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Airman was WWII POW in Romania

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I enlisted in the Army Air Corps on May 26, 1942, reporting for active duty at Fort Hayes, Columbus, Ohio, on Oct. 21, 1942. I became **Harley H. Ross**, air cadet, and was shipped by train with other new air cadets to Nashville for physical exams, immunization shots and tests to see if we were fit to become aviators. Between November 1942 and February 1943, I attended pre-flight and basic flight training. I flew my solo flight, enjoying the open cockpit biplanes we trained in. As a second lieutenant showed me what a plane could do, I got airsick, closing out my pilot training, but I talked him into writing his report so I could attend navigation school.

On Aug. 10, 1943, I was shipped to Monroe, La., for navigation school. I graduated on Dec. 4 and was appointed second lieutenant. I reported to Boise, Idaho, on the 20th for bomber training in four-engine B-24 heavy bombers.

On March 20, 1944, at midnight, my crew left Fortalaza, Brazil, for an 11-hour flight across the Atlantic to Dakar, North Africa. It was a dark, overcast night with no stars showing, so our course was based on wind speed and direction. I watched to get a star shot using my sextant to calculate our position. Suddenly there was one, but I didn't recognize it. I realized it was St. Elmo's fire - static electricity that builds up on

the pilot tube. I looked at the four props and light-blue flames were blowing back from all of them, dancing from the wing tips. Before the crew put on their parachutes and bailed out, thinking we were on fire, it went away.

We landed in San Giovanni,, Italy on March 28, where we left our B-24 and were transported by truck to a B-17 base at Foggia, Italy. On April 3, we climbed to about 25,000 feet joined by hundreds of other American planes headed for Bucharest, Hungary. Ahead of us was a black cloud that looked like a thunderstorm. As we got closer I realized it was bursts of anti-aircraft shells exploding right where we had to fly. I saw a number of our planes going down, some in flames, some out of control and some just being blown up. Parachutes floated down. By then, we had our bomb bay doors open, ready to go over the target. We dropped our bombs - 12 500-pounders from each plane.

On April 16, we headed for Ploesti, Romania, to bomb the oil fields, among the most heavily defended targets in Europe. Germany needed all the oil it could get to fuel their war machine. A plane in front of us got hit bad and the crew bailed out right in the middle of our formation - some were hit by other planes.

The April 24 mission again was the Ploesti oil fields. As we started our bomb run, the flak was extremely heavy and we lost an engine. We managed to get over the target and dropped our bombs, but we lost another engine. We were prey to the fighter planes, but managed to fight them off on the first attack. During a lull in the fighter attacks, I checked my ammo in the event I needed to use my spare case. I took the cover off just when two more fighters came in. I had to open fire. The empty shells fell down into my ammo case jamming my ammo belt and my gun stopped firing. I watched helplessly as an ME-109 came in - all guns blazing. He fish-tailed so he could rake our plane from front to rear. The pilot told us to bail out.

We were at about 20,000 feet when we bailed out and shortly

afterward, our plane exploded. I was swinging back and forth pulling the parachute lines to stop swaying, but it only made me parachute sick, so I drifted down for about 20 minutes. As I got close to the ground, I tried to get myself facing the direction I was drifting, when I hit the ground and was out like a light.

When I came to, I saw that I had landed in an orchard with cows calmly grazing and completely surrounded by soldiers and citizens. I unhooked my parachute harness and started to get to my feet, but was roughly pushed back to the ground. I tried again and again was roughly pushed down. On my third try, they allowed me to get up. Apparently no one spoke English. I indicated by sign language that I was thirsty, so one of the civilians went into a farm home and came out with a glass of water and a small foil-wrapped piece of cheese - both tasted good.

They escorted me to a small village. Along the way, we came to a flatbed truck on which was standing one of our enlisted crewmen. They hauled us into the center of the village to the town hall. Late that afternoon, they loaded us on the flatbed truck along with several guards with rifles. I had trouble walking and climbing up into the truck. The last guard handed me his rifle while he crawled up, then I handed back his gun and he helped me up.

The next day, we went farther north to a larger town to what looked like a motel. A man in civilian clothes identifying himself as a German Gestapo agent stopped by and since he spoke English, we conversed. He asked if we had had anything to eat and I said no. He asked if I had any money, so I gave him what Italian money I had. He left and returned with a bottle of wine, a loaf of bread, a chunk of barbecued beef and four mess kits from World War I.

We hadn't as yet been searched. All fliers were given two sealed packets that contained maps, several compasses, emergency rations and 48 American dollar bills. Our guards finally noticed these packets

in our coveralls and took them. There were malted milk tablets, tablets to keep you awake and something called sea marker that would make a big green circle in the water - easily seen by air-sea rescue if you had to ditch in the ocean. The guards wanted to know what all these things were so I ate one of the malted milk tablets. They thought that everything was edible and started to eat the rest of the malted milk tablets, the no-sleep pills and the green sea marker powder. I told the Gestapo man to tell them not to eat anything but the malted milk tablets, but he just let them eat whatever they had.

We stayed in the motel that night and were awakened in the morning before daylight. It was pitch dark when they escorted us to the railroad station and put us on a passenger train headed south. We saw some of the damage we'd done to the rail system. It wasn't a pleasant sight, particularly when our guards told us we had killed more than 8,000 civilians and military personnel that day.

On May 8, we were moved to the second floor of a two-story schoolhouse in downtown Bucharest. Russian prisoners with us did all the cooking - what there was to cook. In the morning, we got a piece of dark bread and burnt grain tea. At noon, we had a raw onion and a piece of bread or watery soup and bread. At night, it was a piece of bread and burnt grain tea, sometimes we also got a raw onion. On rare occasions, we were given beans and dark bread.

One day I was upstairs in our prison camp and saw a little girl, about 4 or 5 years old, get caught outside when anti-aircraft guns began to fire and flak began to drop. Because of the noise, I couldn't hear her, but I could see her little face. She was terrified and wrapped her arms around a tree. I can still see her little face ... what a terrible thing war is.

In mid-August, they brought in a group of new prisoners who were searched before joining us. Our room on the second floor was right above the table they set up to hold packets taken from each prisoner.

The Romanian officer collected money from each packet and tied it into bundles of about \$200.

Three of us leaned out a window above the table wanting to get some of that money to use for bribing guards. We took a piece of wire, formed a hook and attached string. We managed to hook into a bundle of bills right next to the elbow of the Romanian officer and began to pull it up. All of a sudden about a foot from my ear, a bullet hit the bricks. We dropped the bundle in a hurry.

About mid-August, we saw signs that something was going on. People walking around our POW camp gave us the 'V' for Victory sign. On August 28, the Romanian colonel in charge of the camp told us that Romania changed sides and we were now allies - no longer POWs. We were now in the center of a war zone being bombed by German warplanes.

On August 31, we were taken to an airfield outside Bucharest and told that the Romanians were trying to contact the 15th Air Force to get us back to Italy. They couldn't make radio contact so they took the radio out of a single seat ME-109 German fighter and our senior officer, a colonel, crawled in the radio space. They returned the panel and the plane headed for Bari, Italy. The plane with German markings on it landed without challenge at the American base in Bari before any guards noticed that a German plane had landed. The Romanian pilot threw up his hands, crawled down from his plane, took a screwdriver and removed the panel. Out came an American Air Force colonel. He contacted the headquarters of the 15th Air Force.

A number of B-17s took off for Bucharest, Romania, escorted by what looked like all the fighter planes in Italy. They landed at the field we were at outside Bucharest and we wasted no time in getting aboard. Four hours later, we landed in Italy.

We took off our lice- and flea-infested clothes, which were burned. We

took hot showers, were dusted with DDT powder and got all new clothes. We were fed a meal of turkey with all the trimmings and went to sleep that night with American Army blankets that felt like the softest wool compared to the rough horse-hair blankets in prison camp.

We spent a day at our old base, then were flown to Naples, where we boarded a passenger boat headed for New York City. About 15 days later we arrived in New York harbor - past the Statue of Liberty. We spent two days in New York before I caught a train back to Cleveland - home to my wife and son.

Editor's note: This story is part of an occasional series on World War II veterans and their families. Kate **Ross** of Middlesex edited for grammar and clarity, but these are her father's words, written a few years prior to his death at age 81. He lived in Castleton from the late 1980s until 1996, when he moved to Montpelier. He died in December 1996.

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