

Air Force Odyssey Before Flying B-17s

In the words of B-17 Pilot Keith E. Harris (1919-1980)

Transcribed from cassette tape by Linda Harris

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I WAS BORN ON OCTOBER 13, 1919, which would have made me 21 years old on the 13th of October in 1940. When the draft was originally proposed, the signup was for young men who would be 21 by about the 10th of October or September, something like that, in 1940, which would have excluded me. However, along about July or August of 1940, this was changed to include anyone that would be 21 years old by the 20th of October or some such date, which would have included me in the draft. Therefore, I decided to enlist in the Air Force rather than getting drafted in the Army.

Along about September 20, I went up to Aurora and talked to the folks there. They said that they had a place for me--I guess they always do. And then about the 25th of September in 1940, I went to Chicago and took the oath in the evening, and we were put on an Illinois Central train and sent to Chanute Field in Rantoul, Illinois. We got there sometime after midnight on the morning of the 26th, I believe, of September, and they issued us a pillow without any pillow cover and two blankets, and indicated we should spend the rest of the night in a six-man tent, which there were several of at Chanute Field at that time.

It was cold. Oh, it was awful cold. We had this pillow with no pillowcase and one blanket under us and one blanket over us and left most of our clothes on, and we got up in the morning and it was really cold.

They didn't have any basic training for us there at all; they just kind of moved us around to the different medical briefings and things like that. We took our shots and, oh, nothing actually much happened for about two or three weeks. We just stayed in the tents. A few odd things happened, like a couple of the tents would catch fire from the stove in the center. Our tent didn't have a stove, so we didn't have to worry about that, but there was always a little excitement when a tent caught on fire; they were pretty close together. Some of them I seriously think were arson or just something to do.

Along about October, why, I had applied for Link Trainer school, and it didn't start until January sometime. Maybe it was December; I don't know. Anyway, in the meantime they put me on to work with the fire marshal on Chanute Field, and I just can't remember his name. But there were a couple of others in the same group. One of them was named Eates, and the other was Connor, and we'd go over to the fire department every morning after we got done eating breakfast, sit around there and, oh, polish the trucks or go around and check the fire hydrants and see if the water hadn't leaked up near the top so they'd freeze. It was getting along toward winter and it was pretty nasty. Wasn't a bad job, though; I really enjoyed it. And the fire chief, I can't think of his name now, but he was a real nice old civilian, and he took good care of the firehouse. Of course, we didn't go on fire calls. We were just kind of slaves around the house.

And then about December, well let's see, I came home on the day before Labor Day, no, not Labor Day, Armistice Day, in 1940, and I hitchhiked back--oh, it was about 140 miles, I guess, 120 maybe. And on the way back, I was riding with a fellow and a storm came up, and the wind blew, and we were heading south on Rt. 47 and his hood came unhooked at the front end. It was an old Mercury, and it just came up and just covered up the windshield completely, and he ran off on the right-hand side of the road and got it stopped--didn't hit anything--and we got out and wired it down and went on.

We got back to Chanute and they just moved us in the barracks, and it really snowed--this was the 11th of November, 1940. Really, really was a bad day; cold and snow, and the wind blew out of the northwest, blew about half of the tents away, and there were fellows from the tents moving in and doubling up in the barracks, and we considered ourselves lucky to already have been assigned to a barracks. Of course we didn't know that in less than a month there'd be measles and scarlet fever and just about everything breaking out, and when that happened in a barracks, this barracks was quarantined, and that would last all the way from 48 hours to five or six days.

I finally started Link Trainer school, and we went from 6:00 in the morning until noon each day, and we'd have to get up before 5:00, clean up and make our beds, get breakfast and go to school. It was a good school--they had about six or eight Link Trainers and good instructors and we really enjoyed it. But training sessions were broken about three times by measles or scarlet fever, or something, and they dropped us back a part of a class once, and then we went at night for a while to catch up. And finally the first of April, around the first of April, in 1941 we graduated, and then we had about a week before they knew where we were going, and this was anxiously awaited, of course, by all the graduates.

And while we were waiting, they had to think of something else for us to do, and that was when I caught my KP; I had about three or four days in a row, or else I'd get theater guard--that was the best. You'd go stand by the door and see that they didn't block the aisles, and you got to watch the movie. But KP was rough. We'd go real early in the morning and we'd stay till all the way from 5:00 till 8:00 at night. I remember one day I cut over 4,000 pieces of cake in these large Army bake tins--they must have been about 24 inches wide and about 32 or 38 inches long. Had to cut 'em four one way and seven the other. I figured out it was over 4,000 pieces of cake I cut. Of course, that wasn't a hard job, but it was kind of monotonous.

And then, about the 10th of April I got my orders: 24th Air Base, Anchorage, Alaska. And the other two fellows that I chummed around with, one or them got sent to Alaska with me, and the other one got sent to Philippine Islands, Clark Field. I never heard how he made out after the Japanese invasion and capture of all those people who weren't killed, so I never did find out how or if he survived.

I was home [a farm five miles east of Earlville, Illinois] about the 10th of April for about a week, and I just fiddled around. They were starting to farm. Then on the 18th, of course, I got married; that was a big day. And on about the 21st or so, I got on a bus in Earlville, went to Chicago, and took another bus to New York City and went on the turnpike then--the Pennsylvania Turnpike was just new--and when we got to New York; I was stationed at the Brooklyn Army Base for a couple of weeks, I guess, and we just had clean-up details and KP and odd jobs like that, and at night

we'd practically always go downtown, get on the subway, and go down to Manhattan Island and go to a show.

One day I rode the subway all day long for a nickel. Those were the days you could put a nickel in the turnstile and get in, and as long as you stayed and didn't change trains or anything like that, why, you could. So I took this nickel (and I had 20 cents left, I think, out of my paycheck) and stuck it in the turnstile and got on the subway, and I had a sandwich and an apple and I stayed on all day long. I think it was about 9:00 at night I got off, and I had gone clear up, way up past Harlem and out to Queens and out to LaGuardia Field and down to Coney Island, and just riding all day long. It was real interesting--I saw a lot of interesting sites. Go across the Brooklyn Bridge three or four times and up across the George Washington Bridge once. I suppose I probably went 200 miles all for a nickel. And, of course, we visited the Statue of Liberty, went up in the Empire State Building, did a little shopping, and took the Staten Island Ferry; that was another nickel ride--seemed to be well worth it. It took about 20 minutes each way, I guess, and was pretty good-sized boat.

And finally they ordered us up from Brooklyn up to Ft. Slocum; it's an island, small island off New Rochelle, New York--I guess it is New Rochelle, NY--and it was rough. They had us doing something all the time. They'd make us get a haircut if we hadn't had one for two or three days. There was a bunch of old lieutenant colonels over there in charge of the island, I guess, and they'd just stand around and look for you to do something wrong and then they would immediately relay it down to you through the sergeants in no uncertain terms. We'd pick up paper on the parade ground, and we'd rake leaves, and just all the time--we were busy all the time at Ft. Slocum there, and everybody just hated it, and it was pretty hot--this was in June, I think.

Well, I think the colonel saw that we were all draftees and he had a strong dislike for us because draftees were coming in then and, just like draftees have always done, I suppose, they didn't really seem to fit into the colonel's idea of an ideal military life. And then about the latter part of June we got on a special train, must have been a hundred of us, an engine, three cars, and a baggage car, and we got on the train at New Rochelle and we took off for San Francisco.

See, at the Brooklyn Army base, they were going to take us around through the Panama Canal to Alaska, but when we got up to Ft. [?], well they decided they weren't going to do that anymore, so they took us to Ft. Slocum and from there we got on this train, and it went day and night steady. I don't know, it took us about three days, I guess, two-and-a-half days, it was a real fast train. Going through Texas some of the track was washed out and we had to go real slow. It was pretty monotonous. Nothing to do on the train, of course, just eat and sleep, read, tell stories. We got to San Francisco in the middle of June.

The sergeant who was in charge gave us a big briefing talk when we got off the train, and we went to Angel Island. We got off the train, oh I guess it was Oakland, no it was actually in San Francisco. Then we went down to the foot of the Van Ness Street and we got on a ferry, and it took us right past Alcatraz Island, and we went past this a little further out into the bay, and here is Angel Island, about three miles, I suppose, in diameter. It's got a mountain in the center about a thousand feet or so.

There's an Army barracks there, and that was almost as bad as Fort Slocum. We did KP there; we'd start at 4:00 in the morning, and after KP why they'd find something

else for you to do, too, and they had real tough sergeants there. It was a real poor place to be. Nobody enjoyed themselves. The only thing that was good was they had free movies and Sunday you could get off and we had a ball team. Some of the other fellows and I walked around the island one Sunday; it was about, oh, I don't know, three or four miles, I guess, around the island, and then we climbed up to the peak, looked around, watched a China clipper, the flying boat, take off for China. This was in the latter part of June, 1941.

We could see both bridges from Angel Island and the skyline of San Francisco, and of course they'd let us go about once a week, or sometimes twice a week they'd let us take the ferry over to the mainland of San Francisco, and that was always interesting, going to see some of the sites in San Francisco.

And then, about the 20th of June or 25th, something like that, we got on the U.S. Grant, a troop ship, long and narrow, and we started for Seattle. And that took about a day and a half, I guess, and it really rolled. We got out, went underneath the Golden Gate Bridge and turned right and started up the coast, and we stopped in Astoria, Oregon. I don't know what they stopped for, but we went in there and they let us off the boat for awhile and we walked around town, but there wasn't much to see in '41, so we came back and got on the boat.

That night we sailed again, or no, I guess it was the next morning, and we got out to the--they had a pilot aboard, looked like he was 70 years old--we got out to the ocean from Astoria (well, it is the end of the Columbia River there, I guess), and the waves were really high. We were on the U.S. Grant. Out where we hit the ocean, there was a fellow in a rowboat, and the waves were at least 30 feet high, and this 70-year-old pilot--they stopped the ship. The boy in the rowboat came rowing up alongside and actually the water went up and down the side of the General Grant at least 30 feet--at least--and this old 70-year-old man went down the ladder on the side of the ship a little ways and this rowboat would go up and down, up and down, and then finally he stood there and held on with one hand and one foot, and when the rowboat was just in the right place and came up the side of the ship, he just dropped into it--and that would make anybody gray.

Let's see, the next morning we went in the Strait of Juan de Fuca, or whatever they call it, went past Port Angeles, and Whidby Island, headed for Seattle. And at Seattle we were unloaded and sent up to Fort Blunt--that was an old Army post up in the north edge of Seattle, right on Puget Sound. We stayed there for quite awhile. We'd go down to Seattle; I think it was about four or five miles. I know I walked down one Sunday, down to the USO or YMCA or something, some kind of a thing they had for servicemen, played pool, things like that.

Seattle was pretty dirty--I suppose it just wasn't a very clean looking town. Fort Lawton wasn't too bad--they didn't work us too hard and we had a few odd jobs, but nothing that was really hard work. Moved a piano for a colonel once and helped mow the lawn, picked things up, moved things around. Spent the Fourth of July, 1941, in Fort Lawton, Washington, and had the day off, of course. We just walked around and looked at the sights and took pictures.

Then about the 6th or 7th of July, we went to Seattle and got on a little boat called the Clevedon--I think it was an Italian ship that was captured during World War I, a motor ship, 260 feet or something like that, and there were about 14 of us Air Force men on it and that was all, in addition to the crew. We took off for Seward, Alaska.

Clevedon rode pretty rough, although the water wasn't too bad that time, and we got to Seward one morning real early, went in. Real early in the morning we saw the rocks out at the opening to the bay, and it was foggy and looked terrible. This was in the middle of July 1941. We landed at Seward, and they just had one wharf there and a great big building alongside of it, and they just pulled up and tied it up and we all jumped off and went inside the building, stood around.

Pretty soon they said, "Well, we are going up to Anchorage by train." There are mountains all around Seward. Just west of Seward there is a mountain that goes up about 45 degrees, all covered with trees, and I suppose it goes up 2,000 feet anyway. Anyway, it looked dangerous. Looked like the snow might fall... I suppose the snow might have slid off if it hadn't been for the trees. Seward was a real small town. I suppose it was, oh, maybe 2,000. All wooden buildings. They'd had several severe fires, disastrous fires.

We got on this little train--it was pulled by a steam engine, and had about two cars, and we started up the mountain. We went past a glacier on the way to Anchorage, and it was ice and snow all around, right in July, on the mountains. The train went about 15 miles an hour, made a couple complete circles, crossed over itself, and then we got to the edge of the Cook Inlet, went across a bridge and got over on the Anchorage side of the Cook Inlet, went right along the side of the mountain. Even the waterfalls coming down sometimes would splash in the window on the train, you know, would splatter in.

And we came to the end--we could see the end of the mountains up ahead, and we came to the end of the mountains (they were on our right) and there was a field and there was a fellow with a Fordson tractor out there plowing and I just about fell out of the train; I thought everything would be pretty primitive, but he had a pretty good size field he was plowing--I don't know whether he was going to plant it at that time of year. Anyway, he was plowing it.

We went on into Anchorage (I suppose it was probably a town of three or four thousand), got off the train, and they put us on Army trucks and out to Elmendorf Field. Elmendorf Field was the main base there, and right alongside of Elmendorf was Fort Richardson, the Army base. And we got assigned to the 24th Air Base Unit, met the fellows, and got introduced all around and assigned to a barracks, went and ate supper.

Next morning, we went to the usual briefing, and they said they had too many Link Trainer instructors for the machines--they only had one machine, one Link Trainer, and there were about five of us available to operate it, and three would have been the most they could possibly use. And by very judicious management, we were able to all be retained as Link Trainer instructors and we worked short hours. Link training was at the top story of a two-story combined hangar and maintenance shop, and they were just building the rest of the main part of Elmendorf Field then.

And while we were giving training, I experienced my first earthquake there on the top floor. I was operating the machine, the Link Trainer, and sitting at the table, and I felt the desk start to shake, and I started to get up and I kind of wobbled around. I sat down real quick and the dust rose up from the floor and the windows rattled and the Link Trainer was tipping one way or the other. The lieutenant who was inside, he raised the hood up real quick and said, "Who's got ahold of this?"--and it only lasted about 20 seconds, I guess, and it was done. You could even see the dust outside it

had raised up from the ground. We heard later that two men in a cabin on the side of a mountain had fallen down into a ravine and they were killed, but that was the only serious damage.

The 18th Pursuit Squadron was stationed at Elmendorf when I was there, and they were our near neighbors on the runway, on the taxiway, and they had P36 fighters. I think they had a couple of 30-caliber guns and one over the hood, or one over the cowl that fired through the propeller. They weren't very formidable looking, but they were very maneuverable. Another thing about them, when it got a little later in the fall, they were awfully hard to start--they had a shotgun starter. They put a shell inside the plane someplace in a little case and closed it up, and then they'd fire it and the engine would turn about one revolution, and then generally it would stop. I have seen, oh, I have seen as many as 50 of those shotgun casings out on the taxiway there where somebody had tried to start a plane. And they had ropes that they would put on the props and two or three guys would take ahold of them and pull them through, and that also was a little futile. But once they got them in the air, nine of them could do a loop, and they'd all be in the loop at once. Then they'd do Immelmans and Cuban 8's and--a very maneuverable airplane. They were real pretty. I didn't know any of the pilots personally, except this one, Hazeltine, who I ran into about five years later in Clark Field in the Philippine Islands.

When I was there, I was kind of interested in navigation, and there was a navigating officer there, Lieutenant Barrow, and he kind of took an interest in me, I guess, so he give me some forms and things to work navigation problems, and I built myself a sextant that I could, oh, I could figure out a position within maybe 15 miles, 10 or 15 miles, which I thought was pretty good. He seemed to think that was rather surprising because I made it out of wood and with a protractor and magnifying glass and a level out of a carpenter's level and some batteries, and I had a little bulb in it. It was pretty accurate, but kind of a plaything.

And along about December 7, I guess it was, we went to Sunday dinner and the fellows across from me said something about they had a big--the Japanese were attacking Pearl Harbor, and one of the fellows across the table from me says, yea, he said, he started that rumor. And about 10 minutes later, it became pretty general something was going on, and before we finished our meal, the colonel came in and explained to us that from what he had heard, the Japanese were bombing Pearl Harbor; this was around noon on Sunday, December 7--and that night, it was black at Anchorage.

We actually thought we were next, and we had to have blankets over all the windows and no lights after dark and a lot of extra guards, and within a week, why, three of the Link Trainer operators (instructors) were put on guard duty--and in the depth of December in Alaska, was an awfully poor time to be on guard duty. Three or four nights I went out in the woods about a mile or two from the base and walked around about 500 50-gallon oil drums that were full of gasoline with a .45, and I would be accosted about three times during the night by the sergeant of the guard, and it was pretty cold. Well, it wasn't awfully cold, but cold if you had to stay out in it with snow on the ground, a lot of snow.

I think the coldest it got when I was there was 9 below. The days were awfully short. Along in December, we'd go to work--first part of December, we'd go to work at 8:00 in the morning in the Link Trainer office. Get up and eat breakfast and it was pitch dark. Go to work 8:00 and still dark; you couldn't see a thing. About 9:00, why it

would start getting a little light in the east, and the sun would start showing. About 9:30 the sun would come up over the Chugach Mountains that were east of Elmen-dorf Field, and then noon wouldn't be too bad--sun would be shining--it would warm up a little. A lot of ice skating up there. Three o'clock or quarter after three, the sun would go down. You'd go home from work at 4:30 and it would be pitch dark. It did make a long night, and there wasn't anyplace to go really in Anchorage. Didn't have many--well, they did have Red Cross station or whatever you call it there, just before I left, but I just went to it once.

Along about January, they had a big call for pilots. Well, I immediately rushed over to the medical officer who said no, my visual accommodation was insufficient. I had a little trouble, so I immediately started eating carrots and taking vitamin A pills and all kind of subterfuges to become accepted. And then along the first of February they came out with the paper again--anybody who wanted to go could go, so I went and took the test and I passed and got my orders.

Around the first of March, I went down to Seward on the train, got on the St. Vehiele [?]. That was a huge boat, and we took off from Seward and went out into the Bay of Alaska, and it blew up a terrible storm, and it snowed, and it was just awful. And we were out about one day, I guess, till we got to--seems like it was Cape Spencer, I don't know for sure. Anyway, it was the north end of the Inland Passage. From then on down the west coast of Canada we went on the Inland Passage. That was a beautiful trip. It was cloudy and windy, but water was smooth and beautiful scenery.

We stopped at Ketchikan; I don't know why. We stopped there for awhile and one of the boys I used to know was running an Air Force crash boat there, and he came up alongside and brought some mail. I talked to him a little and he was surprised to see me, of course. There were about 30 of us going back to cadet school. We got back. We landed in Seattle again, must have been the middle of March 1941 [1942], and we were there maybe two or three days, and it had changed entirely. There were a lot more men there and it was a lot stricter, and it was just much worse than it was the summer before.

And around the 15th of March or so we got a train and we went by train to Santa Ana, California, down south of Los Angeles, and we put into a big holding base there, I guess, staging base. And there were a lot of men there. Some of them going to cadets and some weren't. And that was the first time I ever saw Bob Hope--it was around the latter part of March or the first of April of 1941 [1942]. He came and gave one of his early USO shows, I guess. It was pretty good. You know, he told a few shady jokes and they had several luscious-looking females on the program; it was well received.

Then about the first of April they shipped us out to Ontario, California. This is just east of Pomona, east of Los Angeles about 20 miles, and we were south of Ontario, this base is Cal-Aero Academy. It looked like at a country club. Nice one-story dormitories and two men to a room, and they had covered walkways all around, and everything was really A-1. PT-17 Stearmans.

We started training about the first of April, 5th of April, something like that, and I had about three different instructors before I soloed. The first one was named Gray--or Brown, Mr. Brown. He was an old farmer that lived near Ontario, and he farmed and he also taught aviation cadets just as a sideline. The first day he took me up we flew around awhile and he said, "There's a hawk down there. We ought to go down

and chase him a little." I never got sick in a plane in my life and I didn't then, but that was about the closest. He said, "Check your safety belt and hang on; it might turn pretty quick." So I took ahold of the sides and he dove at this hawk, and the hawk was soaring about 400 feet off the ground, and he'd go around the hawk and turn in it seemed about 300 feet and he'd come back again and the hawk was, you know, rather seriously annoyed. One time, I thought we got him with the inner wing flying wires, but it just evidently was on the outside of the outside strut. Mr. Brown, he was laughing, having a big time. I imagine he was 45 years old or 50. He wore glasses, was medium size. He weighed about 180. Then he quit. I don't think that had anything to do with it.

I only had about three hours training from him, and then another instructor came. There was quite a turnover in instructors at Cal-Aero. And another instructor taught me for about six hours, and something happened; he got transferred to Basic. And the last instructor I had before I soloed, he was a real nice guy. I think I had about 11 hours when I soloed, 10 hours and 30 minutes, or something like that. Didn't bother me any. I always landed in the grass. If I was going a little bit sideways, why it would just slip.

Primary was a lot of fun. We did quite a bit of solo work after we had soloed once. And every once in a while you'd see an unauthorized formation go by. And when you are first starting to fly when somebody pulls in and flies formation with you, it is a little frightening--seems impossible that they won't hit you somewhere.

At the end of primary, we had a test by an Army instructor, and he took me up, or rather I guess I took him up. We flew around awhile, and he seemed to be satisfied with most of the things I did (some of them he kind of shook his head). We did lazy-eights and Chandelles and snap roll (didn't do a loop with him) and several other things and finally went back to base and he said come on the pattern, so I started to enter the pattern satisfactorily, I guess--he didn't say anything.

I got on the downwind leg and turned on the base and everything was all right, and I started to turn on the final, and he said, "Where you going to land?" And I said, "Right down there alongside the runway," and he said, "No, land on the blacktop." That was the first time I had landed on the blacktop, and I came down with my normal 15-degree crab, I guess, and we hit the blacktop and it wasn't anything like landing on the grass, and it kind of skidded along sideways there, and I was sitting in the back fighting. He didn't touch the controls--I give him credit for that. He had a lot of nerve.

We taxied over to the ready room. He got out and said, "You almost ground-looped," and I told him, "Yes, and I never landed on the blacktop before." He said, "Well, practice that." And he got out his paper and he started writing down a whole bunch of things, and finally he said, "Well, it wasn't a very good ride," he said, "but Uncle Sam really needs pilots, so I'll pass you on the Basic." Actually, I was elated.

From Basic, we went into BT13's, low wing, fixed landing gear, volteze [?], nice airplane. That was the first airplane I flew at night, solo; that's a [?], especially when there is a lot of traffic. The only thing really good about it was Los Angeles--we were close enough to Los Angeles we could see it real well from the air at night. Of course, they didn't black out the west coast, so it was all lit up and it was really a nice sight, but we only had about a six-mile-square practice area, or four of them, rather, on four corners of the field, and it always seemed as though someone was closer to you

than they should be, and it took a little figuring to say, "Well now, this is a green light," or "This is a red light," or "Which way is he going?" and you always worried about your instruments and how high you were. You had to maintain a certain altitude, and once in a while they'd let down somebody from the 6,000-foot altitude when you were flying in the 5,000-foot altitude, and it was always exciting to watch him go by. But, we didn't have too much night flying; it lasted about a couple of weeks, I guess. We had 60 hours of flying time in basic; they kept real close track of that. Got 60 hours in primary, 60 hours in basic before we moved on to advanced.

In basic training I saw my first crash. There was another fellow who was in the same class I was in. We were flying in a auxiliary field, landing in an auxiliary field one day, and it was pretty busy. I think they had about 12 BT's there, and they had an instructor on the ground with a control plane with the radio going, and I just taxied up and got out of my BT and was walking over the check in and tell him where I was. I looked over and there were two BT's on the final approach. The one in the rear, the furthest from the field, all of a sudden looked like he stalled and he made a sharp turn to the left and he started right straight down and disappeared behind a hill; it was about a mile from the field. We couldn't see what happened to him.

I rushed over to the control plane, and I said, "One of the planes looked like it went down," and so the instructor in the control plane called the other planes in the pattern and asked if they'd seen anything. No, they didn't see anything. They started counting the planes and he said, "No, I think they are all here," and I said, "Well, I don't." I ran over to the edge of this hill; it was a little way back from the end of the runway. Looked over the top and there was a lake down there about a half mile away--Fuller's Lake was the name of it--and right in the middle of it there was a landing gear of a BT sticking out of the water and part of the tail upside down in the water.

So then I rushed back and told him there was a plane in the lake, and just about that time he heard that there was one in, and we got in the bus that took us over there. And the bus went down pretty close to the edge of the lake and we jumped out, and by that time there was somebody, of course we couldn't tell who it was, out of the airplane and was sitting on the inverted plane right on the fuselage--he was, oh, about half out of the water and he was hanging onto the landing gear which was pointing straight up. I took off my flight coveralls and I was going to wade out; I didn't think it was very deep. And just about that time a rowboat came rowing down the lake real fast and they pulled over to the plane and this fellow was able to climb in and rowboat brought him to shore.

His face was all cut up real bad. We couldn't tell who he was; it was Monty Powell that was one of our buddies, and he was gagging and spitting up blood and water. We laid him there on the grass and called for the bus to come on down. I took my coveralls off and we put those on him to kind of keep him from getting too cold, and then we put him in the bus, and he could talk. He said he just felt like he was all full of mud and he was bleeding pretty bad. We kind of bandaged him up and took him in the bus and we went up this hill where the ambulance was on its way then. Took him to the top of the hill and took him out of the bus and laid him on the ground, and I thought he was just about gone but he was still conscious.

The ambulance came and they just bundled him right up and put him in the ambulance and took him to the hospital. The plane was just completely wrecked; the wings were torn clear off the fuselage, and actually the wing was in a different place.

Landed almost--hit the water almost straight down. He stalled out on his final approach. Three days later he was out of the hospital. His face, his forehead was all scarred up real bad, and one of his eyes was pretty badly bruised, but he didn't lose any of his faculties and later on I heard he went into glider training.

We got an awful lecture from the medical officer of the base for moving him, for carrying him in the bus, but the ambulance--I don't know why, I suppose the ambulance could have gotten down there, but they didn't seem to think that they would. This bus was a pretty sturdy machine, and, of course, when we carried him in the bus, he was sitting in the seat, and I sat alongside him in my underwear mainly 'cause that was all I had left. Then we got him up to the top of the hill. He was all right, but I suppose it would have been better to leave him there--but we hadn't had any first-aid training and we thought the quicker we could get him to an ambulance the better. But he turned out all right. They did drop him out of the class, of course--if you wrecked a plane, you were automatically out.

And it was a real spectacular crash. He said he hit the water (I talked to him later)--when he hit the water he was doing about 200 miles an hour, he thought. He stalled on the final approach, and he got into the wing wash of the plane ahead of him, or prop wash, and he stalled it out, and when he went to put the throttle on, he claimed that it didn't take and had dropped off of the left wing and just made a left steep spiral right into the water. The instrument panel was all caved in. His head had hit right at the compass and it all caved in, and it was just miraculous that he didn't get a severe skull fracture. I don't think he even had what they called a concussion. He was just a real lucky boy.

Editor's Note: Sometime after my father, Keith E. Harris, died in 1980, our family discovered the above story that he had taped on his own, probably in the 1970's. The anecdotes and impressions given above illustrate his knack for storytelling. Dad later became a B-17 pilot (see [The 1943 Munster Bombing Raid](#)) who flew his requisite 25 missions in the European Theater of Operations, then came back to the United States to become a B-29 trainer while World War II was ending. He was then transferred to a base in the Philippine Islands for a year or two, following which he opted for a discharge from the Air Force in 1947 with the rank of Major. He spent the remainder of his life more quietly: farming the family acreage near Earlville, Illinois with his brother, Robert E. Harris, driving a school bus route for 29 years, and with his wife, Margie, raising a family of four children--Alan, Kathleen, Donald, and Dale (oldest to youngest).--A.H.

For statistics, photos, and stories about the 390th Bomb Group during World War II, visit www.390th.org

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