

## **PRISONER OF WAR STORY WILLIAM SCHLEPPEGRELL**

*The following words describe, in accurate detail, the complete events leading up to and subsequent to January 1, 1945.*

New Year's Eve in the squadron was to be a gala time for all. Someone had resurrected a small keg of French beer from heaven knows where and had placed it on the small table at the entrance to the recreation room. In the kitchen Captain Jackson, "Patsy" Pryor, Washburn and a dozen others were busy concocting a foul tasting poison, which they later presumed to call "Tom and Jerry". Major Robertson and several others including myself had hastily decorated the room on the day before Christmas, and although the decorations looked very much the worse for their week of existence, the room had a holiday atmosphere that made everyone just a trifle wistful. Over the radio a group of English choristers from the BBC were doing justice to a group of carols, and I, sitting by the warm fire in the fireplace, had just decided that there were surely a lot worse places to be sitting on New Year's Eve, when Sallo poked me and said, "Hey, Schlepp, before you go completely to sleep, let's go see who is on the morning mission."

Every evening about this time either Jackson or Holdemess would put up a schedule of pilots for the morning mission, and naturally everyone was usually quite interested in finding out if he were to get up early or if he could sleep late. This, however, was no ordinary night; this was New Year's Eve, and the 'poison' in the kitchen plus the warm French beer could easily make an ordinary pilot forget he was far from home— - IF - his name just wasn't on the list to fly in the morning. For those obvious reasons there was a big crowd around the bulletin board as each pilot searched for his name. Sallo and I pushed our way up to the front and gave the board a hasty once-over. There was Sallo's name, second on the list, and way at the bottom, number 12, was Schleppegrell.

You can believe what you wish, but I was not in the least disappointed to find my name on the list; however, I was a trifle chagrined to discover Schleppegrell was the last name on the list. That meant "Tail End Charlie" for me. It just doesn't take much calculating to see that after 11 Thunderbolts have gone down to dive-bomb a target, those old "Heinies" down on the ground firing that beautiful and vari-colored ammunition will have had a lot of practice, complete and up to date, when it comes to shooting at old Charlie-on-the-end. I had been number 12 before, however, so I thought no more about it and went to my room to write a letter before going to bed.

My Christmas parcel from home had arrived only the day before with candy, nuts, a fruit cake and books, and I had to acknowledge receipt of the package. I broke off a large hunk of the cake and munched on it, while I sat hunched over my lower bunk and wrote quite a long letter. The more I wrote the more homesick I became, however, so I hastily concluded with a "Love and kisses. Bill" and picked up my diary to make the last entry of the year. I wondered as I did so just what I would be doing at this time next year. Then I looked at my diary and noticed that I had made that same entry the year before. Dec. 31, 1943. "Wonder what I'll be doing a year from today". I decided that it was all a vicious circle, so I undressed and went to bed.

The next thing I knew there was a bright light shining in my eyes and Major Leonard, just a few days before receiving the notice he was now a Lieutenant Colonel, was saying, "Come on-Get up-we're late!" I mumbled, "Happy New year" and rolled over and then, with startling clearness, I realized what he had said and fell all over myself getting out of my "sack".

My usual dress for flying consisted of merely ordinary O.D. shirt and pants under my summer flying suit with the jacket of my winter flying suit on the outside. The cockpit of the P-47 is quite warm, however, and with all those clothes on my body. I would climb out of my plane at the end

of a mission literally covered with sweat. The day before I had vowed that, after that mission, I was going to dress lighter even if I did have to bail out in some zero weather; so I threw my O.D.s aside and put my summer flying suit over my light cotton underwear. I knew it must be getting late, so I hastily slipped on my G.I.'s, grabbed my heavy flying boots and dashed madly down the stairs. We had powdered eggs, bread and coffee as usual and had no sooner finished eating than a horn sounded out front. The truck had arrived to take us to the line. It was a very cold morning and I began to wonder if I had been very smart to wear so little; then I remembered my discomfort during the previous mission and gave the matter no more thought. Little did I realize how much comfort { would have been able to derive from those few extra clothes only two hours later.

The little town of Tantonville, France was very quiet at six in the morning with snow and cold, and the rattle of the truck echoed and reechoed up and down the narrow street as we drove along. The field was just on the edge of town and consisted of one Fighter Group with the 404th, 405th, and 406th Fighter Squadrons. My squadron was the 405th and our headquarters was on the southeast corner of the field. The briefing tent was a large double-type tent and it was toward this construction that we were being taken. Major Johnson, the group intelligence officer, was already waiting for us, so we all took seats and waited expectantly for him to begin speaking.

"Good Morning, fellows," he began in his customary manner. "This morning we have another marshaling yards to hit." We had been concentrating on targets such as this ever since the Germans had broken through far to the north in Belgium. The Battle of the Bulge! Our policy in the group was to send, for instance, the 405th Squadron on a reconnaissance flight of a certain territory. This squadron would spot movements of trains, and it was their duty to stop the train by strafing and thereby destroying the engine. That meant the remainder of the cars would be unharmed; so about an hour later the 406th squadron, which had been informed by radio of the location of the freight train, would come along and systematically destroy the freight cars by strafing. This method had been very successful in blocking and destroying the enemy's lines of transportation at a time when they needed supplies in their drive to the north. "Your target today is the marshaling yards on the east side of this little town," he pointed to a little town about 50 miles northeast of Saarbruecken, Germany [Bad Kreuznach]. "Your planes are all ready to go and loaded with 500 pounders. Take off time is 0715 and it will be a 12 ship show. Good weather over the target so you should have no trouble locating your objective. Good luck!" The room became alive with moving bodies as he left, and we all piled back on the truck, which took us to our squadron tents.

The enlisted men in the control car monotonously repeated "Runway clear" eleven times, and then I gave my T-Bolt the gun, took my position on the runway, gave it one last check to see that all was o. k., released the brakes, shoved everything forward, sped down the runway and lifted the huge monster off the ground, when it was ready to fly. Once more I gave a sigh of relief as I thought how much better it was going to be without all those heavy clothes clinging to me. It was a beautiful day and the first of the year, and as I pulled into formation, I began to think about the huge turkey dinner that would be waiting for us when we returned.

Forty minutes later number one was on his run. There spread out below us was a nice little marshaling yards with a train puffing clouds of steam high in the air. Circling around waiting for my turn I was fascinated by the swelling billowy cloud from the burning buildings; then became even more fascinated by the little puffs of smoke, which came closer and closer to our planes.

"FLAK!" someone screamed wildly over the radio, and even though I had already begun to weave back and forth, I was as startled as if I hadn't even seen the stuff. Yellow one had gone down on the target. He was my flight leader. The four of us were Yellow Flight and I was Yellow

four. The flak was getting worse by the second, but down below me on the ground, nine thousand feet below, fires had broken out all over and it was plain to see that everyone was doing a good job in their bombing. There went Yellow three. I waited till he was releasing his bombs and was ready to pull up. Then I rolled over on my back and went screaming down on the train. Archie, Yellow three, number eleven, had not yet pulled out of his dive, but as I hit four thousand feet, he pulled out and went soaring back up to altitude. I lined up the train's engine in my gunsight and released my bombs. I pulled back on the stick and at the same instant felt a sickening thud and smelled powder in the cockpit.

With startling clearness I realized I had been hit in the engine, somewhere. My engine coughed a few times and resumed its steady purr. On both sides of me puffs of smoke told me that they were still after me. I eased the ship into a slight bank and saw by the altimeter that I had attained 2000 feet of altitude. With relief I saw that those dangerous smoke balls were missing me by some distance.

I pressed the mike button and, in as calm a voice as possible under those circumstances, I began, "Red leader, this is Yellow four. I have been hit somewhere in the engine. All my instruments check and the engine seems to be running smoothly, but I am taking up a course of 270." (That was the compass heading to get back to our base at Tantonville. I waited what seemed an eternity before the answer came to proceed home. My engine sputtered, coughed, and then again resumed its steady purr. I hastily rechecked the instruments and realized that they were still registering normal.

"Yellow four, this is Yellow three on your left wing, taking you home." [Lt. Eliel Archilla]. "Roger, Yellow three, thanks." I glanced over my shoulder and saw a mass of flames and smoke in the marshaling yards now far behind. I was just going to tell Yellow three that everything was still all right, when I saw smoke coming from the engine and thin droplets of oil started spreading over my windshield. I knew then that my oil line had been hit and that it would only be a short time before the engine gave out. It was coughing and sputtering again and I glanced over the side to see if there was any place nearby to make a forced landing, it was all hilly country, but then I remembered that I was still over enemy territory. It was Germany, so it wouldn't make any difference. I couldn't land the plane to hand the enemy a complete P-47 Thunderbolt!

It was then I decided to bail out if my engine completely gave out. Now the home station began calling me. "Discharge 74, you are fifty miles north of Saarbruecken. Bandits, about thirty, reported twenty miles north of Saarbrucken." I had gained a little altitude and was rushing along at 4500 feet indicated, at 150 miles per hour, close to stalling out! I lowered the nose and increased my speed to 160 even though I had to lose altitude in the process.

I thought, "Oh, no, this can't be happening to me." The next instant everything happened - my engine gave one last little brave surge and quit - the home station began calling to tell me I was just 25 miles north of Saarbrucken and to keep an eye out for bandits - about 30 Me-109's to my left - the Red leader cut in to ask how I was getting along-and here I was trying to get on the radio to tell them I was going to bail out. Finally in desperation I cut in and told Yellow three that I was going to bail out.

I unfastened my safety belt and shoulder straps, glanced at the instrument board to see that I was doing 140 miles at 2500 feet, and was just going to tear off my headset. I had already slid the canopy open, when I heard Yellow Three [Lt. Eliel Archilla] tell the Red leader that I was going to crash land. That made me mad, because I wanted them to know that I was bailing out so they would know I wasn't hurt in a crash landing. I sat back in the seat, pressed the mike button and told them that I was not going to crash land. I was going to bail out., so long as I was over enemy territory. I gave one final glance at my altitude, saw it was 1,500 feet, tore my

head set off (I knew I had no time to lose) said "God help me" und my breath and dived over the side.

I knew I couldn't wait to count the customary ten before pulling the ripcord, because the ground was too close, so I pulled the cord, reflected immediately that I WAS still quite far up, saw my new plane crash into the side of the hill and explode with a dazzling flame, looked over the countryside and then saw the green of trees and struck the ground with a thud. Everything had happened so fast that I just lay where I was and tried to catch my breath.. My head hurt and I had sprained my leg in the fall. My flying suit was torn from the knee down, so I ripped the dangling piece of cloth off and put it in my good pocket. All of a sudden I was cold.

The sun was shining and the sky was blue. The ground had afresh layer of snow on it and a sharp, penetrating wind whistled around me, but it was more than this that caused me to shiver. I was scared, shivering scared, my teeth chattered and millions of crazy ideas soared through my mind. I swiftly glanced around expecting to be surrounded by armed guards. I saw no one, however, and regained a little of my composure. I had landed in a field, which had never been plowed, and there were pine trees or firs on all sides of it.

Hurriedly I ripped off my chute and hobbled over to a little country road nearby.. I had landed in a field with pine trees or firs on all sides. I gained the road and looked right and left, then saw a bicycle coming, not far distant. He had seen me, but I decided not to run and cause suspicion, so walked up the road toward him, trying to pretend that I knew where I was going and hoping he would pass me by. I guess I really did have the idea that if I headed toward the southwest I could somehow get through the front lines and back into friendly territory. Now, looking back, I believe I must have been pretty much out of it to think I could somehow walk back to my base!

I must have been quite a spectacle, no hat on my head and no gloves on my hands or overshoes on my feet, with one bare leg, where I had tommy pants. I realized later I was also bleeding from hitting my head on the canopy as I was leaving the plane and I was favoring one leg over the other from the parachute landing. Not realizing or caring just what I looked like at the moment, I continued to walk right down the road towards him. From the way he looked at me as he rode past me, I could tell he knew what I must be. I couldn't help looking around and I saw he had stopped his bicycle. I continued walking as fast as I could, when he began yelling at the top of his voice. I just kept walking, thinking that when I reached the turn in the road I would run.

Then around the comer ahead of me came a motorcycle with two soldiers of the Wehrmacht. The one in back drew his luger and shouted for me to halt, although he might just as well saved his breath. I was reaching for the sky by that time. Then they asked me in German, where I had come from, meaning where I had landed. I refused to answer so they made me sit in the sidecar of the cycle and we returned to the place where I had left my chute. I was forced to gather it up and hold it on my lap until we arrived in the next little town.

One of the soldiers went into a house, (evidently to telephone), the other one and I waited. Out of nowhere civilians began to appear and to crowd around me. One little girl even spoke to me in English. They were not at all unfriendly and I began to regain some of my senses.