

My Last Combat Mission

Home Alive in '45

By

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I was lying on my cot thinking of home when outside I heard an airman, no doubt feeling the lift he got from too much mild or bitter, walking down the Company Street shooting his 45 Colt at the stove pipe chimneys on the tents and shouting "Home Alive in '45". Two days later all airmen had to check their sidearms into ordinance.

April 20, 1945

At Operations we are in the briefing room being briefed for a trip to Norway to make a drop to the underground. This was to be my last mission.¹ Today is Alice's and my second anniversary. We take off around 1900 hours. My regular crew was not flying and I had volunteered to go on this mission so that I could go home.

We hit the coast of Norway right around midnight flying low altitude around 800 feet to avoid radar detection. We were picked up immediately by German night fighters, two JU-88s.² We were hit hard on the first pass. We then flew out over the sea, jettisoned the drop load and came back over the coast right over a German gun battery. They cut loose with ack ack but didn't connect, but our encounter with the fighters was more than the old B-24 could handle.³ We had one runaway engine and one with severe oil pressure drop. Lt Keeney rang the bailout bell; so that was that. Hit the silk! Our altitude at bailout was about 500 feet. I had made three previous jumps so it was no new experience for me.⁴ I finally convinced the tail gunner to jump, sat down in the camera hatch,

¹ The requirement for stateside rotation was 30 missions; this was his 30th.

² The debriefing of Lt Devine, navigator states a single attacking plane was an ME-110.

³ Email from Ivar Kragland of Norway's Resistance Museum to Ron Maassen states that the plane received fatal antiaircraft damage at Rakke near Larvik and crashed at Halle in Brunlanes.

⁴ On the typical Carpetbagger crew only the dispatcher had attended jump school, for the others this was quite likely their first jump.

looked down, saw a plowed field, and bailed out. I had just cleared the plane and got my chute open when the plane crashed and burned about a mile from me. At that time I was 50 feet above the ground. I made a soft landing in the plowed field. I buried my chute, Mae West (flotation device), looked toward the burning plane, did an about face and started to walk. Oh, yes, it was 12:24 am April 21.⁵

There was a road on my right. I did not follow the road as we had been briefed not to travel on roads, but to stay to the woods as the Germans avoided the woods due to the Norwegian Resistance. I walked until daylight and I came to a farm. As it was getting daylight I took refuge in a sheep barn. All of a sudden I heard a neighbor dog barking. I looked to see if I could see anything in the direction that the dog was barking, I then saw someone run out of the house to the middle of a hayfield. He stopped and picked up a big white object, which I knew right away, was a parachute. So I figured that one of the crew must be in that farmhouse. I left the barn, went into the woods, and walked toward that farm. Before I got close to the farm I walked out of the woods and right up to the farmhouse and rapped on the door. Lady luck, or mostly the Good Lord, was with me as a member of the Norwegian Resistance lived there. The radio operator was in the house. It was his parachute that the man had picked up. He then took us up in the woods and told us not to be afraid, as the Germans would not go in the woods in a small patrol because if they did the Resistance would take good care of them. That night two Resistance members came with some clothes, the type worn by Norwegian fishermen. The shoes had hobnails in the soles.

I forgot to say that at the farmhouse the radio operator (his name I forgot) was there with a badly sprained back.⁶ Caused by the bombardier,⁷ who must have been a real hot dog cause when it came time to bail out he couldn't find his chute. I saw him throw it in by the auxiliary power plant when we boarded the plane. He tried to hang onto the radio operator but the sudden jolt from the chute opening broke his hold and he had a free fall to the ground and was killed. It was his own fault because he didn't take care of his own chute.

They then took us right into Larvik and put us way up in the steeple of a church.⁸ The church was located right in Larvik and surrounded by a 40-millimeter gun battery. We stayed in the steeple for three nights and two days. On a couple of occasions we could hear peoples voices (in German) in the church below us. They never came up to the steeple though. I think that it was so close to the end of the war that they were just waiting for it, else they would have searched the whole church. Near the end of the

⁵ In another account he states, "When on the ground I looked up and saw a parachute drifting down, it was the pilot as he was the last out. I could see the reflected light of the burning plane in the chute. The pilot landed damn close to the plane."

⁶ The radio operator was Hubert A. Brabec of Bridger, Montana. He states in a questionnaire relating to Marangas death that Marangas had misplaced his parachute, bailed out with Brabec, and the jerk of the chute opening tore him free. Brabec stated that he passed out from the injury to his back.

⁷ The man in question was 1st Lt. Stephan J. Marangas (0773413), who is variously listed as the Radar Operator, Mickey Operator, or Radar-Bomb.

⁸ The website <http://www.b24.no> reports that this was Tanum church. A photo is at the website.

second day we heard a loud clumping up the stairway. We thought for sure it was the Germans, but to our relief it was the Norwegian Resistance.

Then the Resistance took us to a cabin on one of the fjords. They took us in the middle of the day in a car, a 39 or 40 Chevy. We passed German soldiers enroute. The Resistance personnel escorting us were armed (not visibly) and as we drove I noticed them giving small but different signs to pedestrians and cyclists who were positioned strategically along the route. I learned later when we were in the cabin that they, the Resistance, were prepared for combat with the Germans if necessary. Thank God it wasn't necessary.

The cabin windows were boarded up and were blacked out so that no light was visible from the outside and noise was kept to a minimum. When we got to the cabin we were reunited with the co-pilot, the flight engineer and the bombardier. The next day we left the cabin still dressed as fishermen and headed for Goteborg, Sweden⁹ in an open boat about 20 feet long. It took us 7 hours to cross the Skagerrak between Norway and Sweden. It was a mostly uneventful trip, but the sea was rough. The little one lung engine would labor as we mounted each wave and raced as went down the other side. We were all hunched down in the boat except the skipper, who sat in the back, hands on the tiller and never batted an eye when the cold water hit him in the face.¹⁰ When we landed we were taken to the railway station enroute to Stockholm, Sweden.

When we arrived in Stockholm we were met by a member from the American Consulate. We were told we would be able to identify him because he would be carrying a carton of Lucky Strike cigarettes under his arm. He was and he took us to the American Embassy. The next day a member from the consulate took us down to the Nordiska Company and outfitted us with a complete wardrobe; rain and shine coat, shoes, dress slacks, sweater, wool sports coat, socks and silk shorts and undershirts. They gave us each around \$750.00 per diem. Then they told us that we were on our own. They did take us back to the hotel. We each had all that money so we left the hotel and got ourselves an apartment, maid and all. Then in our sporty new duds we went out on the town.

We left Stockholm aboard an army transport plane, a C-54 I believe, for Prestwick, Scotland. There we boarded an Army Air Force C-47 for London. The base at London was socked in with fog; so we had to return to Prestwick and were to board a train for London. While waiting at the station for the train I can remember a 1st Lt walking nervously around the platform. Some one asked him why he was so nervous. He said, "I am on my way home. I have a baby that I haven't seen." A weathered old Major said, "Hell, I don't know why you are nervous, I've got two that I haven't seen."

⁹ The boat traveled from near Larvik, Norway to Stromstad, Sweden. The men then went by rail to Goteborg and on to Stockholm.

¹⁰ It is reported on the website <http://www.B-24.no> that, "Returning from the last trip the boat disappeared due to bad weather and the crew has never been seen again".

Nothing exciting happened on the train trip to London. The Germans had surrendered, in Europe the war was over. I got a pass to go to our base at Harrington to pick up my personal effects, which by the way were still at the base. I got to celebrate V.E. day in Leicester, England with my old buddies. I was the envy of all; in sport clothes and carrying a special pass stating the reason why I was out of uniform. The next day I went to London and a few days later boarded the General Wm. M. Black for Boston. I got to Boston eleven days later. I got a 65-day furlough and was to report to Miami Beach for rest and rehabilitation. Alice accompanied me at Uncle Sam's expense. We drove down to Miami and spent 10 days at the Claridge Hotel on Miami Beach. I was de-briefed and classified for military discharge. At that time you needed 124 points to be discharged, I had 157. The guy in front of me had only 120 so was re-assigned for duty in the South Pacific, but that also ended in two weeks. From Miami we went to Fort Mc McClellan, Alabama. From there I went to Camp McCoy, Wisconsin and was a civilian again on 04 Sept 1945. 4 years-4 months-4 days.

So as the airman celebrating New Years Eve said, "Home Alive in 45", did come to be.

The preceding information was compiled by Ronald R. Maassen from two separate accounts of the crash of the aircraft Tiger's Revenge. Both accounts were hand written by Ralph L. Maassen. The version containing the most detail of specific events has been incorporated in this compilation. A minimal amount of personal information has been deleted. Footnoted information has been added as amplification or where conflicting data is reported elsewhere.