

DAD'S STORY

MIA/POW, W.W.II

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RANK AND NAME S/Sgt. Robert T. Peterson
(CAPITAL LETTERS) UNITED STATES PRISONER OF WAR.

PRISONER OF WAR No. 1774

CAMP NAME AND No. Stalag Luft 3

SUBSIDIARY CAMP No. Stalag Luft 6

COUNTRY Germany

VIA NEW YORK, N. Y.

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U.S. CENSOR

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Robert T. Peterson

As told to his Children & Grandchildren
Compiled by Dayna Peterson Mason • 1998

*“ . . . yea, they may forget,
yet will I forget thee.
Behold, I have graven thee upon the palms of my hands.”*

Isaiah 49:15-16

The information and events shared in the personal account told in “Dad’s Story” were gathered from the most direct source, Robert Peterson (Dad, Grampa). The 1944-45 POW account is from his memory with an attempt to record his experiences, memories and feelings. I tried to capture it “as he told it,” getting it as complete as possible with accurate locations and chronology. The more I wrote, the more I understood that I could never record it all, nor could I ever really tell “Dad’s Story” the way it deserves to be told. Over the years Dad saved notes, pictures, and letters. Many friends generously shared what they had written or learned since 1945. On occasion, I sought additional resources for the correct spelling of people’s names or places. Any similarity to known or real persons is completely intentional.

Daughter, Doria, encouraged Dad to attend a small, local POW reunion in 1983 after seeing something about it in the paper. He then attended a larger one in 1985 in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. He recognized some of the other guys and began conversing and recounting various experiences. The mutual histories “kick started” the memories and escalated his interest in finding out more. He hadn’t thought much about it for the first 40 years following his release.

His children reminded him of the incomplete stories each had heard. They prompted, listened and questioned. Bits and pieces of the long hushed memories came flooding back, and each one brought another paragraph to the text.

The Austrian journal is a brief record of what the five of us (Dad, Mom, my sons, Aaron and Aric, and I) experienced together as we made our way in search of those historical and secret places in 1997.

I can’t begin to thank all of you who somehow helped us put this together, especially those of you who were total strangers not so long ago, those who sent various pictures to Dad over the years, and those who helped translate, proof, paste, and print it all. So many of you were invaluable in bringing information and insight to light.

All of the players in the past and present are part of “Dad’s Story,” so to everyone who helped us, “Thanks, you will never know how much it has meant!”

Blessings, and with gratitude,



Dayna Peterson Mason (D3)



DAD'S STORY

Robert Thor Peterson

MIA/POW

15th Airforce, 5th Wing, 2nd Bomb Group, 96th Bomb Squadron

Robert Thor Peterson: born 5 January 1923; son of Bror Thorwald & Dora Mildred Thomson Peterson; **brother** of Ben, Bruce and Betty; *(not yet the husband of Pauline Emily Rose Lawrence, nor the father of Doria Lynn, David Robert, Dayna Dale, Daniel Martin, Douglas Paul, Donald Joel and Dennis Chris . . . nor foster-father to Sidney, Candy and Annette . . . nor father-in-law to David Selent, Terry Mason, Donna, Alice, Susan 1 and Susan 2 . . . nor grandfather to Nick, Joe, Kristi, Jeanelle, Aaron, Aric, Joshua, Caleb, Christopher, Jordan, Katie, Jack, Emily; and at this writing, one more yet unnamed, on the way . . . nor uncle to about twenty-four or so nieces and nephews.)*

* * * * *

Bob Peterson enlisted to serve in W.W.II on April 29, 1942. He was only 19 years old, a Chicago boy living at 115th Street and Western.

He first arrived at Camp Grant in Illinois, then went on to basic training at Jefferson Barracks, Missouri. Pay was \$21.00 per month, and by June it had increased to an alarming \$50.00 per month. Although trained as an aircraft mechanic, he also served as a security guard and ultimately a combat gunner. He would fly and survive six bombing missions.

After basic training he was sent to Aeronautical University of Chicago where he completed aircraft mechanic training; then it was on to the "Willow Run" B24 bomber plant at Ypsilanti, Michigan, for continued training and experience in bomber maintenance.

Training for overseas training took place at Camp Kilmer and Atlantic City, New Jersey, where he was issued his military rifle - a Springfield 1903 (#3265202). By mistake he, a buck private, was also issued an officer's passport. He had it for about a month before it was discovered and promptly taken away. No enlisted man should have been given one.

On December 12, 1942, Peterson shipped out with his unit from Staten Island and zigzagged across the Atlantic to North Africa on the merchant troop ship "The James Parker." They had weathered quite a storm on the third day out of New York and U.S. losses to U-boats had been heavy in '42, so Peterson was very pleased to see the lights of Tangier as they began the pass through the Strait of Gibraltar. It was December 24th and Bing Crosby sang "White Christmas" over the public address system. Christmas Day was nice and clear and also brought Christmas presents . . . 50 rounds for his Springfield! The troops landed at Mers-al-Kebir, just west of Oran in northwest Algeria, and on December 26th were sent about 40 miles inland to set up a pup-tent replacement battalion near St. Lucien.

Just one of the many fond recollections there included Earl Petersen (no relation), known as "Little Pete." Robert Peterson was called "Big Pete" as they stood 5'8" and 6'1", respectively. (*Much later, Little Pete and his wife, Lidia, became godparents to Bob's third child and second daughter, Dayna. Earl met Lydia while serving at Bari, Italy, in 1944. She was from Milan, and eventually she became his "war bride."*) The two Petes had been out late, just messing around, and at some point had found some really exquisite dates . . . not the kind you take foot-dancing, but the kind you pick off a tree and eat. On the long walk back to base, they feasted on these unusually tasty delicacies. When they finally got back to their tents, they gained some illumination . . . some real illumination . . . and more than one kind. In the light they noticed a few uninvited little guests. Worms! *No real panic . . . not to worry . . . it can happen any time, any place, but . . . as they went for the next one . . . and the next . . . the air grew tense. Checking the entire bag, they found nary a date that didn't house a nice, juicy worm or two. They figured they had eaten perhaps a pound or so before the 'less than desirable' discovery. (They weren't able to comprehend how welcome a little extra protein would be . . . until much later.)*

As part of the 20th replacement squadron, Peterson was sent out as an Information Center security guard at Oran. The Center was carved out of the mountain and was tightly secured. Inside was the plotting table for the entire Mediterranean theater. He was part of the building's security unit and enjoyed the intrigue and various duties there, especially refusing entry to higher ranking officers until they provided proper identification.

Once Peterson was on "stand-by" guard duty in a cement building adjacent to the Center. With unloaded weapons he and his comrades were practicing the "Queen Anne" salute, which involved some slick coordination and spinning the rifle on the

index finger before snapping into the salute. The corporal of the guard returned, having made his rounds, and decided to “show them the right way to do it.” He got their attention and proceeded to spin his rifle. A shot echoed through the compound, and the bullet penetrated the concrete floor right between Peterson’s legs (*military intelligence?*).

About two months later, and because there was a shortage of gunners, flight engineers, and mechanics, Peterson was sent to Maison Blanc Air Base, near Algiers. He was placed on temporary duty as a mechanic. It was here that he personally worked on General Eisenhower’s B17. He must have done good work . . . “Ike” survived!

Peterson had seen hundreds of German and Italian POWs, but while at Maison Blanc they unloaded a number of high ranking officers. Towering over them all in both physical and psychological stature was Jurgen Von Arnim. He was either a field marshal or general who had been captured during desert warfare. Peterson was only a few feet from him and noted his stately and impeccable appearance. He was impressed. Von Arnim would have been an associate of Rommel and may have been brought there to be questioned by Eisenhower. (*Rommel would later commit suicide.*)

He soon received orders to report to Salé Air Base, near Robat in Morocco, for gunnery training. It was in Morocco that Peterson and Swede (Woodrow Martin Lundquist) met. They were assigned to the 96th Bomb Squadron of the 2nd Bomb Group. (There were usually twelve B17’s in each squadron, and four squadrons in each Bomb Group. The 2nd Bomb Group included the 20th, 49th, 96th, and the 429th squadrons. The six Bomb Groups; the 2nd, 97th, 99th, 301st, 463rd and the 483rd, made up the 5th Bomb Wing.)

(Lundquist was lovingly known throughout his life as “Uncle Swede,” not only to Peterson’s own children, but to nieces, nephews, grandchildren, and unending numbers of friends as well. Peterson’s fourth child and second son, Daniel, shares Swede’s middle name, “Martin.”)

Peterson and Swede had joined the 2nd Bomb Group near Constantine, Algeria, at a base called “Ain M’lila.” They were linked with other replacement gunners that had been merged with various crews as the need came up . . . and . . . as attrition became evident. A number of individuals in this group had already been on “various tables of organization,” and most had some degree of rank - some

20TH BOMB SQUADRON, 2ND BOMB GROUP



(Back, L-R) Foust, Coppinger, Stetner, Mork
 Stetner was not on the mission 24 Feb, Kurtz (not pictured) was on the crew.
 (Front, L-R) Clark (died on the 80-day march), Harvey, O'Leary, Beene, Riccio, Hammond

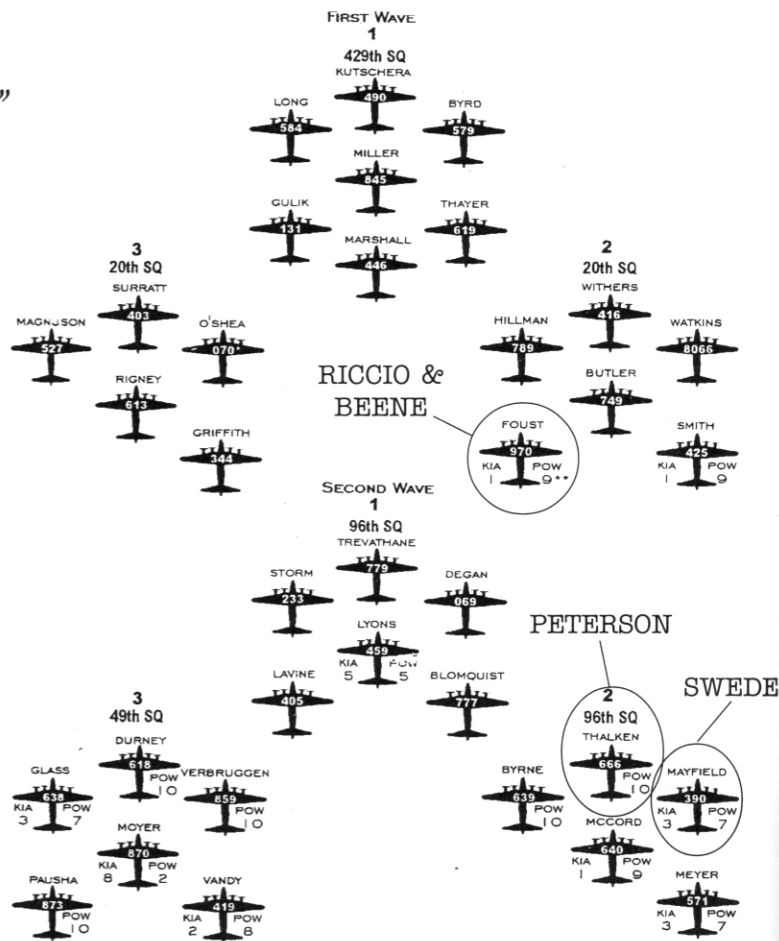
*"God is our refuge and strength,
 a very present help in trouble."
 Psalm 46:1*

Formation Chart **MISSION 150**

Steyr, Austria (Aircraft Factory)
 24 February 1944

2nd Bomb Grp Summary

	Feb. 24	WWII
Lost Aircraft (B-17s).....	14	178
KIA	27	522
POW	113	586
Died as POW	1	Unknown



On February 24, 1944, Peterson was selected to fill in for another crew member, Oscar Rome, who had burned his arm in an accident involving some gasoline, a stove, and a flash fire. Rome was to have been the right waist gunner that day, so instead Peterson was directed to that position. The plane (#42-31666) was piloted by Captain John W. (Bill) Thalken. It was a B-17G bomber named “Miss Laid” and prophetically had the “666” as the last three ominous digits in her serial number. She was in the right rear group of the Second Wave of the 96th Squadron. Also in the wave of 17 planes was the 49th Squadron. In the first wave there were 18 planes; the 429th was in the lead with the 20th in the left, right rear. George Dean, the radio operator, showed up that morning without the proper equipment. Peterson generously offered him his extra electrically-heated gloves, and another mechanic had an extra parachute harness. Fortunately, or unfortunately, he was then well-equipped and was able to make the flight.

(Oscar Rome and Mike Croccia were killed in action while on a later mission, March 19, 1944, at Klagenfurt, Austria.)

“Miss Laid” Crew

96th Squadron

Capt. John W. Thalken, Pilot

2nd Lt. Richard L. Gower, Co-pilot

1st Lt. Samuel P. Mayer, Navigator

2nd Lt. William C. Williams, Bombardier

T/Sgt. Herman Sussman, U/T (upper turret)

S/Sgt. Karl J. Letters, L/T (lower turret)

S/Sgt. Robert T. Peterson, R/W (right waist)

S/Sgt. Thomas H. Bell, L/W (left waist)

S/Sgt. Joseph A. Peters, T/G (tail gunner)

T/Sgt. George O. Dean, R/O (radio operator)

The squadron formed up and headed north toward the intended target, a ball-bearing and aircraft parts factory at Steyr, Austria. The planes were to turn eastward at Lambach (the I.P. or “initial point”) and fly directly to the target. The American fighters could not stay in the air the entire time it took to make the raid because of limited fuel capacity, so the bomber pilots had the choice of whether the fighters

escorted them *there* or *back* . . . not both. The latter was chosen. . . . *a curious choice, since after bombs are dropped it is a little late to take defensive action. Strategic planning would most likely suggest action **before** the bombers reached their target site in order to prevent them from completing their mission.* So . . . making imperfect sense . . . the fighters were to meet them *following* the bombing raid and escort them home. Hence they were nearing their target and were *not escorted* by fighters. Earlier one bomber had turned back because of an engine problem. Peterson's was the lead plane of the second element of the second wave. The 49th was slightly behind them in the "tail-end Charlie" position. The plane on Peterson's left was piloted by Al Byrne and the one on the right by Lt. Mayfield.

They were suddenly hammered by a huge and aggressive swarm of German fighters, who were everywhere and attacked almost "Kamikaze" style . . . they just kept coming. (*Records indicate that the actual numbers were 110 fighters: fifty-eight Me-109's, twenty-five Me-110's, ten FW-190's, ten Ju-88's, six Me-210's, and one Me-202.*)

Just after the right turn at Lambach, "Miss Laid" was severely damaged, suffering a monstrous hole blown through her right wing, however, Peterson couldn't see any fire. Suddenly Mayfield's left wing burst apart in a fiery explosion. The force threw them up and over the front of Peterson's plane, nearly colliding with it. Peterson's close friend, Swede, was in it! Then to the left, Byrne's plane went down! Peterson's plane was left behind, trailing nearly a half a mile behind the rest of the formation. Two Me-109's came in almost "wing tip" close. Peterson raked them with his 50 caliber. The German fighters appeared to be hit, and smoking they dropped quickly away. The radio operator, T/Sgt. George Dean, came charging by Peterson on his way to bail out. The left waist gunner, S/Sgt. Thomas Bell, signaled to Peterson that he was out of ammo, but Peterson still had some and continued to use it. He still had not seen any fire in his plane even though at this point it was likely that two engines were out. Since he no longer had any intercommunication, he hadn't received any orders or status clarification. He hadn't yet seriously considered that they were going down. Bell got his chute on and motioned toward Peterson's still resting in front of him. The tail gunner, Joe Peters, had his chute gathered up in his arms. Somehow it had opened, and now he would have to jump cradling it like a bundle of laundry. Peterson harnessed on his chute and joined Bell to exit. When they got to the hatch, they found Dean standing in the doorway, struggling unsuccessfully to open it against the wind. Peterson reached over and popped the hinge pins, and the door abruptly blew out and away. Dean froze in the doorway with his hands

seriously injured, if not killed, had they not been so well defended. They were again questioned briefly, but the tough questioning didn't come until just outside of Frankfurt.

It was at Wetzler and Dulag Luft that the interrogations started becoming psychological and threatening. Unfortunately the "dog tags" gave out too much information, such as the hometown and whether the soldier was an "enlistee" or not. The first "1" in Peterson's serial number, 16070345, indicated that he had enlisted and the "6" that he was from the Chicago area. Anyone from Chicago was considered an "undesirable" and was presumed to be dangerous. He was coined a "Flying gangster" (in German, "Fliegen" gangster!). To have enlisted meant that you *wanted* to fight the Germans! Again, not a good thing to advertise! "Schweinhund" was another common term of endearment (literally, "pig dog"). Peterson kept fairly cool and continued to repeat only his name, rank, and serial number. He was repeatedly questioned and repeatedly threatened. Eventually he was informed that since he wasn't *really* part of any official squadron, **he would be shot!** (*Remember, he had replaced someone else, so his name didn't appear as part of the official unit.*) He continued to refuse to answer anything other than name, rank, or serial number, and they continued to stress, "**You will be shot!**" It was also obvious that the Germans had access to a substantial amount of current and classified information. They had lists identifying who was who in each squadron, and so on. They even knew that one prisoner had been promoted (something of which the prisoner himself was not yet aware)!

They were transported in box cars to Stalag Luft VI in East Prussia. The nearest village was "Heydekrug" (near Memel, Lithuania, now called Klaipeda. It was situated approximately 9.3 miles west of the Lithuanian border and about the same distance south of the bay "Kurisches Haff.") They were now official residents at the "Kriegsgefangenenlager der Luftwaffe" (war prisoner compound of the air force). It was here that Swede and Peterson met up again. In some ways they were more than brothers, and this was a warm and grateful reunion. Swede was in room G4 with Leonard Kaminsky (Mel Brooks' big brother) and 48 others. Peterson was in G5 with "Snake" Hammond, Silvio Riccio, Hugh Hamilton and 46 others.

(Peterson met up with Kaminsky again in 1985 at a POW reunion. At first he didn't

remember Peterson, but as he was reminded of Swede Lundquist and that they had been together in G-4 at the camp, Kaminsky grinned and recalled Swede. He said, "I remember Swede . . .we were playing cards and I kept kibitzing. Swede said to 'quit it', but I did it again. And then he knocked me on my ass!")

Just like in the movies, prisoners schemed and planned constantly. How and when were they going to escape? They even had "escape" committees. Ideas were brought forward, valid or not, and participants were selected. One such group planned a "great escape." Silvio Riccio joined a group that thought they could escape by going down into the outhouse waste, make a tunnel in the side wall and crawl out under the main gate. It sounded feasible because the main gate was the only place where it would be possible to tunnel out. Everywhere else around the compound there was a "V" shaped trench, cut down to the water line in the sandy soil, except for this one gated area near the latrine. The trench wasn't cut here to allow for vehicles to drive through the perimeter fence. The latrine, just like an old-fashioned out-house except made to accommodate the waste of 1200 men, was extremely rough with back-to-back wooden crate-like seats with a hole cut in the top of each box. There was a short wooden partition between the sets of seats. Two buildings like this were in the compound to serve 2400 men. Even if this "deluxe" unit was just freshly pumped out, it would **not** be an agreeable place to spend the night! The plan was to drop down into the sewage and wait there until lock-up at sundown. They would be trapped there until daylight but would continue working on the tunnel throughout the night. The plan was set into motion, but they had tunneled only about five feet before it caved in. The soil was too sandy. Fortunately, they were not caught.

(Riccio remained proud of his heroism in "the hole" well into his seventies. When he and Peterson met at a reunion fifty years later, they recounted and commemorated the event. It was there that Peterson presented Riccio with a Ph.D. (Pretty High and Deep) for "Tunneling.")

Another latrine story involved someone reaching in one hole with a long pointed stick, stretching up to the next seat behind and swatting a butt. The resulting scream - something about "rat bites" - was hilarious (Peterson and Swede thought so anyway) and provided plenty of material for ongoing "stand-up" comedy for a considerable time to come.