

P.O. Box 61  
Lowell, Oregon 97452  
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Russell A. Strong  
Rt. 1, Scotch Meadows Drive  
Laurinburg, North Carolina 28752

Dear Mr. Strong,

I recently received a request from you asking for any information that I might have that would be of help in your research of the 306th Bomb Group program that you are working on.

I don't know if I have anything that will be of much help to you or not but here is about all that I can offer at this time:

As you already know, I was in the 306th Bomb Group, 368th Bomb Squadron. Our outfit was stationed at Thurleigh, England, Station # 111, a small town about eighteen miles from a larger town called Bedford. We flew missions into Germany and Occupied France.

We were flying B-17s and our plane was named Alexander on one side and on the other side was the words "Big Time Operator". The last three digits of our plane number were 406. I do not recall the first part of the whole number.

Our crew consisted of the first pilot, Thomas W. Simons, Co-pilot, Lt. (John?) Wempe, Lt. Robert F. Proctor, Bombardier, Lt. Jobe (first name not recalled) Navigator, Top turret gunner and Engineer, Oscar Ellison, Radio operator, S/Sgt. Robert F. Woodruff, Ball turret gunner, S/sgt. Grady Parrish, Right waist gunner, Joseph P. Fiddes, Left waist gunner, S/sgt Hayden M. Collier, Tail gunner S/sgt Joseph Begin. However, on our 11th and last mission S/sgt Begin was not flying with us. He was left behind, having injured his ankle just previously and another Sgt., Al J. Deine, who was waiting for his 25th mission flew tail gun position on that mission.

Our target was Bernburg, Germany. It was a maximum effort raid with 1000 planes involved. We reached our target and dropped the bombs and everyone headed for home. Our fighter escort was supposed to pick us up near the Holland border and about the time that they were supposed to pick us up the right waist gunner called out "Friendly fighters at Three O'clock high" He was mistaken. They were German fighters and they hit us from out of the sun. I heard what I thought was the right waist gunner test firing his guns but when I looked to see if this was the case he was just standing and looking out the right waist window. The whole right wing was a solid mass of flame. Our intercom system must have been out for we had no word from any of the other crew members. I tried to release the emergency escape door but it would not release. Suddenly the plane went into a sharp spin and I was thrown to the catwalk beside the right waist gun.

When the plane finally came out of the spin enough for me to pull myself back to the escape door I pulled the release handle again and that time the door was released. I bailed out just as the plane exploded. The right waist gunner, Radio Operator, Tail Gunner, and the Bombardier were the only other survivors beside myself. They were blown out of the plane when it exploded. Robert Woodruff, the Radio Operator did not have his parachute on when we were hit. When he saw that the plane was on fire he started to put on his chute when the plane blew up. The concussion threw him out and wrapped his strap of the shoulder harness around his wrist. He said that he noticed that he was still attached to the chute harness and knew that he didn't have anything to lose so he pulled the handle on his ripcord and the chute opened. The pressure of his weight on the twisted strap kept it in place and he came down safely. When he hit the ground he just shook his wrist and the strap fell off! God was surely looking after him as well as the rest of us.

We were picked up by the Germans soon after landing and taken to the interrogation center at Frankfort. Then we were shipped out to prison camp # 6, Stalag Luft Six, up near the border of East Prussia and Lithuania. The Russians made a drive into that sector and we were moved to Stalag Luft Four down near Stettin. From there I was sent with about six others to catch the Repatriation ship on the coast of France but we never arrived. Instead, we were put into what passed for a hospital in Stargard. Then the Russians made a drive into that area and again we were moved. This time to an officer's camp, Stalag Luft number One up by Barth on the Baltic. The next time that the Russians made a drive into our area the Germans left us behind for the Russians. We were with them about two weeks before they agreed to let our planes come into the airport near-by and fly us out. We were flown out by planes from our own base in England.

After the evacuation we were finally loaded onto ~~KK~~ a new ship of ours and shipped back to the states. I was in prison camp fourteen months and two weeks. I have lost contact with the surviving crew members but would like to know if any of them have contacted your department.

I apologize for the lousy typing but my typewriter is very ancient and I am no expert at typing.

Hoping that this will be of some help in your research I look forward to hearing from your department again.

Sincerely ,

*Hayden M. Collier*  
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