


Don's Great Escape

Life in a German POW Camp

	
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Donald E. Phillips

pdf edition

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Preface

Donald Emerson Phillips was my uncle and also a POW in Germany in WWII in the prison camp made famous by the movie *The Great Escape*. Since his death in December 1995, I have written 3 books about him, then given them to family, and included his words on our website. The first book in 1996 was a compilation of his poems written throughout his adult life, and his wife helped in the gathering of the poems and cheered in their distribution. The poems have flare and whimsy, and were usually spot on regarding the focus of the poem, which was often a person he was trying to honor or thoughts on himself, sports, or life in general. The poem collection was well received by family.

A little later the same year, 1996, I put together the story I knew at that time of Don's Prisoner of War experience in WWII in Germany in Stalag Luft III. In 2000 the POW material, gathered in 1996, went online. Time passed, and the 60th anniversary of the end of World War II was approaching as I was approaching 60 in 2004. I thought what better way to spend the year than explore with my German cousin and American cousins our shared experience of the war from each other's point of view. What followed was a lengthy research and writing effort shared with family and a password-protected website. It was through the latter process I began to come to grips with the experience Don had in the war, although that started in 1995 when Don gave me the materials from the 50th Anniversary Reunion of the Stalag Luft III in 1995 in Ohio. This was the last major event Don attended before his death later in the year. The POWs were gathering on the 50th anniversary of the day they were liberated by General Patton and troops on April 29, 1945. The story is one of extreme hardship, strength, courage, and is both inspiring and gut wrenching.

The uncle I knew, me being born in 1944 when he was in POW camp, was always the epitome of a superbly positive and upbeat man. I often wondered as a kid growing up in rural Illinois when I had yearly visits to their home to stay for what was a niece-heaven week, playing games with my other cousins and treated royally by this great couple, what made him so positive. As I got older, I visited them after I moved across the country to the West Coast. On a couple of occasions Don showed me his POW letters, which had been sent to his parents while in Germany, and were now in his possession after his parents' death. He did not make a big thing about them, but I was curious about them and the experience but never asked many questions. It was clear I was not suppose to do so. On one visit I saw a notebook Don put together on his life with pictures and commentary. I looked through the notebook quickly and by the end of book I had the distinct impression two important things had happened in Don's life: he had been a POW and he had finished the Boston Marathon five times. This did not discount him being a successful business man and loving husband and doting uncle. I was in my 20's by this time.

In my early 30's both my parents died within a month. The year was 1977, and from then on Don took it upon himself to write me very frequently and make sure we got together as often as possible, considering we lived far apart, and talk on the phone. Then my only sibling died in

1986, and I could tell Don was redoubling his efforts to 'be there.' And he always was. I saw him the last month of his life as my husband and I flew down to Arizona because Don had decided I could buy his last car, a racy looking little 1990 wild raspberry Plymouth Laser, the last in a series of head-turning cars he owned. My husband knew my VW drab yellow Rabbit was on its last legs and cheered at the chance for me to get a newer car. The car was driven back to Oregon, and I got a Oregon vanity plate with DEP (Don's initials) on it. It is still in the garage. Still good looking.

Now I am doing ebook publishing and will make one more effort to tell Don's story under some constraints, explained below. It will be done through his words both in letters and narrative, but when his words have under told a part of the story, we'll add accurate details as they are understood. The story of the movie *The Great Escape* was about tunneling and escape, which made for a dramatic story, but equally dramatic was the march forced on the 10,000 prisoners starting January 1945 which eventually ended at Moosburg, Stalag VIIA, and then the liberation in April 1945. It was a harrowing time endured by the POWs.

Don's POW letters were given to me by his wife. I forwarded them with her permission to the United States Air Force Academy Library in Colorado Springs, Colorado, to be placed in Stalag Luft III Collection of the Special Collections Branch in mid April 2005, just before the 60th anniversary of the liberation of the POWs. I contacted the Library and asked if I could reprint Don's letters now that they were the custodian of the collection. The answer was they are in the public domain.

I have read widely on this period of time and have in my possession copies of the Wartime Logs of two of Don's fellow POWs which are not in the public domain, but I did talk and correspond with several of Don's fellow POWs several times after his death. All are now deceased. I have tried to absorb their experience and I take responsibility for what are my impressions when they are not Don's words.

Let us start this story one more time, and I hope the reader finds value in this telling. We will start the story with Don's longest narrative written in 1985 in response to a great nephew's girlfriend needing to interview a veteran for a course she was taking on U.S. Military History. In response to the request Don described his military experience. This will be followed by Don's letters written both before, during, and after his internment with explanation of circumstances as needed. Before we start, here is a snatch found after Don's death, which gives his intention, no date of when this was written:

In the event that my book progresses beyond the 'someday-when-I-have-time' stage...

Foreword

War breeds many things, both abstract and concrete. For some inexplicable reason it brings forth hordes of hitherto unheard-of writers, some of whom go so far as to publish best sellers, thereby encouraging other hordes of younger and still less talented embryo writers to invade the already overcrowded field. Of this last group, a few manage to find publishers willing to put their books into print, thereby encouraging still more...but you grasp the general idea. Already the

saturation point has been reached. What harm, then, in my adding a brief contribution, a grain of sand in the Sahara, a drop of water in the Pacific.

Don has found a publisher.

Theresa Ripley, publisher and editor, 2012

Don's Story as Told by Don

November 1941 found me, along with a few hundred thousand others, entering a branch of service. To me, the Air Force looked like a good bet...you lived well, ate well, didn't have to live in foxholes, weren't subject to the discomforts of the foot soldier, and had to worry about only one thing...keeping the plane in the air. A simple task...right? It seemed so, all through Navigation Training. Then on to England, the 8th Air Force, 306th Bomb Group, and September 6th, 1943.

It started like any other day, with the orderly waking us at 4:30 a.m. to tell us a mission was scheduled. The usual amount of grumbling and griping went on throughout the barrack as we groped our way into our clothes in the semi-darkness and stumbled to the briefing room to be told all the necessary details to the mission...primary target, secondary or alternate target, meteorological data, fighter cover, rendezvous points and time, estimated flak areas to avoid, and many other details. Then into trucks and to the flight line, where our B-17's were already being warmed up and readied for the flight. Then one by one into the air and into formation with other squadrons of bombers, then other groups of bombers, until we numbered almost three hundred strong, at that time a formidable effort.

Everything was going smoothly. We headed for the English Channel, gaining altitude steadily, so that we could cross the coast of Europe at 23,000 feet. At that point the anti-aircraft batteries would blast their first welcome, and the flak exploding around us would announce the German's intentions of keeping some of us from reaching the target area.

Across the coastline and still going smoothly. All bombers, many manned by veteran pilots, were flying in tight formation, the better to protect against fighter attack. Now the sun was coming up and casting patterns on the clouds around us. Another hour would take us to the target, a magneto factor in Stuttgart, Germany, then home to a lavish breakfast and the usual good-natured relaxed banter that takes place at the end of a mission.

An hour later we were on the bombing run, and here our luck changed. Nothing too serious, but cloud cover obscured the target area, and we had to circle and take a second run at the target. Flak was heavy and taking its toll as one bomber, then another was hit and strayed from the formation. The second bomb run was no better than the first, clouds still completely blotted out the target, so we headed for our secondary target, another hundred miles away. Here, too, we ran into trouble but finally were able to drop our bomb load and head for home. By now we were almost an hour behind our original flight plan, and now we had a real problem...sufficient gasoline to get home. To complicate matters further, a strong headwind developed, using our limited supply of fuel even faster. The Chief Engineer busily transferred gasoline from one tank to another, so that each of the four engines would be supplied. Slowly the gauges crept toward the empty mark, and slowly we bucked the headwinds toward England. Now Paris was visible below and to our left, and we knew we were only minutes away from the Channel where we could ditch our plane and hope that Air-Sea Rescue would find us. No such luck...seconds later

the first engine sputtered and coughed its last. The Channel was in plain sight ahead of us, perhaps three or four minutes away, but we were not to reach it. Our plane was in perfect condition, untouched by either flak or fighters, but it was as worthless to us as if it had been riddled like a swiss cheese.

Now we had a choice...we could either bail out, setting the controls so that the plane would dive sharply and destroy itself afterward and be worthless to the Germans, or attempt to ride it down. Our Captain, a veteran of 23 missions, decided to have us bail out.

Suddenly the parachute took on a whole new meaning, a totally different look. All through training school I had looked upon the parachute as a nuisance, a heavy cumbersome thing that Supply Depot insisted I check out at the beginning of each flight. Once inside the plane I had thrown it into a corner, out of the way, and lugged it back to Supply when the mission was completed. Again, when I went overseas I grumbled about lugging the heavy thing around with me. Now, suddenly, it was the only transportation between me and the earth, some 17,000 feet below. None of our crew had ever jumped before, and there was no time now for remembering the instructions from the training films we had seen time and again.

I jettisoned the escape hatch in the nose of the ship where the Bombardier and I were stationed, and the wind swept it back and away as though it were a piece of confetti. Somewhere in the dim dark recesses of my mind I recalled that we were supposed to dive out through the escape hatch, and I looked down at the tiny patchwork of fields and farms far below. Not me...I couldn't go out headfirst. Instead I swung my legs out through the hatch, and the wind sucked me out into the quiet of the September morning.

Now to see how this parachute is supposed to function! I have no recollection of pulling the ripcord, although I know I did, and quickly. No delayed jump for me...the urgency of seeing silk above me precluded that. I felt my body lurch as the great chute billowed almost instantly, checking my downward plunge. What a relief! That silk couldn't have looked better had it been gold instead. An enemy fighter circled me, but made no move other than to probably radio position to ground forces below.

The descent seemed to take forever, though actually it was a matter of minutes...time enough to clean pockets of anything that might be of use to the enemy. The escape kit, a standard issue at the flight line, contained a few simple French phrases..."Je suis aviateur American" etc. in the happy event that the French underground might find and help a newly-grounded, clipped-wing flier, a compass, and 2,000 francs, again for use of the French underground movement, which had done a fantastic job of smuggling many downed airmen through the Pyrenees mountains into Spain, to the American Consulate, and back to England.

Gradually I drifted down, until I could see that I would land in a thick grove of trees at the edge of a small town. Then the ground rushed to meet me and my body was hurdling through branches and stopping abruptly as the parachute tangled in the tree top. Hurriedly, I cut my way down, and stuffed the chute into a nearby culvert. But too late...I straightened up at the guttural sounds of a foreign tongue, and found myself eyeball to a gun barrel with two young German

soldiers, and in the vernacular, "for me, the war was over." Then, and only then, did the horrible realization sink in that this was indeed the enemy, that I was on his playground, that I had only minutes before dropped a few tons of bombs in his nest, and that the rules by which the game would be played henceforth were his rules, not mine.

They didn't speak English, nor I German, but gestures with machine guns in any language are readily understandable. We marched to the depot, where a crowd of French villagers quickly gathered, peering in the windows at the unwilling visitor, in his strange uniform. The descent through the tree had scratched and bloodied my face, and the Stationmaster's wife busied herself with basin and washcloth, sponging away the blood and clucking away in French all the while. While she worked I managed to smuggle the envelope with the 2,000 francs into her hand without being noticed by the guards. She hurried to another room, discovered her good fortune, and returned with a big smile, the typical French kiss on each cheek, and an explanation in French for all the villagers gathered around the station. As the word spread, they, too, smiled, waved, and then boldly formed a line, marched into the station and one by one, greeted me with the French hug and cheek-kissing ceremony. However, the guards took a dim view of this and ran everyone out.

Minutes later, the train arrived and we were on our way to Beauvais, France, a local camp, a large room with barred windows, and my first night in captivity. Already another airman was there, and before morning there were six of us in the room...and an unhappy bunch we were. The next morning we boarded a train to Frankfurt, Germany, solitary confinement, and questioning. Those were long days, with nothing to do but stare at the walls of the tiny cell. My watch had been taken from me, and there was no light in the cell, so I counted the days by the number of times the guards brought the piece of heavy German bread and the bowl of soup, which is standard there. A week later we were taken to Stalag Luft III, 75 miles southeast of Berlin, one of the main P.O.W. camps. It was broken into five areas, each called a compound, each housing about 2,000 prisoners, and each surrounded by a high barbed wire fence. Watchtowers along the fence enabled guards to police the area quite effectively.

This was to be home for the next seventeen months, although, of course, we did not then know it, and would not have believed it. Quickly you find that it pays to look not beyond tomorrow. Always think the war will end tomorrow...if it doesn't, you have whiled away another day, and can look to the next tomorrow.

Each day began at 7:00 a.m. with a lineup on the parade ground for nose count, to be sure that no one had slithered under the barbed wire, somehow gotten by the dogs, and escaped during the night. Then back to the barracks for a cup of coffee and the daily ration of bread, a heavy German concoction which tasted reasonably palatable and, at least, filled the hole in your stomach. Usually twelve prisoners would band together into a family, pool their Red Cross parcels, and cook together. In theory, and according to the Geneva Convention, each prisoner of war is entitled to one eleven pound food package per week. In practice, the enemy is more interested in delivering troops and supplies to the various fronts than he is in handling Red Cross food parcels from Switzerland to a POW camp, hence a shortage of food parcels, and half

rations results...one parcel for each two men, or quarter rations...one parcel for four men, etc. Beside the parcels, the Germans supplemented the diet with their bread, sometimes a few potatoes, and occasionally a coarse vegetable.

How to pass the days? Therein lay the biggest problem of all. The Red Cross and Y.M.C.A. were able to get a few books into camp, and we read almost anything avidly. In a POW camp, even a telephone book is a best-seller. They were able to provide us with a few softballs and bats, and the Stalag III Major Leagues were formed. We kept a path worn around the outer perimeter of our camp with our endless walking. And always, we reversed our former approach toward the tasks to be done. Whereas, in a normal lifestyle, the goal is to finish the task at hand in the shortest time and in the most efficient manner; there the goal is to consume the most possible time with the task, to make it last as nearly through the day as possible. With proper guidance, a new prisoner can be taught to make the simple hand washing of a shirt last the whole morning. And even though at home he cared not whether or not mother ironed his shirt, in camp he will fashion an iron from the empty tin his food came in, heat it upon a primitive stove and spend the afternoon ironing the shirt, even to the extent of the military creases down the back.

A letter from home...this was indeed a treasured thing. We were allowed to write three single-page form letters home monthly, and could receive mail from home. Usually letters were well over a month old by the time of their arrival, but their age didn't matter. They, and the snapshots they sometimes contained, were the things we lived for.

Naturally, our 2,000 prisoners came from all walks of life, so we had almost every trade represented there. Two young interns did their best to care for our medical needs with the primitive supplies they had. Many were former teachers and they conducted informal classes in the subjects they knew best. Among the prisoners were the first trumpet from the Bunny Berrigan band as well as a former Glenn Miller trombonist, and several other musicians. With the help of the YMCA, a few instruments found their way into camp, and a very welcome jazz band put on impromptu concerts for the rest of us.

Facilities for keeping clean were primitive, but the task was not impossible. Summertime was no problem. No one minded jumping under the cold water spigot which was available to us. Each Wednesday during the winter, came the familiar call from the German guards, "Vere und swansik" for showers, and groups of 24 at a time would be marched to a shack which served as a bathhouse. Haircuts were a bit amateurish, but no one minded. Shaving was optional, and there was much experimentation with goatees, full beards, mustaches, and sideburns.

Things went along in this manner until January 1945. At that time the Russian army was spearheading a drive toward Berlin, and our camp lay directly in its path. Through BBC reports on our secret radio facilities we knew they were within a few miles of us, and hoped to be liberated by them. Excitement ran high, rumors were rampant, and expectations of liberation and return to the USA had everyone keyed to fever pitch. No dice. On January 29th, in sub-zero weather, the German high command ordered us south, on foot, carrying whatever food and clothing we felt we could struggle along with, and the camp was deserted in a matter of hours. We must have presented a strange sight to the German Luftwaffe above, for we were 10,000 or

more, counting the German guards accompanying us, and our lines stretched for miles along the snowy roads as we struggled wearily along. In all we marched four days, covered 90 kilometers, sleeping wherever we found space, barns, churches, and once in a pottery factory, which was heated. This brought us to a town called Spremberg, where we were herded into boxcars, destination Stalag VII, near the small town of Moosberg. This camp was much more crowded, sanitation facilities almost non-existent, and food very scarce. A thin soup was brought in once daily, plus a limited ration of the German bread. It became apparent that the war was nearing the end. By the end of April we knew that the Seventh Army was very near, and the rumor mill worked overtime. Most of the speculation centered around another forced march to keep us in German hands. On April 28th came the semi-official word that the Germans would abandon camp, leaving us behind with a token guard force, and allow us to be liberated by the American Seventh Army. The next morning we watched from the camp as the German Swastika atop the Moosberg Town Hall, a mile away, was lowered, and in its place, and billowing softly in the April breeze, up went the Stars and Stripes, seen for the first time in so many, many months. Never will I see a more beautiful sight, and never have I seen so many grown men cry. It was probably the most moving experience I have ever witnessed. Many times in later years, I have stood at athletic events as the Flag is raised and the Anthem played to a yawning, apathetic crowd, and thought again of that moment. If you have never lost your freedom, it is a thing taken for granted, perhaps even laughed or scoffed at by some. For them I have only pity.

Things moved swiftly after the raising of the flag. Minutes later, a U.S. Army tank steam-rolled its way into our camp, not even stopping to open the barbed wire gates. Even though we hadn't budged an inch from where we were, suddenly we were home...we were among friends. It took a few days to make the arrangements, but we were soon flown to Camp Lucky Strike in France, deloused, fed, clothed, interrogated, and on our way to the States. Our ship docked in New York on June 5th, we had a night on the town, then on to Chicago, another night on the town there, and the next day, we were furloughed for 60 days and I was on my way to my hometown of Pontiac, Illinois, and a much-anticipated reunion with my family.

Three things stand out...the afore-mentioned raising of the flag in Moosberg, the sighting of the Statue of Liberty as we entered the harbor, and the final moment when I stepped off the bus in Pontiac and embraced Mom and Dad for the first time in so many months. A most gratifying moment, and a cherished memory even now.

Training to Thurleigh

That was the longest narrative Don wrote about his experience. Don's letters written at the time will be used to give the framework to his experience, along with other detail to understand the narrative, or lack of same, in some letters. First some context of Don prior to the war.

Don Emerson Phillips was born August 1, 1918, the fourth child and first son of Amelia Klein Phillips and Ralph Waldo Emerson Phillips. They lived on farms in rural Illinois about 100 miles south of Chicago, a couple of different locations during Don's youth. Don's older sisters were Blanche, Bernice, and Dorothy. Don's early education was in a one-room rural school, and one of those years his oldest sister, Blanche, still single, was his teacher, and she lived at home with her parents and family. During the day Don called her Miss Phillips and at home she was again Blanche. Blanche also hired Don as her janitor and paid him \$4 per month, which made Don feel by his own memory, "a first-of-the-month-millionaire." High school education was at Pontiac, Illinois, where he participated in: Booster Club 4; Com. Club 4, Class Play 3; Track 2, 3, 4; Gym Circus 1, 2, 3, 4; Intramural 3; Honor Roll 1, 2. Don graduated in 1936 from high school and from July 1936 to November 1941 he was a carpenter working for a local neighbor.

On November 27, 1941, at age 23 Don was inducted into the army in Chicago. Don received a diploma on May 7, 1942, in Airplane Mechanics being trained at Chanute Air Force Base at Rantoul, Illinois. Don was then sent to Texas and graduated in the very first class, and he was second in his class, at Army Air Force Navigator School at San Marcos Army Air Force Base, San Marcos, Texas. Diploma received June 24, 1943, and he was commissioned in the Army Air Force as Second Lieutenant. Don was then assigned to the 306 Bomb Group, 368 Bomb Squadron (H). H stands for Heavy. It is unclear exactly when Don sailed for England, but he was on the Queen Mary with 25 other navigators. Eventually he went to Thurleigh Airfield which was about 35 miles east of Cambridge, England. Life started to change in a major way. By August 1, 1943, just about five weeks after his commission, this letter was sent home to his parents from a replacement center which he could not mention in the letter.

This letter was printed in a local paper and the Chenoa Public Librarian kept a notebook of such items. The article stated, "Mr. And Mrs. R.W.E. Phillips have received their first letter from their son, Lietu. Donald E. Phillips, since his arrival overseas, although they previously had word of his safe arrival by a cablegram." The letter although undated was written on August 1, 1943, as can be understood from the first line.

Today marks a quarter of a century for me. Was just thinking that I spent Christmas '41 at Jefferson Barracks; my birthday '42 in Texas; Christmas '42 at Ellington Field, and now my birthday '43 in England.

Yes, that's where I am, and I'm allowed to tell you that much, but that's about all I can tell you. Next time you're in Chenoa, you might tell the McEwen brothers that I rode through their country, and a very pretty country it is, very green and all rolling, grazing land.

I am my own censor, as the caption on the envelope states, but officers are doubly responsible because of that, and are subject to quite rigid disciplinary action, so I must be very careful. As you can see by my address, I am at a replacement center and not at a permanent post. You can write me here, however, and the letters will follow.

All I can tell you about my trip over is that it was uneventful, and I enjoyed it—as I didn't get sick.

The climate, I am told, is consistently wet. More about that after I've been here awhile. Suffice it to say for now that I'm quite well, enjoying good food, etc., and eager to see England and its people. Have a lot to tell you some day. Lots of love, Donald

How long it took Don to get from the replacement center to Thurleigh Airfield is unknown, but today's reader can be a little clearer what it is was like to be at Thurleigh by watching the movie *Twelve O'Clock High* which was about the 306th Bomb Group at Thurleigh in this exact time frame. The 1949 movie with Gregory Peck and then later a TV series from 1964-67 had the same name, *Twelve O'Clock High*. Don was only to be at Thurleigh Airfield for about 4-5 weeks, but one can imagine it was a tension-filled month.

The 306th Bomb Group, of which Don was a part at Thurleigh, prided itself being the first over Germany to bomb and doing that without fighter plane escort during Don's time there. This meant they were relatively easy targets for the Luftwaffe because the bombers were slow moving. The missions were precision daylight bombing of manufacturing and other targets. Daylight was needed for the precision, but that also put the squadrons in harm's way for by being visible from the Luftwaffe and particularly when those guns were aimed at them from Twelve O'Clock High above them. Imagine that.

No letter survives from Don at Thurleigh, but it appears he started flying from Thurleigh on August 12, 1943, and started combat missions on August 30, 1943. Clearly it would be bantered around the airfield that a commander had whipped this group into shape to contribute maximum effort on what were often missions leading to a bailout or a shooting down of a plane. The losses were very heavy. As portrayed in the movie, here is the first speech the new commander, played by Peck, gave, "You've been looking at a lot of air lately... and you think you ought to have a rest. In short, you're sorry for yourselves. I don't have a lot of patience with this, 'What are we fighting for?' stuff. We're in a war, a shooting war. We've got to fight. And some of us have got to die. I'm not trying to tell you not to be afraid. Fear is normal. But stop worrying about it and about yourselves. Stop making plans. Forget about going home. Consider yourselves already dead. Once you accept that idea, it won't be so tough."

Are you motivated? These were the grim prospects for anyone thinking of days filled with a combat mission and then coming back to the airfield, hopefully, to wait for the next mission. As gut wrenching as a mission might be, it would seem the waiting for the next one would be equally grueling. This is what 5 weeks at Thurleigh held for Don.

Then on September 6, 1943, after a very short time at Thurleigh, everything changed again.

Bailout to Sagan

Depending on whom you read and what you choose to believe, the September 6, 1943, Army Air Force mission is listed either as a disaster, fiasco, poor leadership, or other derogatory descriptors; but there seems to be agreement in that it was a horrible defeat for the 8th Army Air Force and one of the worse missions of the WWII. On that fateful day, 338 bombers left England to go to Stuttgart to bomb ball bearing plants. It was the largest bomb group that had been assembled thus far in the war. There were disagreements as to the efficacy of these daylight precision flights, but this one was to occur in bad weather conditions at target area. They took off in tight combat flight formation, but without fighter plane escorts, strung out over 20 miles. Each airplane carried a crew of 10. They arrived at their target in bad weather, and flew over and around the target, some bombers circling three times. Not one bomber reached its target. Planes were assaulted by German Focke-Wulfs, and many lacked the necessary fuel for a return trip. Forty-five planes were to go down, the rest straggled back in the opposite of a tight formation, and hundreds of men were either killed, missing, captured, or helped by resistance leaders on the ground. It was a mission to give pause to what the Army Air Force were doing and how they were doing it.

Don was there as a navigator flying with 9 other men. The pilot was a veteran of 23 missions, which during that time was almost unheard of as missions had such a high rate of nonsuccess in 1942-43, only 1 man out of 5 completing 25 missions, which was considered a combat tour. His luck had held 23 times, but not on his 24th mission on September 6, 1943. Don's luck fell short of 25 by a long shot. An account exists from Don's co-pilot who states they received heavy flak at target area and opened and closed their bomb bay doors three times without bombing the target but finally dropped the bombs nearby. Their B-17 was noted to be the least fuel efficient on the base, and his report verifies what Don states about moving the gas from one tank to another and flying with zero fuel for over five minutes when the pilot told the crew to bail out.

Don described this decision in this manner.

To our pilot fell the decision of bailing out or crash landing. To crash land meant giving the plane to the Germans practically intact, and it meant further that any alert troops below could follow our descent fairly accurately and possibly capture all ten of us in one process. To bail out meant that we would be scattered out over a larger area, thus augmenting our chances of escape. This latter course was the one our pilot chose and later developments proved that his choice was a good one.

Don describes vividly his own bail out in his longer narrative. After capture he was sent to a local camp, Beauvais, France. Then on September 7, 1943, he was placed on a train to Frankfurt, and into solitary confinement. It was reputed that German Intelligence had extensive information on all Air Force personnel. How that was obtained, one can only wonder. One family

story passed down relates that once Don was asked why he fought against his motherland, his mother being 100% German and named Klein. Was this asked during this week. We do not know.

One week later Don was taken to Stalag Luft III, near Sagan, which was considered as the most secure POW camp at the time. We know most of these trips took 3 days by train in not very good conditions.

This is one of Don's snatches about seeing Stalag Luft III for the first time. Don says:

My first look at the place seemed to confirm my worst suspicions. As we approached the massive barbed wire enclosure, the sight of the blood-red Nazi swastika billowing arrogantly above the gate stifled momentarily any fond hope I may have had of making the place seem as much like home as possible. Inside I could see huddles of men, attired in various and outlandish garbs, and looking out at us in a wistful, silent sort of way. It was as though we were one step nearer freedom than they, by mere virtue of the fact that we were still outside the final fence that was to bound our world for the next twenty months.

Still, as we came within speaking range, it was almost like a homecoming for many of the twenty-five men in our "purge", as we later came to call them. Almost all of them knew fellows inside, had flown, drank, and stood inspection with them in what now seemed almost another age. There were glad cries of "Bill, you old bastard, I heard you were dead!" "J.B., you sonuvagon, I thought probably you'd finished up and gone home!" "Is Johnny still with the group?" "Did'ja lose a lot of the squadron on Schweinfurt?"

Fragments of conversation fell like confetti. "We were flyin' deputy lead...sprained it landing...got it right over the target...no, he got out...got on my pinks, you louse,...number two supercharger ran away...did my clothes get sent home...damn lead navigator took us right over the flak area."

What was Stalag Luft III like in 1943 when Don arrived?

Stalag Luft III started in March 1942 and eventually would become five compounds with approximately 2000 men living in each of the areas designated as East, Center, North, South, and West. Don was to become a member of Center Compound, Block 44, Combine C. His combine, or living group, initially consisted of 3 men but increased to 14 before they were evacuated from the camp. The design of each of the five compounds was the same. There were 15 one-story barracks which were 10' X 15'. Triple stacked bunks were inside each barrack to house 15 men and one stove. If you have seen the movie *The Great Escape*, they reproduced with keen accuracy what one compound area looked like. Exkrieges agree the movie had the sense of living conditions quite accurate. Kriege is the shorten German word for prisoner of war.

On the home front, when did they know what had happened to Don. This is uncertain, but there is a report from the local paper, undated, that states:

Second Lieut. Donald Phillips, 25, a navigator in the air corps, has been missing in action, according to a telegram from the war department received by his parents, Mr. and Mrs. Ralph Phillips, who reside near Ocoya.

Lieut. Phillips, who received his wings after graduating from the navigation school at San Marcos, Texas, was second high in his class. He was sent overseas shortly after graduation, landing in England. He graduated from the Pontiac high school in 1936. He has three sisters, Mrs. Raymond Ripley and Mrs. Edwin C. Rhoda, of the Chenoa community, and Mrs. Floyd Rittenhouse, of Pontiac.

One other family memory remains of the oldest niece of Don, Jeannine, who was almost 9 when Don was captured. Jeannine says:

I also remember when Mom (Bernice Phillips Rhoda) learned that he was missing in action. She was doing the wash on the back porch (heating the water in a copper boiler, carrying it out, shaving in the homemade lye soap) and Jim and I were fighting over something. We took our quarrel out to the porch, and Mom was crying. Now, you have to realize, that was the only time I ever saw Mom cry. On that long ago day, Jim and I just froze, because it was so frightening to see Mom cry. And...she railed at us and scolded us for being so selfish and fighting with each other, and told us to leave her alone.

Don's first postcard home is self-dated September 15, 1943, in Don's print hand. He wrote:

Dearest Mom & Dad

You will be glad to know that I am a P. of W. I am not injured in any way. Apply to the nearest Red Cross Agent for all information. My address for reply will be Lt. Donald E. Phillips, Stalag Luft 3, Deutschland. Your Loving Son, Donald

The top of the postcard had the word Kriegsgefangenenlager which translates into prisoner of war camp. Don's time there now begins. How long will it last and how do you pass the time? The postmark on the back on the postcard reads September 21, 1943. When it was received in Illinois is unknown. The wait begins there as well. How do they cope?

Fall 1943

Don wrote 6 letters home from September 27, 1943, to November 6, 1943.

This is the first full length letter Don wrote, space is limited on the page and the average length of any letter is 130 words. Don rarely entered the year, but this will be added for clarity.

Sept. 27, 1943

Dearest Mom & Dad:

I'm allowed four letters a month and though there's little new to tell. You'll at least know I'm well and thinking of you.

I have enough to do to take up my time and that helps loads. We do our own cooking and I'm improving a little but yours is still the best cooking on earth, and it will be a happy day when I'm eating it again.

As for my health, I never felt better in my life. Hope you and all the family are as well. I have some warm clothes and all I miss is my pipe & tobacco.

The Red Cross is a marvelous organization, and never again will I believe a word against them or refuse them anything within my power to give.

That's all for now. All my love to all of you. Donald

Don remembered his promise of giving to the Red Cross. In 1979 niece Theresa had a Fulbright to Sweden. Nearing departure time Don told her if she met anyone who had helped with distribution of food parcels during WWII she was to take them to lunch or dinner on him. This is the reason why.

The first American Red Cross POW effort started in 1943 and continued through 1945. Initially most of these packages, contents described below, were moved through neutral Switzerland. As the Allies occupied France in August 1944 distribution channels by the Germans were disrupted and the International Red Cross had to move their most effective distribution channels through neutral Sweden. All of these distribution systems of food and personal mail were disrupted often as the tides of war changed and the number of prisoners grew. The result was food often did not arrive on time or at all. The contents of parcels also became barter of exchange with the German guards as they often did not have access to the type of contents in Red Cross packages.

The typical contents, although there was some variation, of an 11-pound package were: one pound can of powdered milk, one-pound can of oleo margarine, half-pound of cube sugar, half-pound package of biscuits, four-ounce can of coffee, two D-ration chocolate bars, six-ounce can of jam or peanut butter, twelve-ounce can of salmon or tuna, one-pound can of Spam or corned beef, one-pound package of raisins or prunes, five packages of cigarettes, seven vitamin C tablets,

two bars of soap, and twelve ounces of C-ration vegetable soup concentrate. This was to last one man one week.

You will understand the importance of all this for Don and his combine as the story unfolds. When asked near the end of his life what food did you most miss having while in POW camp, the response was simple--plain foods, all foods. At the same time he recalled the food trains came to his food lager which was just outside of Center Compound. Per Geneva food regulations the distribution was one 11# food parcel per man per week; or if on half rations, 1/2 parcel per man; or worse yet, 1/4 rations, 4 men per parcel. As you will see, it gets to the last level and worse as time passes.

Undated letter, but presume this is the second full letter sent in October 1943.

Dearest Folks and Family:

You should have already received my card so you know where I am. I am quite well, uninjured, and settled down to my life here. I do lots of reading, sleeping, and thinking. Have had lots of time to regret some of the things I've said and done. Believe me, when I get back I'll make it up to all of you. A belated anniversary wish to you, also a Happy Thanksgiving to you all.

Please write Dottie and Dot and tell them where I am, also let P.D. know. Take the best of care of yourselves, give my love to all the family, and above all, don't worry about me. I'll be okay. Could you send me a toothbrush and powder, pipe and half-and-half tobacco, socks, & handkerchiefs. Your Loving Son, Donald

It is possible this is the first letter after the initial postcard. Whether it is the first or second letter, clearly there is a lot of time to think of the past and regrets about same, and deal with the realities that would make current life a little bit better with toothpaste and pipe and tobacco.

Don refers to his parents' anniversary which was October 5. It would have been their 39th. Ralph and Amelia had three daughters and three sons-in-law who lived nearby. All of them lived on farms and led a farm life of raising crops, livestock, and children. I doubt the admonishment not to worry about him did much good. By the time Don went into Stalag Luft III he had 8 nieces and nephews, whom clearly he thought about a lot as will be seen in upcoming letters.

Third letter is dated October 8, 1943.

Dearest Folks:

Everything is fine here. Very little to do, of course, but there are books to read, and cooking to do so time doesn't drag too slowly. By the time this reaches you, I imagine the work will be all done and you'll have settled down to another winter.

My allotment will continue as usual. After all is squared up, put the remainder in the bank for me and don't sell the Pontiac unless you think best. If any of the family needs it it's theirs to use. I think about all of you every day and hope you're all well. Don't forget the kid's birthday dollars. Give my love to all the family and my regards to all my friends. Eat an extra piece of pie for me on Thanksgiving. That's all for now. All my love Donald

One of Don's combine members made a four page list in his *Wartime Log* of all the books he'd read, giving a personal rating system. Don, when asked at the end of his life, said he read

whatever was available and recalled reading *Gone With the Wind*. The Geneva Convention stated prisoners of war were not suppose to be forced to work which meant a lot of time to fill.

As far as allotment, that translates to pay. An officer's pay data card had categories of: monthly base pay, additional pay for flying, rental allowances, subsistence. The next line on the card had allotments. Don's allotment, probably monthly, is estimated to be in the \$150 range.

Uncertain of the year of the car or its condition, but it was for anyone to use now, if they had gas that is. The birthday dollars had a special significance and it's unknown when Don started this. Each niece/nephew got \$1 from Don on his/her birthday. At Stalag Luft III he wanted to make certain his allotment was used for these special events.

Fourth letter is dated October 17, 1943.

Dear Folks & Family:

Another week gone by since I wrote last and everything is still going fine. I feel great, never better, and can't complain about a thing. Wish that I knew you were all okay. It's been almost three months since one of your letters reached me. I met a little girl about Jeannine's age who reminded me so much of her. For some unknown reason I find myself thinking about her more than I think of the other kids.

The weather is getting colder now. What a difference between last winter and this, but variety is supposed to be the spice of life, isn't it?

That's all for now. My love to all the family. Take good care of yourselves and I'll see you before too long, Love Don

Since Jeannine was the oldest of the nieces and nephews and a darn cute little girl, we'll allow for the favoritism. The rest were just approaching cuteness, but many were darn cute when Don returned two years later.

It is known Don reached England by August 1, 1943, and was downed on September 6, 1943. It appears he got few, if any, letters after he arrived in England. It is possible the last letters received were when he was stationed in Texas before commission. At this juncture in his story it must seem forever since he has heard from anyone at home. Were the crops in? How were his parents and family reacting to the news of his capture? Did they know he was alright? Did they know where to write him? The questions must have been endless, and many hours to think about them.

Fifth letter is dated October 25, 1943.

Dearest Mom & Dad:

By now the first of my letters should have reached you. I hope it wasn't too long between the time you were notified I was missing and the assurance that I was okay.

I'm fine. Last week was very warm, just like Indian Summer. Lots of time for thinking and I'm doing a lot of postwar planning. Needless to say, plans for the first week include eating, eating, and more of the same. Not that I'm starving here, but I'm hungry for some of Mrs. Phil's famous cooking.

Tell all the family hello for me, and that I think of all of them often. Keep my summer uniform all pressed and waiting cause I'll be wearing it next summer, I hope. Lots of love to you all. Donald

Food, food, food will be a continuing theme. One wonders if Mrs. Phil was pressing and keeping that suit ready to be worn. As far as a letter being received already in the U.S., it took approximately 14 weeks for any letter to be received stateside so in all probability, they still had not received a letter.

In the wider European war, the second raid on Schweinfurt occurred on October 14, 1943. The losses were so heavy to the 8th US Army Air Force it was labeled Black Thursday and daylight precision bombing would not continue on these targets for four months and then not without fighter escort protection. Probably many more fliers were added to Stalag Luft III at this time if it took the 'normal' 10 days from capture to camp. One can be pretty certain it was news all over the camp. At least one of Don's combine members, V.F., added to his combine on or about this day by the statements in his *Wartime Log*. He was captured on October 14, 1943, and states 9 days later he arrived at Stalag Luft III. He was a pilot in this Black Thursday mission, and he was to become a life-long friend of Don.

Sixth letter is dated November 6, then erased, and a 7 put over the 6, 1943.

Dearest Folks:

Two months today since I was shot down. Time passes faster than I thought it would, and every passing day brings closer the day when I'll be home again.

Everything is still much the same. I'm getting enough to eat and clothes enough to wear plus a chance to keep clean so I can't complain. We have a theatre and quite often they put on plays and debates and concerts.

By the way, tell Ray that I've got lots to tell him about planes and parachute jumps when I get home.

Comes the end of the page so I'll just wish all of you happy holidays and the best of health. Take good care of yourselves and I'll do the same. All my love to all the family. Donald

It is interesting Don said shot down, which he was not correct, but perhaps was just an easier way to explain it in one word. Enough to eat. In the South Compound during the same week it was reported potatoes were again available after seven lean weeks. One would think the same true in Center Compound. As far as keeping clean, one documentary of Stalag Luft III said each POW had one hot shower a week, with 3 POWs under each shower head. The guards would turn on water for a minute. Stop it. POWs lathered up. Then water on for another minute or so to get the suds off.

There was entertainment put on by the POWs as described by Don. Center Compound had a 250-seat theatre, the seats being made with Canadian Red Cross boxes. The productions were quite elaborate with lighting and staging since killing time was the main name of the game. The men had to take all the female leads in plays and they took great effort to make those performances seem real. The best entertainment, though, was probably at the combine level where anything and everything was discussed long and hard and often.

Even though four letters a month were allowed to be sent, another one of Don's combine members states how difficult it was to even fill the small page to think of anything to write. In this letter Don mentions one of his nephews, Ray, who would have been 9. Ray had his picture taken professionally in a military type uniform during the war years and was no doubt watching and listening to everything that was happening to his Uncle Don with his parents and grandparents, Don's parents, who lived 1/2 mile away. Don's father farmed with Ray's father in their two almost adjoining farms. And it was Ray's mother, Blanche, who was Don's early teacher as well as sister. The home front families had many types of connections and interconnections.

Holiday Season 1943

Don wrote five letters home from November 18, 1943, to January 3, 1944.

Seventh letter is dated November 18, 1943.

Dearest Folks:

Without a doubt there is the finest collection of beards, goatees, and handlebar moustaches here outside the House of David. What a motley looking outfit we'll be by the time we get back to the States.

Everything is fine here. The weather isn't bad yet and I'm eating well, as usual. I should be checked out on this cooking deal well enough to take over for a few meals when I get home. Tell Bernice she has to teach me how to bake an angel food cake, and I need a little of your advice on cherry pies.

Well, I hope you and all the family are well. I hope to see you next summer. Give my regards to everyone around home. Lots of Love, Donald

This is clearly a nonletter letter. Nothing new to add and still Don has not heard from anyone at home to make a response. Under those circumstances it was clear Don was just using up space and did not even use all the lines allotted on the page. Bernice is Don's sister who has five children by this time and was renowned as a great cook.

In the wider European war, on the night of November 18, 1943, 440 RAF bombers started a two-night raid on Berlin and surrounding area, but the damage was not significant because of bad weather conditions at target area. Stalag Luft III was about 100 miles southeast of Berlin. Did they hear the bombing in camp? If so, does one cringe in fear or realize the war is bigger than you being in the middle of a target area?

Eighth letter is dated November 27, 1943.

Dearest Mom and Dad:

Two years ago today was a memorable date, if you'll recall. Certainly I've done more traveling since then than I ever expected.

I've really no news, other than to reassure you that I'm still in good health, and that's what you're most interested in. I think this will probably be the coldest winter I've ever experienced but I am fairly well equipped with clothes, etc. So don't worry about me. I'll be living for, and looking forward to, the day when I'll be sitting down to one of those big family dinners of fried chicken at home again. Till then, take the best of care of yourselves because since I've been here I've really begun to realize how much all of you mean to me. Lots of love from Donald

Recall from a previous section, on November 27, 1941, at age 23 Don was inducted into the army in Chicago. Don always was a man of dates and anniversaries and thinking of same. Two years later Don had trained in both Illinois and Texas, taken a ship to England, flown over Europe, captured in France, and transferred to Germany as a POW. Quite a journey for the farm boy from Illinois. Thousands were like him and experiencing the same thing.

At this date Don still had not heard from home but certainly remembered the mouth-watering fried chicken. As far as warmth, air circulated under the floorboards as they wanted to make escape attempts difficult by not putting the flooring to the ground. This had to make the floor very cold. There was one stove for cooking and heating but being warm was probably not happening to a great degree in a German winter.

Ninth letter is dated December 9, 1943

Dearest Folks & Family:

Same old news, which is no news at all. We've had some freezing weather already and I'm hoping it will be a short winter. I'm okay, not losing any weight, and keeping as clean as possible. We skimped along before Thanksgiving and managed to bake a fruit cake apiece. Next Thanksgiving we'll really have a feast, won't we?

I'm expecting your first letter in the next month. Nothing would suit me better for a Christmas present than to get word that you're all okay. Until that day when I come walking up the front steps again, take care of yourselves and don't worry about me. Lots of Love to all the family Donald

Little did Don know then that Thanksgiving 1944 would find him in the same place with more men in his combine and skills learned over a year to make the most of a holiday spent not in Illinois, not with family, but with men who shared the worse of times and best of times together.

Tenth letter is dated December 15, 1943

Dear Folks:

Only a few more shopping days left and I haven't done any yet so I guess I'll skip it for this year. Winter is just beginning here and the next three months will probably be colder than any I've experienced before.

It will be a month before I can write again so don't worry if you don't hear for awhile. Everything is okay and I'm sure we'll get thru the winter safely.

Saw a show here last nite. We get an old movie here occasionally, this one was 'Bringing up Baby.' Probably some of the girls will remember it.

We've started having debates in the barracks in the evenings. Helps pass the time.

That's all for now. Lots of love to you and all the family. Donald

Thus far in the correspondence all of Don's letters have been in block print except for his signature. Then in each case his name was written in script. Don had the most beautiful script, legendary among his correspondent confidants later in his life. One guess, printing takes a bit longer to do, and one can think a bit more what you are going to say. Time was one thing Don had plenty of, so he did not hurry in writing these letters.

Bringing up Baby was a 1938 movie with Katherine Hepburn and Cary Grant. In all likelihood, Don had probably seen it stateside before his departure. The term 'debate' could also mean arguing as one of Don's combine members put it more succinctly or discussing any and all topics to make the winter's night go by which could include post war plans and world problems.

Another reason these letters are so positive is indicated by the SAO in Center Compound. He states censors often returned his letters because they were too pessimistic. Don has not received a letter from home yet, but the censors worked in both directions. Thus, little or any 'real' information was passed between POW and intended receiver of letter throughout the entire internment.

Eleventh letter is dated January 3, 1944.

Dearest Mom and Dad:

At last I can write in answer to one of your letters again. Two of them came New Year's Eve, along with your snapshot. I don't know of when a picture has meant so much to me; never before, I guess. That, plus your good letters assuring me that all is well at home, makes me feel a hundred per cent better.

Had a big Christmas Dinner, complete with plum pudding and fruit cake.

I am well. Still getting enough to eat, warm clothes to wear, and a place to sleep so I can't complain. The weather hasn't been bad yet; only a few cold days. I'm proud to hear I have a name sake, and you may be sure I'll buy him that wagon when I return. That's all for now. All my love to you and the family. Don

Can't you just feel the joy in this letter. It has probably been over five months since Don has heard from home and now two letters and a picture. Oh joy, the holiday season has ended better than it had been with a taste of home.

Winter 1944

Don wrote seven letters from January 15, 1944, to March 18, 1944.

Twelfth letter is dated January 15, 1944.

Dear Folks & Family

Haven't received any more mail since those first two letters. Judging by the way the parcels are coming thru I'm expecting your first one soon. I've never mentioned cigarette parcels to you. In case you haven't sent any yet, please do, because I don't have many here.

I hope everyone at home is well. I've been wondering if I'd have any new nieces and nephews by the time I get home. A little sister for Joe would be nice. Don't you think?

*I'm fine, as usual, winter has been exceptionally mild lately. Hope it continues the same. Lots of love to all of you. My regards to all my friends, take care of yourselves and we'll hope to be together again before too long.
Donald*

Cigarettes had more than smoking value to a POW. They were used as currency and trading for other items. American cigarettes were double the value of English cigarettes and Canadian in between American and British. The International Red Cross allowed the next of kin to send one personal parcel each month to a POW weighing no more than 12 pounds. One book parcel was also allowed weighing no more than four pounds. Don never spoke of receiving a book parcel in any letter.

As far as new nieces and nephews, little did Don know that each of his three older sisters would deliver while he was in POW camp in 1944. He would come home to three new faces and his responsibility as an uncle would grow.

Thirteenth letter is dated January 23, 1944.

Dear Folks:

Your first package arrived yesterday; everything was in good shape and greatly appreciated. Seemed just like Christmas.

Everything is well here. The weather is surprisingly warm so I've been getting plenty of exercise and fresh air and I feel great. As soon as spring comes we're going to start gardening on a large scale. Our diet at present lacks vegetables, otherwise it's not bad. However, if you can, include some food and vitamin tablets in your parcels.

That's all the news from here. Haven't had any more mail yet, but I hope and trust you and the family are okay. Remember me to my friends. All my love to you. Donald

The garden was a major plan by the SAO in Center Compound. The plan began to unfold probably about the time Don was writing this letter. The elements of the plan were to secure seeds through the Red Cross; watching the horses in camp carefully to secure manure; and the getting and making of tools to work the soil. The emphasis on a garden for vegetables and hope

must have been of immense value. The soil was a huge issue. Don had left a part of the world that arguably had the best soil anywhere to be encamped at a place with very sandy soil that was good at growing hardly anything, but when this letter was written there was probably hope for a better crop than would come forth for them.

The fourteenth letter was dated February 5, 1944.

Dear Folks:

I mentioned getting your first package in my last letter. Since then I've received the first cigarette parcel and the second personal parcel you sent. Yesterday another of your letters arrived so things have been coming through fine. I'm very glad to know that all is well at home and I'm sure things will continue that way.

So far we've had a very warm winter, and spring is not far off now so I'm not expecting any severe weather.

As for me, I'm as well as ever. Have no worry for my welfare. I'm getting enough to eat. By the way; the articles in the food parcel offered a welcome change from the regular diet. Thanks for everything, and all my love to you. Don

Not much new information in this letter, but just the sense of communication going back and forth between POW camp and home must have brought a great sense of relief. With the cigarette parcel Don now had trading stock, wonder what he got in return. Others traded for clothes or food.

The fifteenth letter is dated February 16, 1944.

Dear Folks & Family:

A couple of your letters have come through again. I noted that you'd received none of mine yet. I hope they come through faster hereafter.

Everything is fine here. The weather is mild and spring can't be too far off. I'm feeling fine and putting on weight in the wrong places. Too much starch in my diet, I guess. One of the members of our band composed a song that you may be hearing in the States before long. It's called "Night Again" and is very good. The band puts on a program once or twice a week for us. They're really getting good.

That's all for now. Keep yourselves healthy and happy. I'll do the same. Love Don

Now we turn our attention to what was happening in Illinois. Just how soon were they receiving these letters? What happened when they came? Did parents Amelia and Ralph immediately call Blanche, the nearest adult child on the same phone exchange, and read her the letter? The phone from parents to daughter Blanche was through Ocoya exchange. Blanche was short-long-short on two and Ralph and Amelia were three longs on 22. Was Ocoya Central listening in to the call, were the rest of the party line farmers doing so, all rejoicing that the Phillips had heard from Don? It's a easy story to envision. No doubt the whole community was involved on many levels personally with Don and with their own members of family in service.

One wonders also how many letters were going to Don. Clearly his parents and sisters were writing him and probably several friends. So far Don has mentioned only receiving four letters

and two parcels this far into his experience. One can be certain a lot more letters had been written but had not found their way to Stalag Luft III over five months from his capture.

There was both a symphony orchestra and jazz band in Center Compound. One assumes Don is mentioning the jazz band and the song listed could not be found, so it probably did not become a hit Stateside, but guaranteed it was a hit at Stalag Luft III.

The sixteenth letter is dated February 28, 1944.

Dear Folks:

Another of your letters came yesterday, also one from Frank C. It seems to take them about three months to get here, but all news, stale or not, is most certainly looked forward to.

You mention one of your current favorite songs. We manage to keep up fairly well on the hit parade, although most of the songs are strangers to us now. However, occasionally one of our "camp composers" turns out a new tune. That really goes over big here.

I'm fine as always. One thing I miss is not being able to dress up in a pair of pinks and a green shirt. If you think I'll be here long enough to receive them after you get this, send me an outfit, with wings, collar insignia and all. All my love. Donald

This letter begins to give some resignation to just how long Don feels he might be in camp. If he knows that it takes letters probably 3 months to get home and 3 months to get back, he is aware that asking for clothes means he's seeing the possibility of being there for an extended time. A pair of pinks and a green shirt in WWII dress lingo means wearing a pair of pants that were rose shade and an an olive Army green shirt. Don wanted to look spiffy. This was being encouraged by the command of Center Compound, and it was not unusual as Don pointed out in his narrative that a POW would take several hours to put creases in his clothes from a SPAM can fashioned into an ironing device.

The month Don died in December 1995 niece Theresa was with him and at one point he wanted to share an important point of view to her about life. Essentially it was always try to look your best, this coming from a man ravaged by months of cancer treatment.

The seventeenth letter is dated March 3, 1944 (although Don dated it 1943, but that is impossible).

Dear Folks:

I was puzzled at first by a reference in your letters to the Monser family. Then the truth dawned; presume you have a complete list of the crew. Pete is here with me, and fine.

Got letters from Bernice and Mike P. today. Please tell Mike and Shook and other friends that since I have only three letters and four cards per month I can't answer theirs but to please keep writing. I'd appreciate snapshots of anyone, especially some of the children.

So you're going to farm Mike's land next year. Good for you, and more power to you!

Everything is fine here. I walk several miles a day for exercise and am feeling good. Since your cheerful letters have come through my morale is better, too. Tell Joe to keep his fingers out of the mousetrap. Love to all, Don

In this letter Don discovered his family knew about the rest of the crew members from the September 6, 1943, flight. Monser is listed as the Waist Gunner in the Escape and Evasion Report listed for him online which means he was not captured after the flight and in fact got back to the UK by the end of October 1943. Don was telling his family that the only crew member he knew in Stalag Luft III was Pete who was the pilot of the ill-fated September 6 flight. Don probably knew these men hardly at all, and in all probability that was the first time they'd flown together.

Don received a letter both from his sister, Bernice, and his former employer, Shook, and a continuing theme, remembering the children. Joe, the mousetrapper, is a nephew who did have a way of always being into things.

Don's exercise, if not started at Stalag Luft III, lasted the rest of his lifetime as he became a marathon runner later in life, and even after diagnosed with cancer kept to his exercise routine as much as possible.

The eighteenth letter is dated March 18, 1944.

Dear Folks:

Congratulations to the crew members who are on active service! Wish I'd had better luck.

Got the third cigarette parcel today. Mail has been rather slow this week but last week made up for it. Spring seems to be almost here and time should go faster after I can get outside and get a tan. Myron J. of Pontiac is in a hospital near here. Might get to see him after he gets out.

I'm counting on Christmas dinner at home this year, and I don't think I'll be disappointed. It's a long time since the whole family has been together for Xmas, but better years are coming up!

Hope that the extra farming isn't bothering you, that Dorothy got along okay with the baby, and that everyone is as well as I am. Lots of love to all. Don

By this letter it sounds as if Don found out from his parents about the rest of the crew of the September 6, 1943, flight. Of the ten person crew, four of them have Escape and Evasion Reports online, and six of them were listed as MIA after the September 6, 1943, flight including Don. It appears all this information was filtering down to the family level of the involved crew.

Don is back to hopeful about the future and certain the next Christmas will be at home. This will not be. Don's sister, Dorothy, was to deliver a baby on April 17, 1944. Her name, Marjorie Beth. Don knew by the time his letter reached Illinois, in all likelihood, he would be an uncle again.

The main event of the movie *The Great Escape* happened on March 24, 1944, from North Compound. One who has seen the movie knows of the tunneling efforts and the eventual escape of 76 prisoners, 50 being captured and killed, 3 making an eventual escape out of Germany, and the rest going back to various camps after capture. When asked at the end of his life Don said the

average kriege was not aware of the escape until it came off. Reasonable since the five components lived so separately. Don went on to say the main difference after the escape was that the security was tighter.

Spring 1944

Don wrote 6 letters and 2 postcards from March 30, 1944, to June 12, 1944.

The nineteenth letter is dated March 30, 1944.

Dearest Mother & Dad:

Just got another of your letters; I think they're all coming through, judging from the date intervals. I'm glad to hear that you're getting mine. We'll have lots of things to talk over some day, won't we? Unless I miss my guess, that day will come this fall or early winter.

Everything's okay here. Snow and sunshine is the best way I can describe the weather. It can't seem to make up its mind.

Must be about time for Dot's baby. I'll be thinking of her and hoping she gets her girl. Had a card from Warren & Clara today. They didn't mention Verne; I presume he's okay. Give my love to all the children, 'cause I can't send them cards. Keep the packages coming as you have been. Take care of yourselves. Love, Don

This letter is the first time Don acknowledged two-way communication has happened. It took six months from capture for that to occur between he and his parents. Fall and winter '44 Don will not be home, but still at Center Compound, Block 44, Combine C living with even more men than he is now. One possibility for Don's optimism is news did make its way to Stalag Luft III and the knowledge of the D-Day invasion plans could be bringing hope to the captives.

The baby mentioned is the one he mentioned in the last letter, and his sister Dorothy was two weeks away from delivering Marjorie Beth on April 17, 1944.

Warren and Clara lived in Ocoya close to Don's parents and had 3 sons. Clara was Don's mother's niece. Verne, mentioned in the letter, was in the Marine Corps in WWII in the Pacific, and brother Lyle, was in the Navy. Over 300 were serving in WWII from the small farming community where Don grew up. Thus, all families either had someone in service or knew someone in service on the adjacent farm or shop in town. They were involved!

A postcard dated April 16, 1944, is the next communique.

Dear Folks: We're having marvelous weather here. Busy putting in a garden and playing ball. I have a good start on a tan, as usual. The Bible you sent arrived okay. All is well here; a shortage of things to write, as always. Love, Don

Interesting to speculate on this one. Note Don did not say thank you for the Bible. Later in a POW letter Don comments on his religious leanings, or lack of same. He grew up in a Christian family, but one that did not wear it on their sleeve. Don's maternal grandparents were German immigrants and helped establish the Lutheran church in his small growing up community. His paternal grandmother, an immigrant from Scotland, was Presbyterian. His paternal grandfather's history went back to 1640's when Rev. George Phillips came as a Puritan to Massachusetts to

escape English religious persecution. How these religious practices, or lack of same, filtered down to how Amelia and Ralph raised their children and how Don interpreted those practices is not known. Probably most beliefs would be questioned and/or strengthened by current circumstances in POW camp. Both Catholic and Protestant services were held in Center Compound each Sunday in their theater. Don's attendance unknown, but any entertainment or music must have been welcome, no matter what the nature of same.

The twenty-first letter is dated April 21, 1944.

Dear Folks:

I've gotten lots of mail this week, including several letters from Pat; she was Jack's fiancée. I think you knew of his death. He was an only child, and his folks are taking it marvelously well. They gave the city a playground in honor of Jack and other boys who might be killed serving their country. So I sent her a letter, which cuts yours down, but I'm sure you won't mind. They were all so good to me once and have asked me to visit them at Greensboro some day.

Spring is really here. Nice weather, the softball season is under way, and I've a good start on a tan. The next few months will pass more quickly and I hope we don't spend another winter here.

Birthday greetings to you, Mom and to Jim. Bernice says he does so well at school. I think of you always, and am thankful for all your letters. They shorten the distance between here and home. Love, Don

What a bittersweet first paragraph. How many other friends had Don already lost in the war? How many fiancées had lost boyfriends? How many wives husbands? How many parents son? The list could go on and on in the end of relationships caused by this war.

Then the letter turns to good weather, time passing, hopefully coming home and the birthday of his mother who would turned 63 on April 25 and his nephew Jim turned 7. One wonders just how many times those letters were read and where they were kept in his very sparse quarters.

The twenty-second letter is a postcard dated April 28, 1944.

Dear Mother, Dad and family:

Nothing new to say; just that everything's okay. Summer will pass more quickly than the past months have, because there's more to do. Thinking of you always and hoping all is well at home. Love, Don

The twenty-third letter is dated May 11, 1944.

Dear Mother and Dad:

I feel rather guilty about letting half the month slip by before writing my first letter to you. I can think of so little to say that I hoped some of your letters would arrive and furnish me with a few topics.

Had letters from Russell Klein and Uncle Gus but that's about all. Both very cheerful letters.

Joe must be getting smarter by leaps and bounds, judging by his interest in electricity and plumbing. I've been hoping for snapshots of various members of our family. Also sweating out Dot's picture, supposedly mailed months ago.

As usual, all's well here, though time seems to drag, everything will work out eventually and I always keep in mind the happy reunion we'll have some day. All my love, Donald

What to say when you have nothing to say. Don is getting letters from his first cousin, Russell, and uncle, but it appears letters from his parents are not coming through right now. Joe is the nephew who earlier had trouble with mouse traps, and now it appears he's getting his hands in larger things at his very tender age of almost 4.

One wonders after a POW gets pictures are they posted for the rest of the combine to see or kept where only the prisoner can see them and keep that ever so wanted reunion in mind visually. During the time frame of this letter is when the date of the D-Day invasion in June was set. Did the POWs expect, because they were aware of the possibility, that going home was soon?

The twenty fourth letter is dated May 19, 1944.

Dear Folks:

My best cure for the blues, which bother only occasionally, is to read and re-read your letters--which I just finished doing. If absence makes the heart grow even fonder, and I'm convinced of it, I'll be so attached to you when I return that you'll have me underfoot continually like a pet kitten.

Everything okay here, as always. Packages coming thru okay. Oh yes, due to a new regulation it is not advisable to send dried fruits.

Have you ever heard from Russell Philpit? He was here and was sent home in Feb., and he promised he'd write you.

Give my love to all the children. I think of all of them often; wish I could write each of them. My friends have all written swell letters. And of course you know I send you all my love. Donald

Now we know one of Don's methods to deal with the boredom, connect by reading the letters sent to him by family and friends. For a moment you can be with that person and not at Stalag Luft III.

Research shows 2Lt. Russell Philpit was downed on a mission on August 12, 1943, about 3 weeks before Don's ill fated flight. It is unknown why he got to go home, but evidently he was to take greetings to family back home after he left Stalag Luft III in February 1944.

The twenty-five letter is dated May 28, 1944.

Dear Folks:

Your letters come in bunches, like bananas. Seven of them came today, including the one with Dot's picture, which, incidentally, doesn't do her justice at all. Also, another package arrived this week. The noodles made a delicious dish, covered with a paste of cheese and milk. The pipe is swell. I wondered if Floyd helped pick it out, remembering that he's a confirmed pipe smoker. Please send filters and pipe cleaners in future packages.

Several new books have been added to our library. I believe I've read more books, both fiction and non-fiction, during my stay here than during the rest of my life. I miss my glasses. If they've been sent home to you yet, pack

them carefully and send them. That's all for now. I'm thinking of you always and hoping all is well. Lots of love, Don

The occasion of getting seven letters spurred Don to write immediately, and in the future he had more letters to read when he got 'blue.' If one can get excited about noodles with Velveeta cheese and powdered milk, which was called Klim (milk spelled backwards), we know things were not too tasty normally.

When asked at the last of his life what books he read in camp, Don responded whatever was available but recalled reading *Gone With The Wind*. One of Don's combine members made a long list of the books he read, complete with his rating system of each book, but then acknowledged that even reading can get boring, particularly if you don't have the necessary glasses as in Don's case.

What does it take to make pipe smoking enjoyable? If Don's brother-in-law Floyd helped picked out the pipe, did he make sure his in-laws sent the proper accessories needed? it's certain the German guards would not go out and get the necessary item, but perhaps there was always trading system to get one what was needed for a particular enjoyment needed to make life more pleasant that day.

The twenty-sixth letter is dated June 12, 1944

Dear Mom and Dad:

I'm glad that my friends remember you with letters and cards occasionally. How did Buck get Dottie's address? He'll probably feed her such a line that she'll think me a saint or a devil, depending on the mood he's in. Good old Buck; he used to talk me into plenty of things!

Everything's okay here as always. More than ever now I'm counting on Christmas dinner at home, and I sincerely believe I'll make it. If I do, I'll bake a cake for the occasion. Since we have no baking powder here, our cakes are necessarily heavy and I'd like to see what I can do with all the necessary ingredients to work with. I'm completely checked out on peeling potatoes and operating a can opener, if nothing else. Remember me to my friends and, of course, the family and don't worry. Love, Don

Judging by the date of this letter and the optimism that is evident, it seems pretty clear that the news of the D-Day invasion on June 6, 1944, has made its way to Stalag Luft III. Little did Don know that he would not be home for Christmas and the hardest part of his experience would come after Christmas 1944. But for now there is hope.

Summer 1944

Don wrote 7 letters from June 20, 1944, to September 12, 1944.

The twenty-seventh letter is dated June 20, 1944.

Dear Mother and Dad:

I'm taking trumpet lessons now; started this week. Johnny Ward, the composer of "Night Again," and another tune since then, is giving me lessons. He's a grand guy, a good teacher, and I'm enjoying the experience. Tell Ray he and I will play a duet some day.

It's nice that you correspond with the other crew member's parents. Pete and I have often wondered where all the crew is. We only know of the two you wrote us about. Just another of the many things we'll have to talk over some day, I guess. Pete, incidentally, is quite a guy, a big raw-boned Swede with four-foot shoulders and a chest like a young bull.

Keep well and happy, and some one of these weeks I'll be calling to tell you which train to meet. Lots of love, Donald

Still lots of optimism in this letter and starting a new activity where he warns his 9-year-old nephew, Ray who plays a clarinet, that some day they will play together.

Pete was the pilot of the ill-fated September 6, 1943, in which Don was navigator and they ended up in the same combine in Stalag Luft III and continued a friendship throughout life.

The twenty-eighth letter is dated June 30, 1944.

Dear Mother and Dad:

Another month gone and summer well underway. This place seems to be almost free of flies, a good thing since of course we have no screens. Hope your farm work is coming on okay and that the increased acreage isn't too much.

October 5 will mark your 40th wedding anniversary, will it not? Maybe I'll be home then, who knows? If not I'll bake a cake and celebrate the occasion here. I could certainly use one of those fried chickens and I appreciate Greg's suggestion that you send one, if that were possible.

There will certainly be many, many simple little things I'll appreciate that I never noticed before. That's all for now. Time for a trumpet lesson, an hour that I really enjoy. Lots of love to all, Donald

Don certainly came from a part of the country where flies were everywhere and bothered everything, one small relief in his current scene. Of course Don is correct on the date and year of the anniversary. Even if Don did not have a birthday/anniversary book with him, it would be good odds that he could recite each family member's birthday and anniversary from memory. This would be a total of 17 people just in his nuclear family and their families. Don had a good memory and gave attention to celebration dates. He could do it.

As far as sending the fried chicken, which clearly Don had mentioned several times, it was nephew Greg, age 7, who came up with this good idea. This clearly was one of the simple things he enjoyed that was missed.

Isn't it nice to hear that Don enjoys something--blow that trumpet!

The twenty-ninth letter is dated July 12, 1944.

Dear Folks:

Just received the card concerning our joint bank account. I have no way of returning it so will have to wait and deliver it in person in a few months. Okay?

The mail has been coming in regularly. Several of yours arrived this week, also some from the old gang, Joe and Del and Winnie. They send the usual good news. Guess they've been moving around quite a lot lately. I suppose gas isn't rationed so strictly in their part of the country.

We've been having grand weather, and I have my usual summer's tan. If I were home now I'd be just in time to shock oats for you. Had a letter from Shook telling of Bob & Theresa's bad luck. Always thinking of you. Love, Don

Interesting that one's financial accounts catch up with you anywhere, even in POW camp. Gas rationing was a part of WWII on the home front. We don't know what Don's old gang did but there were A stickers and B stickers. Those that had A stickers were considered nonessential drivers and got only 4 gallons a week. B stickers were given to those with essential needs for the war effort and could get 8 gallons a week.

The thirtieth letter is dated July 26, 1944.

Dear Mother and Dad:

You must tire of these letters. They're just like cowboy stories, when you've read one you've read them all. I've been waiting with this month's until some of yours arrived. Five of them came today, the latest an April 16 letter which I opened eagerly, anticipating news of Dorothy's baby but evidently she's running behind schedule. Practically all of my friends have written me, but Dot's letters, if she's writing, aren't coming through very well.

Sorry to hear that Marjorie is in the sanatorium; she's had a rough time, poor kid.

Judging from the irregularity in the arrival home of my letters, I'll probably beat some of them home. Nothing would please me more, God knows. Take care of yourselves and remember me to my friends. Love to all, Don

Don, a very skilled writer under normal circumstances, is acknowledging what is the truth, these are very dull letters under the opposite of normal circumstances. Dorothy, his sister, had her baby on April 17 and thus did not make the deadline for the April 16 letter. How many months longer will it take for Don to learn his niece Beth has arrived. As far as the other Dot, this just might be the case of a Dear John letter that may or may not have been written.

What we do know is efficient communication back and forth is not happening. News, when it comes, is very old, and some people Don would like to hear from are perhaps not writing. Good thing it's summer and long nights do not have to be contended with as well.

The thirty first letter is dated August 10, 1944

Dear Folks:

I'd almost bet you a new living room suite against a dinner of fried chicken and cherry pie that I reach home before this letter does--but if I do I'll get the dinner anyway and if not I won't be there to buy the other.

Everything is okay here. We're having good weather and still killing the time playing ball and lying in the sun. I can remember a time when I thought I'd be living the life of Riley with nothing more than I do here--but I can see I was a mere youngster then. Which reminds me, another birthday has come and gone since my last letter. My combine members baked a huge delicious cake for the occasion. You'd be amazed at the cakes some of these boys can bake without flour or baking powder. So much for now. All my love, Donald

This is the most optimistic letter yet on the time line to make it home. Don knows it takes 3 months for letters to get to Illinois, so he is guessing he will be home by Thanksgiving. Not to be. What was Don hearing that made him so optimistic. Paris was not liberated until August 25, 1944, but one must assume the Allied troop movements are well known within the camp.

In Don's 'life of Riley' line we can see the beginnings of the poem he wrote during his stay in camp. Clearly having a leisure filled life was not nirvana.

Don's birthday, his 26th, was August 1. His last birthday had been celebrated in England right before he went to Thurleigh airfield for assignment to his bomb group and then capture a short five weeks later. What a year!

A short break from letters. Don was a wordsmith and enjoyed writing light verse throughout his life. It is unknown exactly when he wrote the poem below but it was sometime while in POW camp in 1944. It seems to fit with this letter above.

Are you weary of the present?

Home or business life unpleasant?

Do you long to stow it all and get away?

Taxes eating up your income?

Bonds depleting it, and then some?

Draft board calling louder every day?

Some blonde siren with a bubble

On your trail and brewing trouble?

Wife and in-laws getting in your hair?

Tired of getting up at seven?

Swing shift working you till 'leven?

Looking for the life without a care?

Stalag Three's the spot for you, boy!
Hop a thousand bomber convoy.
Come and live the life of Reilly for a year.
Sleep the clock around on Monday;
Sleep the week around till Sunday.
Let the Krautheads feed and clothe you while you're here.

Rest assured that blonde tornadoes,
Salesmen, wives, and desperadoes
Cannot storm this haven on a hill.
Barbed wire serves as insulation
To the woes of civ'lization.
Hawk-eyed Super-guards complete the bill.

One important stipulation...
When you leave your present station
Hold it open for me, will you please?
Because for me this life has cloyed
And I'd be damned well overjoyed
To peddle apples in that land across the seas.

The thirty-second letter is dated August 23, 1944.

Dearest Mother & Dad:

My anniversary is approaching; several anniversaries, in fact. Seems the last of August and the first of September has always been a bad time for me--as witness 1940, '41, and '43. In future years I'll hibernate through the period so that I can't stumble into something unlucky.

Everything is much the same here. Tomorrow we're going to have a fall housecleaning and really scrub the place up. Our garden didn't turn out too well, though we got some good of it. The soil is too sandy for anything but watermelons.

More and more I'm looking forward to the day when I'll be home again, and I hope it will be in time for Christmas. That would be the finest present I've ever had. Love to all, Don

One of the anniversaries Don is describing is September 6, 1944, will mark one year since his capture. This was an event he noted throughout his life and made certain to pass this significance down one more generation. This is a note written to niece Theresa in 1988, Don knowing Theresa was going to be airborne on September 6, 1988, en route to London. "September will be big for all four of us. First of all, we wish for you two the best possible success on your trip to England. Also, I want it to be an enjoyable trip for you. The enclosed sawbuck is to help insure that at some point on September 6, whether it be on the plane to Dallas, at the airport, or on the flight to England, buy yourselves a drink and toast the fact that I am a much happier man today than I was 45 years ago on September 6." He wrote a similar note 5 years later when Theresa was again en route to London on September 6. "Enclosing a stipend for use in having an airborne drink or two on my fiftieth anniversary flight. What a long time ago it all seems now. I can recall being able to slip 2000 francs to the stationmaster's wife as she wiped the blood off my face while we waited with the German guards for the train to arrive, and how ecstatic she was. But better she get it than the Germans, right?" So Don wanted this remembered as a significant anniversary. The other two years probably have to do with relationships that did not go well.

And that darn sandy soil. One wonders just how much watermelon one can eat, but if it varies the diet it is probably no so bad. Christmas 1944 will not be spent in Illinois, but this was not known at the time.

The thirty-three letter is dated September 12, 1944.

Dear Mother and Dad:

The fiscal year is now completed and I feel that an "annual report" is due you. The following, then, is a conscientious evaluation of the sole member of your male progeny.

Financially, I am, of course, sounder than ever before. Wish I could take some credit for this but it was literally forced on me. Physically, I am much the same. Eyes a little weaker, lordosis curves a little stronger, otherwise unchanged. Mentally, it's difficult for me to judge. I believe I still have all my bolts and screws but the threads may be stripped on some of them. Spiritually, I am wavering between atheism and agnosticism but neither worries me at all. Socially I'm far behind the times and the best cure for that would be if you could have as a Xmas dinner guest your love son, Donald

Don's fiscal year has everything to do with being at Stalag Luft III now for one year, his arrival probably coming 10 days after his September 6, 1943, capture. His ledger is an interesting, and one wonders if his parents saw it as humorous and positive at the time.

Forced savings are going into his home bank account and Don is keeping active by walking and other sport activities in camp. Reports indicate that the men in Center Compound overall did come out better mentally than those who had been there longer, like the British, and in addition the British had to be concerned about what was happening to their families in the bombings. There were incidents of being wire happy, a term for going over the edge, during internment. Don's dose of religion is tending at this point to no religion, or one of an unstructured variety. Christmas in Illinois is still a hope, but it turns out to be a dream not realized.

Fall 1944

Don wrote 7 letters and one post card from September 23, 1944, to December 7, 1944.

The thirty-four letter is dated September 23, 1944.

Dear Folks:

I note with misgivings that only 77 shopping days remain before Christmas. Things will have to speed up if I'm to be there in time to tie my knick knacks on the tree.

Naturally, I spend lots of time here wondering about a post-war occupation, after I've graduated from pinks to tweeds. Impossible to come to a decision here. It's late in life to be thinking of school and yet I'm tempted. Could go back to my old trade, and possibly will. There are many advantages--I have to think of a family before my teeth and hair fall out, for one thing. One page letters are a headache. Can't cover a subject at all before you run out of paper. Lots of love to all the family and I hope you're all as well as I. Don

One wonders by this letter whether Don and his fellow POWs knew about Operation Market-Garden which was conducted between September 17-25, 1944, in which the Allies failed to cross the Rhine River into Germany and essentially dashed the hope of the war ending by Christmas. Did Don know? His that what his reference to speeding up means? Perhaps.

When not thinking of the Allied advance, Don is wondering what will happen when he changes from military uniform to civilian clothes. Should he go back to being a carpenter, or try to go to school. Lots to consider when you are already 26. There is no way to know if Don knew the GI Bill, which allowed for provisions for education, was signed in June 1944. Thousands of veterans went back to school after the war and they were almost a majority of the student population at college by 1947.

The thirty-fifth letter is dated September 29, 1944.

Dear Mother and Dad:

A new shipment of personal parcels has arrived, an event comparable now to buying a new car or enjoying a shopping spree a couple of years ago. I'm reminded of that carton "Big events in the lives of little men".

All goes much the same here. Cooler weather has taken the edge off the softball season and I spend more time reading again. Hope it won't be necessary to spend another winter here, but if so, we'll get by.

I've done very little concentrated studying here. The only thing that has gotten more than a spasmodic effort from me is the trumpet and I've been blowing it religiously. Always thinking of you and all the family and very glad to get your letters, and always looking forward to the big day. Love, Don

This letter indicates the POWs knew that the Allies were not advancing as hoped, and time in the camp would be longer than hoped. It appears Don was not spending his time studying. Others were. Sagan University was organized with the talent and education of those in camp and certificates given for completed classes. These certificates were recognized when the POWs went

back to the States. Don, though, was having none to little of this which was not uncommon. Uncertainty of what the future held back home, and the uncertainty of the Allied advance kept the motivation to go to classes low for many POWs. Perhaps better just to blow a horn. Some of Don's combine members did take classes. What sort of group pressure, or lack of same, contributed to Don's decision to do little.

Don noting personal parcels was probably very important as the Red Cross parcels went on half rations in September 1944, and more men were moving in their barrack. It was starting to get more meager, and it will become much more so.

The thirty-sixth letter is dated October 11, 1944

Dear Mother and Dad:

Seems I didn't get home for your anniversary after all. We had a cake in your honor; also one of the boys in my combine was celebrating his 1st wedding anniversary that day.

Just got the news about all the crew. Very glad for their sake. Pete and I bawled in each other's beer all day--or would have if we'd had any.

We're having Indian summer weather here--thank God for small favors. I really hate to see winter come again.

Just heard, too, about Bernice's latest addition. I had heard she was expecting and I was really sweating her out and glad to hear she's okay. All okay here, hope everything at home is too, my love to all of you & hope to be home soon. Don

Don wrote about his parent's anniversary in October 1943, and now another year has passed and his parents celebrated their 40th wedding anniversary on October 5, 1944, and Don celebrated it as well. In other family news, his sister Bernice had her sixth child, John, on May 19, 1944. It is clear by Don's reference that it took five months for the news to reach him.

Bawling in his beer refers to getting more knowledge about the ill-fated crew of the September 6, 1943, mission. Pete, the pilot, was also a member of his combine but other members of the crew made it back to England after bailing out of the plane. Pete and Don were not so lucky.

Glad Don can enjoy the weather now, because he is to face the harshest winter in many years in even worse conditions than being housed at Stalag Luft III as hard as that is to believe.

The thirty-seventh letter is dated October 19, 1944.

Dearest Mother and Dad:

I hit a jackpot today--fifteen of your letters. Evidently mine go home in the same fashion. I certainly enjoy them and I hope mine area are as cheerful and encouraging to you.

For the past few months I've been killing part of my time cutting hair. The first few attempts were pretty gruesome but as we see only each other here, nobody cares, and time and experience have improved my technique somewhat. Still taking trumpet lessons but it takes months to build up my lip muscles. Time passes well enough and of course we all hope it won't be long now.

Glad to hear everyone is so well at home including the two new additions to the family. Loads of love to all of you. Donald

It is clear by this letter that Don's main intent of this letters is to be cheerful and encouraging, no matter what the real circumstances were. Don talks of 'killing' time while the Allies are killing Germans. When this letter was written the Allies were involved in the three-week battle of Aachen. On October 21, 1944, the first German city was taken after heavy casualties, 5000 Allies and 5000 Germans, and 5000 German POWs taken. Don and his fellow POWs wait.

The thirty-eighth letter is dated October 23, 1944.

Dear Mom and Dad:

Just was re-reading all your letters, of which I now have about 80, and noted a reference in one of them to a new litter of kittens. We have here a camp cat who is as regular and fruitful as old Jacko was. Her last attempt was evidently a maximum effort and she came through with eight.

I am resigned to the idea of spending Thanksgiving here now though I'm still hopeful in regard to Christmas at home. Seems like a lifetime since Xmas of '40.

In case you're ever in doubt as to what to send in personal parcels, send food. Baking powder, flour, spices, etc. and send the limit. I should have clothes enough to last the war out now. Hope both you and the family are as well as I. Lots of love to all of you. Donald

The comfort those 80 letters must have brought. None of those letters made it back to the U.S. which means when Don was forced to evacuate the camp he either did not take them, or they got left along the arduous route he took from evacuation of Stalag Luft III in January 1945 to liberation five months later in April 1945.

Not only did Don spend Thanksgiving at Stalag Luft III, but Christmas 1944 as well. Little did he know then that the last major German offensive would take place from December 16, 1944, to January 25, 1945, known as the Battle of the Bulge, which involved 600,000 American troops, 81,000 being killed.

You will see how the parcel sending plan develops among the combine as the war progresses in this last grueling phase of the war and internment.

The thirty-ninth letter is dated November 7, 1944.

Dearest Folks:

July-Sept. parcels arrived since I last wrote, and very welcome it was! Several letters too, and I'm amazed and of course pleased to hear that Blanche & Raymond are expecting. What a prolific family I have! The three of them seem to be having a contest to see who can show me the most new faces when I return. No disrespect intended--I'm all for it. Best I get home and enter into competition, though. I'm tired of this monastic life.

Hope you harvested a decent crop of corn and have settled down to the comparative relaxation that winter affords. Christmas greetings to all of you--think I'll spend the holidays abroad again. Ho hum. I'll pin my hopes on a new Easter bonnet. Tell all the children hello and Happy Holidays from Uncle Don. Take care of yourselves. Lots of love, Donald

In this letter Don learned his oldest sister Blanche, also his former teacher, was pregnant and having a second child almost a decade after her first. He did not know niece Theresa had already been born on September 24, 1944. Each of his three sisters made him an uncle again while in camp, and he was ready to be a part of helping the family grow.

Something happened in Don's thinking or perhaps his morale between the October 23 and November 7 letter. Now he is resigned to being at Stalag Luft III at least into the new year of 1945.

The fortieth piece of correspondence is a postcard dated November 14, 1944. Postcards had 1/3 the space of the regular short letter correspondence.

Dear Mother and Dad: Some of your letters are coming through in four or five weeks. Practically special delivery, getting news only a month old! Getting along okay here; every day brings me one day closer to home. Soon, I hope, this will all be behind me. Love to all, Don

Perhaps what is most surprising about this postcard is that it verifies Don is getting mail. Many of the supply lines in Germany for their own munitions, rations, fuel, replacement troops, and other essentials to keep a war going by this time in the war were having a great deal of difficulty. Supply lines used by the Red Cross for parcels and letters at this juncture apparently were functioning and even better than in the recent past. How?

The forty-first letter was dated December 7, 1944. It is back to the standard small letter size, but over half of the letter is totally blackened and was censored.

Dear Folks:

(Then totally censored after the salutation, and this is where it picks up next line.)

...It was a pleasant experience; may the war end soon that I may return to the land where...(then two more lines blacked out).

My army anniversary has come and gone again, too. Seems like a long time. Still, I'm none the worse for those years and for that I'm very grateful. Many many others have fared worse than I. Hope you and the family are all in excellent health and spirits. Lots of love to all of you. Donald

We can only guess what the pleasant experience was that Don had and wanted to convey to his family and what made it censorable by the Germans or the Americans since probably the letters were censored by both systems.

November 27, 1944, marked the third year Don had been in service. Don is able to keep those years in perspective with the experiences he has heard from and about others.

The forty-second correspondence was again a postcard which was dated December 21, 1944.

Dear Folks: Stop sending me cigarettes and tobacco, and send all cigars from now on, as many as regulations permit. I think you're allowed to send 4 boxes of 50 every 30 days. Send Robert Burns Deluxe Panatella. Naturally, expenses come from my allotment. Love, Don

As the reader will see, the next letter is dated the same day with lots of specifics of what Don wants sent to him. What are the combine members thinking? What are they gearing up for in this time when the Battle of the Bulge has already started? Will the cigars be used for trading for things needed?

The forty-third letter is dated December 21, 1944, same as postcard above.

Dear Folks:

I have a few things I want you to send me; hope you'll get this letter in time to include them in my March to May parcel. I want a pair of dress oxfords, brown, size 9C. Buy good ones if they're available. Next, a wrist watch, something in the 25 dollar class. If possible buy a waterproof, shockproof non-magnetic one with luminous dial and sweep-second hand. If you have to pay fifty dollars, okay. My money is doing me very little good here. Also, in each parcel, send at least four of those large Hershey bars, with almonds, the size that Dot U. sent. I say at least four, more if regulations permit. Other than that, all food. Dehydrated figs, dates, and bananas, cake mixes, cake & pancake flour, baking powder or soda, spices. This letter sounds like an order to Sears but I know that you know I'm thinking of you & send my love. Don

It is difficult to get inside Don's head to understand this letter knowing what really does happen for him at the end of the war. Does he want the shoes for walking, have his current shoes worn out? As it turned out boots would have been much better than dress oxfords. The watch sounds like a navigator, which he was, who wants true precision by being able to see in the dark and even when wet. Who knows what conditions he thought he might face and wanted to be prepared. Clearly he was asking for some foods that could be carried in a backpack.

One can only wonder how this was received on the other side of the Atlantic, his parents would try to comply whatever his reasons. His next letter, the last from Stalag Luft III written about two weeks later, shows how the thinking changed of what he needed.

Winter 1945

Don wrote only one letter in winter 1945.

The forty-fourth letter is dated January 6, 1945.

Dear Mother and Dad:

Our combine has evolved a new plan in regard to food from home, so these instructions supersede all others in regard to food. In my next parcel please send: 1 20 oz. pkg of Pillsbury's pancake flour, 1 lb. dried apples, 8 oz. soluble coffee, 1 lb. corn starch, 1 lb. beans, 1 lb. box of macaroni, 3 pgs's. vegetable soup mix (not box type), 1 oz. cinnamon, 1 1/2 oz. can nutmeg, 2 oz. can allspice. This accounts for 7 lbs. For the remaining 4 lbs.---in my last letter I asked for a pair of brown 9C dress oxfords, (good ones), and a \$25 to \$50 wrist watch, waterproof, shockproof, with luminous dial. If you haven't sent these, include them in this one. If you already have send 3 or 4 T-shirts, various patterns and colors, and 3 pr. of shorts, size 30. Everything is okay here. I'm looking forward to spring and warm weather again. Hope all is well at home. Love, Don

This is the last letter sent from Stalag Luft III. The next letter will be sent from Stalag VIIA on April 8, 1945. It will be a very long three months and a long physical and psychological journey from one opportunity to write till the next one.

By the middle of January 1945 the Russians began their winter offensive in supremely cold weather and advancing toward Stalag Luft III. The tide of war was turning against the Germans on both the eastern and western fronts and German civilians were in dire straits in addition to the military being in last-ditch efforts, not knowing what would happen next. By January 25 the Russians were only 48 miles from Stalag Luft III. What would happen next? Most prisoners thought the time had passed when they would be evacuated. They had to steel themselves for other options which included the possibility of a mass execution or optimistically that they would be left to be liberated by the Russians or a force march out of camp.

On the morning of January 27 the commandant received an order the prisoners were not to be moved; later in the day the order was reversed. At 7 p.m. the Germans said the camp would be evacuated. The prisoners were told they had to be ready to leave within the hour. This was an evacuation of 10,000 men, about 2000 per compound. As it turned out, the five compounds of Stalag Luft III left at various times. The first out was South Compound at 11 p.m. Then West Compound left at 12:30 a.m., followed by North Compounds at 3:45 a.m., then Center Compound left (Don's compound), and finally East Compound left at 6 a.m. Sunday morning.

Here again is what Don wrote about this time.

Things went along in this manner until January 1945. At that time the Russian army was spearheading a drive toward Berlin, and our camp lay directly in its path. Through BBC reports on our secret radio facilities we knew they were within a few miles of us, and hoped to be

liberated by them. Excitement ran high, rumors were rampant, and expectations of liberation and return to the USA had everyone keyed to fever pitch. No dice. On January 27th, in sub-zero weather, the German high command ordered us south, on foot, carrying whatever food and clothing we felt we could struggle along with, and the camp was deserted in a matter of hours. We must have presented a strange sight to the German Luftwaffe above, for we were 10,000 or more, counting the German guards accompanying us, and our lines stretched for miles along the snowy roads as we struggled wearily along.

We don't know what Don carried with him for this trip, others report making last minute sleds, wearing socks over socks, insulating gloves with paper, fashioning boots out of old KLIM containers, trying to eat all food supplies in the camp and thus making some sick, and deciding what personal effects to take on a journey to wherever. It is known Don carried one piece of paper out of the camp which was ripped out of his *A Wartime Log*, pg 73-74. On one side of this paper was a line drawing of Don completed in 1943 by a fellow POW and on the other side of the paper he managed to make a log of his experience from January 28 to February 24. This will be used as a basis for telling the story along with impressions from reading the accounts of others in the experience. The journey started in up to a foot of snow and still snowing and reports of 20 degrees below zero (F).

January 28, 1945

Don's Entry: *Jan. 28 - Left Sagan, walked to Halbau, slept in church, cr???, walked 16 km.*

This is the only entry where there is one word unreadable and clearly one word erased and 'walked' put over the erased word.

At almost 4 a.m. in the morning of January 28 the 2000 men from Center Compound were walking about 10 miles to find any shelter. American officers in charge were urging no man to sit down during breaks because if they did stiffness and difficulty in continuing would happen because of the extremely cold weather and continuing snow.

Sorting through various accounts it appears they arrived in the town of Halbau about noon on January 28 and it took a couple more hours, all the time snowing and standing outside, to find a place for them to rest. It was finally found in a small church which could house 500 people, but on this evening it housed 2000, packed in like sardines, unable to lie down for any rest. Not all 2000 could get inside and some had to remain outside with the walls providing some shelter. Everyone was cold and wet and hungry and exhausted. Many men were sick and had frostbite. All through the night men were trying to get outside the church, struggling over each other, to relieve themselves or vomit from sickness. Thus, day one outside of Stalag Luft III ends in a church where much later was placed a plaque commissioned by the American POWs in gratitude for shelter the first night of the march. The inscription reads "Dedicated To the Glory of God Donated by grateful American Air Force POW's Stalag Luft III who found shelter here during the night of January 28, 1945"

January 29 and 30, 1945

These two days will be described together.

Don's Entries:

Jan. 29 - Marched to _____. Slept in deserted barn. 18 km.

Jan. 30 - Stayed over.

Don did not fill in the name of where they were, apparently he did not know the name of the town at the time which was Barrau.

Starting out on the morning of January 29 took some time and effort to do the counting of all the men at the church. For most there had been no sleep for over two days. Many men during the previous day had done trading and showed up on this morning with sleds. All were able to move. They stopped for a noon day meal and by late in the afternoon they were to the day's destination which were 3 barns filled with hay. It was still extremely cold and snowing and windy. There was continued frostbite and sickness from the available food which caused loose bowels for many.

Center Compound were allowed to stay a second night in this accommodation and get some of their clothes dry by sleeping next to them. There was continued trading and one can see the value of taking lots of cigarettes out of Stalag Luft III when you left.

January 31 - February 2, 1945

These three days will be described together.

Don's Entries:

Jan. 31 - Marched to Muskau stayed in brick factory—dem fine place! 28 km.

"Feb 1 - Stayed over

"Feb 2 - " "

January 31, 1945, was the longest one day walk in this march. The weather changed from snow to rain to hail over the hilly terrain, and they ended up at a brick factory in Muskau. To these POWs it was a some respite from the last few days because it was warm and dry and there was some food to eat. Consider, though, that any place they stayed, particularly if it looked like a defense plant, could be bombed by Allies unaware that the occupants of this place were friend, not foe. So on the one hand, they could be optimistic that bombers were coming through, but also realized it could be their demise as well, a sobering reality.

There had been a lot of trading along the route, the POWs using cigarettes and coffee, to get items needed, including food. With the opportunity to stay over an additional two nights, they could wash themselves and underwear and socks in cold water and shave and sleep. Many men were very ill and weak from the prior days taking their toll on them.

At this time there was increased speculation of where they were going. Some wanted to escape which would have been relatively easy, but nearly all decided that to stay with the group was the best option for survival.

February 3, 1945

Don's Entry:

Feb. 3 – Marched to Graustein 18 km. Stayed in barn

The weather was getting better for this part of the trip and many men had to disassemble their sleds as the snow was melting and decide what to keep and what to take. On noon of this day 1000 B-17 Allied bombers with 550 fighter escorts from the 8th Air Force completed a noon hour air raid to the city center of Berlin. It was the largest bombing to a city until then. The purpose of the attack was to help the Soviet offensive on the Oder River with the belief that German troops were moving through Berlin by train. The bombing was so severe that it caused smoke, driven by the wind, to go south and could be seen by everyone in the march who were only about 60 miles from the severe bombing. Clearly the Allies had strength, but would the men in the march inadvertently be harmed by that strength in this last dregs of the all out war. The smoke and fire lasted for four days but before that time these POWs were on the road themselves to elsewhere.

By this time in the march the POW's were learning how to care for themselves and most found shelter in a barn this evening on their own and traded with Germans for food and hot water. The rumors were getting clearer that a train ride will happen to Southern Germany.

Imagine what it would be like to be now 8 days into this march under the conditions described. The adjectives one would come up probably don't come close to reality. Don during this lifetime did not describe the march. He did state he was paired with one of his combine members and as much as possible the entire combine tried to stay together under these difficult conditions. Who bolstered whom? Who cried first? Who had to be helped in keeping on day after day? One combine member did state in 1995 that when they left Stalag Luft III on January 28 he got a new pair of shoes upon leaving the camp. His regret at doing same was stated emphatically, very emphatically.

February 4, 1945

Don's Entry:

Feb. 4 -- Marched to Spremberg stayed in garage, caught train in aft.

This day saw the POWs go into Spremberg and into a German military post where the Germans prepared a noon day meal of hot soup and they had the opportunity to wash and shave. At this time the Senior American Officer for Center Compound found out he was to leave his men along with an American General. This was difficult news for the POWs because of their upmost respect for him, but he had no choice in the manner as he had been selected by the Germans for another mission.

By 5 p.m. of that day the men were walked several kilometers to the train station where they were boarded, in very crowded conditions, on box cars to travel to Moosburg. These box cars were called French 40 and 8 (Hommes 40, Chaveau 8) because they could carry 40 soldiers or 8 horses. In this case at least 50 men were put in a box car that had no straw. Now the train trip

begins. They had traveled 50 miles by foot from Stalag Luft III in severe winter conditions, and now they were in for a much longer journey, equally as difficult as what had transpired to this point in the journey.

February 5-7, 1945

Don's Entries:

Feb. 5 -- rode

Feb. 6 -- "

Feb. 7 -- rode, arrived at VIIA late p.m.

The oral and written descriptions of these days on a train come close to limits of what you think people can endure, but we know these limits were tested on many levels and by many people throughout the war both military and civilian. The rail cars were about half the size of American rail cars and some had recently hauled cattle with all the droppings still in the car. Some cars were filled with 55 men by one account and adequate food and water and sleeping space was not a part of this trip. It was cold and drafty as the train moved and they were exposed to Allied bombing from above by several reports. Men were sick everywhere and relieving themselves, both vomit and excrement, but the worst descriptions were the absence of water during these days.

By the end of February 7 they were at their new location, Stalag VIIA, Moosburg, Germany. This was now to be 'home' to men who had endured a 12-day journey and now would have to cope with new and equally alarming conditions.

February 8-24, 1945

Don's Entries:

Feb. 8 -- Stayed over 550 in 1 bks.

Feb. 9 -- " "

Feb. 10 -- " "

Feb. 11 -- " "

Feb. 12 -- Deloused, bathed, moved to diff. quarters, 350 to bks.

Feb. 13-21 -- Stayed there

Feb. 22 -- Snake pit for delousing

Feb. 24 -- Back again--still lousy

Even though Don had more space on his one piece of paper, this is all he said about days in Moosburg other than the one letter he wrote his parents in April. The accounts of others at Moosburg are sobering.

In putting together several accounts it appears Don was initially in a block outside of the main camp with up to 600 men in what was described as the Snake Pit with no beds or fuel. Almost everyone was sick and there was still little food. On February 12 they were moved to the permanent camp, Stalag VIIA, after being deloused. The new home greeted them with bed bugs and fleas and continuing cold and damp weather. There were beds of a sort, 12 men in a 6 feet wide by 6 feet high and 12 feet deep area in a 3 bunk high arrangement. The rations were much less than at Stalag Luft III. Because it was so cold and little food and space, basically the men stayed in bed most of the time. They could not sit up in their bunks and very poor lighting. The men were miserable and morale was what you would expect under such conditions.

One aspect of this camp was the latrine which was a facility that accommodated 40 people at one time for a camp that had 1200 people, add to this the number who had diarrhea and you have a set up for what some called The Latrine Revolt. The latrine had not been cleaned out and men literally had to walk in their own excrement to use the latrine. The POWs revolted and stated their demands and got the latrine cleaned out. New prisoners were coming each day to this camp which was initially built for 14,000 French prisoners and by war's end had up to 130,000 POWs from many nationalities.

Don notes being sent back to the Snake Pit on Feb. 22. What the Germans did is deloused the men and then put them back in the same camp with the same barracks which still had lice, bed bugs, and fleas to start the process all over again. This is the interpretation of Don's comment of "still lousy." It can be agreed Don said little about this experience from January 28-February 24. We have no idea how he acted throughout the experience. One POW described many years after liberation at a POW reunion he could not even talk with a man who stole a potato from a fellow POW at Moosburg. Don's narrative of his experience at Moosburg was described in two sentences. "This camp was much more crowded, sanitation facilities almost non-existent, and food very scare. A thin soup was brought in once daily, plus a limited ration of the German bread." We can agree this is understatement. What we do know about Don is that his combine members at Stalag Luft III and Moosburg became life long friends and their bonds were enduring.

In the bigger picture of the war the day after Don was moved into the permanent camp of Stalag VIIA, February 13, 1945, is when as many as 1300 Allied bombers dropped 3900 tons of bombs and incendiary devices on Dresden, Germany, becoming one of controversial acts of the war. The report of deaths range from 25,000 to 500,000, the real number never to be known because of the number of refugees in the city at the time. Allied POWs were used to gather the corpses, one being Kurt Vonnegut, American novelist.

March, 1945

Don had no entry or letter dated March 1945. What Don and the rest of Stalag VIIA did was wait and wait. During this month the Allied troops cross the Rhine River more than once into Germany and also cross the Seigfried Line. The war news from the Western front was received by the POWs, but still they sat and waited.

On March 3 the POWs heard there would be no more Red Cross food parcels for 3 weeks which did change for the better in another week and got back to one parcel per man per week. The majority of conversation among the men was about FOOD and what and when they would eat when they got back in the States. The men were making little burners out of their tin cans to heat whatever food they did have, although getting fuel for burning was an issue. When Don was asked near the end of his life what food he most missed, the simple answer was: plain foods, all foods.

Every clear day also saw massive Allied air power. The raids were on nearby Munich but sirens would go off in the camp and some days were spent in the slit trenches where they stayed until the all clear signal.

Bartering was going on in the camp, the medium of exchange was cigarettes. The enlisted men did get out of the camp to work in Munich and they could get items and then trade when they got back in camp. Being an officer in the camp, like Don and everyone with him from Stalag Luft III, was not an asset as the Germans thought they might conspire to organize the enlisted men in the camp to do what, who knows. Thus, they were closely watched.

Thus, imagine yourself at Stalag VIIA in March 1945, in a bunk where you can't sit up until you go out to be in a slit trench for air raids; poor lighting; bed bugs, fleas, and lice; nothing to do; crowded together with men who are trying to keep it together for another day; and no real food of substance to eat. Imagine this for a little bit longer and you have the beginning of knowing what it was like at Moosburg in March 1945.

Spring 1945

Don wrote only one letter as a POW at Stalag VIIA.

The forty-fifth letter is dated April 8, 1945. It is a different type of form than the one used at Stalag Luft III.

Dear Folks:

While I do expect to beat this home, still I remember feeling that way last fall and all for nothing so best I keep writing. All is well here. Cooking is quite a different proposition here than at Stalag III. Here we cook on stoves which we make from the empty tins from Red Cross food parcels. Mine is a two-man stove, a tiny thing 6" X 10" X 7", with a doll's oven 2" X 5" X 5". I think Jeannine would get a bang out of cooking on it. With spring weather coming on, my combine buddy & myself sit out in the sun and cook as long as the food holds out. Don W. and I have been holding some lengthy bull sessions and as I said before it seems darn nice to find someone from home.

Perhaps soon now I'll be holding some of those lengthy bull sessions with you & all the family. I've looked forward to that day for so long that sometimes it seems it will never get here. Love to all from Don

This, dear reader, is what Don describes of his experience as a prisoner at Stalag VIIA. Of course to say more might have been censored or bring concern to his parents, to say less would have been acknowledging some defeat. Thus, what Don does is mention his oldest niece and how she would have liked the stoves that had to be fashioned from tin cans coming into the camp. The Don mentioned in this letter is a younger brother of one of Don's high school classmates, and now here they are together in this experience.

In all likelihood Don's parents and family had no idea where he was on April 8, 1945. This is not known for sure but one of Don's combine members had a notification go to his wife and it was received on April 24, 1945, that her husband had been moved from Stalag Luft III. We may assume Amelia and Ralph received a notice in or near that time. News reports were available about movement of military troops in February, 1945, to keep them away from Russian soldiers. How much did Amelia and Ralph know? How did they deal with those days, turning into months, of no information at all? There is no lack of courage needed on both sides of this communication.

Easter was April 1. Some men describe trying to make a good a bash as possible for the holiday considering what they had to work with for food. All mention it getting more crowded as more and more men come to the camp every day and tensions rising. Army officers came as well, 1000 arrived about April 6 and one immediately put in command.

April 12 - 29, 1945

On April 12, Franklin D. Roosevelt died. Most accounts agree that either one or two days after he died this news was known in the camp and a memorial service was held trying to dress as

much as possible in full military uniform. Since FDR became President in 1932, for most of these men he had been their President for over half their lives.

So after 19 months and 23 days in captivity, how did it end for Don in April, 1945?

To review these are the words Don said about the time prior to and on liberation day.

It became apparent that the war was nearing the end. By the end of April we knew that the Seventh Army was very near, and the rumor mill worked overtime. Most of the speculation centered around another forced march to keep us in German hands. On April 28th came the semi-official word that the Germans would abandon camp, leaving us behind with a token guard force, and allow us to be liberated by the American Seventh Army. The next morning we watched from the camp as the German Swastika atop the Moosburg Town Hall, a mile away, was lowered, and in its place, and billowing softly in the April breeze, up went the Stars and Stripes, seen for the first time in so many, many months. Never will I see a more beautiful sight, and never have I seen so many grown men cry. It was probably the most moving experience I have ever witnessed.

Accounts vary on what happened the last few days before liberation, but it appears the wires were cut between compounds and men could move back and forth between them even though there were still German guards on duty. Very few POWs escaped the camp, and most waited to see what would happen next. Prisoners were brought into the camp from the South and thus the prospect of a forced march South did not seem likely. The sounds of war came closer and closer to camp and on the morning of the 29th of April a battle took place all around them. Soon the men could hear the sounds of American tanks and then the tanks entered the camp and were immediately entirely covered with POWs.

Having reviewed numerous accounts of the Allied forces entering and the Nazi flag going down and the American flag going up, what becomes abundantly clear is that it is the most glorious moment any man there had ever experienced in his life. Some of the men in the camp had been there since Dunkirk in 1940, and now they were free. Emotions were raw and tears were in abundance.

For an ironic juxtaposition, on April 30, 1945, Hitler committed suicide and this wire reached the newspapers back home. "AMERICANS FREED: PARIS-- WILDLY CHEERING AMERICAN SOLDIERS, ABOUT HALF OF THEM AIR FORCE OFFICERS, NEARLY MOBBED TANKMEN OF THE 14TH ARMORED DIVISION WHEN THE TANKS BROKE DOWN BARRICADES OF STALAG SEVEN-A YESTERDAY. THE CAMP IS LOCATED AT MOOSBURG, NEAR THE SWISS BORDER IN SOUTHERN GERMANY. IN THE CAMP AND IN NEARBY TOWNS THE GERMANS WERE HOLDING ONE HUNDRED AND THIRTY THOUSAND ALLIED WAR PRISONERS..."

Don wrote two letters after liberation. The first is not dated, but it is before May 5, 1945.

At the top of the first letter it says, censored by Donald Phillips 2nd Lieut. U.S.A.A.F. It is a V-Mail form and the Don states he is in Moosburg at the top. This is the forty-sixth letter.

Dear Mother and Dad:

What a long time since I've written you on one of these forms. The long awaited day has arrived at last, and it certainly seems great to be surrounded by G.I.'s instead of Goons.

As to when I'll be home, I think a month to six weeks will find me trekking into Pontiac. I suppose will land in New York, and Pete wants to buy a car there and drive to Chicago, so I'll drive thru with him.

I am in good health; was afraid you might think I'd been kidding you about that for the past 20 months so you wouldn't worry. Haven't gone bald or lost my teeth, but I am thinner. A few weeks of your cooking will remedy that. The latest news I have of you is now six months old, but I'm confident everyone is okay. So, give my regards to the family and expect the black sheep home in June. Love, Don

A family newspaper clipping with no date announces that Ralph and Amelia Phillips received a V-mail about Don's release. The piece says, "His parents had received no word from him during the past five months, his last letter having arrived on Dec. 21, 1944." It appears the last three letters from Stalag Luft III were received after Don got home and it is clear Don has no current information from home. In the above letter Don states the plan is to travel with the Pete who was the pilot of their ill-fated September 6, 1943, mission who then became his long-term combine member in both POW camps.

General Patton visited Moosburg about two days after it was liberated. There is not agreement on what he said, but all agree it was in the style of the celebrated General. The Red Cross also made Moosburg the central place for food distribution. From various accounts it appears the next few days were much like being in POW camp except better food and the latrine truck sounded different with the G.I. power system. Mostly it was a week of waiting to see what would happen next.

Don's last letter from Stalag VIIA is dated May 5, 1945. At the top of the letter it again states, censored by Donald Phillips 2nd Lieut. U.S.A.A.F. In the right hand corner, written by Don in the return address lines, Lt. Donald Phillips, 0-683307 R.A.M.P. Germany. The initials stand for: Recovered Allied Military Personnel. Evidently between the first letter after liberation and the May 5 letter Don had been assigned a R.A.M.P. number. These persons, who were former POWs, were to be expedited to get home.

Dear Mother and Dad:

Now that there's no restriction on the number of letters I can write you, I find there's still little or nothing new to say. Still hoping to leave the camp in two or three days; now that we're actually in Allied hands I'm very impatient to be on my way to Pontiac. I'll be getting home just in time for the fried chicken season, the best time of the year. Also, I plan on plowing corn, shocking oats and cleaning up a hundred odd jobs, such as the bathroom ceiling, etc. The peace and quiet of the farm really appeals to me after living under such crowded conditions for so long

I suppose two years has wrought many changes in the people and places I knew. Well, it won't be long now, I guess I sound terribly impatient--and I am. Love to all the family from Don

It is known from a later letter Don did not leave Stalag VIIA until May 8. Some POWs did walk into Moosburg in these early May days and what they saw were white flags from every German window. Back at camp misinformation kept circulating of when and how they would be leaving with rumors of up to two more weeks in this camp. Fights in the camp were not uncommon, emotions were running very high and for many it was a very trying time. On May 5 one POW reports it was rainy and windy and it dampen spirits even more. American white bread made it into camp, an item often talked and dreamed about, and also American female nurses and Red Cross women were seen for the first time in many months or years. Rules for eating were distributed and these were quite rigid as these men had been on starvation diets for months to years and they had to be brought back to health in a prescribed manner notwithstanding their endless talks and dreaming of food.

Thus, the elation of April 29 and liberation were followed by some very difficult days.

Don's shipboard letter May 21-28 and posted on May 31, 1945.

Don is finally at a place where he can write as much as he wants. The days from May 5 to when this letter starts have been filled with lines for everything from delousing to completing forms to interrogation. The men talked of never having to be in lines again in a perfect post-war world. Don was sent to Camp Lucky Strike in France, one of the so-called many cigarette camps which were tent cities in the LeHavre area which had a port that could accommodate large ships. Camp Lucky Strike had as many as 100,000 men a day to accommodate. Below Don describes what happens to him from May 8 onward. Ironically, Don does not even mention the end of war, V-E day (Victory in Europe when allies accepted surrender of armed forces of Germany), happening on May 8. Other POWs write about this event but speak of it as being anticlimactic to them and their current situation. Here is Don's letter, not in italics.

Posted May 31, 1945

May 21, Abroad Ship

Dear Folks

This is where I came in. (Don sailed across to England in 1943.) All of it, the life preservers, the constant easy roll of the ship, the hammock like cots, and a dozen other things bring to mind the Queen Mary and 25 green navigators, off to England. Coincidentally, another of the original 25 is on board with me now, having travelled approximately the same roads as I during the past 22 months.

Speaking of ship's roll, this is a much rougher crossing so far. For one thing we're on a boat one-fourth the size of the Queen and for another the weather just naturally isn't calm. My stomach hasn't revolted yet, but I'm knocking on wood. Then too, as I stagger and slide around on deck I can see the advantage in being an octopus or a centipede--anything with a lot of legs--two are highly inadequate!

Left LeHavre, France on May 19 enroute to Trinidad, then New York. To go a bit further back--liberated Apr. 29, rode a G.I. truck to Straubing on May 8, flew to LeHavre, spent 10 days there being fed, clothed, bathed, shot, and interrogated--and here we are, on our way home and darned eager to get there! Why I had to hit this boat bound for South America, I don't know. At another time I'd probably welcome the trip.

I'm feeling great--have started filling out already and should soon have regained the few pounds that knocking around Germany peeled off me. Life holds so many things in store for me again, for instance, today I used the first hair tonic since September '43, yesterday I had my first orange and apple since then; I'm still sweating out ice cream and Coca-cola.

Gradually, too, I'm catching up on the news, there are always back issues of *Times* and *Newsweek* to be found. Tomorrow we're supposed to have our pictures taken for release to the hometown paper. Was just thinking what a surprise it would be to you if they managed to get it in before I got home, and without your knowing it beforehand.

Oh yes, the day before I left Moosberg (Stalag VIIA) I saw Bob Shook (an Ocoya, Illinois, neighbor and fellow POW). Of all the boys I didn't expect to see, he was the last! But life is full of surprises, I'm finding. Anyway, in case this reaches you before either Bob or myself gets home, he's fine, fatter than I last knew him, and should be on his way home soon. Somehow I always expected to see P.D. come straggling into camp--but he never did. Of course, it's been over six months since I've had word from any one.

I saw the comic strip *Blonde* the other day. Judging from the way their children have grown, I suppose all my nieces and nephews have sprouted beyond recognition almost. I dream of all of you occasionally--funny thing, I always seem to be dreaming of the McMahan family (other Ocoya neighbors) Can't explain it.

I had hoped to stop over in New York for a day but it seems we're going straight to Ft. Sheridan so I won't be able to. I should be home, actually home by June 8th or 10th, and as things stand now, I'll have 60 days leave. So I'll get to spend a birthday at home--the first one since '41.

The food on board ship is fine; two big meals a day plus a snack at dinner. Then too there's the luxury of toilets that flush, lavatories with running water--and mirrors. All in all, this G.I. way of life is the nuts! Soldiers of any other nationality are just naturally fighting for the wrong country. I wonder if the German POWs in the States realize how fortunate they are. Their country is nothing but ruins--all of it. So much for tonite. See you in three weeks or less. I check off the days now.

May 22, 1945

Much calmer today. You don't have to chase your peas all around the tray and back. Other days they acted like Mexican jumping beans.

After reading various articles about the shortages in the States, I'm all confused. Some writers seem to think conditions are much the same, others paint a picture that resembles the chaotic

destitution of Europe. I read of black markets on eggs and young fries and wonder how you're affected by all this. Then too, *Life* has pictures of mile long lines for cigarettes. Guess I'll just have to wait till I get home and see how drastic has been the change.

We are traveling in a convoy with some eight or ten other ships. Today I watched them transferring fuel from our ship to a smaller one. This, of course, is done as we go--I don't think we even slowed down. Actually, I guess it's not much of a maneuver but to someone like myself it was impressive. Tomorrow we are supposed to leave the convoy and strike off for Trinidad--the rest go straight to N.Y.

Had hoped to be home in time for the Derby, June 9th. I've always wanted to see one run--might still make it.

May 28, 1945

Tomorrow we dock at Trinidad. Everything's been going smoothly, the weather's been lovely. Although it's getting hot now that we're in tropical waters. Some of the fellows sleep out on deck--it's damned hot down below.

I spend an hour or less each day watching the flying fishes cavort and flit about. They're little devils, only six or eight inches long and they come zipping out of the water and fly along a foot above it for 20 or 30 yards. Occasionally, too, we run into a school of porpoise.

I'm gaining weight like furious; have a cute (?) little roll of fat now that blouses over my belt when I sit. There's no room to exercise here--I'll soon remove that roll at home.

I'll close now and hope to get this posted tomorrow. I don't think we exkriegies are allowed ashore but some friend will no doubt help me. I guess this is the first long letter since way back when. Oh yes, our latest ETA for N.Y. is June 5th--so I'll be home around the 10th. Love DON

Father's Day, June 17, 1945, Ocoya, Illinois

It is not known exactly when Don landed in New York but a War Department Identification Card with Don's picture on the front in uniform and his fingerprints on the back was issued on June 5, 1945. Don is listed as 6' 0" and 170 pounds and his R.A.M.P. number is imprinted below his picture.

When did Don arrive in Pontiac, Illinois, the nearest town with transportation hubs? Not quite certain but right before his death Don answered this way to a question of who was there to greet him? "Not knowing how (bus or train) or exact arrival time, Mr. McCarty, a local farmer, told my folks he would meet all buses and trains. I arrived by bus; I called the folks and they came to the station to pick me up."

Probably Don was home by June 10, 1945 plus or minus a day or two. Among family clippings this little yellowed piece of paper was found. The heading states: HONORED AT DINNER.

A family dinner was enjoyed Sunday at the home of Mr. and Mrs. R.W.E. Phillips, which not only celebrated Dad's Day, but also the return of their son, Lieut. Donald Phillips, who spent nearly two years in a German prisoner of war camp and recently returned to his home here.

All members of the family were in attendance at the dinner, they being Mr. and Mrs. Raymond Ripley, Mr. and Mrs. Edwin C. Rhoda and Mr. and Mrs. Floyd Rittenhouse, and their families, and Lieut. Donald Phillips. Miss Tillie Klein, of Pontiac, sister of Mrs. Phillips, also was present.

The people present at this dinner were Don's parents, Ralph and Amelia; Don's three sisters, Blanche Ripley, Bernice Rhoda, and Dorothy Rittenhouse; Don's three brothers-in-law (names given above); Don's maternal aunt, Tillie Klein; and Don's nieces and nephews, a total of 11 at the time. They were Jeannine, Jim, Sue, Dave, Martha, and John Rhoda; Greg, Norman, and Beth Rittenhouse; and Ray and Theresa Ripley. Don's sister Dorothy was seven months pregnant at the time with Eric who would arrive on the scene August 21, 1945.

Don was home and we can probably be 100% certain the dinner had fried chicken.

Publisher's Note

What did Don think about his POW experience? We get some indication from the piece he wrote in the 1980's, but I think Don's opinion comes close to the words expressed by Lt. General A. P. Clark a POW who later became the Superintendent of the Air Force Academy and was responsible for establishing the Stalag Luft III Collection at the Air Force Academy Library. When Clark was asked about liberation from Moosburg he said, "It was a very emotional period, especially for a few of us who had been very old prisoners. We were closely bonded, so some of most wonderful friends I've ever had came out of those camps. We stayed together and helped each other. None of us feel it was a total dead loss, the experience I mean. A lot of us learned a lot about ourselves, about our limits, and we certainly learned how to get along with other people in difficult circumstances, which is a very important lesson. So I am sure that there are many people who don't share that view. But they've disappeared. They don't come to reunions. You never hear from them. I just hope they are happy too. But I doubt whether they're as happy as we are."

What we know is Don did go to reunions and the last major trip Don took before he died was to attend the 50th Anniversary Reunion of the Former Prisoners of War of Stalag Luft III from May 11-14, 1995, in Ohio, when traveling was difficult because of treatment for colon cancer. Don died on December 29, 1995. By the time of the 60th Anniversary of liberation from POW camp, Don's POW letters had been donated to the Stalag Luft III collection. When Lt. General Clark signed his book to me, listed in For Further Exploration, he said, "Thank you for your letters of your uncle, Don Phillips and your interest in POW heritage. APClark, Lt. Gen. USAF (Ret) May 19, '05"

Don came home in 1945 to become a part of The Greatest Generation, and in his case became a good business man, a good civic leader, a good sportsman, and most important for us who knew him, a good family man. We all have our stories of how he helped and supported. Just one from my family. I can remember in the late 1950's when Don literally carried in the kitchen sink to our tenant farm house. We finally had running water, and Don, the plumbing contractor, was making sure his oldest sister and former teacher would have both hot and cold water and a life made easier by a sink and toilet. Life was never the same again for us, thank goodness.

Don would eventually have 13 nieces and nephews when Marilyn Rittenhouse was added to the group in 1948. All have special memories; all can tell stories of support through their growing up years and later.

A view into Don's adult attitude can be had from an article which was in the the Champaign, Illinois, paper, *The Daily Illini* on February 26, 1976, when Don was going to run in the 80th Boston Marathon. It was Don's fourth Boston Marathon and he was 57 at the time, having started to run regularly when he was 45. The article states, "Phillips believes that it is healthy for people to take a change of pace in their life pattern as he did when he began running seriously. 'I

like to think that I am flexible and would make further changes, but we are all Archie Bunker more than we think,' he explained. Phillips admits he started running too late in life ever to attain his full potential as a runner, but does not regret his late start. "The best way of looking at this age thing is not to say boy, I wish I were 18, but say there is a 90-year-old man somewhere out there who is saying if I were only 57, I ask myself what is it he would be doing, and I do those things."

So we come to the end of telling Don's POW story. It has been a pleasure to be a part of the telling, but it could not have been done without Don's wife, Sally, giving us all his POW materials. Cousin Greg Rittenhouse, a meticulous researcher, poured over every ounce of the story with me and together we tried to understand the circumstances when there were no words from Don. Every one of my first cousins have contributed stories and memories over the years to understanding our joint story of being with Don both before and after the war. I thank each one of them for every story told and written to me. I thank Cousin Norman Rittenhouse for preserving the picture that is on the front cover and friend Mike VanDeWalker for taking a landscape old photograph and making it a picture perfect portrait cover.

For Don's post POW life the best decision he made was to marry Sally Chiary on October 22, 1946. They celebrated 49 years of marriage and devotion. Don would not want any story about him not to end with Sally.



Theresa Ripley, publisher, and most important, niece

2012

For Further Exploration

For those that are motivated to know more about this experience, the following video and books are recommended:

Behind the Wire. Video produced by the 8th Air Force Historical Society, 1994. Excellent documentary by the men who lived through the experience.

Burton, Paul. *Escape From Terror*. Murfreesboro, AR: Looking Glass Graphics, 1995. A self-published book by the author about his war experience.

Clark, Albert P. *33 Months as a POW in Stalag Luft III*. Golden Co., Fulcrum Publishing, 2004. Excellent description of General Clark's experience who would become Superintendent of the Air Force Academy and start the Stalag Luft III collection there.

Daniel, Eugene. L. Jr. *In the Presence of Mine Enemies: An American Chaplain in World War II German Prison Camps*. Attleboro, Mass., 1985. An account written by the chaplain in Center Compound of Stalag Luft III.

Durand, Arthur A. *Stalag Luft III: The Secret Story*. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1988. A well documented account of the entire history of the Stalag Luft III, scholarly and well done.

Kimball, R. W. *Clipped Wings*. 1948. Self-published with pictures of the camp.

La Ferriere, P. & Vernon L. Burda. *Tipton's Crew*. Wilsonville, Or: Beautiful American Publishing Co., 1994. The story of one American B-24 Bomber crew which includes their time in POW camp.

O'Bannon, Robert E. *Return to Sagan*. La Mirada, Ca.: La Mirada Press, 1994. Another self-published fictionalized story of the camp.

Simmons, Kenneth W. *Kriegie*. New York, 1960. A good description of daily life in Center Compound which gives the reader a sense of what it was like in camp from the prisoner point of view. Excellent description of the March of Death in January-February 1945.

Spivey, Delmar T. Major General. *POW Odyssey: Recollections of Center Compound, Stalag Luft III and the Secret German Peace Mission in World War II*. Attleboro, Mass: Colonial Lithograph, Inc. 1984. Another self-published effort, wonderfully done, by the senior American officer in charge of Center Compound.

