

2LT Reid Flamm Ellsworth

(346th Bomb Squadron, 99th Bombardment Group, 15th Air Force)

1915 - 2007

EARLY YEARS

Reid Flamm Ellsworth was born in a little house built by his father and grandfather in Rexburg, Idaho on 13 November 1915 to Claude William Ellsworth and Matilda Ann Flamm Ellsworth. He was the third child of ten and had interesting boyhood experiences, one of which was returning to Rexburg in a covered wagon from Montana, where his father thought he had found new employment. The job in Montana unfortunately didn't pan out, so after 23 days of traveling in a covered wagon, the family returned to Idaho, and his previous life resumed. Reid was a brilliant student, skipping two grades in elementary school. After graduating from high school in Pocatello, Idaho, he attended Idaho State University where he studied engineering. He later served a Spanish-speaking mission for the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints which terminated just prior to US involvement during World War II.



MILITARY YEARS



*U.S. Army Air Corps and
U.S. 15th Army Air Corps Patches*

After a year of preflight training and navigation school, Reid began his military service in May of 1943 as a 2LT in the US Army Air Corps. Although beginning his training as a pilot, he retrained and ultimately served his country as a B-17 navigator with the 346th Bomb Squadron, 99th Bombardment Group, 15th Air Force-Africa. On 10 November 1943 during his last bombing mission, his plane was shot down over Italy, at which time he was injured by flying shrapnel, earning him the Purple Heart. He parachuted safely just before his plane exploded. After a 3-mile freefall before his parachute finally opened, leaving him short of oxygen, he was able to land safely but was unable to locate the other seven crew members who had jumped before him.

In his own words Reid recalled the experience:

The next forty-eight hours had their own stresses, German soldiers were almost immediately in the area. Friendly Italians were helpful to me as much as they could be. Immediately after hitting the ground, one man came from a nearby road and motioned for me to follow him, which I did. But by reason of lack of oxygen for a time, I was unable to keep up, though he was probably ten years older than I. Eventually he and another had to leave me to do my best alone. In one situation a few minutes later a German soldier walked within ten feet of where I had concealed myself. After dark I sought out an isolated farmhouse where I identified myself as an American soldier needing assistance, which was cautiously but willingly given. Some way during the late evening or night the man acquired for me civilian clothing large enough to fit me. During the next day I tried unsuccessfully to cross the Po river in an attempt to get into neutral Switzerland but decided to not cross a long bridge at the middle of which a German soldier stood near a guard hut. An additional factor convinced me that such an attempt would be folly since I was conspicuously though not seriously burned before the plane blew up in the air, and which explosion he had undoubtedly seen.

For five weeks Reid hid out in various locations, wandering through northern Italy, finding berries to temporarily satisfy his hunger, and occasionally obtaining clothing, meals, and lodging from Italian families, but relying mostly on them for protection and sustenance. They didn't have much to give but shared what they had freely. During all this time, he had to trust that they would not turn him in for a reward. Thankfully, because of the similarities between Italian and the Spanish he had learned on his church mission, he was able to communicate fairly easily and received the help he needed.

After walking for five weeks, Reid arrived at the home of a sympathetic Italian family, the Cenciottis, who sheltered him for five additional weeks. By then, he had suffered from hunger, diarrhea, stress and exposure to cold, even trying occasionally to sleep burrowed into straw stacks for protection. At the family's insistence, he stayed at their home in Rocca Sinibalda until he was caught in their shed during a house-to-house search by the Germans.



Shed where Reid was captured

CAPTURE

Once captured, Reid was transported to Rieti, Italy where he was jailed, given

almost no food, threatened and beaten. After a week he was transported to a temporary transient POW camp in Spoleto, Italy, was interrogated and threatened again this time with being shot as a spy. Eventually he and a number of other POWs were loaded onto a box car with no toilet facilities except a small keg and straw on the floor. Due to extremely limited space and the number of POWs crowded into it, sleeping was done in shifts as they traveled over the next several days.

Being transported through Germany during the bitter cold at the end of January was enough to discourage most escape attempts, but to ensure no escapes were successful, shoes were taken from the POWs by the Germans. With no shoes on his feet, only thin socks, and with very little food for several days, Reid was taken to Stalag IV-B at Mühlberg where he remained for about 10 days. He was eventually transported to Szubin, Poland where he was interned as a POW, spending his first six weeks in the infirmary due to frostbitten toes and raw feet.

LIFE AT OFLAG 64

While at Oflag 64, he was always cold, which resulted in continued problems with frostbite, and was always hungry, but he was forever grateful for the American Red Cross Parcels that contained badly-needed rations to supplement his diet. He, at first, received those on a fairly regular basis, but this ceased after allied bombings of the railroad yards prevented parcels from getting through any longer. Meager German rations were far less adequate in quality and quantity and as a result, he and the other POWs lost significant amounts of weight and suffered malnutrition. During the two months before his capture, his parents didn't hear from him but were later notified by telegram that he was Missing in Action. Nearly three months later, in March 1944, after being already held captive for a few weeks, Reid's parents were finally informed that he was a Prisoner of War.

Reid described the educational program at Oflag 64 *as being very broad, with other POWs already well-educated in their respective fields*. Some held doctorates in their fields, some had considerable experience in their fields. He and another officer who had previous training in meteorology were assigned the responsibility of observing and making reports on the weather. The purpose for this was to be ready to assist possible future American parachute landings or to have equipment and supplies dropped to them.

Of his camp experiences, Reid early on wrote this to his parents:

We have the opportunity for an excellent education—I study university courses in foreign languages, philosophy, business, and law. And we are allowed to organize softball teams, have weekly movies, lectures, and church services.

Reid was able to participate in most of these camp activities. Outside of education, he was particularly interested in keeping himself in good physical condition which also helped him keep his morale up. He participated in organized team competitions including football, baseball, basketball, volleyball, group walks around the inside perimeter of the camp, and track and field. In football, he played end opposite Major John Dobson. In a track and field relay race, he and Major Jerry Sage ran anchor legs for their separate teams, after which he disappointedly reported that Jerry's team won. In a track meet held in 1944, Reid placed first in broad jump and was awarded a small wooden box with the words "Broad Jump, First Place, 1944".



1st Place Award

He was able to assist with the tunnel project, which many other POWs were involved in as well. His own responsibility was that of storing dirt above the barracks' ceiling. A crew of eight worked together passing dirt-filled boxes from one to another until such time as a signal was given that the camp guards were approaching. Another signal was given when it was all clear. Storing dirt in this manner continued until a creak was heard and the ceiling dropped about thirteen inches. It was decided around that time to discontinue the tunnel project.



Replication of
Insanity Project

While in the camp, it became Reid's goal to either escape or be repatriated. After the tunnel project was discontinued, he figured escape wasn't the best option but repatriation was. All escape or repatriation plans had to be submitted to the camp escape committee, so after his plan was approved, Reid began the lonely task of faking insanity and alienating all others to whom he might otherwise have become close while there.

Reid later wrote this about his insanity project:

At the mess hall, where we had one meal a day, I would sit on one side of the table and stare right through the person sitting opposite to me. I would raise a spoonful of food straight up from the plate, hold it out in the air in front of my face sixteen or eighteen inches away and just hold it there for a time before bringing the spoonful of food into my mouth, all the time staring through the person opposite me.....Dr. Abrams bunked in the cubicle immediately opposite the one where I had first been and began to observe things about me that caused him to ask me to go for a walk with him around the camp perimeter. He asked if there was something bothering me.....He was convinced I was having real trouble and referred me to Dr. Gruenberg who had some psychiatric experience. Sometime later I was referred to still another doctor who had been a division psychiatrist.....As time went on, I needed to continue doing things that would draw attention to me. I would stay awake at night, I would moan or cry or make

some moanful plea for someone to leave me alone. I undertook efforts to indicate that I was giving serious thought to suicide.....gathering up pieces of strings and shoelaces to begin braiding a cord. I would also stand for hours at a time with my back to a locker looking up at the crossbeams of the barracks, supposedly considering that I would hang myself.

ESCAPE AND RETURN HOME

As time passed and as Reid and one of the other POWs were taking a walk one day, they encountered Colonel John Waters coming from the opposite direction. He stopped them for just a moment and said: *“Ellsworth, apparently it’s all successful. You are scheduled to be sent to Sweden on 17 March 1945 to be returned to America on an exchange of prisoners.”* However, due to the Russian advance, the Germans marched him and nearly everyone else out of the camp on 21 January 1945, and what was known as “the long, cold march” to Hammelburg began. Reid took a blanket and wrapped as many supplies as he could in it and tied it in a knot to be slung over his shoulder as a rather large bundle. On the first night, after arriving at a large barn near Exin, Poland where the POWs would stay the night, he and two other POWs hatched a plan to escape from the column of marchers. The next morning when the guards awakened the troops, he and his companions concealed themselves in a place where they wouldn’t be found. Not wanting to be caught, they remained there the majority of the day until they were certain that the Germans had left. They subsequently spent several days in the area, encountering Poles, Russians, and other Americans, and enjoyed hearty meals and a variety of activities, including singing and dancing with some young Polish women.

While on the way to Odessa, Major Merle Meacham, one of the camp escape committee members who had escaped from the march with Reid and several others, announced to the group that Reid’s insanity project had been an approved project. Dr. Gruenberg, who was with them and upon hearing this announcement, said, *“I’ll be damned. The only thing that would have gotten you out of the camp faster would have been a sloppy suicide attempt.”* Reid informed him that such plans had been in process and that he was satisfied that this had not actually been necessary.

Over the next few weeks, Reid was able to make his way to Odessa, Russia where he acquired a complete Russian uniform and Russian trinkets. In the end, he boarded a British ship and arrived back in the States in April 1945, a month after his original scheduled repatriation. Following processing, he returned home to his family in Idaho. After the war, Reid was heard to say, *“It wasn’t an experience I’d*



ever want to repeat, but I'm thankful for the experiences that helped me grow and made me who I am."

LATER YEARS



Reid and Lela on their wedding day

Within a year after returning home, Reid met and married Lela Young in Salt Lake City, Utah. They moved to Provo, Utah for schooling but eventually relocated to Tucson, Arizona where he entered law school and earned his Juris Doctorate from the University of Arizona. Soon thereafter they moved to Phoenix where he set up a law practice. He and Lela were eventually blessed with six children: five daughters, and one son who suffered a severe and profound brain injury at birth which permanently disabled him. Because of this, Reid became an active advocate for mentally retarded citizens and remained so for nearly fifty years, working tirelessly to protect the rights of citizens who couldn't speak for themselves.



Reid remained in the U.S. Air Force Reserves for twenty years following WWII and retired as a LT COL. During the war and remaining years, he earned several military awards and honors but service to his country was what he was most proud of. He loved his country, its flag, served with honor, and was a true American patriot and hero in all respects.

He always tremendously enjoyed serving others and looked for opportunities to serve whether it was serving his family, his church, his country, or anyone in need. Reid served in his community, as years passed, as a Precinct Committeeman during several elections, school board member, youth leader, temporary foster parent. Service—what an important value to pass down to his children!



As missionaries in Italy

In later years, Reid and Lela served a two-year, Italian-speaking mission in Italy for the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. During that time, he was able to reunite with the Cenciotti family, the Italian family that was so helpful to him prior to his capture, having provided food, clothing, and shelter. They remained in contact for many years thereafter and his capture story is still known today amongst the people of Rocca Sinibalda, Italy.

Good health and fitness were important to Reid and he remained physically fit throughout his life. As a young man he played on a city baseball league, with his team earning top honors. On the 50th anniversary of his forced parachute jump, and at the age of 80, he duplicated his original jump by skydiving at a local airfield. At age 83, he participated in the Senior Olympics in track and field events (long jump, discus, javelin and shot put) both on a local and national level and won three Gold Medals and one Silver Medal in his age bracket.



Skydiving on his 80th birthday

Reid loved his family tremendously, and was always willing to listen to and support them. He was very much involved in his children's activities and always encouraged them to do their best in everything they did. Hard work was not a stranger to him; he was a good provider and his family never went without. He was a very patient person, never raised his voice, taught by his good example, was kind and compassionate, and served others until he could no longer do so.

TAPS



Reid Flamm Ellsworth, 91, beloved husband, father, grandfather, brother and friend died peacefully at the home he shared with his daughter Janet Ellsworth on Wednesday, 4 July 2007 in Farmington, Utah. He was preceded in death by his parents, several siblings, and his beloved wife of 54 years. He was buried with full military honors next to his wife Lela at Larkin Sunset Gardens in Sandy, Utah on 9 July 2007.

AFTER THOUGHTS

Pictured here is the Cenciotti family in Rocca Sinibalda, Italy between 1986-1988. Reid is third from the left, back row. Lela is fourth from the right (in red), back row. Behind her is the shed, which still stood, where Reid was found and captured in 1944.



Text written by Elodie Caldwell with contributions by Bill Caldwell, Diane Hill and Cecily Weatherford, photos are from family files— ©9/14/22

Italicized phrases and sections are from personal letters and quotes from Reid's book:

**THE REID F. ELLSWORTH STORY
AN ACCOUNT OF WAR AND DIVING INTERPOSITION**