

A Letter home

August 22, 1944

Bill Chapman, the son of Foster Chapman, shared this letter, written by his father, with us. Foster was the radio operator on Ken Muse's 830th Squadron crew. This crew was an early replacement crew in the 485th Bomb Group. It's amazing this letter made it through censorship, but we're glad the censor was a little lax on this date. It provides rare insight into the thoughts of an airman who had just returned from a mission to one of the most feared and heavily defended targets in Europe - Vienna. The letter was written just a few hours after the crews returned, when the memories were fresh.

On this mission the target was oil storage tanks. Of the 25 planes that made it to the target, 14 were damaged. One crew bailed out over Yugoslavia and two planes landed on the island of Vis. 22 planes landed safely back at Venosa. Chapman's crew was one of these.

August 22nd 6:00 PM

My Dearest Family;

This is my second letter to you today, but I had to throw the first one away. It was such a mess that I couldn't even read it - guess I was too nervous. It is only God's will and the skill of a very wonderful pilot, that any of my crew are back here tonight. You always tell me that you want to know the details so I will tell you about it.

As you might have guessed, we hit Vienna again, it gets worse every time we go back there. Today we flew "Deputy Lead"; this ship takes over the leading of the group in the event the "Primary Lead" ship should go down. Lead and deputy lead are always "Pathfinder"; that's the ship that has all the radar equipment for bombing through clouds etc. They cost nearly a half million dollars. The deputy lead Radio Operator takes care of all the communications for the entire group and it has a special radio room built into the top part of the rear bomb bay, it's about six-foot square.

Well we got to the target and the flak was heavier and more accurate than it has ever been before. It was terrible. The sky was absolutely black and B-24s were going down all over, exploding, burning and just spinning. The sky around us was a mass of flames, black smoke and falling debris. I was in this little radio compartment with the door shut, so that I could concentrate on my work. The ship was rocking and pitching violently due to the flak and I could hear it pounding on the sides of the ship. I saw a B-24 going down so jumped up to try to get the number on it. Just as I left my stool, there was a terrific noise in my compartment that left me deaf for a few seconds, I turned around and right where my head would have been, had I been sitting down, was a five inch hole in one side of the ship and out the other. If I hadn't stood up just a few seconds before that, I wouldn't be here now.

By this time the flak guns had our range perfectly and I saw huge holes blossoming all over the left wing. Finally, I heard the call "BOMBS AWAY". Those were wonderful words, as I was riding right on top of the bomb load. It wasn't but a few seconds after "BOMBS AWAY" our ship gave a terrible lurch, shot straight up in the air and then fell off on the left wing, headed straight for the ground, right over the target. I had just sent the bombs away message back to headquarters when we went into the dive so I started right out of the compartment. You have to go out through a little door on your hands and knees. I had my chute on and, with the ship in a straight dive, I was trying to climb uphill. One of the waist guns tore loose from its mount and headed to the rear of the ship just missing Kozak (Editor's note: Casmir Kozak was the tail gunner), who was standing by the escape hatch, then the ship started to spin, a long "flat" spin. Stuff ammunition, radio tuning units, extra flak suites, headsets and everything was flying all over the ship. I had my helmet on and the strap buckled, it was ripped right off my head by the centrifugal force. Everyone was thrown to the floor and banged up against the side of the ship and our headsets were torn loose from their connections so no one could hear directions for bailing out. There wasn't any time for directions, we were just waiting for the (warning) bell to ring, it seemed like an eternity, but it all happened in just a few seconds.

Kozak had the escape hatch in the floor open and we were going to bail out without waiting for the bell; just then the ship went into a long glide and leveled off. All of this time, of course, we were in a terrific flak barrage and all by ourselves. The formation was way ahead and we had lost over three thousand feet in the spin. We all got to our feet, not knowing what to expect next. Finally, we had gotten out of the range of the flak guns.

We looked out the window and saw the cause of the spin; both of our aileron controls had been shot away and they were just hanging there. They are the controls that run along the trailing edge of the wing. We were still at 18,000 feet and our oxygen masks had all been torn off and we were all very weak. Some of us found our masks, but others had been thrown out the window in the spin so we had to drop down to 12000 feet. It was a miracle there were no enemy fighters around. We would have been shot out of the sky. Ammunition belts were all broken and lying all over the ship. I evidently got hit in the face by something, as I have a cut lip, and I chipped one of my front teeth; I don't know when it happened. Lt. Muse truly saved our lives today.

We were still deep in enemy territory and had plenty to worry about. We started to prepare the ship for a crash landing, throwing out all the radar equipment (\$10,000 worth), all the ammunition, the other waist gun and everything that was loose in the ship. If you crash land at 140 MPH this stuff will do a lot of damage. I never saw such a beautiful job of flying. Lt. Muse is really a born Pilot. Our A-5 (Automatic Pilot) was damaged and so he did most of the flying with elevators and rudders. We crossed the Adriatic and back to friendly territory - then came the landing.

Several planes had seen us spinning down over the target so thought we were lost. I radioed the field and told them the trouble. They had their ambulances standing by, the fire department and the crash trucks. We took off most of our clothes, rolled them into big bundles to make pads with, then sat on the floor with our legs around one another and braced ourselves. We were all

afraid we would run off the “runway” - the runways are bad enough as it is, being just metal strips that lock together. We hit very hard and bounced, then we hit again and rolled smoothly along - we had made it. There were all of two hundred men waiting at the “hard stand” (parking place) when we taxied over there. I jumped out of the waist window, got down on my hands and knees and kissed good old Mother Earth. All of the fellows were shaking hands with us and all the high-ranking officers of the field were there. Truly Mother and Daddy, I never thought I would be back home. I think I took twenty years off my life today, as did all of us. Well, that was today’s mission, a double (Editor’s note: “double” means the crew got credit for two missions) thank God. That gives me twenty-nine now and I hope we never see another one like that. We had over seventy flak holes.

Now for the nice things, I had a very nice letter from you, Mother dear, and two from Janet, finally. She had gone to Lake Milacs for a few days. That picture of Jeanne is so beautiful and she looks wonderful in it. The doggies were swell too. Well, guess I had better close. The other fellows are sleeping, believe I will do that soon. Hope you’re all fine, I feel ok, except for being terribly on edge. Good night for now.

Your loving son and brother,

“Junie”