

## G.L. Leslie

Grover L. Leslie was a student at the University of Tennessee when Pearl Harbor was attacked. He enrolled in the United States Army Air Corps shortly after the attack. It was not his first experience with the military having been a cadet at the United States Naval Academy in 1938. However, he received a medical discharge after he had a fainting spell, brought on by the intense hazing that he and other cadets received from the upper classmen. He was glad to be discharged and had been a student at Tennessee for two and half years when the war broke out.

Leslie initially went to pre-flight training in Texas and, as he was going to be a navigator, he went to navigation training in Lubbock, Texas. As Leslie joked, “when they thought we were lost I confirmed it!” At the time he was training with a crew that was intended to fly B-17 Flying Fortress bombers which suited Leslie just fine. However, while in Lubbock the navigators from all the B-17 crews that were training were pulled out and transferred to Salt Lake City, Utah where they were assigned to be navigators on B-24 Liberator bombers. Leslie was not at all happy with the switch to B-24s as they had vulnerable fuel tanks that caused them to burn easily when hit by enemy fire. He was also not happy with the navigator position in the B-24 which was much smaller than in the B-17 and not equipped with a machine gun.

When Leslie and his crew had completed training they picked up a brand new B-24 from a factory in California and were soon to fly it to an overseas war theatre. They decided to give it their personal stamp by paying an airman \$100 to paint a cartoon on the nose of their B-24 before going off to war. They were given orders but were instructed not to open them until a certain point in their transfer flight. They knew they would go either to the European or Pacific theatres. Leslie dearly wished to go to the European Theatre.

They followed an air route that led south to Brazil and then over the Atlantic to Morocco. It was after leaving Fortaleza, Brazil that they were allowed to open their orders and discovered that they were assigned to 8<sup>th</sup> Air Force in England. They arrived in England in late 1943. There they were extremely disappointed to have “their” new B-24 and its new nose art immediately taken away from them! They had been assigned to one of the bomb groups that made up the 8<sup>th</sup> Air Force and were told they would be given an airplane when they arrived at their unit.

The crew began flying bombing missions in March 1944. On April 1, 1944 they were on their ninth mission when disaster struck. They were on a “good and easy” mission to bomb the I.G. Farben industrial plant in Frankfurt, Germany when things started to go wrong. The bombers were lined up and approaching the target with their bomb bay doors open, they were waiting for the lead bomber to drop its bombs, which was the signal for the rest of the group to drop. As the navigator on the plane Leslie was aware of the position of the group and was astounded when the group overflew the target without dropping their bombs! The group flew on almost to Switzerland “wandering around like a bunch of idiots”. Leslie recalls being able to see Lake Constance. Finally the lead bomber realized its mistake and wheeled around for another run on the target. By this

time their shorter ranged fighter escort was running low on fuel and had to return to their bases in England. This meant that the B-24s would be unescorted and vulnerable to the defending German fighters.

Unfortunately for Leslie and his crew they were attacked by a German fighter plane that fired into the forward part of the aircraft killing or wounding most of the crew located there. Leslie was in the navigator position in the nose of the B-24 but was partly protected from the incoming fire by boxes of machine gun ammunition. Despite this protection he was wounded in the hand and suffered burns on his hands and face. An alarm bell rang, which was the signal for the crew to bail and Leslie did so through the nose wheel well. In fact he was the only survivor from the nose section of the aircraft and the only officer in the crew to survive the downing. He had seen at least two other crewman bail out of the aft section of the aircraft.

Leslie landed in a tree and found himself unable to easily get down. Because of his injuries he only had the use of one hand. He began unbuckling his parachute in order to lower himself to the ground but with only one good hand he lost his grip, flipped upside down and fell to a hard landing on the ground. He was quickly captured by the Germans and taken to a hospital in Frankfurt, the place he had just been trying to bomb. There he stayed for six weeks where his injuries, now including an injured pelvis, were treated. He was impressed with care given by the German hospital staff and surprised by the number of Red Cross workers at the hospital.

Once he was well enough to travel he was sent to the Luftwaffe (German Air Force) Aircrew Interrogation Center or Dulag Luft in Frankfurt. There he insisted that he had no vital information to give the Germans since he had been in the hospital for six weeks and all of his operational knowledge was undoubtedly outdated. He confessed later that in fact he probably could have told the Luftwaffe interrogators things that were of interest to them but he was determined not to. In the end he was transferred to Stalag Luft III in Zagan, in modern-day Poland. Stalag Luft III was a prisoner of war camp for Allied airmen run by the Luftwaffe.

Leslie was in for two surprises when he reached the POW camp, one pleasant, one not so pleasant. On the pleasant side he found three other classmates from the 1938 class of Lee-Edwards High School in Asheville. They were Furman Davis, Joe Davis and Bill Bradley. The four men hadn't been particularly close in high school but now, finding themselves in a tough situation they formed a quick friendship that helped all of them get through to the end of the war. However before Leslie had this fortunate reunion he found himself placed in solitary confinement. He didn't know why at first but after a few days he thought he would try to communicate with one of the German guards to find out the reason for his treatment. He asked one of the guards, a sergeant, if he spoke English and the guard replied in fluent English "Enough to get by!" The sergeant explained that he was in fact a graduate of Oxford University in England! Leslie joked that, "he spoke English better than I did!" In the end this man was able to help sort out the question of how Leslie ended up in solitary. It turned out that when he was admitted to the hospital in Frankfurt his first and last names had gotten switched, when the Germans discovered that

there was no information on Leslie Grover they assumed he was lying. Fortunately the error was discovered and after ten days in solitary Leslie was released to the general population where he met his Lee-Edwards companions.

Leslie described conditions in the camp as tough but bearable. The men were placed in blocks or barracks consisting of a central hallway with rooms off of either side. Each block held about 100 men. The food was tolerable but there wasn't really enough. However considering the situation in Germany at the time and the suffering of the German population as a whole, Leslie thought the prisoners were well fed. The men spent their time playing cards and in Leslie's case sleeping. He "hibernated" so much that he earned the nickname "Bear".

In general they were treated well by the camp guards. There was some apprehension among the prisoners about what the Germans would do when they realized that they were going to lose the war. The prisoners were given a hint as to how some Germans felt about the war when news of President Roosevelt's death reached the camp in April 1945. Leslie found the guards "as much in mourning as we were". Later they realized that the Germans, in fact, knew they were going to lose the war and hoped that Americans, under Roosevelt, would give them more lenient surrender terms than the British or Soviets.

The worst effect of the impending end of the war was the constant westward movement of the POWs. The Soviets were steadily driving into Poland and Germany in early 1945 and the Germans moved the Allied prisoners to keep them from being liberated. Since there was no transport to be spared to move the prisoners they were forced to march everywhere. Leslie lost track of the various locations they moved from but did remember hauling around a record player that had been supplied by the Red Cross wherever they went. As he said he had "a strong back and a weak mind" and thought it would be good to have music to provide some entertainment during the moves!

On April 29, 1945 his group of prisoners was liberated by an American armored division advancing into Germany. His block was one of the first to be released and sent to France where they received medical examinations to ensure they were relatively healthy. Leslie was sent to a hospital at Le Havre, France for a short time to recuperate from a minor illness. He dropped from 210 to 168 pounds but other than that was in fairly good health.

After that he was transported, with other POWs aboard a ship with returning soldiers and war wives (non-American women who had married American soldiers and were going to meet them in the United States.) Leslie had fond memories of the trip home as the crew had established a special, well stocked mess for the returning prisoners. They were allowed to eat before the other passengers, including the war wives. Once they had eaten they would then sneak into the regular mess and eat again with the returning soldiers and war wives! They had been cautioned about eating too much too quickly after having been deprived of a regular, healthy diet for so long but they couldn't help themselves. They had been hungry for a long time and wanted to eat!

Leslie arrived in New York City in late spring 1945 and after a period of leave visiting his family he returned to Texas to get refresher navigation training. The war with Japan was still ongoing and many airmen were being transferred to the Pacific for the planned invasion of Japan. It was in Texas that he received news of the atomic bombings that ultimately led to a Japanese surrender. He was quickly discharged and returned to home to North Carolina where he helped his parents run a motel and tourist gift store in Cherokee for two years before moving back to Asheville with them to take up farming. In the meantime in November 1946, he married a girl he had been acquainted with at Lee-Edwards High School. They later had a son who fought in the Vietnam War as a soldier in the Army. Fortunately, Leslie was able to impart some of the lessons he learned from his experience in World War Two that helped his son get through his own war experience.

When asked what lessons Leslie took from the war, it was apparent that his experiences, both traumatic and uplifting, had given him a wonderful perspective on life. In short he kept his sense of humor and learned not to sweat the small stuff. Not surprising for a man who had survived being shot down and spending a year as a “guest” of the Germans.