a leaf, and may have offered as much safety as my chute.

Escape!

What followed was the first of several intense prisoner of war interrogations at diverse locations, while I, in turn, obsessed about escape. During one such episode, I was being transported by an officer and two enlisted men in a black Mercedes from a small village to Giessen. As we approached the city, we heard an air raid siren. After the driver and officer looked through the windshield, they made several excited exchanges, pulled the car to the roadside, and stopped. He and his men jumped out of the car and into a deep ditch on the right, leaving me alone in the rear seat. I immediately jumped into a gully on the other side and spotted a P-51 bearing down on the Mercedes. It made two strafing passes and peeled off. Shaking the several inches of dirt off me, I crawled on my stomach past the burning car to the other side of the road. Looking into the ditch, I saw the officer and both soldiers lying dead. I immediately got up and ran towards the nearest wooded area to hide.

I was soon recaptured by the Volkstrum and given my worst interrogation: beaten with a rifle butt until I was unconscious. When I finally awoke, I was in a solitary cell at a Luftwaffe base outside Giessen. As bad as I felt after being beaten, being an Air Force sergeant somehow earned me better treatment on this base in the days to come, especially from one seventy-year-old Luftwaffe soldier. He was just doing his duty, he said. He had to serve or be interned or killed.



Schlag's crew. Schl the right.

Rescue?

One morning as I was praying for my safety, I heard shellfire sounds, different from those I was used to hearing. I suspected the Americans were coming. My guard at first denied it, but later, he admitted the Americans were shelling Giessen. The next morning, my friendly German came to take me away. He said he had been ordered to kill me, but, instead, would take me to a nearby village where I would be safe.

He took me up some stairs from what turned out to be a basement cellblock and on through a long hall. There was an Air Operations room on the left and a pilot's dormitory with bunks on the right. As we left the buildings where I had been held, we observed total chaos on the main road to the right. Civilians and soldiers, on bikes, in trucks, and on foot, were retreating from the city. I looked down the field towards a landing strip with hangars to one side. I could hear the sounds of artillery whistling overhead and exploding at the end of the base.

As my guard and I were about to crawl under the arc of cannon fire to a small village across the strip, we heard the popping of a motorcycle behind us. A German Waffen SS officer rode double with a driver. He called my guard to attention, saluted, and proceeded to question him as to who he was, my identity, and what he was doing with me. After much excited conversation directed my way, the officer motioned for the guard to take me to the wooded area alongside the building where I had been held, and to shoot me.

Ally Turned Executioner

As we walked to the trees, the old man was muttering. "Ach, mein Gott, please forgive me," he whispered. He told me he would be shot if he didn't follow the SS officer's orders. We stopped. He got out his pistol and, with the SS man screaming at him to hurry, placed the muzzle at my right temple. At that point, we were both praying fervently. I felt as if my entire body had gravitated to my feet and had left only an empty skeleton standing there. My feet felt like two concrete blocks. I remember thinking, "God, after all this, why now?"

At the very moment I was to be shot, an artillery shell fell short and exploded near the officer, knocking both him and his driver to the ground! With that, they hurriedly picked up the motorcycle and sped off into the retreating crowd on the road.

My guard and I collapsed together, both of us totally drained. After about thirty to forty minutes, we had regained our strength, and were able to crawl beneath the shellfire to nearby village. I never learned the old man's name. He took me to the home of Albert Abedd and other friendly Germans who took care of me until I was liberated by Patton's 7th Armored Division.

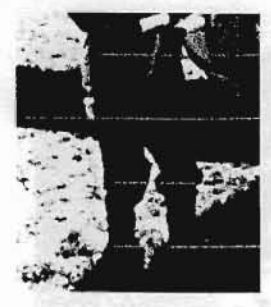
Reunion!

<http://www.ghostwings.com/ByronSchlag.htm>



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I was removed from that location, put through several more interrogations by the forward American Military Police, and, finally, moved to the 90th General American Hospital in Verdun, France. There, during an inquiry by an American Intelligence officer, I learned that besides myself, there was only one other survivor from my crew. My best friend, Eddie Shibble, was miraculously still alive. Without a parachute, he had fallen twenty-three thousand feet in the other half of the plane, and was still sitting in the ball turret as it crashed through the trees!



Schlag today with a historian in front of

While I was recuperating at Coral Gables Hospital in Florida, I went home on leave and found Eddie in the Deshon Army Hospital at Butler, Pennsylvania. It was, to say the least, an emotional reunion.

Since Eddie was Catholic and I was Protestant, we had often visited each other's churches, as well as having attended Jewish services together. I said to Eddie, "When you found out your chute was gone, what did you do?" "I stayed in the ball turret and prayed," he replied. "To whom?" I asked. "To anyone who would listen." It was only by the Lord's grace that both Eddie and I survived, when both of us could have died so easily, so many times.

After World War II, Schlag was employed by the Sheriff's Department of Allegheny County, Pennsylvania, for twenty years. He then worked as a real estate broker and appraiser before owning a construction company. In the midst of all this, Schlag attended Cornell University while married and with two children. Today he is very involved with the Eighth Air Force Historical Society, National Capital Area Chapter and is the Vice-President of the 447th Bomb Group.