

WORLD WAR II:

The Last Letter Home
A story of faith, courage and heroism
as a young American pilot,
Lt. Charles Ralph Campbell of Rupert, Idaho,
makes the ultimate sacrifice in the cause of freedom
when his B-24 Liberator bomber is
shot down over Vienna, Austria
*on December 11, 1944**

By Rand Green
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THERE WERE FEW CLOUDS in the sky over Blechhammer, Germany the morning of October 13, 1944, as the formation of B-24 Liberator heavy bombers from the U.S. Army Air Force's 451st Bomb Group approached their target, an oil refinery that provided fuel for the Nazi war machine.

The good visibility was a two-edged sword: It made it easier for the bomber crews to see their target on the ground, and it made it easier for the German anti-aircraft defenses on the ground to see their targets in the air.

Lt. Charles Ralph Campbell saw a veritable wall of flak bursts in the sky ahead of him as the target came into view. Undeterred, the young pilot held his course as did the other pilots in the formation, flying directly into and through this barrage of aerial explosions that had proven to be Hitler's most effective defense against allied bombing missions.

Four months earlier, Allied forces had established a beach head at Normandy, suffering enormous casualties in the process. On the ground, the Allied troops were, for the first time in the war, making steady advances on the ground – but against stiff resistance and at horrible human cost.



Over Bleckhammer, October 1944

Lt. Ralph Campbell sent this photo home in late 1944. On the back, he wrote, "This is what it looked like over Bleckhammer that day. Note airplanes and vapor trails upper left, also formation center. The black puffs are where flack shells have burst into chunks of steel ranging in size from a half inch cube to a six inch square an inch thick."

Lt. Campbell the other nine members his crew – Jack Ward, Dave Davis, Kenneth Trimmer, Charles Clark, Paul Butler, Gilbert Fisher, Andrew Kraynak, William Devine and Vincent Daniels – had been together since their pilot training days back in the States. They had all grown close to one another, but Lt. Campbell and his copilot, Lt. Jack Ward, were particularly good friends. Just before shipping out to Italy, Ralph had been best man at Jack's wedding.

Ralph, Jack, and all of the other members of their crew knew well that diminishing Germany's ability to fuel its tank battalions and fighter squadrons would save American lives and hasten the end of the war.

They also knew the dangers facing them on every mission they flew.

Eight days earlier, Lt. Campbell, who was known as "Chuck" to his crew, had written home to his parents in Rupert, Idaho: "It isn't pleasant to see the realities of a war. I'm not saying this so you'll worry more, because I know you must be worrying about me now. I just believe I should let you know just what the score is. One of the finest chaps I know is a tail gunner on my buddy's crew. They were flying right next to me yesterday, and I saw the tail end of his ship blown up and disintegrate from a direct flak burst...."



"I Do" and "Adieu"

Lt. Jack Ward married his sweetheart Beverly just before shipping out. Ralph (far right) was best man at the wedding. Crew members Ken Trimmer (far left) and Dave Davis are also shown.

"Dad, I've seen the worst an enemy can hand out to us, and I do know that praying helps. You don't pray out loud because you're too busy, but when you see it coming, you put a lot of trust in your Heavenly Father."

"We came back yesterday with the hydraulic system for the flaps, landing gear and brakes shot out. We set her down safe, and no one had a scratch."

Now, once again, as their big bomber penetrated the flak wall defending the target, Lt. Campbell and his crew saw the bursts of black smoke around them at close range, heard the explosions of the anti-aircraft shells over the roar of their own engines, and felt the concussion as flak fragments struck the number two engine and ripped through the tail section. Coming off the target, the plane's number two engine was burning and the rudder controls were shot out.

In the tail turret of the plane just ahead of them, an army photographer snapped a picture freezing the moment in time. The photo shows smoke streaming from the number two engine of the plane, and behind it, a sky filled with flak bursts and dark smoke bellowing from the refinery below.

For the second time in just over two weeks, Lt. Campbell flew a damaged airplane back to the base in Castelluccio, Italy, with no injury to any of his crew. Later, writing to his parents about the mission, he said, "It took us three and a half hours to get back. But we landed with everyone in good shape."



Coming off the target in Blechhammer, 13 Oct. 1944

Ralph sent this photo home to his family in late 1944. On the back, he wrote, "A camera man in the lead ship snapped this picture of us as we were coming off the target, a big oil refinery at Bleckhammer, Germany. Our #2 engine was burning, and the rudder controls shot out. It took us three and a half ours to get back, but we landed with everyone in good shape." Co-pilot Jack Ward also sent a copy of this photo home and wrote on the back: "Oct. 1944, Blackhammer, Germany - Our rudder controls were shot out. Edge of flak area in background. Seems there was a war going on." (A nearly identical photo has been published elsewhere with the target identified as Vienna, Austria.)

Lt. Campbell and his crew were part of the 451st Bomb Group, 725th squadron, operating with the 15th Army Air Force. According to an account by John Bybee of the 764th Bomb Squadron ("Angels Unknown," www.461st.org), "since May 1944, 15th Air Force heavy bombers had hammered at fuel plants and oil refineries located at Ploesti, Vienna, Silesia, Poland, Sudetenland, and Budapest. In July, overcoming some of the most potent resistance encountered over Europe had cost the 15th Air Force 318 heavies." Among the casualties were 9 out of 24 Liberators from the 451st Bomb Group that were "shot down by waves of German fighters" while attacking Markersdorf Airdrome at Vienna on August 23. But by the end of August, the Italian-based 15th Air Force B-24s and B-17s "had sent 1.8 million tons of crude oil up in flames." They had also inflicted major damage to aircraft factories, airfields, bridges, marshalling yards and other targets.

Yet the job was far from over.

Charles Ralph Campbell was born in Burley, Idaho on the day after Christmas, 1922. He was the fifth child and oldest son of Charles and Rhoda Campbell. Growing up, he won grand championship in a grade school marble competition, became class president in high school, and worked summers and after school in the family produce business. He loved music and won several state and regional singing contests. He hoped to make music a career.

According to a family history written by his oldest sister, Elvera, Ralph also loved cars and trucks "and sometimes managed to make a few other people quite upset with him when he indulged in his love for speeding. 'He used to straight-pipe the trucks,' recalls one of his brother. 'You take the muffler off the truck and replace it with a straight pipe, and it makes those big trucks just beller like a bull. Of course, that made the local police most unhappy with him.'

"Although he had the height of a basketball player [he was well over six feet tall], much to the despair of the coach he lacked interest in high school sports, preferring the challenge of work." [*Tartan, Sage & History*, p. 318]

"Ralph went to the warehouse every night after school," recalled his brother Clarence. "The big thing there was ... to be able to lift a bigger load and throw it higher [than the next guy] when you were stacking beans or bucking potatoes. He could work anybody in the place under the table. Being the boss's son, he had to prove himself – and he did. He worked harder and longer and did more than anybody else in the business."

Ralph was 19 and attending college when Japan bombed Pearl Harbor on Dec. 7, 1941. Two years later, on October 29, 1943, he enlisted in the Army Air Forces Advanced Flying School at Ellington Field, Texas. He was class commander, and was commissioned a second lieutenant upon graduation. He took B-24 bomber training at the Combat Crew School at Tarrant Field in Fort Worth. While there, he wrote home: "Dear Mom & Dad, I really believe I'm going to like heavy bomb... A B-24 is a really good ship. I had three props feathered today and was holding my altitude with only one engine turning over. Anyone who tells you a 24 can't fly on one engine is wrong."



B-24 training flight over San Francisco in early 1944.

From Tarant Field, Ralph went to Mudoc Air Base in California to finish his heavy bomber training with several other airmen who would eventually be his crew in Italy. Shortly before shipping overseas, Ralph and his crew were selected, presumably because of their flying skills, to fly a B-24 under the Golden Gate Bridge for a Hollywood movie that was being filmed.

During his training, Ralph still found time to go to church – and to sing at church. The depth of feelings he put into his singing and the special quality of his beautiful bass voice prompted one member of the congregation to tell him in a letter, "I've heard 'The Holy City' sung numerous times but rarely with your particular understanding and beauty ... an innate something that eludes verbal expression. A spiritual quality so rarely found in 'professional' singers. Please don't ever lose it."

Ralph's love of speed and excitement "carried over into his air force training days," his sister said, and on one occasion he was reprimanded for doing some low flying and buzzing. Apparently, he was something of a daredevil.

"It was a B-24 Liberator Bomber he was in, as I recall the story," said his brother Clarence. "As he came home, he was flying so low that he picked up some branches of a tree in his bomb bay. [Other accounts say there were leaves and twigs found in the landing gear – but that may have been on another occasion.] When he landed, he buzzed the tower, and it happened that the CO was on the tower watching him come in, and the CO saw the branches hanging out of the Bomb Bay doors, and was there to meet him."

According to the navigator, Lt. David Davis, the plane had also clipped some power lines, and Ralph and his copilot, Lt. Jack Ward, were nearly court-martialed over the incident. Davis, who had high praise for Ralph's skills as a pilot, concluded that the army must have needed crews worse than it wanted to hold the court-martial.

When Ralph's dad got word of the buzzing incident, there was a fatherly reprimand as well. Ralph was in Italy when he received his father's letter, and on October 5, 1944, he wrote home: "Dad, I'm sorry you felt so bad about my buzzing. It was very foolish. There really isn't any justification in doing it just for the fun of it, but it's just something everyone has to cut loose and do once in a while. There are times here when knowing how to hit the deck low and fast will save your life and the life of those nine boys riding with you."

Ralph knew that back home, his father was having to work especially hard, since because of the war, good help was hard to come by. "I wish I were there to help you," he wrote. It was the policy of the Fifteenth Air Force at that time that each crew member was to complete 50 combat missions before returning to the States. "When I get my 50 in," Ralph wrote, "I'll see if I can come back and give you a hand."

Davis described Ralph as a "man of action" who was physically very strong, "quiet and seething" and never used profanity.

The bomber crews at Castelluccio Air Base were housed in four-wall tents, and Davis recalled that on one occasion the crew needed a 100 pound bag of cement to make a floor for the tent they were sleeping in. He went to the quartermaster to ask for – and then beg for -- the cement, but to no avail.

When Davis told Ralph that the quartermaster wouldn't give him the cement, Ralph said, "Let's go," went straight to the supply area, walked past the quartermaster, tossed a bag of cement over his shoulder, and walked off with it. "Nobody messed with him," Davis said.



Living Quarters at Castelluccio Air Base

Lt. Ralph Campbell (the tall guy with the hat in the back row) with some of his crew members, outside of the tent where they slept.

At times, the heavy bomber crews at Castelluccio would fly two missions every three days. They would often be in the air for eight or ten hours at a time, flying through dense fog along Italy's Adriatic coast en route to targets in Austria, Hungary or Germany, emerging to face the inevitable wall of flak from 75 mm., 88 mm., 105 mm. and 155 mm. artillery, and then returning through the same barrage of anti-aircraft fire. It was a grueling pace, but they knew that each target destroyed brought the war a little closer to an end and each safe return brought them one mission closer to going home.

They also knew that every mission could be their last.

Once, while flying through a flak field, Ralph and his crew witnessed three B-24s in their group go down in a chain reaction. Flak hit one plane at a higher altitude. The bombs from the first plane fell onto a second, and that plane, in turn, hit a third plane on the way down. All three planes were lost.

While some bomber crews apparently were assigned their own airplanes, Ralph and his crew did not always fly the same plane but flew various B-24s in the pool on different missions, particularly if the plane they had flown on the previous mission had been shot up and was still being repaired. On at least one occasion, they flew a plane called the "Betty Co-Ed," presumably named for the 1930 Rudy Vallee hit song and the 1931 Betty Boop movie of the same name. On another occasion, they flew a ship named the "Lazy Susan" and may have flown in one called "Buzz Baby."

The crews called the B-24 Liberators "Fords" partly because they were made by a subsidiary of Ford Motor Company but also because the parts were interchangeable. At times a plane was pieced together from portions of several different damaged B-24s, so it was difficult at to say which was the original plane.

"We flew whatever they gave us," said crew member Lt. Kenneth Trimmer.

Returning from one mission, Ward counted 88 holes from flak bursts in their aircraft.

During another mission, Davis left his navigation station momentarily for some reason while the plane was over the target, and while he was gone, a piece of flak ripped through the fuselage. It passed through right where his head would have been if he had been in his seat.

While on a mission over Vienna one day, the crew's plane got shot up quite severely, and it was questionable whether the plane was capable of staying in the air long enough to return to base. Ward tried to talk Ralph into flying into Switzerland, which was closer. Perhaps half-jokingly, he argued, "It would be a great place to rest up for a while, till they get us out." But Ralph kept the plane on a course back toward the base in southern Italy.

Crossing from Austria into Italy meant flying over the Italian Alps, which proved to be a struggle for the badly damaged aircraft. Ralph coaxed the heavy bomber to a high enough altitude to clear the summit and then, knowing that the plane wouldn't stay in the air much longer, he directed it toward an American fighter squadron's air strip near the southern edge of the Alps.

On approach, he radioed to the air strip and said, "We're coming in."

The message came back, "You can't come in here. The runway is too short and it's too narrow. It's not made for a bomber."

Ralph radioed back, "I don't think you heard me. We're coming in." He then brought the crippled heavy bomber down smoothly on the front end of the runway that consisted of just strips of steel mesh laid on the ground.

The 110-foot wingspan of the big B-24 was several times the width of the runway, but Ralph managed to keep his wheels from veering off the edge of the narrow landing strip. Still, the runway was, in fact, too short, and the big bomber rolled off the end and mired down in about twelve inches of mud.

The commander of the fighter squadron was furious at first, and headed out toward the end of the runway in his jeep prepared to give this foolhardy bomber pilot a good reprimand.



Mired in the Mud after an emergency landing at a fighter squadron's air strip. The runway was too short for the big bomber.

But when he saw the condition of the plane, he marveled at the competent manner in which Ralph had been able to land such a badly damaged craft and realized that by doing so he had saved the lives of his crew.

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Caterpillars pull the 30-ton Liberator out of the mud.

Lt. Trimmer said that Lt. Campbell "was, in my opinion, the best pilot in the squadron. He knew the exact distance from his pilot seat to the ground, and he could set the airplane down on the button."

Crew member Gilbert Fisher said of Lt. Campbell and Lt. Ward, "Every man in our crew knew our pilot and co-pilot were two of the best. They were not only the most capable but had great love and consideration for their fellow man and country."

Shortly after getting back to Castelluccio, Ralph wrote home: "Dear Mom & Dad, Guess what. You know how you wouldn't ever let me buy a motorcycle. Well, here's the payoff. When we got back from a mission two days ago, I went to town and looked up a P-38 pilot who had a motorcycle he wanted to sell me. I agreed on \$200, as I could easily get that out of it if I leave here. Well, I came back out to the field and requested a partial pay as I haven't had any pay for two months... My squadron commander asked me what the score was. I told him I wanted \$200 partial pay to buy me a motorcycle... We had just gotten back from a mission, and after flying through the soup to get there, and the flack, and coming back through that stuff, and making a forced landing on someone else's landing strip, he told me I couldn't buy the motorcycle because it is too dangerous.

"Mom, I guess I just wasn't cut out for anything as dangerous as a motorcycle. And to think I thought, 'Ha, Mom can't stop me from buying this motorcycle now.'

"Well, it's 2030 and I've got to go on another mission tomorrow. I'll write some more when I get back. Love, Ralph."

BY LATE NOVEMBER, 1944, Lt. Ralph Campbell and his B-24 Liberator Bomber crew from the 725th Squadron, 451st Bomb Group, based in Castelluccio, Italy, had completed 18 combat missions. The Fifteenth Air Force had reduced from 50 to 35 the number of missions required to complete a tour of duty, so that left just 17 to go.



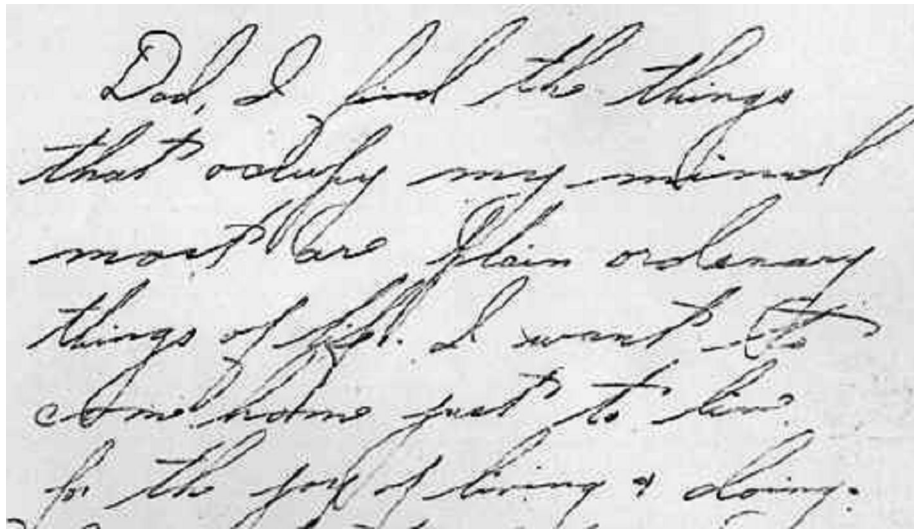
Back row: S/Sgt. Gilbert Fisher (nose gunner), S/Sgt. Vincent Daniels (waist gunner), S/Sgt. Andrew Kraynak (ball turret gunner), 1st Lt. Charles Ralph Campbell (pilot), 1st Lt. Jack Ward (co-pilot), Lt. Kenneth Trimmer (bombardier).
Front row: Lt. David Davis (navigator), T.Sgt/William Devine (waist gunner), T/Sgt. Charles "Tip" Clark (top turret gunner), S/Sgt. Paul Butler (tail gunner).

On November 20, Ralph wrote what was to be his last letter home. He talked about how tiring the missions were, "pounding through an eight to nine hour flight," with temperatures inside the plane getting as cold as 54 degrees below zero." But "there are hundreds of other guys doing the same thing," he said.

"I look at it this way. There's a little white piece of paper in operations that has my name on it and 35 squares. I'm sorta living right there on that piece of paper. Every time when I come back from a mission, no matter how rough it was or how much we got shot up, I feel good when my whole crew is OK and we walk in and see another one of those white squares colored red. We've got 18 of them colored now. Seventeen more and we'll be seeing the ones we love at home.

"Of course, besides just finishing our missions, all of us like to feel that we're helping to finish this thing as fast as possible.

"Dad, I find the things that occupy my mind most are the plain, ordinary things of life. I want to come home just to live for the joy of living and doing.



Detail of Lt. Ralph Campbell's last letter home, written on November 20, 1944.

"I want to get up in the morning, do a good hard day's work, eat a good meal at a good family table, say 'hello' to the neighbors, shoot pheasants, walk out through a pretty field of spuds, drive to town through the snow, go to church with my Dad, wrestle with the boys and tease Mom and the girls, sing in the choir, have a family dinner together on Thanksgiving, go fishing, haul more beans with my truck than the next guy can with his, hug my Mom, marry the sweetest girl in the world, do as fine a job raising a family as my Dad did, build a house and help to make it a home.

"A million things like that are what I want to live for, Dad. When I hear a beautiful piece of music, that's what it says, and when I pray, those are the things I ask my Heavenly Father to let me do.

"I know your faith and prayers are always with me, and I hope I can live up to the kind of life you meant for me."

After mission 19, Ralph and his crew were given a week's rest on the beautiful island of Capri.

Then, following a mission briefing on the morning of December 11, 1944, 1st Lt. Charles Ralph Campbell climbed aboard his assigned aircraft, along with the other nine members of his crew, and prepared to depart for Vienna.

Ralph took the pilot's seat in the cockpit alongside his co-pilot, 1st Lt. Jack Ward. The navigator for the mission was Lt. Dave Davis, and Lt. Kenneth Trimmer was bombardier. T/Sgt. Charles Clark was flight engineer. S/Sgt. Paul Butler was tail gunner, S/Sgt. Gilbert Fisher was nose gunner, S/Sgt. Andrew Kraynak was ball turret gunner, and T/Sgt. William Devine Devine and S/Sgt. Vincent Daniels were waist gunners.

It started out "a day of particular honor for us," Butler would later write. Lt. Campbell, who was in line to become squadron commander because of his reliability and piloting

skills, had been "selected to be the deputy wing commander" for this "vital and dangerous mission to Vienna." That meant that if something happened to the wing commander, Lt. Campbell would assume command of the mission. The 49th Wing was made up of four different bomb groups, each being composed of four squadrons.



Lt. Campbell instructs his crew before boarding.

One after another, the big 30-ton bombers cranked up their four powerful engines, pulled into line, lumbered down the runway, picked up speed, and lifted off into the early morning sky with 2,700 gallons of fuel and four tons of bombs aboard. The formation of bombers flew up the coast of Italy, then across the Adriatic toward an Initial Point over Austria where it was joined by several other heavy bomber squadrons and an escort of P-38 fighter planes.

In all, 435 heavy bombers from the Fifteenth Air Force, with fighter escorts, attacked targets in and around Vienna that day. Some 100 B-24 Liberators, including the one flown by Lt. Ralph Campbell, assembled in formation and headed toward their assigned target, the Moosbierbaum oil refinery on the outskirts of Vienna.

From the Initial Point, the big bombers flew straight and level toward their in a tight formation. A German reconnaissance aircraft that had awaited their arrival radioed information to the ground about the size of the formation, the direction of its approach, and its altitude, so the anti-aircraft gunners could trim the fuses on their flak shells to explode at the desired altitude.



Ralph in the cockpit

As Ralph and his crew approached the target area some four hours after take-off, they found it to be heavily fortified. According to Sgt. Butler's account, "as the Germans had salvaged many of their anti-aircraft weaponry from Ploesti and Budapest and strategically intensified the defense around our target, the oil refineries in the environs of Vienna." Repeated assaults over previous weeks by bomb groups from the 15th Air Force had all but totally demolished the oil refineries in Ploesti. With the loss of the Ploesti refineries, which had represented a significant percentage of the German war machine's petroleum production, the Nazis were now heavily dependent on the Vienna refineries, which enhanced the strategic importance of the target.

As the 100 or so Liberators from the 451st Bomb Group approached their specified target, Lt. Trimmer could see from his position in the nose of the airplane a square field of flack bursts several miles wide situated over and around the target area..

"Our bombing run from the Initial Point to the target required a close formation of all aircraft and straight, level flight, meaning no evasive action could be taken," Sgt. Butler said. "Visibility was unlimited, which was favorable for bombing but ideal for the tracking of our formation by ground defenses." And on this day, "the anti-aircraft fire was particularly intense."

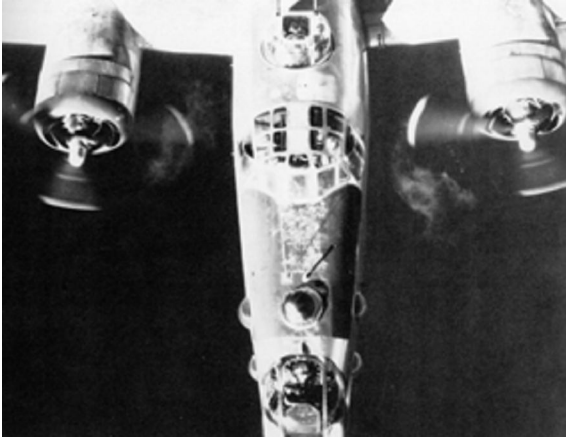
Keeping his ship on a steady course, Ralph penetrated the flack field as he had done on previous missions. Several bursts of flack struck the aircraft, disabling its radio system as well as its internal intercom system. At this point, none of the crew had been hurt. But flying at 21,000 feet through what Butler described as "a veritable field of exploding steel," the plane and its crew were now incommunicado with the outside world, except for visual contact with other planes in the formation.

Even within the huge ship itself, communication among crew members was hampered. The only way for the cockpit to get a message to the tail gunner, if that were needed,

would be to send a messenger, which would involve someone leaving his station.

The tight formation of Liberators released their bombs over the target area and then followed the wing commander on a sharp turn to the right. That path took them directly over a battery of 105 mm. Howitzer anti-aircraft guns mounted on flat-bed railroad cars. "The fire was painfully accurate, and the bursts were of a size that I had never seen before," Butler later recalled.

The wing commander's plane was hit, went out of control, and began a rapid descent.



Over the Adriatic

This is a photo of the B-24J Liberator, serial #44-10629, that was piloted by Lt. Charles Ralph Campbell on December 11, 1944, the day he was killed. The photo was taken a month earlier on November 7. It was previously published in *American Bomber Aircraft Vol. I, Consolidated B-24 Liberator*, by John M. Campbell (no relation), published by Shiffer Publishing. Lt. Campbell's nephew, Colin Campbell, is now in possession of the original 8x10 glossy photograph.

From his position in the tail gunner turret, Butler witnessed a plane piloted by Lt. Lyle Jensen, a new pilot on his first mission, get hit by a flak burst, catch on fire, flip over, and head straight down. "I saw no parachutes," Butler said. "He was so close to me and gone so fast. I think I was in shock after that."

At about the same time, Ward saw another flak shell exploded just above the number three engine to his right, rocking the aircraft. Flak fragments blasted into the side of the plane. One chunk of hot metal passed through the right window of the cockpit, ripped through the palm and thumb of Ward's left hand, and then entered the pilot's neck, just below his flak helmet, killing him instantly. Other flak fragments hit the co-pilot in the left calf and the right foot. He lost consciousness.

The nearest other person to the cockpit was the flight engineer, Sgt. Clark. When he surveyed the damage to the aircraft and saw the pilot and co-pilot both slumped over the controls, Clark immediately bailed out.

The bombardier, Lt. Trimmer, and the navigator, Lt. Davis, both left their stations to see what was going on in the cockpit. When they entered the cockpit, they found the pilot dead and the co-pilot unconscious and bleeding profusely. They attempted to revive Lt. Ward.

Meanwhile, without functional on-board communication, the tail gunner was unaware of what was going on in the cockpit and didn't know that no one was flying the plane. He remained at his station, keeping a lookout for enemy aircraft. Moments after he saw Lt. Jensen's plane go down, he saw a parachute pass by under the plane. Only later did he realize that it was probably Sgt. Clark's chute he had seen.

Damaged and with no one at the controls, the big B-24 Liberator went into a dive. Sgt. Fisher, sitting in the nose, felt the pressure of the descending plane against his back. By the time Trimmer and Davis were finally able to revive the copilot, the plane had lost 10,000 feet of altitude. The number one engine was out, the number three engine was running erratically, and most electrical systems, including the instruments, were not operating.

Having regained consciousness, Lt. Ward immediately took command. His left leg and left hand were completely incapacitated. His right foot was severely injured, and he was still bleeding heavily. Yet the left-handed co-pilot grabbed the yoke with his right hand and managed to pull the ship out of its steep dive and regain control. Once it was flying level again, he determined to try to get the aircraft over allied territory before the rest of the crew bailed out. He directed the navigator to give him a course to the nearest Russian lines.

With the instruments not working and with the plane having been flying for some time with no one at the controls, it was hard to know for sure what their location was. But Davis and Ward set a course for 150 degrees, hoping to reach the Russian-controlled territory near Lake Balaton, a 40-mile-long lake in Hungary some 120 miles south-southwest of Vienna. Trimmer applied a tourniquet to Ward's left arm and then alerted the crew to be ready to abandon the aircraft.

It was a struggle for the co-pilot to retain consciousness with such a severe loss of blood. But he remained in command and held the course. Two of the engines seemed to be running smoothly, but the number three engine could not be controlled. Whenever Ward attempted to adjust the throttles, the number three engine would race temporarily, throwing the plane out of control. No attempts to reduce the RPMs of the engine seemed to have any effect.

Ward was also unable to apply enough pressure with his one useable foot to work the flaps, "so I set the throttles at 3/4 open and flew with the trim tabs," he later said.

Despite the seriousness of his wounds, Ward "would not hear of bailing out over enemy territory," according to Butler. "It was his fervent wish to return his aircraft and its crew to Allied forces so that we could all fly on another day." But with every minute that went by, "our position was rapidly becoming [more] perilous."

There was a very real question how long Ward, who continued to lose blood, would remain capable of flying the plane and an equally real question how much longer the plane would continue flying. "I could not have held control of the ship had the [number three] prop completely run away," Ward later said.

With a lake in view that they thought was Balaton, it seemed that the Russian lines were almost within reach, but Lt. Ward "felt that at the rate we were losing altitude, we might not make it across the lake - and at a lower altitude, we would not be able to parachute," Butler recalled. So the co-pilot gave the order for the crew to bail out, but continued to fly the plane until everyone had bailed out except himself and Trimmer.

Ward then circled back toward where the other crew members had jumped, so that he and Trimmer would be bailing out as close as possible to the same spot, before putting the plane on automatic pilot. Then, with the help of his bombardier, he made it to the bomb bay. Trimmer then tried to extricate the pilot's body from the pilot's seat but was unable to do so.

Butler later recalled, "Shortly after my parachute opened, I saw our B-24 return toward me, and then I saw two parachutes leave the plane. I later learned that these two officers had concerns about my welfare and rerouted the aircraft back toward me so that we could be re-united on the ground. This act of unselfishness would very quickly increase the degree of difficulty in their lives, as a flight of B-17s appeared on our general area and a great deal of anti-aircraft fire resulted."

As the crew descended to lower altitudes, they could see "a major road cluttered with vehicles and troops." They were all German, and Butler said he later learned that they were "in retreat from the Russian Army" which was then at the outskirts of Budapest. The German troops fired at the descending parachutists as the wind carried them across the highway. But "fortunately, we had just enough altitude, their fire was inaccurate, and none of us was hurt."

The ground "came up pretty fast for me," Butler said. But the two officers, who were at a little higher altitude, drifted downwind several hundred yards further. It would be 34 years before Butler and Ward would see each other again.

The plane went down about a mile from where he had landed, and he saw it crash and burn upon impact.

When Butler reached the ground, high winds made it difficult for him to collapse his parachute. "I would get up on my feet and then be knocked down again and be dragged along the ground as the wind would catch my chute," he said. He found himself thinking about how much more difficult a time Jack Ward would be having, given his condition. It must have been an "excruciatingly painful experience for my co-pilot," he said.

The other downed airmen were apparently spread out over several miles. No doubt, all were anxious to collapse and dispose of their parachutes so they could reunite with their crew and formulate plans to evade the enemy and make their way to Allied lines. But the wind was making that difficult to do.

As Butler struggled with his chute, suddenly he became aware of "a form standing over me." A large man in overalls who Butler said looked like Li'l Abner was armed with "a long-handled pitchfork which he appeared ready to use," and the man had "a most menacing look."

Then a German officer rode up on horseback, said something to the man, and "the threat was over," he said. "I might add that we were all unarmed."

The nine survivors of Lt. Ralph Campbell's crew were all taken captive by the Germans and spent the remainder of the war as POWs. As such, they suffered a variety of indignities and "unfavorable experiences," not only at the hand of their German captors but by some of the locals as well. "There were those of us who were stoned and spat upon by the populace," Butler said.

When Ward was taken prisoner, he was taken to a local hospital in Győr where he received only the most superficial medical care. As the Russians advanced, the German forces retreated, and they evacuated the hospital, including the patients. Ward, in spite of

his condition, was forced to march with other POWs as the Germans retreated toward Germany. He spent the remainder of the war in Stalag VII-A in Moosburg, Germany. On December 21, word reached the parents of Lt. Charles Ralph Campbell from the War Department that their son had been reported missing in action.

On January 21, 1945, Ken Trimmer wrote a letter to his mother from the POW camp in Germany where he was being held. "Seems like the winter will be long and cold," he said. "They say the snow doesn't melt 'til May. Jack and I are still a stone's throw of each other. We think it best that you write to Chuck's dad. He was killed by flak over the target. We bailed out. At least his folks should know what happened, rather than wait endless months and then perhaps get no word of his whereabouts. Address, C.N. Campbell, Rupert, Idaho. Forgive me for putting the burden on you, but we thought it best."



The St.-Avoird American Military Cemetery in France where Lt. Charles Ralph Campbell is lies interned along with thousands of other brave young men and women who gave their lives in the cause of freedom.
Let us never forget.

When the war ended, all members of the crew came home, with the exception of their pilot.

It was not until the following July that the army confirmed officially that Lt. Ralph Campbell had been killed in action. His remains were later interned at the St. Avoird U.S. Military Cemetery in France.

On June 23, 1945, Jack Ward send a letter directly to Ralph's parents. In it, he described their son as "the hardest working, steadiest pilot in the squadron.... His crew felt so safe with him that they wouldn't fly with any other pilot. He was a successful pilot and leader who knew what he was fighting for."

Charles Clark wrote to Mr. & Mrs. Campbell a few weeks later. In his letter, he said, in behalf of the crew, that their pilot and leader had been "like a brother to us and the truest friend and comrade a person could ever have. All of us respect Chuck for his companionship and leadership. He gave his all for the defeat of our enemy, and we pray that it will not be in vain."

It was not in vain. Five days after Lt. Campbell died in action over Vienna, on December 16, 1944, the Germans launched their Ardennes Offensive in eastern Belgium – the famed Battle of the Bulge. The fighting went on for six weeks, resulting in 81,000 American casualties, including 19,000 killed. It was the largest land battle of the war, and the Germans threw everything they had into the offensive in one last all-out effort to push the Allied forces back into the sea. But they failed – largely because their tanks literally ran out of gas.

Although the fighting would continue for several months more before Germany surrendered, an Allied victory was now assured. The courage, faith and sacrifice of Lt. Ralph Campbell and his crew, and tens and thousands of other airmen who risked and sometimes gave their lives in the strategic bombing campaign to turn off the oil spigot of the German war machine, paid dividends. That effort and that sacrifice did, in fact, hasten the end of the war and help crush the brutal Nazi regime.

We who breathe free air today owe an eternal debt to Lt. Charles Ralph Campbell and his crew, and to all other Allied military personnel who fought and died in World War II. We can repay that debt only by remembering, and by doing all within our own power to safeguard our freedoms for generations yet to come.

AUTHOR'S NOTE: I owe a debt of gratitude to my cousin Colin D. Campbell of South Jordan, Utah, who is, like me, a nephew of Lt. Charles Ralph Campbell and who is author of a limited edition book entitled *Charles Ralph Campbell Pictorial History*, for generously furnishing most of the research and documentation and most of the photographs that made this project possible. I am aware that there are some discrepancies among the various accounts of events described in this narrative. I have chosen to use the versions that seemed to me most plausible, given the information available to me, and I would welcome comments from any reader who may have information that that would shed further light on these events. -- Rand Green

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