FRANK FARR, CHARTRES & MERSEBURG, GERMANY

B17 mission: Merseburg, Germany

A fresh, green crew, we flew (Lt. Bruce Benton's crew) our first combat mission on July 31, 1944. It was a long haul to Munich, Germany, but for us fairly uneventful. Flak—antiaircraft fire—didn't get close enough to scare us (though our group did lose one B-17)s, and no fighters attacked. Our second mission, the very next day, looked like what veteran crews called a "milk run," a short, easy mission. We were to bomb a German air field outside of Chartres, France. A milk run for most, it turned out to be, but not

for us. Just after "bombs away," a burst of flak scored a direct hit on the plane on our left wing. One moment it was there, the next, it was gone. The same burst put about 70 holes in our aircraft—and one in me. A piece of shrapnel about twice the size of a .45 slug ripped through the left side of the nose, tore through my navigator's work bench, bounced off a heavy piece of bracing, and tore through the heavy zipper on my flying boot, coming to rest finally in my right foot. Another piece shattered my interphone, making it impossible for me to speak to my crew members. My bombardier, three feet away, was not hit, and he offered me morphone for pain, which I declined. Then he asked if we should try to stop the bleeding. I was afraid if we pulled the boot off, it might make matters worse, so I declined that offer too.

I was awarded the Purple Heart. Three months later, I could have got another one if I'd reported a very slight wound sustained when I was shot down over Merseburg Nov. 2, 1944. At the time I thought the wound so slight that I didn't really deserve another Purple Heart, so when accounting came after our liberation from the prison camp six months and a couple of weeks later, I didn't mention it.

An account of that event (and my wounded left shoulder) follows:

Just out of Merseburg was the Leuna oil refinery, perhaps the most important of several such refineries in the Reich. It was tenaciously defended. I've heard that there were more flak guns ringing Merseburg than Berlin. I don't know if this is so, but certainly Merseburg was one of the most dreaded targets we flew to in Germany. Merseburg is in the vicinity of Leipzig, a great city in the east-central Germany.

On Nov. 2, 1944, when the 91st BG flew to Merseburg, it lost 13 B-17s, each with at least nine men on it. That was the largest number lost by the 91st in a single mission in the entire war.

I was in the 323rd Squadron of the 91st Bomb Group (of Memphis Belle fame). On Nov. 2, 1944, our group was sent to bomb the refinery at Merseburg. I had heard about Merseburg, and I didn't look forward to it.

I was flying as a substitute navigator with Lt. O.J. Snow in "Winged Victory," a B-17 with an image of the Venus of Samothrace (Nike) painted on the nose. My regular plane, "Pard," was being flown by "Rusty" Rustand. He died in the Merseburg battle. Nice guy, and a fine pilot. I had navigated for them (as a veteran of combat) on their first mission.

We flew through heavy flak to drop our bombs. Flak accounted for at least one of our group before the fighters came. Fighters, Me109s and FW190s,

hit us right after "bombs away," just before 1 p.m., if memory doesn't deceive me. They ripped us. They lined up several abreast high and behind us, then zoomed down through our formations, tearing us apart with 20 mm. cannons. With all our guns firing, they darted through us repeatedly. The third pass hit our left wing tanks and set the wing afire. With no hope of putting out such a fire, out pilot ordered "bail out."

I recorded all this faithfully in my navigator's log--time of bandits attack, direction of the attack, the usual log entries. Then I got up from my navigator's work bench and turned to my machine gun in the right side of the nose. Before I could get the second of two hooks undone, the bail out order came. I was happy to leave the burning plane. I had been hit by tiny 20 mm fragments, but I didn't know how seriously. When I bailed out, I didn't attempt to open the chute until I judged I had fallen to about 10,000 feet. (We bailed out at about 25,000) When I pulled the rip cord, it failed to open the chute. I can still see that bright red handle with a wire attached--and I was still falling. Reflexively, I clawed at the front of my chest-pack chute and succeeded in pulling out a piece of silk (nylon) that the wind caught. The chute opened, and I was falling through the most intense quiet I ever remember experiencing. I could see bits of burning airplane falling.

When I hit the ground, I was covered immediately by two men, one with a rifle, the other with a shotgun. My jacket was shredded by the 20 mm cannon fragments, but only three tiny bits penetrated my shoulder. I remember walking with my arms up, the two armed men behind me. The shoulder hurt a little bit, and my left arm tended to sag. Each time, the guy with the shotgun would tap it with the barrel of his gun, and I'd hoist it up again.

NOVEMBER 2

November second –
Merseburg day –
So many airmen
KIA.

November second,
'Forty-four,
Marked by death
And blood and gore.

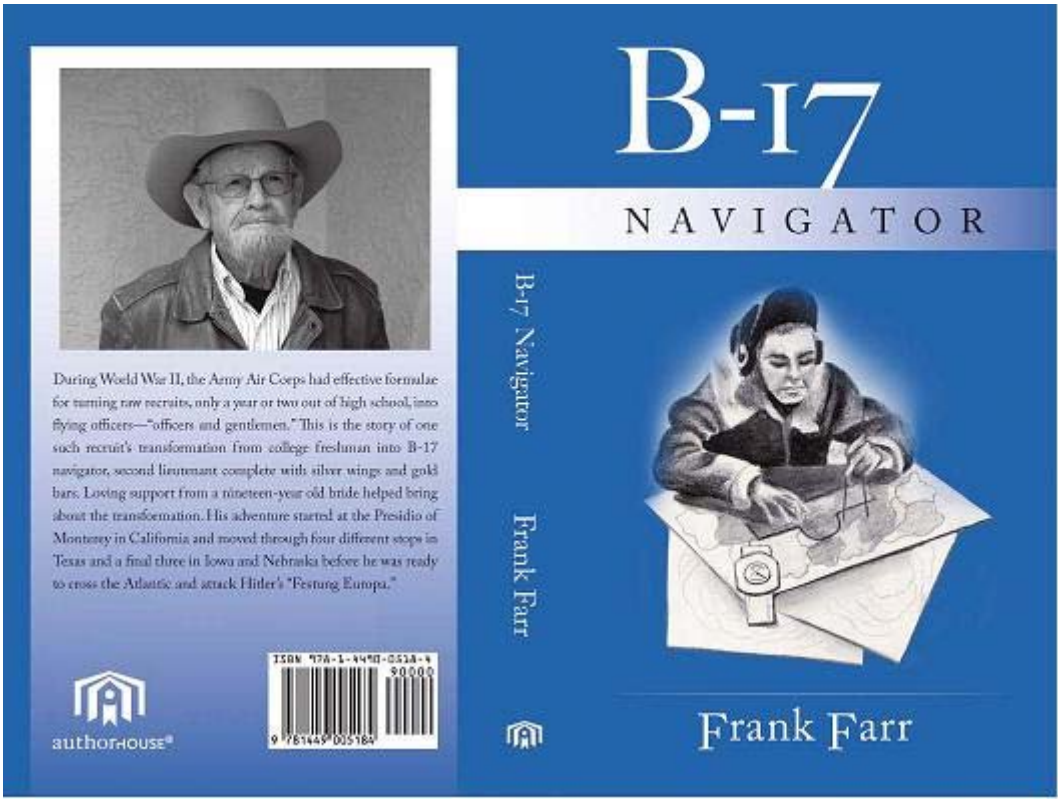
Six-score and ten
Went down in flames.

Went down in flames –
What were their names?

Epic battle
In the sky –
Many flyers
Doomed to die.

Six-score and ten
Went MIA.
Let's not forget
This fateful day.

by Frank Farr



"B-17 Navigator" by Frank Farr

The two gunmen escorted me into an enclosed farm yard—one of those European farms where the house, the fence, and the outhouses join to make a complete enclosure. Then the man with the shotgun, by far the most unfriendly of the two, told me to back up against a stone wall, and he took his gun off his shoulder. For

a fleeting moment, I was sure he was going to shoot me; and I determined instantly not to show him I was feeling any fear.

Almost as quickly I realized he hadn't intended to shoot me after all. This was a tiny community, and I was an instant curiosity. Among the handful of people who came to look was a jovial gentleman who seemed to be a man of some influence. With him was a young girl, perhaps 16 years old. We had a pleasant little conversation while the man with the shotgun glowered. The man asked where I was from in the States. Aware that I shouldn't really tell him the truth, I said "San Francisco." The girl admired the shiny green nylon that covered the wiring in my electrically heated vest. I took it off and gave it to her. She put it on and preened like any American teenager. A young woman in the farmhouse wanted to bring me a chair, but the shotgun guy wouldn't let her.

After an hour or two of standing in the yard, I was taken to what appeared to be a little home guard station just outside the village. I was to be kept there until transportation to a larger center arrived—Dessau, I believe. While I was there, a sympathetic soldier, several years older than I, took from his footlocker a cookie and gave it to me. He let me know that his mother, who lived in Hamburg, had made them. I was touched by his compassion, the more so because the 8th Air Force had bombed Hamburg relentlessly. The man told me he was a veteran of the fighting on the eastern front (Russia). When I offered to share a bite of chocolate from my flying suit, he refused. I thought he was telling me that I would need it.

A badly wounded airman was brought in, his face covered with blood so I couldn't recognize him. He knew me, though, and told me he had survived the explosion that took Rusty's life. He had flown his first combat mission with me as navigator. I had done an outstanding job on that day, and he thought I was something special. I gave him a blanket that the soldier-guard had given me and tried to make him as comfortable as possible. Besides the head injuries he had a broken arm. (The guard brought me another blanket.) A young nurse came in to tend, as best she could, to the wounded airman—a sling for his arm, a bandage for his head. She asked if I had been wounded, and with my left shoulder still smarting a bit, I said that was minor damage to that area.

When I peeled back my shirt so we could see the shoulder, we burst out laughing. The only visible wound was three tiny punctures that had bled maybe a drop or two each. I hastily covered my shoulder, considerably embarrassed; but the girl said, "Nein, nein," and directed me to uncover my "wounds" again so she could put disinfectant on them. I hated to see her go.

Some time after dark, a truck came to transport us to a larger "collection center," Several other captured airmen were already in the truck. The guards took us to a basement in the downtown district of what I believe was Dessau. More than 100 prisoners were already there. The following day they put us on a train, and we were taken to Dulag Luft, a notorious interrogation center. We were too many to allow for the full treatment of incoming prisoners, so some of us were lucky and were not kept very long at Dulag Luft. I was one of the lucky ones; after three days, I moved on to a sort of clean-up delousing center in Wetzlar along with many other prisoners. There we were given showers and new GI clothing, Red Cross food parcels (with cigarettes), and felt generally comfortable. We were there a week. My pilot, O.J. Snow, and I and a man who could play the saxophone formed a little band and entertained the other troops for three or four nights of the week we spent there. O.J. played piano, and I played guitar.

Our next move took us by train east across Germany to Stalag Luft III at Sagan, near the Polish border. Six American airmen were moved into a large room with six RAF flyers. The British already had things pretty well organized, and we were comfortable in Stalag Luft III. We were only there two months, though, before orders came to pack up and prepare to hit the road. The Russians were coming in from the east, and the Germans didn't want us to be liberated. We marched for five bitter winter days in January, 1945, along snow-covered roads, sleeping in whatever makeshift accommodations the German guards could find. We spent at least one night in a barn. Another was in a bomb-out glass factory. We carried as much food from our Red Cross food parcels as we could—and as many cigarettes. Cigarettes were like money. They could be traded with the Germans for items of food or, on at least one occasion that I remember, a canteen full of beer.

The march was brutal for some. Those who couldn't make it were loaded onto wagons and trundled along at the rear of the column. After five days we were loaded—crammed--into the little box cars that were called "40 and 8s" in World War I and hauled southwest to Stalag VII-A. It was just outside of the little city of Moosburg, not far from Munich.

Stalag VII-A was desperately overcrowded and with very few comforts. There were no baths to be had there, though a very few hardier prisoners than I stripped in the cold and sponged off with cold water from the only tap available for a prison hut with two or three hundred or more airmen "making do." We had a large, pit-type outdoor toilet—perhaps a 10-holer. We wore the same clothes that we arrived in during our stay in VII-A—about four months.

I was interned in an officers' section of Stalag VII-A, and we suffered more from neglect than from any real ill treatment. However, I have read real horror stories told by enlisted prisoners in other sections of the camp.

I believe that the degree of "horror" the prison camp had for individuals depended a great deal upon the individual's perception of it. So the same conditions that were uncomfortable and inconvenient for me, essentially an optimist, might have seemed horrible to another person.

I lost about 20 pounds during my six months as a prisoner, weighing about 115 when we were liberated by Gen. George Patton's Third Army. Bigger guys lost a lot more weight.