

Clayton Lee Vowell
Excerpt from “The Barr Fly Flies Again”
Author Wendy Vowell

Born in 1924, Clayton Lee Vowell’s personal journey included the Great Depression, the Dust Bowl of Oklahoma, and his family’s 1939 migration to Southern Illinois for oil field jobs. Due to housing shortages and poverty, the Vowell family lived in a tent between his father’s jobs as Roustabout.

Clayton enlisted in the Army Air Corp in March 1943. After fifteen months of stateside training, he arrived in Italy on June 10, 1944 for his first assignment with the 301st BG, Fifteen Air Force. Two days later, Sergeant Clayton Lee Vowell was assigned to Waste Gunner position on The Barr Fly, serial number 42-31523. She was a B-17G Bomber based in Lucera, Italy.



July 26, 1944 started like any other mission day for Sergeant Vowell and the 301st Bomb Group. After breakfast and a briefing meeting with other enlisted men, Clayton climbed into layers of flight gear with electric heating elements like a modern electric blanket. At sea level, the mid-summer morning would have been very warm, the flight gear heavy and cumbersome. Within minutes, sweat rolled off Clayton’s face, his cotton undershirt and shorts sticking to his skin. A logical person would suggest putting on all that heavy gear inside the plane at a cooler altitude, but close quarters made that impossible. In addition, there was no place inside the belly of the plane to stow the electric coveralls, boots, gloves, oxygen mask, etc.

When The Barr Fly departed Lucera on July 26, the two waste gunners, belly gunner, and tail gunner were most likely seated on the floor behind the radio room. There were no jump seats, no seat belts, and no safety harness. The B-17G didn't even have a hand hold to brace against the curved inside wall. Wind howled in around the waist gunner windows and the tail gear assembly. At ground level, it felt cool and refreshing. But as The Barr Fly climbed out over the Adriatic Sea, the outside air temperature dropped 4.5 degrees Fahrenheit per 1000 feet of elevation. If the departure temperature was a balmy 70 degrees, then it was a bone chilling minus 42 degrees plus wind chill from all the plane's openings.

Just East of Lucera, over the Adriatic Sea, The Barr Fly joined formation with 27 other planes of the 301st, all loaded with 1000-pound bombs. The destination was Weiner Neudorf Aircraft Factory in Austria. At some point after departure, two aircraft turned back due to mechanical problems. It was a common occurrence. Spark plugs fouled, fuel lines leaked, any number of issues cropped up. Crews who turned back would not get credit that day toward the required 50 missions.

On almost every mission, the bomb group gathered over the Adriatic Sea, then turned north, Italy to the left, Yugoslavia to the right, crystal blue waters below, and the snow-capped peaks of the Swiss Alps ahead. Unfortunately, the enemy took note of the repeated flight path. Anti-aircraft guns staged along the route, most concentrated around important assets. The Axis ground forces usually knew in advance the estimated arrival time for a bombing raid based on ground sightings and distance from the Fifteenth Air Force base of operations.

On July 26, the 301st Bomb Group departed around 7:30 AM. Over the Adriatic Sea, they joined 425 bombers and 366 fighters of the 15th Air Force. From the ground, it must have looked like an air parade with a deadly payload and a deafening roar as almost 800 planes passed overhead.

At around 10,000 feet Clayton and the rest of the crew plugged in electric heated suits, gloves, and boots to The Barr Fly's electrical outlets. Then Clayton and his companion waste gunner, Bill Kelly donned goggles, an interphone connection, and an oxygen mask tied into the plane's systems.

The Fifteenth Air Force with the 301st Bomb Group crossed the Adriatic far south of Trieste. Then they climbed to 25,000 feet and turned northeast toward Austria. Dense cloud cover below obscured landmarks, making visual navigation difficult. The clouds did not deter the anti-aircraft guns from below.

At 11:00 AM, 60 miles before reaching their primary target (IP), the 301st Bomb Group flew into a hornet's nest of 75 to 100 enemy aircraft. For the second day in a row, the 301st was assaulted with an attack of breathtaking size and intensity. The Barr Fly's crew watched and listened as incoming enemy fighters shot down one plane after another. At his waste gunner window, Clayton stood ready. Both hands gripped the 50-caliber gun mounted on a swivel. Electric cords and oxygen lines ran from the fuselage wall to Clayton's suit and mask. Wind howled through the plane, buffeting Clayton's clothes while turbulence rocked the plane.

Over the interphone system, crew mates called out warnings to each other. Flak carpeted the space between planes with black puffs of smoke. The Barr Fly guns fired from the nose, the top turret, the belly, tail and both waste guns. With all 13 guns going off, the plane shook and rattled almost out of control.

Five minutes into the battle, a group of four brown and green fighters came from 6 o'clock high, guns blazing, straight at The Barr Fly. The tail gunner, Staff Sergeant Glen Kingsley saw enemy fighters approaching from behind. He shouted, "Fighters at 6 o'clock" and then took a fatal shot to the head.

Suddenly, bullets slammed through the fuselage and sliced through the air inside the Barr Fly. Pilot in command, 2nd Lt. Charles Starling asked if all were OK.

Co-pilot 2nd Lt. Charles Van Houten reported the number four engine was hit by enemy fire and in flames.

Lt. Starling cried out, "Oh Hell!"

Enemy fire strafed the radio room behind the bomb bay, cutting two gaping holes in the side of the plane. Navigator/radio operator Lt. Charles Campbell was shot and killed. Fire broke out in the radio room, fed by the cache of oxygen bottles.

Bombardier, 2nd Lt. Warren Garren shouted, “Oxygen check”. Then shots shattered the Plexiglas nose of the aircraft. Garren was sucked out of the hole. Gone. The plane became a wind tunnel with air flow straight through from nose to tail.

Engineer, Staff Sergeant Bolton Jones, yelled, “Oxygen check”. Then nothing more was heard from him. Another man down.

The alarm sounded to evacuate the plane. Crew members checked parachutes and called out status. One engine was in flames. Onboard, fire raged behind the cockpit. The plane flailed for balance. Once, twice it spun while nearby plane crews watched helplessly. Pilot Starling managed to wrench the plane back under control. Then the #3 engine was hit and caught fire. With a sickening sound of banging, screeching metal, six feet of the burning right wing broke off and dropped away. The Barr Fly fell into a death spiral.

G-forces pinned crew members in position. The fuselage broke apart in front of the ball turret. At 4.5 miles up in the air, crew members tumbled out into the clear blue sky. The temperature was around minus 30 degrees Fahrenheit. Bodies fell helplessly into the clouds below at a rate of 120 mph. For the first five minutes of descent, insufficient oxygen rendered the men unconscious. If unchecked, the fall would take about nine minutes. At around 10,000 feet altitude, oxygen returned to their brains and the men began to regain consciousness. That left just three minutes to evaluate the circumstances, determine surroundings and pull the chute cord at a safe altitude of 3,000 feet.

While they fell, dense cloud cover protected them from enemy aircraft, but the barrage of flak continued all around. Just before 11:30 AM, five of the ten men from The Barr Fly opened their parachutes and floated into enemy territory. Around them the flaming carnage of The Barr Fly plummeted to the ground. Shortly after, the men found themselves in a lush green valley surrounded by woods somewhere in Austria.

But that day’s horror show had only just begun. Clayton Vowell along with four of his companions came down behind enemy lines in a non-English speaking country. They had limited local currency and no credit cards. Emergency rations might last a day at best and then they would have no food. Without a radio there was no way to call for help. Even if they could contact the Allied base in Italy, there would be no rescue mission behind enemy lines. Switzerland, the closest safe haven was over 350 miles to the West. They had only each other. And they were stranded.

Missing in Action

On July 26, Major George M. Sanders, Group Historian wrote in the official mission report for the 301st Bomb Group, “no chutes were observed” from The Barr Fly. All ten crew members reported missing in action.

Major Jack A. Nendall filled out eleven Missing Air Crew Reports that day, one for each of the eleven planes lost. Ten men went down in each plane. 110 souls were lost in one day, almost a third of the 301st Bomb Group airmen.

In Missing Air Crew Report #7127, The Barr Fly was listed as “Failed to Return, Wiener Neudorf, Austria on July 26, 1944. Aircraft was lost as a result of enemy aircraft.” Weather conditions were dense cloud cover beneath with high cloud formations all around. Since the plane was seen to explode over enemy territory, there was no search for The Barr Fly and her crew. Observations were reported from plane #185, the neighboring plane in formation by 1st Lieutenant H. S. Koobatian, Navigator and 2nd Lieutenant Paul L. Gerhart, Bombardier. In special notes, the report reads “Surrounding circumstances not reasonably conclusive of KIA casualty status.”

The families of all ten men from The Barr Fly received telegrams, announcing they were missing in action. No further information was available.

MIA

Later, William H. Kelley, Right Waist Gunner completed an Individual Casualty Questionnaire for his fellow crew members, one page for each man. In tidy hand-written notes, Kelly's observations became the official record of that fateful day for Glen Kingsley, Charles Campbell, and Bolton Jones all killed in action. Kelly reported enemy soldiers showed him the dog tags from his dead crew mates. He was never allowed to see the bodies.

Killed in Action:

- Second Lieutenant Charles H. Starling, Pilot from California
- Second Lieutenant Charles H. Van Houten, Co-Pilot from New York
- Second Lieutenant Charles H. Campbell, Navigator from Tennessee
- Staff Sergeant Bolton L. Jones, Engineer/Gunner from South Carolina
- Staff Sergeant Glenville J. Kingsley, Tail Gunner from New Jersey

Reported to Red Cross as captured on July 26, 1944.

- Second Lieutenant Warren H. Garren, Bombardier from Illinois,
 - sent to Stalag Luft III for commissioned officers
- Staff Sergeant Charles L. Jackson, Radio Operator from Georgia,
 - sent to Stalag Luft IV for non-commissioned officers
- Sergeant William Krippel, Ball Turret Gunner from Illinois
 - sent to Stalag Luft IV for non-commissioned officers
- Sergeant William H. Kelly, Waist Gunner from New York
 - sent to Stalag Luft IV for non-commissioned officers
- Sergeant Clayton L. Vowell, Waist Gunner from Oklahoma
 - sent to Stalag Luft IV for non-commissioned officers

On Clayton's POW registration card for the International Committee of the Red Cross, he was reported captured on July 26, 1944, the same day he fell out of the sky over Austria. There was no record of how or when he got from St. Kathrein, Austria to Stalag Luft IV, near Gross Tychow, Prussia, now Poland. Clayton later told his children about being "gathered up from the woods".

Post-war correspondence and press clippings provide scant details. It appears Clayton, Krippel, Kelly, and Jackson were held prisoner in Vienna, Austria for a short time. They were starved, beaten, and interrogated. In Vienna, one of the guards was kind to the prisoners. The Barr Fly Survivors had no money, nothing to barter. Everything of value had been taken. But "Stonewall" Jackson had managed to keep his prize 17-jewel wristwatch. In captivity, Stonewall realized the watch was worth nothing if he starved to death. After consultation with his cohort, Stonewall offered his watch in return for food. The single sympathetic guard took the bribe and made sure the foursome got a little more food on his shift.

In a missing air crew report (MACR) later filled out by William H Kelly, the "Bombardier, Warren Garren was last seen alive in Budapest, waiting to be sent to POW Camp". I had to read the MACR three times to believe it.

The timeline of The Bar Fly crash shows Garren was the first man thrown from the plane. He probably landed several miles away from the other four men. The MACR proves Garren survived being sucked out of the plexiglass nose! The POW records show Garren was later separated from the other survivors and sent to Stalag Luft III, a POW camp for Air Corps Officers. It's unclear whether Garren survived till the end of the war.

Budapest seemed to be a way station for sorting out POWs, interrogation and intelligence gathering activities. Among Clayton's post war artifacts, a letter from the US military reported his dog tags were found buried in a Budapest residential garden after the war. As I piece together the story, I think Clayton, Krippel, Kelly and Jackson were all sent to Budapest.

For comparison, a fellow POW at Stalag Luft IV, Renard (Renny) Kampstra, was shot down June 16, 1944. In a Christmas newsletter some sixty years later, Renny recounted his journey, one very much like that of The Barr Fly crew. Renny was first held in Kapavur, Hungary about three days, then transported by train to Budapest. There, Renny was imprisoned in a four-story jail building. After about three weeks in isolation, Renny and several other prisoners were loaded into boxcars with standing room only for the trip to Stalag Luft IV. Records show four of the The Barr Fly's survivors were also transported 850 miles north to Stalag Luft IV in Gross Tychow, Prussia – now Poland, near the North Shore. By then, it was probably August. At Gross Tychow, Renny ended up in the same Lager, the same room with the four surviving gunners of the The Barr Fly.

The Boxcar

Central Europe's rail system was easily accessible from almost anywhere and heavily used for the movement of POWs. Clayton later told his family how he was loaded into a boxcar, too many men crammed in too little space with a single bucket in the corner for a latrine. There was no food or water during the late summer journey. I imagine it was hot and steamy inside the boxcar, the smell of unwashed men was overwhelming. The prisoners were hungry and thirsty. Conditions only got worse as the 850-mile journey droned on. At times, the train was pulled to a siding. War supplies and equipment took precedence. At times, the prisoners heard Allied bombers overhead and feared the worst. Would the train be bombed? Would the boxcar be strafed by fighter pilot guns?

In the summer of 2020, Clayton's son Randy recalled Clayton's journey to Stalag Luft IV.

"Dad said he heard people talking outside the railcar during the stops. Inside the car, the silence was eerie. Finally, the train got to the stop for the POW Camp. The boxcar doors slid open, and nobody moved. Nobody said a word."

"Dad was close to the door when it opened. A German soldier climbed into the car and stood in front of Dad. The soldier shouted, "Raus!"

"Dad froze. He didn't say a word. Nobody moved."

"The soldier looked directly at Dad and shouted 'Raus! Mach schnell!' Dad still didn't move."

The Americans in the car were likely petrified. They probably wanted out of the boxcar in the worst way but to where? Maybe they were squinting into mid-day sun. Inside the car was miserable but familiar. There was strength in numbers inside. Outside the car was unknown territory. Outside was a strange language, and likely more torture.

Randy continued, "The German shouted again, but Dad still didn't understand. Everybody just stood there. Then the soldier jammed the butt of his rifle down, right on top of Dad's foot."

At this point in Randy's story, I cringed. My foot twitched in empathy. Excruciating pain must have gone straight up Clayton's leg and into his brain. With an injured and possibly broken foot, Clayton was forced to hobble two miles to the entrance of Stalag Luft IV. The injury would plague him for the rest of his life. And after that incident, every time a soldier said "Raus", Clayton and his buddies scrambled.

(Author's note: In July 2020, Heather Steele, a researcher of the war in Germany for the WWII History Project, interpreted "Raus! Mach schnell! Get out, now!")

To make matters worse, Clayton's dark wavy hair and crystal blue eyes drew attention from the camp commander, a racist and antisemitic. Clayton had to prove he was not a Jew, that he had not been circumcised. He was just another American. Clayton was of Creek Indian descent, held hostage

by yet another generation of brutal white men. Like his forefathers, he chose to retain his heritage, his language, and his soul. Maybe Clayton called on the warrior spirit of his ancestors for self-reliance, bravery, the strength to make it through one day at a time. Or maybe he just tried to blend into the masses of white men trying to survive.

When Clayton arrived in Stalag Luft IV, he was wearing the same clothes he put on for the mission over Weiner Neudorf Aircraft Factory on July 26. The heavy gloves, insulated boots, electric heated coveralls, and hat were probably discarded near where he landed along with his white silk parachute. American parachutes were highly prized and quickly scooped up by locals to repurpose into fine shirts, handkerchiefs, and other garments. And as a side note, nobody wanted the brown parachutes used by the Russians.

At Stalag Luft IV, all the things Clayton took for granted vanished. He couldn't take a bath. He had no fresh uniform or shaving kit. The camp had open latrines with no privacy, no toilet tissue or even a Sears catalogue to clean up with. There was no soap to wash his hands and face. Along with his camp mates, he suffered constant thirst, hunger, and frequent diarrhea from spoiled food. With the diarrhea came the indignity of a long wait in line to use the open-air latrine.

Family archives show letters between Clayton and Lenora but only one exists today. How could he expect anyone to understand his experience? Every letter he wrote to Lenora and his mother had to be a work of under-statement. Anything he wrote about this place would only be considered exaggeration, assuming it got past the censors.

Clayton was assigned to Lager A (Camp A), Barracks #7, Room #4, with his buddies from The Barr Fly, William Kelley, Charles "Stonewall" Jackson, and Bill Krippel. Along with twenty other men in Room #4, they shared letters from home, Red Cross Rations, dysentery, and lice. The twenty-four men of Barracks #7, Room #4 called themselves the Hazzabalyai Club or the Hazzabalyai Boys. The bonds grew so strong they stayed in touch for decades after the war. Their personal correspondence provided significant source documents in recreating Clayton's story.

The Hazzabalyai Boys

Stalag Luft IV

Lager A, Barracks #7, Room #4

**Warren Braddock, Samuel Bussieres, Doran Carr, Harry Chabin,
Glenn Duncan, Thomas Eubanks, Joe Grimmer, Cecil Hamm,
Gordon Hovet, Charles Jackson, Renny Kampstra, William Kelly,
Bill Krippel, Kenneth Lancaster, Carmen Lingobardo, Chuck
McClintock, JH McCord, Stew McFarland, George Miller, Alfred
Szafranek, Edwin Tofte, Leonard Van Den Bergh, Clayton Vowell,
Tom Williams,**

Sometime during the winter of 1944 to 1945, Clayton figured out a way to fashion a hat for himself from re-purposed yarn to keep his head and ears warm. In 2020, the hat resides with Randy Vowell, in his dad's suitcase of important documents and keepsakes. The hat is an autumn gold color, about 1/8" diameter yarn, and according to Randy, "it's coarse enough to sand a piece of wood." It appears Clayton teased the yarn out of a sweater and made a ball of yarn. Then for a crochet hook, he

melted and bent the handle of a toothbrush. (In 2020, the modified toothbrush is in family archives with son, Brian Vowell).

When Clayton finished with his crocheted hat, it had ear flaps two or three layers thick for warmth. On the front, a squared off cap bill had a stiffener inside, shaped to keep the rain and snow off his face. Clayton's design also included a pair of strings on either side of his head to tie under his chin. From the quality and consistency of the stitches, Clayton already knew how to crochet. He used a bit of clever design work to fit his need at the time.



After the war, the hat came home with Clayton. When he died, it was found among his keepsakes. Today, the yarn still carries an imprint of its creator. Dark stains concentrate on the front bill and sides, where dirty hands regularly pulled the cap into place. The yarn reeks, as though tainted by fear and sickness. It is even possible that Big Stoop touched it. But the hat also kept Clayton's head and ears warm during the most horrifying days of his young life. It seemed to be a revered relic, a reminder of good times and bad.