



Twelfth Armored Division Association

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12th Armored Division Rescues Wounded Fighter Pilot

As part of the Seventh Army's triumphant drive from the Rhine River down through southern Germany to the Danube River and into Austria, the 12th Armored Division rescued American and Allied POWs, slave laborers, displaced persons, and concentration camp internees. The total number is probably unknown but is estimated in the thousands.

This story is about one wounded American fighter pilot, Bill Cullerton, who said he was rescued by a unit of the 12th Armored Division near the town of Feuchtwangen on April 20/21, 1945.

In the summer of 1943, Bill Cullerton, a Chicago area native, joined the Army Air Corps with the idea that he would be a fighter pilot. After completing his physicals and other tests, he was told his chances were slim due to his low scoring on his test and the that he should consider other positions such as bombardier, a navigator, or a staff officer. He persisted in his dream to become a fighter pilot. He persevered through cadet basic training and advanced to flight training in a PT-19, an open cockpit, two-seat trainer, for student and instructor. He then advances to the solo B-13 and later on to a real fighter aircraft, the P-40 Warhawk. One of Cullerton's instructor is a Canadian ex-barnstorming pilot who teaches him many maneuvers that are not in the instruction manual for fighter pilots, and Cullerton excels in these tactics. The final phase of his training is with an A-36, an aircraft that was used to prepare pilots for aerial combat. All through the training cycle, cadets were washed out of the fighter pilot class and transferred to other training. When Bill Cullerton graduates as a fighter pilot, he is one of only three that made it from a class of 100.

In early June, 1944, Lt. Cullerton arrives in England and is assigned to the 357th Squadron, 355th Fighter Group, 8th U.S. Army Air Force. He spends a few days getting familiar with the P-51 Mustang and with the procedures of the 357th Squadron. Due to the shortage of pilots, Cullerton is on his first mission the next week. He is part of the bomber escort for B-17s and B-24s on their mission to Germany. Some of the early missions are boring but for Bill a learning experience. They P-51s rendezvous with the bombers over the Channel, escort them to the target and back, protect them from enemy fighters, and look for targets of opportunity, and return home. They take on German fighters, bombers, or strafe German airports, trains or military vehicles or installations. By late August, Bill Cullerton has 33 missions and several German planes to his credit.

In August 1944, with the Russians approaching Warsaw, the Polish underground Freedom Fighters start an offensive against the German occupiers of the capital city. The battle rages for weeks while the Russians stop at the gates of Warsaw to re-organize, hoping the Freedom Fighters will kill a lot of Germans and the Germans will eliminate the Poles. The Poles need help. After much delay and negotiations with Stalin, Gen. Eisenhower decides to provide help to the Warsaw fighters with a substantial airlift of food, arms and medicine. Bill Cullerton is part of the escort to protect three bomber groups that will drop the supplies over Warsaw. After the airdrop, all the planes will continue to Russia to re-fuel and re-supply. That night, the Russians stage a night of dining and drinking. Most of the Americans brought whiskey and cigarettes for the Russians. The next morning the entire group of 100 bombers and 72 P-51s armed with Russian bombs, hit the railroad yards in Hungary. They then proceed on to an Allied Base in Foggia, Italy. A day or so later, the Mustangs escort the bombers to their base in France and they head for their home field in England.

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Bill Cullerton's final mission was on November 4, 1944. He had completed 55 missions and was eligible to go home for Stateside duty. He was an ace fighter pilot and was the first in the 8th Army Air Force to destroy 8 enemy planes in one day and the first to destroy 15 enemy planes in two days. Before he leaves for the States, the Group Commander offers Cullerton the position of Flight Leader if he promises to return for a second tour. The answer is "yes".

By November 15, 1944, Bill Cullerton is back in Chicago and is hailed as a war hero. Bill is in all the Chicago newspapers being photographed with Mayor Edward J. Kelly and other politicians.

Early in 1945, Bill Cullerton is back at the Steeple Morden airfield in England. He receives the latest version of the P-51 Mustang and is back in the routine with the 355th Fighter Group. On the 8th of April, Bill's group escorts a flight of B-24 bombers over Germany. At this point in time there is less danger from German fighters. When the escort mission is completed, the fighter squadron looks other targets and decides to strafe the Airdrome at Ansbach. Bill is approaching the airfield at treetop level and is hit by anti-aircraft flak. The P-51 shudders and bursts into flame. Bill tries to gain altitude while the fuel fire is licking at his back. He ejects his canopy and is somehow thrown out of the plane. He pulls his ripcord, the chute opens and in seconds he hits the ground. He hits very hard but has no injuries. He sees his plane crash and explode about a quarter mile away. He runs across an open field to an adjacent forest and hides under the heavy pine bows, a chance to catch his breath, calm his nerves and formulate a plan. He stays in the woods until dark, then plans to head west. One of the buttons on his flight suit unscrews to reveal a hidden compass. He checks the direction and heads west through the pitch-black forest. For three or four days, traveling at night and hiding during the daylight, he begs food

from the slave farm workers in the fields on occasion as he moves closer to the American lines. As the morning light comes through the evergreen trees, Bill hears the sound of American artillery and then the responding German artillery. The American artillery moves closer and eventually begins to crash through the trees. Bill decides that the forest is not the best place to be as the American artillery advances. Even though it is now daylight, he runs across an open field to the adjacent woods. He runs over a small hill and runs into a group of German soldiers, a dozen or so Waffen SS. The Germans are fleeing the oncoming artillery. There is nothing to do but surrender. The officer in charge walks up to Bill Cullerton and requests Bill's Colt 45. He sticks it against Bill's body just below the rib cage and says "For you the war is over and pulls the trigger. That's all Bill remembers. The Germans assume he is dead and are in hurry to leave. Bill lies there, in and out of consciousness for the rest of the day and night. While he is conscious, he can tell he is bleeding from the front and from the back. His eyes are covered with frost and he is cold and hurting. He passes out or falls asleep, then feels someone taking off his watch. He moans and startles the scavenger. A local peasant is rifling his pockets for valuables, and is surprised that the body is alive. He drags Bill to a wagon and takes him to a small hospital in Feuchtwangen.

The hospital is run by Nuns from Bavaria and one civilian doctor, Dr. Meier. The doctor examines Cullerton and tells him he is bleeding internally and will probably die since there is nothing the doctor can^{do} except make him comfortable and sneak him some food. Over the next few days, with the food and care Bill receives from the Nuns and Dr. Meier, the bleeding stops and he regains some strength. The Germans are retreating and want to take Cullerton with them. The doctor objects and asks that they sign for the prisoner so that the doctor will not be responsible when the Americans arrive. The soldiers refuse and leave. The next day when the doctor is

busy, the soldiers take Bill out of the room and accidentally push him down the stairs. Hearing the commotion, the doctor again berates the soldiers and returns Bill to his bed. Later that afternoon, the doctor tells Bill that he must escape that night. All the Germans will be leaving the next day and they will take the prisoner without the doctor's permission. The doctor arranges to have a large pile of manure placed under the second floor window to break Bill's fall. A young Dutch boy who cleans up at the hospital, brings a pillow case with Bill's flightsuit and some food to Bill's room after dark. Bill jumps out the window into the pig manure and is on his way headed toward the west. A short distance outside of Feuchtwangen, Bill cannot go further and hides in a culvert under the road. As daybreak approaches he hears vehicles. Hiding in the culvert, he hears trucks, tanks, motorcycles and wagons, all heading east. This goes on for hours, then silence. After about five or six hours, the noise return, but this time the sound is different. The German tanks had a high-pitched whining sound. Now the sound is a low rumbling roar. Bill Cullerton decides that these tanks must be American and crawls out of the culvert, waving and yelling "American pilot, American pilot". The tanker standing in the turret, holding sub-machine gun says "I don't care who you are. Don't move or I'll shoot you". A number of U.S. Infantrymen run up with rifles aimed at Bill. They ask "Who the hell are you?. He tells them that he is a P-51 pilot from the 355th Fighter Squadron. Bill Cullerton is cold and weak and sits down as the Infantrymen mill around and ask questions. They ask him if he is wounded and he tells them his story. They immediately collect four or five blankets to get Bill warm and produce a bottle of fine brandy that they liberated. The brandy tastes good and warms Bill's stomach. Then someone gets some fresh eggs boiling and Bill eats the eggs and sips the brandy and then he throws up.

The Captain comes over and tell Bill that this force was to return as soon as they checked out Feuchtwangen, but because a tank ride was out of the

question for a wounded man, they radioed back for an ambulance and would stay with him until it arrives.

After a couple hours, the ambulance arrives and a medic, a young officer examines Bill and exclaims "Jeez, who got this guy drunk? He's wounded and bleeding and now you have him drunk". The ambulance takes Bill to the Field Hospital behind the lines where he sees all kind of wounded soldiers. The medics examine him carefully to determine that ^{he was} shot with a hole in front and an exit hole in his back. They put him on an air transport to the 250th General Hospital in Paris. After 3 or 4 days, Bill gets himself moved to a military hospital near his old base in England. The doctors there are amazed by his rapid recovery after a bullet wound from a Colt 45 and his ordeal over the past two weeks. They tell Bill he is fortunate that his executioner pressed the 45 tight against his stomach. A foot or two away and Bill Cullerton would have died in minutes.

Bill flies from Scotland to New York, then went by train to Washington DC for debriefing, another train ride to Chicago and Bill is home on June 12, 1945.

Now for the 12th Armored Division's part of the story that is short and puzzling. Bill Cullerton was shot down in the afternoon of August 8, 1945. When he leaves the Tank/Infantry force outside of Feuchtwangen in the ambulance, he asks the medic "What day is it". The medic replies, "I think it is the 21st". During the last 12 or 13 days, Bill has been in various stages of consciousness. Everything is blurred. To add to his medical problems, he is also full of Brandy.

On April 19, the 12th Armored Division is in the area of Feuchtwangen. CCA is in Schwabach. CCB and CCR are in Ansbach. All three Combat Commands head for Feuchtwangwn. to launch a two-pronged attack on a south axis toward the Danube River. It appears that all three Commands passed through Feuchtwangen on April 20/21 and my guess is that the first scouting units of tank

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and Infantry, would be the units the Bill Cullerton met at the culvert in which he was hiding. The first scouting group probably was from CCR according to information in "Seventh U.S. Army--Report of Operations", page 805 and "Journal of Operations of the 17th Armored Infantry Battalion", page 11/12.

I first met Bill Cullerton in March of 1999. He came to our American Ex-POW meetings and gave a short talk about being shot down, dodging the Germans, his capture and execution, his escape from the hospital and his rescue by the American Forces. He made no mention of the area of Germany where this occurred nor the units that rescued him.

The next time that I saw Bill was mid-November, 2005. I turned on the TV after dinner, and there was Bill Cullerton being interviewed on Channel 11, the local public television station. The program was "Chicago Tonight" with host Bob Sirrot. The program was in progress and I missed a portion, but as Bill was finishing his story, he said that he was rescued by the 12th Armored Division. I was dumbfounded and was kicking myself that I did not find out this in March of 1999.

The next day I called Bill Cullerton and we talked for some time and reviewed his story. I told him that I never heard nor read any accounts that match his story. He then said, "Well maybe it was the 14th Armored Division, but I'm pretty sure it was the 12th. I get those two units mixed up". I told him that I would like to write a story about him and the 12th Armored Division if I can dig up some of the details.

After more than two months of searching books and records, searching the Internet and talking to a number of Hellcats, I have a lot of data but no hard facts.

We can rule out the 14th Armored Division. I contacted the Historian of the 14th AD, A Mr. James Lankford, and his information is that the 14th AD was not in the area of Feuchtwangen on April 19-21, 1945. They were in and around Nuremberg and were proceeding in a northeastern direction toward the Third Army zone.

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Secondly, I think we can rule out independent Tank Battalion that are attached to an Infantry Division like the 63rd Infantry. They were involved in mopping up operations in the Seventh Army, but were further west (near Heilbronn) and would normally follow the spearhead units.

That leaves the 12th Armored Division. Bill Cullerton remembers the unit as the 12th AD and the Division's objective was Feuchtwangen. Records confirm that CCR was in town on April 20/21. What we need is conformation from Hellcats that were there or some documentation of the event.

For his service in the 355th Fighter Squadron, Bill Cullerton was credited with 27 German planes destroyed and the following decorations:

Distinguished Service Cross

Silver Star

Distinguished Flying Cross with Three Clusters

Purple Heart

Air Medal with Seven Clusters

Presidential Unit Citation

Prisoner of War Medal

European-African-Middle Eastern Campaign Medal

World War II Victory Medal

Polish Medal-Warsaw Uprising Cross

Russian Medal- Order of the Great Patriotic War

French Medal-Croix de Guerre

After being shot down, he never piloted a plane again. He was one of two Chicago area heroes to be considered for the naming of Chicago's O'Hare International Airport. Butch O'Hare was selected.

After the War, Bill Cullerton resumed his interest in the Fishing Tackle Industry and became a legend in the Sport Fishing and Outdoor Sports World. He is a member of the International Sport Fishing Hall of Fame, the Fresh Water Sportfishing Hall of Fame, the Hall of Legendary Anglers and is listed

in America's 100 Sportfishing Legends. He has been active in encouraging youngsters into sport fishing and worked with the disabled and veterans. For more than twenty years , Bill has been Outdoor Editor of WGN Radio in Chicago conducting the popular weekly "Great Outdoors" show. He is semi-retired and does some consulting for the Cullerton Company and some voluntary activities.

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Historian

Sources

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- *History of the 23rd Tank Battalion--Jim Francis
- *Steel Victory--Harry Yeide
- *Journal of Operations of the 17th AIB
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JM;
THANK YOU FOR
HAVING
A GREAT CAP PHOTO

Bill Cullerton
02/20/01



