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“Journey to Freedom and Beyond”
by Col. Robert M. Slane

Colonel Robert Slane was the last wing commander of the USAF 553rd Reconnaissance Wing. Prior to assuming the position of wing commander, he was vice wing commander of the 553rd Reconnaissance Wing for a couple months. Being vice wing commander allowed him to fly some 25 combat missions prior to assuming the position of wing commander, giving him a good understanding of the mission of the wing, as well as the issues which confronted it.

The book is available either direct from Col. Slane, or from the publisher. Col. Slane makes the book available direct for a cost of \$25.00 each, including shipping within the continental United States. If you would like to purchase the book direct please send a check or money, payee Robert Slane. Cost is \$25 per book. Col. Slane does not accept credit cards. Please mail payment to Col. Slane at:

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Journey to Freedom and Beyond

by Robert M. Slane

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Real life experiences of an American bomber pilot during and after World War II.
Read more!

About the Book

A true-life story of combat during World War II. In the book the author describes the action that leads up to the loss of his combat crew when their aircraft is downed by German forces. Events after he crash-lands his aircraft provide a narrative history that leads the reader into the emotional life of a prisoner of war.

The reader is taken through a progressive series of events as the author adjusts to a life that is a composite mixture of boredom, fear and danger. With escape uppermost in his mind he is made increasingly aware of the risks and retribution following a failed escape attempt.

He was in that same Stalag Luft III prison camp when British Prisoners in the adjacent North Compound made their escape through a tunnel. When captured, fifty of these prisoners were shot to death. The directive to murder the prisoners came directly from Hitler.

Solitary confinement for an escape attempt followed by a "forced" winter march as Stalag Luft III is evacuated, provides further insight into the dangers and hardships faced by the prisoners as their captors move the prisoners from one area to another in an attempt to avoid liberation by Allied military forces.

As the war continues the Red Cross food supplies are depleted and starvation becomes a reality. Dysentery and vermin are prevalent in the prison Stalag located at Nuremberg where thousands of allied prisoners have been relocated.

The author describes in vivid detail the chaos and fear created as bombs fall on targets located adjacent to the prison compounds.

Seeking to make his way to friendly territory the author continues his quest for freedom with multiple escapes during a second forced march from Nuremberg to Moosberg, Germany.

The author is greeted with a shocking scene of horror when captured after several days of freedom and returned to an "Oflag" where British ground-officer survivors of the battles of Dunkerque, Crete, Dieppe are imprisoned by the Germans.

The day of liberation finally arrives, but the story does not end with the events of that joyous day.

Adventure and tragedy continue after the war as the author flies combat during the Korean conflict and later provides a stirring, emotional account of a B-47 accident.

After his combat tour in Vietnam and retirement from the military the author and his wife revisit areas in England and France where some of the wartime events took place. Of special significance was a visit to his gunner's grave in France.

About the Author

Robert Slane was born on August 5th, 1923 in a one-room, railroad boxcar that was situated near the rail-tracks at Ludlow, Colorado. 1923 was a depression year and many of the lower income railroad workers were furnished with housing of this type as part of their income. Through grade six he attended grammar school in a one-room schoolhouse where a single teacher taught all eight grades. He graduated from Trinidad High School in 1941.

Immediately after graduation he enlisted as a private in the U.S. Army Air Corps. Shortly thereafter, he entered the Staff Sergeant flying program as an Aviation Student and graduated as a Flight Officer in January 1943. That same year, he was commissioned a Second Lieutenant.

After graduation from pilot training, he became a First Pilot in B-17's and flew the "Flying Fortress" in combat in the European Theater. On October 14th, 1943, he and his crew were shot down and Col. Slane was held as a prisoner of war in Germany for 19 Months.

During the Korean conflict, he spent a year in Korea, volunteering for and receiving a combat assignment after serving seven months of his tour. He flew 40 "night intruder" missions before his year tour was completed.

In Southeast Asia, Col Slane was Vice Wing and Wing Commander of the 553rd Reconnaissance Wing at Korat Royal Thai AFB, Thailand, and later was assigned as Base Commander at Bien Hoa Air Base, Republic of Vietnam He flew 78 combat sorties in EC 121R, A-37, and OV-10 aircraft. Six combat sorties were flown in Vietnamese owned aircraft, A-1 and F-5's.

During his Air Force career, Colonel Slane served almost 16 years in various assignments within the Strategic Air Command. He was a combat crew commander in B-47 and B-52 aircraft and has approximately 5,000 hours of multi-jet flying time.

During his tour in the Strategic Air Command he served as Deputy Commander for Operations at Altus AFB, Okla., and the last assignment in SAC, prior to his Southeast Asia tour, was as the Wing Vice Commander at Plattsburgh AFB, N.Y. Between prior SAC assignments, he attended the National War College and served a two-year tour with the Joints Chiefs of Staff as an operations center team chief.

Colonel Slane was assigned to Barksdale AFB, LA from 1954 to 1964. (A Major during this period) He was flying on a night-simulated combat mission over Canada on 30 November, 1956 when he was forced to eject from a malfunctioning B-47 aircraft. He survived the Canadian wilderness until rescued by helicopter the following day.

Among his awards and decorations, Colonel Slane holds the Legion of Merit with One Oak Leaf Cluster, Distinguished Flying Cross, Meritorious Service Medal with One Oak Leaf Cluster, Air Medal with Four Oak Leaf Clusters, Air Force Commendation medal with Four Oak Leaf Clusters, the Prisoner of War Medal, the Vietnamese Honor Medal First Class, and the Vietnamese Air Service Medal. A special tribute from the Vietnamese was the award of and authority to wear South Vietnamese Pilot Wings.

Colonel Slane is married to the former Mary Lee Valentine of Boise, Idaho. They had a daughter, Judy, who died in 1977. Their son, Tom, presently resides in Johnson City, Tennessee. Their grandchildren are Sarah Elizabeth Slane and Matthew Thomas Slane.

Excerpt

Introduction

Although many years have passed since World War II and much of what occurred during those years has faded into the past; there are certain events that are forever etched in my memory. I still see the faces of my B-17 crew members just as I first saw them in 1943. Those faces are still young and filled with the buoyancy of youth. I can still hear the cough and feel the vibration of an aircraft engine as it awakens with the rough, jerky motions of a propeller that without warning suddenly settles into a smooth, beautiful, see-through circle of air. I remember the feeling of exhilaration when skimming over the tops of stratus clouds that are layered like a ruffled sheet covering the earth as far as the eye can see.

I remember the helpless feeling when flying through a barrage of dirty looking puffs of flak and watching as a train of these black demons gets closer and closer until you can see the red glow of destruction and hear the muffled sound of the exploding shell. I can still see the red tracers of enemy 20mm arcing over head and fading into distant space. I can hear the shattering sound of guns within our aircraft as the gunners fought for our lives to deter an enemy that was determined to down our aircraft.

I have vivid recollections of the cast of characters who occupied Room 4 in Block 36, in the South Compound of the German Prison Camp at Stalag Luft III - my home for fourteen of the eighteen and a half months that I was a prisoner of war in Germany. I will always remember standing at the feet of a dead Corporal who had been murdered by a guard at Stalag Luft III. That date was Easter Sunday, 1944.

There is no forgetting the snow and piercing, icy cold wind as we prisoners struggled to stay on our feet and to keep moving during a forced march in the dead of winter. I

remember well, the stench, filth, and hunger as I traveled for three days and nights locked up in a 40 and 8 French box car with over sixty fellow prisoners.

Most of all I remember the feeling of despair as the days passed and freedom seemed so remote that I sought God's help to give me the courage to attempt escape and I resolved that I would accept what ever His plans for my future might be.

Never to be forgotten is the feeling of exhilaration during those short periods of freedom when I finally did escape.

I note that, after the 2nd Schweinfurt mission on 14 October 1943, a command decision was made that for the remainder of the year there would be no bomber missions scheduled against targets deep in enemy territory during clear weather unless fighter escort was available all the way to and from the target. However, this story is not about decisions related to the air war or to the significance of a particular target.

My experiences are typical of thousands of men who fought in the air war over Europe. Others have stories of action and events that they encountered during successful completion of a combat tour. Many did not live to see the end of combat over Europe - others flew and completed their missions during a period when fighter protection was available all the way to and from the target, but there was always the danger from flak or loss of oxygen or loss of engines. Any aircraft that fell out of formation for one reason or another was always exposed to increased danger. With respect to the crew members who were shot down - some were killed by enemy gunfire; others parachuted to safety only to be captured and sometimes killed by irate citizens. Many died in the crash of their aircraft. Some were badly injured and were hospitalized prior to imprisonment. There were those fortunate enough to survive and receive aid in escaping to a neutral country. Many, like myself, had no opportunity to escape and became prisoners of war.

This is my story,

Robert Slane

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