

Escape to Freedom

By HOWARD W. CANNON U.S. Senator from Nevada



■ Sen. Howard W. Cannon (D.-Nev.) is a qualified jet command pilot in the Air Force. In World War II, he served five years in the Armed Forces, enlisting as a first lieutenant and emerging as a lieutenant colonel. His 15 decorations include the Distinguished Flying Cross, Air Medal with two Oak Leaf Clusters, Purple Heart, Presidential Unit Citation, and the French Croix de Guerre.

ONE RECENT MORNING, I received a surprise birthday gift from a friend of mine in the Pentagon. It was an oil painting of a war scene in Holland, depicting two shabbily dressed "farmers" crossing a bridge near a bombed-out village. Incongruously, in the foreground, there was a large apple from which someone had taken a bite.

The painting was by Col. Roy Weinzettel of the U.S. Air Force, who had been an Intelligence officer in our wing during World War II. I was one of the "farmers" shown escaping to freedom.

The scene holds deep meaning to me, and I hope it will to all Americans as well as to the rest of the free world. Now, for the first time, I am telling the full story behind the picture.

As operations officer with the 440th Troop Carrier Group, I had copiloted the lead plane dropping paratroops over France on D-Day. On Sept. 17, 1944, during the Allied invasion of Holland, our mission was to discharge 'chutists over the Arnhem bridge. Col. Frank X. Krebs of Chicago and I were the pilots in the lead C-47 plane.

Flying through heavy flak over enemy-held territory, we dropped the paratroops and started back. I saw two Allied planes catch fire and another burning on the ground. As we turned for home, climbing to 3,000 feet, I thought the worst was over.

Our Plane Is Lost

Just as we passed Breda, we were hit. I heard a terrific explosion in our left engine. The left propeller vanished, there was a huge hole in our side and companionway, and the cockpit was a shambles of broken glass. With controls gone, the ship began to nose down in a spiral. I rang the signal bell ordering the crew to bail out.

Hydraulic fluid from the shot-out lines spurted all over us, almost blinding me. I groped for my parachute but slipped on the fluid and fell on my face. When I regained my balance, I had a hard time getting out of my flak suit, but I finally hooked on the 'chute pack and managed to reach the cabin door with the aid of Colonel Krebs. The rest of the crew had already bailed out.

I had never jumped before. Hardly able to see, I dived. When my parachute billowed out, I was at an altitude of about 800 feet.

As we drifted with the wind, German patrols below started shooting at us. To put it mildly, it was

For three days, Senator Cannon and Colonel Krebs hid in a "room" beneath a woodpile as a battery of German 88s kept shells whizzing by.

Shot down behind German lines during the war, a U.S. Senator tells about his amazing adventure—and the people who taught him a priceless lesson

as told to Theodore Irwin

uncomfortable. Landing in a potato field, we got rid of our 'chutes and ran for cover to a ditch as Germans on bicycles headed through the field toward us. With me were Colonel Krebs, who had broken his left arch in the fall, and T/Sgt. Frank Broga of Chester, Mass., our crew chief.

We lay flat on our backs in the watery ditch, tall brush and grass pulled over us. Our .45s were cocked while we listened to the searching Germans yelling and jamming bayonets into piles of straw. After an interminable time, they left.

Then, suddenly, a Dutch farmer was standing over us. He motioned to us to stay hidden. When we couldn't understand what he was saying, he pointed to my watch—to 9 o'clock. We caught the idea that he would return after dark.

Could we trust the farmer not to give us away? Some of our flyers had told us not to expect any help from the Dutch because they were "first cousins of the Germans" and the only way to talk to them was with a .45. For the next five hours we sweated it out.

Toward dusk, we crawled under a pile of straw. When the farmer finally returned and we could see he was alone, we emerged. We followed him to the top of a hill. There we came upon two men in uniform. In a quick reflex action we pulled out our guns. They only grinned at us. It turned out they were local policemen, both in the underground.

With the policemen slowly riding their bicycles ahead of us, we started the longest walk I've ever taken. The Germans would have shot without warning anyone out after curfew without special-permission identification. Three times we encountered enemy patrols, but the policemen tipped us off, and we kept out of sight until the patrols passed. Reaching a farm, we were hidden in a shed.

Then came the Dutch "reception committee"—all the neighboring farmers bringing bread, cheese, and hot milk. Everyone there wanted to shake hands with us. It gave me a singular feeling of brotherhood that I had never before experienced.

At 2 a.m., we moved on, Krebs riding the handle bars of a policeman's bicycle. At the home of the local underground leader, in the little town of Audenbosch, Colonel Krebs' foot was treated by a doctor. Sergeant Broga and I slept in the attic of the police station. After two days we were given police uniforms and, riding motorcycles, boldly proceeded to the city of Breda.

We Have a Cozy Hideout

For three weeks, our home was a department store that had been closed to civilians, although the Germans often came to requisition items. Our "bedroom" was the upholstery department, and naturally there was plenty of furniture on which to sleep. Whenever the enemy barged in, we scooted out through a tunnel to the home of the store owner across the street. Or, if we didn't have time, we'd climb through the trap door in the ceiling of the elevator, push a switch that put it out of order, and sit on its top until we were safe.

We ate mostly potatoes, cooked in the store's deserted restaurant kitchen, and occasionally had a sort of meat stew. Food was scarce, and it must have been a hardship for the Dutch to feed us.

I knew, too, that by hiding us the Dutch were risking their lives every hour. Collaborators were busy informing on anti-Nazis and revealing hidden Allied fugitives. Every day we were told of Dutch citizens being rounded up and executed for taking part in underground activities.

In our department store, other American, British, and Canadian flyers kept joining us until there were 13—too dangerous for so many wanted men in one hideout. We had to split up into pairs. Colonel Krebs and I were presented with civilian clothes, ration books, birth certificates, and forged identification papers complete with photographs, our own fingerprints, and official seals. I was "Hendrik van Gils," a city clerk, and Krebs was a schoolteacher.

The Long Trek Back Begins

The superb efficiency of the underground continued to amaze me. Even our brown paratroop boots, a sure giveaway, had been dyed black. If we were caught in civilian clothes, we'd be shot as spies, so the underground kept our uniforms for that emergency.

In the next few weeks we hid in closets of several homes and then under the floor in the home of a Dutch officer who had spent 18 months in a Nazi prison. His spirit hadn't been shaken. To keep busy, we did household chores and buried his heirlooms in the cellar. Every now and then, German search parties came through, and we felt we were endangering the family. We decided to make a break to the Allied lines.

Setting the day, we asked for complete new sets of identification papers and some old clothes. The Dutch came through with their usual finesse. Colonel Krebs became a farmer carrying a hoe. I was his hired man with an armful of twigs for firewood. He could speak German, but I knew only a few words of the language, so I tied a bandage around my neck. If we were stopped, Krebs could say I had a sore throat and couldn't talk.

At a predetermined hour we walked down a street until we came to a bridge where two 14-year-old boys were munching apples. This was our recognition signal. I pulled an apple out of my pocket and took a bite. (The apple and the bridge are shown in the oil painting.) Whistling cheerfully, the boys assigned to be our guides walked ahead of us as we trudged along.

We had 15 miles to go on foot, through roadblocks and patrols in no man's land. Every two or three miles, our young guides would change, so that none would be found too far from home—a serious offense to the Nazis. To skirt some towns, we followed ditches and climbed through barbed-wire barricades. Other times, we couldn't avoid walking by sentry posts, but we had learned to say "Morga" ("Howdy") to the guards.



Senator Cannon (l.) and Colonel Krebs reminisce over their war experience depicted in painting.

Occasionally, the boys were stopped, and we plodded on until the youngsters caught up.

At the end of that nerve-racking day, we arrived at a farmhouse scarred by shelling. In the yard, a woodpile covered the bottom of an old silo. The widow who owned the farm pulled aside a few sticks of wood and pointed to a small "room" under the brush. Even some food awaited us.

About an hour later, a battery of German 88s rolled up nearby and started firing. They were so close we could hear a German officer give his orders to fire. For three days shells were whizzing around us—both ways. The farmhouse was hit, the barn knocked down, and two sheep killed. That meant fresh mutton, served graciously by the widow to her eight children—and the two Americans in the silo.

In the middle of the fourth night, the 88s pulled out and an eerie silence settled over the farm. Next morning we ventured out of our room under the woodpile to stretch our cramped legs. Then we heard voices of a patrol moving up. We were about to dash back to shelter when our ears caught the clear sounds of familiar slang. They could only be GIs! A few days later, we were back with our outfit, after 42 days behind enemy lines.

Shortly before that Christmas, after the Breda area was liberated, Colonel Krebs and I loaded a plane with clothes, C-rations, candy, soap, and cigarettes—all contributed by about 50 men in our outfit. This mountain of supplies was heaped into a trailer and jeep which we took along in our C-47. Landing near Breda, we retraced our steps in the jeep and trailer, passing out our tokens of gratitude to those who had helped us.

This is the simple story of the oil painting now hanging in my Senate office in Washington.

It is not a profile of heroism by a couple of jittery American airmen; the real heroes are the Dutch people. Colonel Krebs and I were symbols of the free world. We were important to all these vanquished but unconquerable people who treasured the dignity of liberty.

When I parachuted into Holland, I felt I was nothing—someone small and unimportant—a speck in the universe leaving a disabled plane for a hostile country. When I left Holland, I sensed I had accomplished far more than our original mission—I had learned from the "defeated" the true meaning of freedom and how we must never give up fighting for it.