

# The Sky Was Falling: Shot Down Over Europe

*This is a true experience written in 1946 by South Dakota native Terrence M. Williams. Following this episode he was a POW until he was liberated in 1945.*

BY TERRENCE M. WILLIAMS

We came out over the west side of the Cherbourg peninsula at about 500 feet. We were weaving a little and moving right along, but didn't have nearly the speed I like to have when crossing an enemy coast. I saw the tracers fan up behind us, but when we went down closer to the water, they could not find us.

We took a course to bring us to England a little east of the Isle of Wright and climbed to a thousand feet. I reminded the flight crew to check their gas and plan on landing as soon as we hit the coast, if necessary. Then we just rode along for a little while, watching the great train of ships shutting back and forth between Normandy and England, and the wave after wave of fighter-bombers sweeping towards the German lines.

This was the 13th of June, 1944. The fighting was very bad along the invasion coast, but there was not so much danger of being pushed back into the channel now, and the Luftwaffe had shown a disability or disinclination to contest the landings. The greater part of the P38s had therefore been taken away from the patrols over the shipping lanes and sent to bomb and strafe behind the lines.

I could see the English coast ahead now. A low cloud layer began about at the land, so we ducked under and began to fly very low along the rolling hills going up and down with the contour. The country was green and cool looking; every town along the way was jammed full of the vehicles of war, and long lines of trucks carrying men reached south towards the ports.

The country became more familiar as we went north. I dipped my right wing hard twice and watched the flight echelon neatly out to that side. Then I called the tower for landing instructions and turned hard to the left. We leveled out with the grey runway showing ahead and dived until we were nearly in the grass. I saw the green light as we flew down the runway, so I waited until the end

came in view and then pulled up hard to the left until the plane shuddered a little on the edge of a stall and I could see grey, then rolled out and pushed down the wheels and made a hundred adjustments and checks in the cockpit.

The green light found me again, so I slipped to the left and straightened out to hit the asphalt and bounce once and then roll straight along the left edge. My crew chief was waving his arms so I turned towards him and rolled on until he crossed his arms above his head. Then I stopped and set the brakes and cut the mixture controls. When the props stopped I cut the switches, and lifted the canopy above my head. I could feel the tiredness run from my hands through my arms and shoulders down through the stomach into the legs and feet. It was very hard to fill out the forms and explain the action to the crew chief. The parachute and dinghy felt as if they had grown to me, and the boots were heavy as lead during the slow walk into the operations building.

We got the regulation ounce of whiskey and then I got the bottle from the flight surgeon and passed it to the two men left in my flight. It was too late for another mission that day, and I did not want them to think too much now about what a plane looks like when it cartwheels into the ground and spreads a rolling path of flames and metal over a half-mile strip. We had just watched that happen to the fourth man in the flight.

We talked things over with the intelligence officer until he had a clear idea of what had happened. Then I went to talk to the crew chief of the man we had lost. That was a hard job because the crews always felt personally responsible when a pilot went down, and they sometimes worked themselves into such a guilt complex that they had to be taken off the planes entirely.

I changed clothes and went down to the mess and ate. Then we got up a card game and played and drank until eleven when I broke off and started to walk up the path towards the barracks. The air was sweet with the flowering vines that grew along the road. Above I could hear the roar of the English night bombers as they started out towards the Germans.

The Squadron Commander was still up when I got in so we had a big drink of his personal whiskey and then I went to bed.

I could hear the Intelligence Officer as soon as he came into the

other end of the building. I listened as he progressed from room to room wakening pilots, and I wondered if I was on the list for the day. He came in and switched on the light. I stared at him not feeling the light in my eyes. He said the briefing was at 6:15 and it was now 5. Then he shook me to make sure I was awake and to annoy me.

I got up and dressed and did not have enough energy to shave so I walked down through the misty rain to the mess. I was one of the first so I drank some coffee and tried to eat the heavy hot cake and went in to sit in front of the cold fire place and smoke a cigarette.

When the others were ready we all went out and climbed into the truck in the dark. I sat with one of the smaller men on my lap until we reached the briefing room. When we jumped out of the truck the cold pavement hurt our feet very much. We sat in front of the maps and watched without enthusiasm while the colonel took down the covering sheets and explained the plan of attack for the day. We were to escort the heavy bombers on a short run into Belgium and after they left to go home we were to return and strafe transportation. We took down the courses and times and then climbed back into the truck to go to the squadron ready-room to dress and wait for take-off time.

Every one of us had to go to the cold outside toilet. When that was taken care of we got into the heavy clothes. I explained some possible situations to the flight and what would be expected of each man and when they seemed confident and ready we went out and sat in the planes. It was nearly light now, and the mist had lifted so that we could see across the field.

When the watch came around to the second I started the engines and heard the lifting noise as the other planes came to life. I taxied out watching to get in the proper order and trying to see if the right planes were behind me. We lined up on the runway. The two planes ahead started off. I looked at the plane on my right wing, and nodded and opened the throttles. We lifted off well before the end of the runway, and almost immediately went into the clouds. So I went onto instruments and climbed straight ahead until we broke out on top in the brilliant sunlight.

I put on sunglasses and oxygen mask and looked around for the formation and started a climbing turn

to get into the right position. It was clear and bright as we started the long climb towards the rendezvous with the bombers, and as I watched the planes spread out on either side and the clouds beneath disappear revealing the coast of England as it merged with the blue and white of the North Sea I began to feel alive and exhilarated and I knew I would enjoy the flight until the first dogged fear struck. Maybe it wouldn't come this morning. Sometimes it started from the ground and then the entire time was a horror of fighting to keep from turning back and knowing that that was impossible. Sometimes it was high adventure.

The bombers were on course and on time, and they completed the short mission in a few minutes. We watched them cross the coast out with the flack bursting in the formations. Then we swung once across the white contrails to make sure the German fighters were not flying along them to reach the heavies. There was nothing so we started to dive shallow and fast towards the east border of Holland. Over the Zuider Zee we dropped the external tanks and prepared for strafing.

From about 15,000 feet I saw a plume of white smoke. It was behind and to the left. I called the attack and position and turned sharply to the left and steepened the dive. When the locomotive began to take shape in the gun sight I held the red dot a little high and fired a short burst. A moment later I could see the red flashes cover the front on the engine. Then, because I was much closer now, I put the dot directly on the engine and squeezed a long burst. The bullets sparked red as they covered the boiler and then it exploded in a great burst of grey steam and smoke and I could see pieces of metal above me.

I pulled up and turned a little right to pass over some high tension wires that I saw at the last minute. Then with three rapid explosions, cannon shells hit my left engine and broke the canopy and blew the instrument panel away.

Fire at once streamed back from the engine and a large section of the cowl broke off and tore back under the wing. Flames leaped up from the front of the cockpit, so I pulled back hard into a climb, and started to feather the left engine. I did not finish because right then I decided to bail out, and I hoped the two engines would hold the plane level while I left. I hoped I could find the window catch and get it down, and I reached

for the red handle above my head that released the canopy.

The glass came off with a crack like a rifle shot. Then the window was down and I jerked the safety belt release and tried to stand up. The oxygen tube held me down so I sat back and tore off my helmet and mask and glasses and stood up again. The wind caught and held me with my shoulders out and waist caught over the back edge of the cockpit. I struggled and knew then that I was going in with the plane and I knew it wouldn't hurt but would be over in a blinking flash of fire and concussion, and I steelled every nerve in my body to hold myself in for that moment. I had seen it happen like this to so many others.

The weight shifted and I slid down the back edge of the cockpit and put my hand on the ripcord. I hit the tail with both legs and my right arm and for a second was unconscious, then I threw my right arm out from the shoulder because there was no feeling in it and I did not know if I still held the ring. I saw it was still in my hand so the chute should open. Then I was out for another few seconds.

Then the very silence and peace after the roaring of the hurt engines and the flames seemed to waken me and I saw I was going to land in a plowed field. I remembered reading that you should cross your legs if you were going to land on a fence so I crossed mine, and then that seemed so silly that I uncrossed them again. I hit hard and fell backwards and my head hit the ground with a thump that I could hear but not feel. I tried to stand up, but my legs would not work, and I saw the people running towards me so I lay still. They got me out of the harness and carried me into a house nearby on a ladder covered with a blanket. The neighbors from all around came to look at me and smile in a friendly and surprised way. A little nun held me up and gave me some tea.

I knew that I was a prisoner, but I have never been so happy or so pleased with life in general as I was at that time. I looked at the trees and the grass and was as happy as a kid who is late for school just because there are so many interesting things to look at along the way. I was so happy at just being alive that when the Germans with their shaved heads and brutal faces and loud, shouting voices came blustering in waving pistols. I compared them to a grade B movie cast and smiled to myself.

## McDermott

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*It probably took about ten minutes to get the arm off and wrap the stump in a wad of cotton and a length of bandage. ...I don't know what happened to the amputated arm but I do know that my patient was totally unconscious when the job was finished... The sweat was running off me like a river, and I felt a bit queasy as I sat on my helmet and considered what I'd just done... My patient survived several days. I thought he probably died because the infection had progressed too far to stop without the massive doses of antibiotics we didn't have. That, plus his diminished physical condition, didn't allow him to survive."*

Following this, there was one rather humorous moment in another part of An Loc, again in a basement. (It should be noted that McDermott's weapon of choice, at this time, was a 12 gauge "trench gun" loaded with 00 Buck). As his two companions were clearing rooms on the ground floor:

*I saw the basement door and paused to listen for any sounds from below before I cautiously went down the steps. When I got to the bottom, I poked my shotgun around a corner and glimpsed a threatening figure moving at the end of the dim hallway. My response was immediate - I triggered off a load of 00 buckshot and quickly jerked back out of sight. The blast of the shotgun was followed by cement chips and pellets bouncing off the walls. I reached around the corner and pumped three more loads of buckshot down the hallway. There wasn't any return fire. I quickly reloaded my shotgun and knelt down to peer around the corner but couldn't see anyone on the floor. Just dust and gun*

*smoke floating in the air. I was getting ready to roll a grenade down the hall when it all began to come into a better focus. The frame of a large mirror on the far wall was smashed and knocked cockeyed. The menacing presence I'd glimpsed had disappeared with the mirror.*

A short time later, in a chapter entitled "Tanks in Town," Mike describes what it's like looking down the barrel of a Soviet made T-54.

*I must have told Colonel Ulmer I was coming to visit because I expected to find him in the South Vietnamese commanding general's bunker. So off I went down a back street in the direction of my quest. It was mid-afternoon and I was in a hurry because I wanted to get the issue settled before another night arrived. After running fifty yards or so I hunkered down in a concrete gutter to get below the level of the street. It took a couple of minutes to catch my breath while I looked around, then it was time to struggle on. I was reclining in another ditch farther down the street, peering toward the enemy part of town, when I thought I saw a building begin to shift and bulge. The structure was a couple of blocks away, and I blinked hard to clear my focus, but it still seemed to be moving.*

*Then part of the wall fell out and a tank began to appear, and suddenly it clanked out into the street in a cloud of dust and diesel exhaust. I could hear the squeal of drive sprockets and the crunch of steel treads on broken concrete. The torn-up fenders, sloppy tracks, and low silhouette of a T-54 were clearly visible. An enemy tank suddenly revealing itself was an unexpected and unwelcome surprise, and I scrunched lower in the ditch to watch the monstrous thing. I stared in disbelief as the turret swung around and the main gun came to rest aimed right down my street, seemingly directly at me. I wiggled deeper into the filth, hoping a mine*

*wouldn't explode just as a 100mm cannon shell blasted past me about head high. I was frozen in place.*

*Then it fired again and another giant shell went tearing down the street after the first one. My shotgun was badly overmatched and I was in a pickle.*

*I didn't know what he was shooting at, probably just firing blindly into the friendly part of town. For a moment, I thought he might actually be shooting at me, but that seemed preposterous. I was sure he couldn't see me down in the ditch, but lying there long enough for him to come down the street and find me didn't seem like a good idea either. Jumping up and running was an equally bad option because I knew there was a coaxial machine gun mounted in the turret pointing wherever the main gun was aimed, and at that moment it was looking in my direction. The whole event probably didn't last more than a minute or two, and it came to an end when the tank suddenly reversed back into the building in a cloud of dust. The roof on the building seemed to settle as he disappeared from view. I quickly scurried on down the street and within minutes was in the 5th ARVN Division's headquarters bunker, standing toe-to-toe with the garrison's senior American officer.*

By June, and a certain inevitability had set in and the Vietnamese Airborne Brigade was being pulled out, as was McDermott. As he put it, "Col. Taylor said my tour was up. And my orders to return to the U.S. were waiting on the personnel clerk's desk in Saigon...It was time to go."

As stated at the outset, if you want a taste of conflict as it unfolded in one Vietnamese city near the end, find a copy of "True Faith and Allegiance."


## A 17-Year-Old In The Pacific

Submitted by DeeDee Wood


Edwin M. Pugh was born June 23, 1925 in Miles City, Montana. With both his parents having passed away, at 17 he volunteered to join the Navy. He served in the South Pacific theater, mostly in New Guinea. He saw a lot of action and at just 17 years old, it was very traumatic. Like so many of the World War II veterans, he didn't talk much about his time in the war. But there was one story he liked to tell me and my siblings. It was about the time he saw enemy eyes in the jungle.

One of his duties was to check the fresh water supply which was located up on the top of a hill above the camp. It was nighttime and he had to walk up the path to the tank. He carried a flashlight and a .45 or a Tommy Gun. One night as he was heading up the hill, he saw a bunch of eyes peering out of the jungle brush. He turned his flashlight toward the eyes, but they disappeared. He continued on his way when he saw the "eyes" again. This time he didn't shine his flashlight but instead opened fire on the jungle. Everyone in camp of course heard the ruckus and prepared for battle. It was then discovered that there were tiny fluorescent flowers all along the path. Yep, my Dad killed the jungle!


To read more about Eddie's World War II adventures, please look him up on Yankton Area "World War 2 Veterans Facebook Page." Thank you Mr. Doug Haar and Mr. Dave Hosmer for putting together a wonderful tribute to the men and women who stepped up to serve our great country.



To our military men and women,  
thank you for serving  
our country and  
protecting our  
freedom.



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