

Corman Bean
445th Bomb Group
Birmingham, Mich., April 12, 1999

Corman Bean: I've been in touch with George Collar and Bill Dewey, and then I got some periodicals and whatnot, but I haven't had that big deep interest in [the history of the Kassel mission] that some of the other fellows have exhibited.

When we got back home, the local paper, the Fargo Forum, had gathered the names of all of the people from town who had been prisoners of war, and they got us all together and they took our picture and paraded that around a little bit, and that was the finale.

Millie Bean: We're both from Fargo.

Aaron Elson: Really? I've never seen the movie, but did you see "Fargo"?

Millie Bean: Hilarious.

Corman Bean: One little short scene supposedly taking place outside of Fargo, and they named the movie "Fargo," and the town got all that disrepute over that one little incident.

Aaron Elson: Did you go to school together?

Corman Bean: High school and college.

Aaron Elson: Which college?

Corman Bean: North Dakota. It was Agricultural College then; it's North Dakota State University now.

Aaron Elson: And when did you go into the Air Corps?

Corman Bean: I enlisted when I was a sophomore in college, with the promise that you enlist now and we won't take you in until you graduate. Well, about six or eight months later they changed their mind and they took us in. We went in in February of 1943, and went down to delightful Jefferson Barracks outside of St. Louis, down in what they called Pneumonia Gulch. And then on to a college training detachment in Eau Claire, Wisconsin, for about six weeks.

Aaron Elson: Pneumonia Gulch?

Corman Bean: There probably aren't too many people that called it that.

Aaron Elson: I've heard the Jefferson Barracks described as being very cold.

Corman Bean: It was cold and wet and they were ill-prepared to take care of us. We marched in the mud to the mess hall and through the mud everywhere we went. And they called

it Pneumonia Gulch among our group at least because so many guys wound up in the hospital from it. They eventually took about 200 of us out of there and sent us to Eau Claire, and we were there as college students really. They called a big assembly shortly after we arrived, to welcome us and meld us into the student body, and there was so much coughing and wheezing in the audience that the doctor who was in attendance said, “We’ll have nothing going on for one week,” and he said we will all be, I don’t think he used the word quarantined, but we’ll be isolated for a week until everybody gets healthy. At the end of that week, then we started classes.

Aaron Elson: What was it that made you want to be a flier, as opposed to joining another branch of the service?

Corman Bean: I really don’t know, but maybe it was peer pressure, because six or eight of my close friends and I all enlisted at the same time on the same day. We were all about the same grade in college. We were called up at different times, but we enlisted together. And one of my buddies, we left him at Pneumonia Gulch; he never saw anything other than hospitals after that, till he was discharged. His lungs were beat up badly from that pneumonia. He healed and got well and they sent him back home for the duration. But then, after about six weeks at that college training detachment in Eau Claire, they took those of us who were further along in our education – and by that time I was into my junior year – and sent us out to Santa Ana, where we went through a classification process, and it was decided whether you’re going to go to bombardier school, navigator school or pilot training. We did a little flying at the college training detachment in Piper Cubs, but I wasn’t particularly thrilled by that, and I’d always been intrigued by the mathematics aspect of flying, so I asked to be a navigator.

Upon the completion of our very basic training in Santa Ana – it was actually called preflight; it was pretty much the same for navigators and bombardiers – they sent us out to the desert in Las Vegas for aerial gunnery school, and we spent about six weeks there, both land gunnery and some aerial target practice.

After that we went home for a few days and then it was off to Hondo, Texas, for advanced navigation school. I think that was probably from September to the middle of March 1944, at which time we got our wings and commission.

From Hondo, we went to Casper, Wyoming, to a reserve training unit where they formed the bomber crews. I knew by that time I was going to be in a B-24 and of course would be the navigator. At Casper they took guys from pilot training, from bombardier training, from navigation training, and formed the officer nucleus of a crew. And they also went to a pool if you will of flight engineers, radio operators and gunners and selected six of those fellows to form the balance of the crew. So we had a 10-man crew there formed at Casper. And we practiced there as a crew for six weeks.

Millie Bean: I was with him all the time.

Aaron Elson: You were married by then?

Corman Bean: Yes.

Corman Bean: After a meager six weeks we were sent to McCook, Nebraska. Why I don’t know because we were there only two weeks, and did a little more flying as a crew, and then we

went to Topeka, Kansas, which was our jump-off point for Europe. We picked up a brand-new B-24 at Topeka and flew it over to either Ireland or England; they took it away from us as soon as we got there, because new crews didn't get new airplanes in combat. Some other crew got that nice new airplane and we got an old junker. It was such an old junker that on our very first combat mission one engine just plain wore out. We never did get to the target. We salvaged our bombs, circled a little bit, and waited for the rest of the planes to make the bomb run and then we snuck up behind them to fly home in the group.

Aaron Elson: On your first mission, did you fly together as a crew or did they break you up?

Corman Bean: They took our pilot out and he flew four or five missions as co-pilot on an experienced crew. As a matter of fact I think he flew a couple of missions with Reg Miner in training. I'm not certain on that, but he flew I think five times with an experienced crew before we flew our first combat mission as a crew. And we flew as a crew most of the time, with a substitute now and then. I'm sure George [Collar] mentioned to you that he flew as a substitute on our crew the day we were shot down.

Aaron Elson: It was his first time with that crew, yes.

Corman Bean: Our regular bombardier had been on a three-day pass or some such thing as that and didn't get back in time. So they took Collar, who was not scheduled to fly that day, and assigned him to us.

Aaron Elson: Has anybody ever contacted the regular bombardier?

Corman Bean: He was killed in subsequent action. But of our original crew, he was the only – well, after the Kassel raid he was the only one who was not either dead or a prisoner.

Aaron Elson: What was his name?

Corman Bean: His name was Dick Aarvig. He was from Chicago. The irony of it is if he had flown with us, he'd have probably been a POW and survived the war.

Aaron Elson: Were you very close as a crew?

Corman Bean: No. We all came from different parts of the country. We had different backgrounds. Different training specialties, among the officers at least, and I guess that was true among the enlisted men, too. Fewer of them were college people. We got together for work, and that was the only time we spent together. Until we got to England, and then it just so happened that the crew I was on and Reg Miner's crew were assigned to the same quonset hut, so we spent a lot of time together – a lot of time being three months before we were shot down. But we were not really close as a crew. I presume the two closest were probably my pilot and myself.

Aaron Elson: Your pilot was Jim Schaen?

Corman Bean: Yes.

Aaron Elson: What was he like?

Millie Bean: Handsome.

Corman Bean: Yeah. I think of him as being a damn good pilot. He took us through some scrapes; we owe him a lot for the way he handled an airplane. One night when we were in Casper, our crew was assigned for nighttime bombing practice. Well, for me, the navigator, it was supposed to be a milk run because we were just a few miles from base and the pilot was navigating by radio and that was all there was to it. Until our electric went out. And he didn't have radio to guide him back anymore. So there we are flying in a light snowstorm up in mountainous territory – Casper is right is right in the foothills of the Rockies – and we didn't know where to go. So we circled around, and just kept our eye out on the ground, and finally we saw a couple of rows of dim lights, which we knew would be an auxiliary field, probably an emergency field for an airline. And he took us down and landed on that in pretty soft mud. It was a doggone fine job of flying. We got up the next morning – I think we spent the night in the airplane – and when dawn broke we looked around and there were mountains on three sides and the side we came in on was the open side. Now, commercial pilots would have known that because they'd have had that on their maps, the direction from which to approach; we just lucked out on that. But the landing area was so bad and so mushy that in order to get the plane back out of there, they sent in a command pilot, a really experienced pilot, who flew, and our pilot flew co-pilot, and an engineer flew with them. The rest of us went back by truck. And they took that airplane down to the very, very end of that soft runway and revved it up full blast before they pulled the brakes, and they got it out. In the meantime, we'd stripped everything out of it to make it like a glider. But that night we owed an awful lot to Jim Schaen for getting us down safely and taking care of that airplane.

Aaron Elson: And that's before you even flew one mission in combat.

Corman Bean: We had just been formed as a crew. Another interesting thing: Jim Schaen had gone through his transition school – pilot school – in Liberal, Kansas. And they were rushing pilots through so quickly down there that while he was in transition he never did fly in the left seat. The very first time he was in sole command of an airplane was the first time he took his crew up in the air, at Casper. That wasn't that night; we'd had several flights before that. But he really cut his teeth as a first pilot with nine new men in the airplane, all depending upon him.

Aaron Elson: How many missions did you have in combat?

Corman Bean: We went down on our 16th.

Aaron Elson: And before the Kassel mission, what kind of close scrapes did you have?

Corman Bean: The biggest was probably the very first mission when we lost the engine that just wore out. We didn't know a thing about combat, so that was pretty scary. We hadn't run into a lot of fighter opposition; it was very rare, so our opposition was mostly flak. In fact it was almost totally flak. But they – they being our [intelligence] in England – had the flak guns pretty

well located on the Continent. As a matter of fact, we navigators knew where the guns were on the ground and we actually used flak bursts in the air to check our navigation, because if there was big antiaircraft on one side and big explosions on the other side of you, maybe two miles away, you knew you were down that safe corridor where they couldn't reach you. And from time to time – in fact, almost every time – we'd see planes shot down, and sometimes see parachutes out of the plane and other times no parachutes. So it was always tense, because you never knew when that next shell was going to come up at you.

Aaron Elson: That tension must have been so thick.

Corman Bean: I don't understand how air crews, after being up there four or five times and being shot at like that, I don't understand how we ever got guts enough to go up again. But you know, it always happened to the other guy. And we knew we had to, so we did. But when we get older and smarter, forget it.

Aaron Elson: Did you fly a lot of missions in succession?

Corman Bean: Not very often, until we came to this Kassel business.

Aaron Elson: Had you flown the day before?

Corman Bean: One of my boys started putting a lot of stuff together for me, and one of the things that we have in here – we have every bit of correspondence that we ever got, except the one piece we wanted, and that's the letter that Millie got from Hap Arnold when we were shot down. Now, what was I looking for? The Form 100.

Millie Bean: Now they handle all these people that get missing in action wires with psychologists and psychiatrists and everything. All I had was a good friend, and we just sort of worked it out together. A girlfriend.

Aaron Elson: You got the telegram that said missing in action, and nothing else?

Corman Bean: Oh, there were so many thousands of us scattered around the country.

Aaron Elson: That must have been terrible.

Millie Bean: Well, he told me he was coming back and I believed him. Right?

Corman Bean: This what they called a Form 100. It has the dates, and those are the targets, and this is the flight time.

Aaron Elson: So you flew on the 25th to Koblenz, a 6 hour 35 minute flight. You flew on the 26th of September to Hamm, a 5 hour 10 minute flight. And the 27th, to Kassel.

Corman Bean: That was the last flight.

Aaron Elson: You had flown three missions in a row.

Corman Bean: If you note the dates, that was the only time that happened. Here's four days, every other, or it's two days, four days separate, two days separate, two days in a row, a week apart, another week apart, then two days in a row, then ten days off and two days in a row. Then over two weeks off, and another week off, and then three days in a row.

Part of that time when we had that three weeks off, they had selected our crew for a special training program, the purpose of which we did not know. But they took us off combat operations and all we did was fly at night, up and down all over England and Scotland. It was to train the pilots to fly at night, but it was primarily to train the navigator to navigate at night. We did that for maybe two weeks, and then they needed so many airplanes on combat that they put us back on combat operations.

I learned after the war during a debriefing that the reason we were on those special training missions was that our crew had been selected, among many others, to load up with bombs in England, fly deep into Germany – so deep you didn't have enough fuel to get back to England, but you would go on to Russia, load up in Russia, take another crack at southern Germany and land in Italy, load up in Italy, come back over Germany and land in England. So we were going to "fly the triangle." And it was almost all going to be night flying.

Aaron Elson: What can you recall from the beginning of the day on Sept. 27th? How early did you get woken up?

Corman Bean: I don't know; in the dark of night at any rate, because you had to get up and get dressed, get over and get some breakfast and go to briefings and get out to the hardstand, and you generally revved the engines at 6:30 or 7 o'clock in the morning, so we'd been up three hours probably before that.

Aaron Elson: Did you know before they woke you that you would be flying?

Corman Bean: We knew we were going to fly. We were almost always told the night before. And at the officers club bar they had an owl on the mantel over the fireplace, and if they turned that sonofagun around so we couldn't see the group there, that meant the flight was off for the next day, either the weather was bad or there was no flight scheduled. But I think we always knew we were going to fly, so we were waiting for the wakeup call. Probably awake most of the time before the wakeup call.

Aaron Elson: Who did the waking up?

Corman Bean: I presume somebody that was attached to the base headquarters would go around and wake everybody up. Usually two crews were living together, so he'd come in and if Miner's crew was flying one day, he'd wake the Miner guys. If our crew was flying, he'd wake the Schaen guys. Then it was a matter of gathering everything and getting out, going through the briefing, and getting out to the airplane. And once again out to the hardstand; of course, it was all in the pilot's hands then. And was until we headed off across the Continent.

I don't recall anything out of the ordinary on that mission until we got to the initial point. A couple of minutes after we hit the IP and made our turn supposedly toward the target, we could

look off to the right, and see hundreds of airplanes in a line, headed down that way, and here we were headed over this way, just 35 of us. So it was very, very obvious that we were wrong.

Aaron Elson: Did you know prior to that that you might be off course?

Corman Bean: Oh no. We were right on course until we hit the initial point. And the whole string of the whole Second Division was on the same course. It wasn't until we hit the IP and made the turn toward the target that we knew we were wrong. We were, I don't know, 15 degrees off or something.

Aaron Elson: Had there been any radio communication between Schaen and the lead plane?

Corman Bean: There was a lot ...once everybody realized we were wrong. I think everybody knew it except the command pilot, and if he knew it he didn't do a damn thing about it. And they never had a chance to interview him because he died on the mission. But I'm sure every navigator and every bombardier that was riding the front turret knew that we were not in the main group anymore, and that we were isolated. Of course, that's when we got hit.

Aaron Elson: What was the first indication that there were fighters?

Corman Bean: I was not among the first to see the fighters. The navigator was bundled up in that little tiny hole in the front of the ship with a desk there, and while we didn't have much to do when we were on the bombing run, we didn't have very a very good observation point either. You just had that little bubble on the side of the nose to look out, and you never did get a good, clear perspective of where you were or where you were going.

Aaron Elson: So the plane may have been hit before you knew anything was wrong.

Corman Bean: I'm sure we knew we were under attack before we were hit, because one shot doesn't bring you down. You have to get shot up pretty badly before that airplane falls. But during the air battle, I could look out through that little bubble and I did, and I looked to the rear of our airplane, and from the bomb bay back it was solid fire, so you know then it was just a matter of seconds before the bell rang and it was time to leave. I thought there's no way those guys in the back could ever get out; if they're not dead already they're going to die with the ship. And they did, all three of them. The two waist gunners and the tail gunner all were killed.

The tail gunner was Hurd. The waist gunner was Johnson, and another guy was Parsons, Dick Parsons. Those three and Jim Schaen were the four that died. But when the bell rang to leave the ship, I was up in the nose, and Collar was in the front turret, and there's no way a guy can get out of that quickly. Usually you'll squeeze your way out if you've got a lot of time, but if you're in a hurry you can't, so I distinctly remember opening those doors to the turret and grabbing Collar by the neck and pulling him ass over teakettle backwards into the little navigation quarter, and then we got our parachutes hooked on, and I went out first and he followed me.

Aaron Elson: Do you remember your altitude?

Corman Bean: I don't remember precisely. It would have been in the neighborhood of 24 to 25,000 feet.

Aaron Elson: Now you've left the ship. What did you see, and what did you do?

Corman Bean: We had been trained back in England what to do and what to expect in the event that we got shot down. And one thing that they emphasized in our training was that if you bail out of an airplane at high altitude, don't pull the ripcord right away. Freefall for a long way.

Well, during that freefall, you can assume any attitude you want to – physical attitude, not mental – so I remember rolling over on my back and looking back up and seeing the planes flying over, the fighters and the shells exploding, but it's just a matter of seconds and that flight is gone, especially when it's as small as ours was, so few airplanes. So then I free-fell, and as I remember best, we were told not to open our parachute until we could see an individual tree. But I went into a cloud bank, and I figured when I hit that cloud bank I'd fallen far enough, I'd better slow this thing down, so I did, and I landed in the top of a tree.

Aaron Elson: When you opened the chute, did it surprise you how much of a jerk there was?

Corman Bean: No. See, we hadn't ever parachuted but we'd been given some instructions, and one of the things they said is, Roll over on your back and pull the chute so if it goes – we had chest chutes – so if it doesn't open you can at least claw it open. And if you're on your back, you'll absorb the shock through your whole body rather than picking it all up in the thighs and the crotch.

Aaron Elson: I think several people didn't do that.

Corman Bean: Oh, I'm sure of that; it's a pretty exciting time. I know when I got to the ground I thought, where's my ripcord? I apparently had thrown that as soon as it pulled.

Aaron Elson: Going back a little bit, when you looked up, what specific images do you recall seeing?

Corman Bean: They flashed by pretty fast because I was going this way, they were going that way, but I remember seeing some of the bombers, and I remember seeing a lot of smoke. The 20-millimeters made a little puff of smoke when they exploded. I guess all I could really say is that I saw the bombers, some of them in trouble. I saw a lot of other parachutes. I saw a lot of people bailing out. And saw some planes smoking and on fire, and not much more than that, that I remember vividly.

Aaron Elson: You landed in a tree?

Corman Bean: I landed I suppose 40 feet up in a tree. In a forest. I didn't get hurt, though. And we were told, get your chute and hide it; well, that was a crock, you weren't going to get a chute out of a tree. In fact, you had to crawl up a little bit in order to take the tension off so you could unhook the straps, and then shinny on down the tree once you got free of the parachute.

And when I got to the ground, there was another lieutenant – he was a co-pilot from another airplane in our group, I don't think he was in our squadron – when I got to the base of the tree he was standing there waiting for me. He had seen me come down.

Aaron Elson: Who was that?

Millie Bean: Isn't he the one that wrote to you from England?

Corman Bean: Yes.

Millie Bean: You've got the letter I think.

Corman Bean: Maybe I filed it.

Millie Bean: I could write a book on just the stories that go along with this. The female perspective.

Aaron Elson: You should.

Millie Bean: The kids have heard it enough.

Corman Bean: I don't know why I kept this where I did, but it was in the bill drawer.

Aaron Elson: (reading) "Eugene George, PO Box 4426, Austin, Texas."

Corman Bean: He was a co-pilot in another plane. It's interesting because his account of our time after we met at the foot of the tree and my account are very different. You say about the same event and two people see it differently; he and I were together right after we both landed. I knew where we were, pretty close to where we were because, well, I'd been the navigator, I ought to know where we were. And I had a couple of compasses, little ones, on my body. So we thought, well, we'll get the hell out of here, we'll walk back. So we started off in the right direction. We walked near an autobahn, and followed the autobahn a little bit, but it wasn't long before – well, even before we got to the autobahn – the ground was being covered by German soldiers looking for us. It was like a bird hunt; we were wounded birds all over the place. So he and I were "evading" and we were in the brush alongside a road, and the Jerries were on bicycles and/or in automobiles looking for us, and we just stayed hidden and waited till they went by and then we'd walk. We stayed hidden pretty much during the daytime, and tried to do our walking at night. But after we'd had about 48 hours of that we knew that there's no way we're going to get out of here. If the Jerries don't shoot us the Americans will if we ever get to the front lines. So toward the end of the second day, we were less careful in our hiding, and we literally allowed ourselves to be spotted by a group of farmers working in the field. They "arrested" us, and took us in to the local Wehrmacht office. When we were there, they questioned us some, but they had no authority over us. I was able to communicate with them enough to say that – well, they knew we were American fliers and that we should be prisoners of the Luftwaffe, not the Wehrmacht. We're not your prisoners, we're German air force prisoners. And they loaded us on a little truck and took us over to the nearby German air force base, and then we were prisoners of the air

force.

We had been told back in England, if you're shot down, try to get to be a prisoner of the German air force, because they'll take better care of you than the German ground troops will. Let alone the SS. So we were successful in becoming prisoners of the German air force.

Aaron Elson: At any point were you threatened by the farmers or other civilians?

Corman Bean: They were not hostile toward us. You've seen the cartoons and this was about like the cartoon, all they had was pitchforks, but that was enough for us. There were a lot of them. A big group working out in that particular field.

Aaron Elson: Where were you interrogated?

Corman Bean: The Luftwaffe took us off to a Dulag Luft. That's a temporary interrogation center. And this George and I had been separated by the Germans, according to my account, and he was badly burned, so they took him in one direction for medical help and I was hale and hearty so they just shipped me off to this Dulag Luft, and I remember they threw me in a cell. I was all alone, and I was dead tired. I hadn't slept in two or three days, and I lay down on some straw and went to sleep. And when I woke up there were six or eight other prisoners in there that had been picked up in the same raid. And within a day or two they started interrogating us.

The first interrogation session that I had was with a German officer. He was sitting behind a desk, and his first question to me was, "What do you think Mildred will think of this?"

Now that's kind of jarring.

He had a file, which he said "we keep on all American fliers because we get so many of you down here," and he knew all about me. He knew where I was going to college. He knew which Army bases I'd been at. He knew where I was in England, which bomb group I was with, and the crowning blow was, he pulled a picture out of that file and it was a picture of our airplane, the one that we had finally been assigned to, sitting on a hardstand in England.

So there wasn't much more he could get out of me, and he knew it. But they kept me there for about two weeks, and their interrogation went just the way our instructors had told us it was going to go. Very nice to you to start with, and friendly, and the instructors had said, "You give them name, rank and serial number, and they'll respect that. But they'll feign anger after a week or so when that's all they've got, and then they will have you in this room and you'll hear some rifle shots outside and they'll say, "Those guys wouldn't tell us anything." We were told they would do that and it was all a hoax.

Aaron Elson: Did they do that, with the rifle shots?

Corman Bean: They had the rifle shots. They didn't kill anybody that we know about.

Aaron Elson: What did they say to you?

Corman Bean: The interrogator said something to the effect that that's what happens to the guys that don't tell us what we want to know.

Aaron Elson: That's got to be emotionally wrenching.

Corman Bean: Yes, but we had been prepared for that. And at each step along the way, things happened just exactly the way our people had told us it would happen. So you start getting pretty confident that hey, I've got a little control here. I've got a few cards of my own to play. But then after about two weeks, and all they got was name, rank and serial number – they had the rest. And I think they knew that a poor little navigator doesn't know anything about the conduct of the war other than where you're going this day and they knew that, too. They recognized that there wasn't anything more that we could have given them. So they loaded us on a train and headed us off toward our prison camp.

We were on this train, and we got near Berlin at night and the train stopped, and they herded us off the train and held us out in a field, and we could hear the bombers. We couldn't see very much, but you could see Berlin burning, and you knew that Berlin was being hit by the British that night. So we waited that out, and then got back on the train, and they hauled us through Berlin and out the north end and we were on our way to Stalag Luft 1.

Aaron Elson: Who did you room with at Stalag Luft 1?

Corman Bean: Reg Miner and I were together. They put us in one compound, and Miner and I were in the same room. Then, after about four months, about half of our time there, they moved us into another compound, and they left Miner and me together, so we were together in the same room for eight and half months. I've got a list of many of the guys that were in our room.

Aaron Elson: At what point did you, Millie, learn that Corman was a POW?

Millie Bean: I had a dream that I'd hear on my birthday, which is November 24th. At ten minutes to midnight the Western Union guy came with the message that he was a prisoner of war. Now you could take that for what it is.

Aaron Elson: So that was two months after Corman was shot down?

Millie Bean: September 27th he was shot down. It was about a week afterwards that I got the missing in action letter.

Corman Bean: The MIA came pretty quickly. But the prisoner of war notice came on the 24th of November.

Aaron Elson: At Stalag Luft 1, how hungry did you get?

Corman Bean: Well, it varied. The Red Cross had what they called food parcels for us, and they were supposed to give one parcel per week per man, in which case, on the few weeks that they did that, we ate pretty well. It was supplemented a little bit with German food; barley soup and hard bread. But then, for some reason or other, the Jerries would withhold those food packages, and we'd get nothing but Jerry food, and that was practically nothing. So our degree of feeding ran the gamut, from pretty decent to pretty bad. It was interesting that when the Russians came into camp, we were liberated by a Russian private and his girl riding on an American jeep. They were the first Allies in the camp. But a couple of days later, when the Russian officers got

in there, they were friendly and they were talking to our command, and the first thing they wanted to do was bring their girls in the camp. I suspect that our American commander could see the headlines back home if that were to happen, so he nixed that, and he nixed their bringing vodka in the camp; that would have killed us if we'd have gotten a little booze at that time, but they did let the Russians drive some cattle in the camp. We had some butchers among us, and they cut up some beef and we had our first taste of real meat in a long, long time. It was funny because we gorged ourselves those two weeks that we were in camp because they had thousands and thousands of Red Cross parcels just a few miles away, but they hadn't brought them in but meagerly. So we got some details that hauled Red Cross parcels in the camp, and for two weeks we ate a lot. Then we got to Camp Lucky Strike and the first thing they did was put us on restricted diets, because they didn't want us filling our bellies too full too soon.

Aaron Elson: How did it feel to be free again?

Corman Bean: A great relief. And wonderful to be going home to wife and family. I got back home to Fargo in early October, and my college class had already started, and I had my third term of junior year and first term of senior year to do together, with a late start on top of it, so for the first two months or so I was so enmeshed in schoolwork that I didn't have much time for anything else.

I came back home on what they call TDY, temporary duty at home, with orders to report to Miami Beach in six or eight weeks. And that was a pretty joyful time. We had time enough to think about what was happening then and to relax a little bit and appreciate the good things in life again. And they housed us right down on the beachfront. We were billeted in one hotel, we went to another hotel for meals, and there were only four or five hotels that I remember down there; of course they've long since been torn down and replaced with big ones. But we were down there – well, let's go back a little bit. I was sent home for temporary duty with orders to report to Miami. During this time, rationing was still on, so we had spent our time and gas stamps very cautiously. In fact, I had talked to my farmer friends and gathered a few extra stamps. They gave us enough to go by car to Miami, but we wanted to do a little bit more than that, so we'd saved up some extra stamps. On August 14, we were sitting around the dinner table at my parents' house when we heard about VJ-Day. The very next morning we took off – this had been pre-planned – for Miami. We were going to spend a couple of weeks getting down and visiting friends, and we pulled into the first service station somewhere in southern Minnesota, pulled out a handful of stamps, and the guy says, "You can keep them. The rationing is off." So then we got down to Miami.

We spent six weeks in Florida. We went down there for rest and rehabilitation, and we were scheduled to go back into training for flight work in the Pacific, but when the war in Japan was over, they didn't really know what to do with us, so they sent us back to Fort Snelling in St. Paul and they discharged me there. And then from there it was a quick trek home and right back to school, about the day I got back home.

Aaron Elson: What kind of car did you have?

Corman Bean: When I got back out of prison camp, cars were damn hard to find. But we located a gal who for some reason or other wanted to sell a 1940 Mercury convertible, and she didn't have a very hard selling job. It was like, "How much do you want? Okay. Here it is. Let's

go.”

Aaron Elson: Do you remember what it cost?

Corman Bean: I don't remember what we paid for that, but I sold it to the Ford dealer there in Fargo. We didn't have it too long. I sold it before the winter because a convertible is really not the car to have out there; but I sold it with the promise that he'd give me a new car on the first load of Fords that came into town, and he did pretty well by me. He gave me one off the second foursome that came into town, and I remember what I paid for that. It was a 1946 Ford Super Deluxe four-door, and you had to buy the radio extra and the spare tire you had to pay for extra, and the whole price was \$1,275. The best car that Ford put on the road at that time.

Millie Bean: Remember when you were down in Florida, you had a chance to get extra flight pay if you wanted?

Corman Bean: Well, yes. Even when the war was over they were encouraging us to stay in the Air Force Reserve, and one thing that they did was, “Hey, you guys can go back and fly, we'll just take you up and circle Florida for four hours and you get your extra,” what, 75 bucks a month? And Millie wouldn't let me off the ground. Then before they sent us back up for discharge, they made the offer of a promotion if you'll sign up for the Reserve, and like I mentioned earlier, my only ambition was to forget it all and get back to living again, so I didn't go in the Reserve.

Aaron Elson: What were you studying in college?

Corman Bean: Chemistry.

Aaron Elson: And what did you do after you graduated?

Corman Bean: A good buddy of mine and I started selling farm chemicals out in the Red River Valley in North Dakota. We were just trying to get a little business going, and we went about two or three years, then the Korean War came along and all of the nitrogen got sucked up by the government, and the phosphates, so we couldn't get any fertilizer to sell and that was our bread and butter. So we cashed it out, and I went to work for Standard Oil Company, back when there was a Standard Oil of Indiana. I worked for them for seven to eight years, and then left them and went to work in the marketing department of Dow Chemical Company, and retired from Dow 13, 14 years ago.

Millie Bean: He'll never add it, but he did get his masters in chemistry, and the man that he was in business with went on to be governor of North Dakota for 12 years.

Corman Bean: Bill Guy. He was in the Navy. He had a ship torpedoed, and I had an airplane shot out from under me, and we wind up back home going into business together.

Millie Bean: With the Guy Bean Farm Improvement Company.

Aaron Elson: What was it like for you, Millie, before Corman became a POW, being the wife of a guy who was overseas?

Millie Bean: I think Cormie said it right, there were so many of us; I mean it was always somebody. Now like I see these three prisoners of war today [In Kosovo] , but those are just three. We had thousands of them. And I think that keeps you going. Then you read about a dear friend who was killed, and you think, gee, how lucky you are. And I had good friends. I had a good home. I lived with my parents and his parents lived a block away. But I was eternally the optimist.

Corman Bean: [Taking out a notebook from his time as a prisoner of war] This is some poetry, and a little bit of prose. I got it out last night and I was reading it again, and some of it is really good.

Aaron Elson: Why don't you read a couple of poems? Had you written any poetry before?

Corman Bean: Oh, this isn't mine. This is a collection that I put together from several guys there in prison camp. This is kind of long. This is an ode to a P-38.

Ode to a P-38

*Oh, Hedy Lamar is a beautiful gal
Madeline Carroll is too
But you'll find if you query a much different theory
Amongst any bomber crew
That the loveliest thing of which one can sing
This side of the heavenly gates
Is no blonde or brunette of the Hollywood set
But an escort of P-38s*

*In all the days past when the tables were massed
With glasses of scotch and champagne
It's quite true that that sight was a thing to delight us
Intent on feeling no pain
But no longer the same nowadays in this game
As we sail onto the missing state
Take your sparkling wine but always make mine
An escort of P-38s*

*Byron, Shelley and Keats ran each other dead heats
Describing the views from the hills
Of the valleys in May where the winds gently sway
An army of bright daffodils
Take your daffodils Byron, the wild flowers Shelley
Yours is the myrtle, friend Keats*

*Just preserve me those cuties
All American beauties
An escort of P-38s*

*Sure we're braver than hell on the ground all is well
In the air it's a much different story
As we sweat out our track through the fighters and flak
We're willing to split up the glory
Well, they wouldn't reject us so heaven protect us
Until all this shootin' abates
Give us courage to fight 'em and another small item
An escort of P-38s*

The Pilot and the Bombardier

*The pilot and the bombardier were walking round the wire
A German search had turned them out into the mud and mire
It is a funny place to be, they said, for any Army flier
If I could build a ship of klim and make the wings of spam
I wouldn't stay, the pilot said, in this place where I am
I've got it, said the bombardier, we'll make it run on jam*

*We'd fly right home, they both agreed, and land at Selfridge Field
We'd eat a crate of strawberries that Rita Hayworth peeled
And drink so much, the pilot said, our blood would be congealed
And then we'd hit a restaurant and order sirloin steak
It would be even bigger than an ordinary lake
With eggs on top, the pilot said, or else my heart would break*

*Lots of beer, said the bombardier, or is that understood?
And for dessert I wonder what would be surpassing good
Ice cream, of course, pistachio, in portions like Mount Hood
And when we've eaten all we can we'll tour the smart night spots
We'll invite the girls we'd like to make in twenty dozen lots
And drink the scotch we'd like to drink in straight quadruple shots*

*I think I'll bathe in Grade A milk to cleanse that Jerry stain
The bombardier said he'd prefer a tub of pink champagne
Imagine taking baths like that along with Lola Lane
With all the money we'd collect I'd buy a Cadillac
Custom built along the lines I dreamed up on my sack
Give me a smoke, the pilot said, you still owe me a pack*

*And as they took another turn the air raid warning blew
That kind of thing encourages the goons to hurry through
Do you suppose, the pilot said, they found our raisin brew?*

We spent one New Year's Eve there in camp, and a couple of months before that a group of guys got together and decided they were going to make some brew for New Year's Eve. So they saved what prunes they could get hold of out of the Red Cross boxes, and raisins and sugar, and they got some yeast from a German guard, and they put the thing together in a great big old pot and just let it sit there and curdle for weeks and weeks, and it fermented of course, and that group of maybe eight or ten guys sat around a big table with that big jug of booze in the middle and drank until they were just about dead. The foulest looking stuff you ever saw. They didn't have the distilling apparatus, so they had to drink it raw.

A Pilot's Lament

*Oh, the fortress is an aircraft constructed of rivets and tin
With a top speed of over 100, the ship with a headwind built in
If ever you run into ack-ack or a Focke-Wulf makes a good pass
Just slide back your seat and start jumpin'
To heck with the crew, save your ass*

*If ever you should lose an engine and don't know which way to turn
Just reach right up on the dash, push the button marked spin crash and burn
Oh why did I join the Air Corps? Mother dear Mother knew best
For here I lie 'neath the wreckage, fortress all over my chest*

Here are some excerpts that were collected from letters from home:

"If you need any money let me know." From his mother.

"I find it difficult to live on your two hundred dollar allotment each month." To Lieutenant BL from his wife.

"We're not sending you any parcels. We hear you can buy everything you need in stores near your camp."

"I've been living with a private since you are gone. Please don't cut off my allotment, though, because he doesn't make as much money as you."

"I'm going to file for a divorce. Mother and I have talked it over and since you have been gone so long, we decided it was best."

"I knew I should have kept you home and joined the Air Corps myself. Even when you were a kid I expected you'd wind up in prison."

Talk about a kick in the butt. The POW received a sweater from a woman through the American Red Cross, and upon writing her a letter of thanks received the following answer: "I'm sorry to hear that a prisoner received the sweater I knit. I intended it for a fighting man."

A Liberator's Lament

*Early one crisp September morn the planes begin to roar
Into the wild blue yonder, they were going out to war
The target it was Kassel and as such was highly cursed
And they, we Old Man's terrorfliegers were out to do their worst*

*We formed the three-ship section and then we formed the six
But when we tried to form the group the leader did some tricks
The inside ships were stalling, the outside did 210
The Old Man grabbed his microphone and yelled "Now listen, men
Though this looks like a milk run mission I want you all to know
When I go on a mission it's bound to be a show
The bunch ahead I'm sure you know is a flying fortress group
So about the way we're gonna fly now I'll give you some poop
The Jerries they are tricky, they know that we're too new
They're expecting us to straggle and they'll get us if we do
So this is what we plan to try if Jerry starts a fuss
We'll fly so close to the group ahead they won't know which is us"*

*Flying over Munster where Jerry'd laid a trap
The Old Man took his tin hat off and laid it on his lap
He turned back to the engineer and this is what he said:
"If something must be shot away I'd rather lose my head"*

*The flak was thick around us, the fighters they were worse
But above the roar of battle you could hear the Old Man curse
The vibration of the turrets made the instruments all dance
The colonel was so frightened he darn near filled his pants
Now Collar grew so anxious that his sights were synchronized
He sat there sweating drops of blood as all hell filled the skies*

*The bombs dropped out from all the ships, the crisis finally passed
The Old Man yelled "Get out of here, and brother I mean fast!"
We never completed that mission, though our Air Medal has a star
And we knew the crews were wishing that the group would build a bar
Because when a man has done a job that takes both guts and spunk
The one thing that he'd like to do is go get stinkin' drunk*

*No matter at all how brave you are, no matter lad how bold
A flyer's great ambition is to die from growing old
And when the flak is mighty thick though he's a fighting man
The place a guy should like to be is back home on his can*

Millie Bean: It mentioned the word Collar in there. Was that George Collar?

Corman Bean: Yeah. That must have been written in prison camp by or about somebody that was on our mission, because it mentioned both Collar and Kassel. I may have put Collar's name in there, I don't know.

Millie Bean: Isn't that the book that has your menus in it?

Corman Bean: Oh yeah. When we were in prison camp and were adequately fed, the talk was all about girls, and sex, and stuff like that that any young man would talk about. But when rations were scarce and everybody was hungry, all the talk turned to food, and everybody was obsessed with food. So a lot of guys sat down and wrote out the menus for their first week at home. Some psychologist would have a field day with this.

Aaron Elson: Let's hear one of the menus.

Corman Bean: "Sunday, breakfast: Half a cantaloupe. Waffles and maple syrup. Eggs sunnyside up. Vienna sausage. Cream of wheat. Pecan rolls. Peanut butter. Milk and coffee." You couldn't get away from the table!

"Lunch: Tomato consomme, scalloped corn, candied yams, mashed potatoes, roast pheasant, dressing gravy, cottage cheese, lettuce pear salad, angel food cake with crushed strawberries a la mode, hot buns, cranberry sauce, milk and coffee."

Millie Bean: That sounds like at your mother's house, Cormie. You must have written that one.

Corman Bean: Oh yes, I did that.

Aaron Elson: What was that one you were just reading?

Corman Bean: "For you the war is over," which was quite a quote among the Jerries to the prisoners.

*For you the war is over
The flyers heard that phrase
But it took a while to sink in
We still felt slightly dazed*

*Short hours ago our plane had roared
Through those skies above still blue
With tons of death hung in our belly
And a damn good fighting crew*

*For you the war is over
You can make it what you please
Solitary treatment rough
Or else a life of ease*

*Information you can give
Can hurt you none at all
What is that phrase you Yankees use
Oh yes, How about playing ball?*

*We can give you food and cigarettes
And quarters as our own
Or else some lead from a firing squad
And a grave simply marked "unknown"*

*Your commander we know is Colonel Blank
You flew with the Umpteenth Group
All your training was done out west
You see, we have most of the poop*

*He was still a kid with his life ahead
And he didn't want to die
But just as he opened his mouth to speak
This scene flashed through his eye*

*The boys of the group were back at the bar
And the old toast rang on high
"Here's to those who have gone before
And here's to the next to die"*

*He tried to laugh but it wouldn't work
He hoped it was just a bluff
But if this bastard was telling the truth
It's certainly going to be rough*

*He was scared it's true but what the hell
He had played the game and lost
He had laughed at death up in the sky
And now he'd pay the cost*

*"For me the war is over, Bud, you've sure got something there
But there's a million more just like me and they'll be getting in your hair
You've got me where you want me, you can put me neath the grass
But I've got five words to say first, Major. Blow it out your ass."*

Millie Bean: I couldn't figure out where you were last evening. Usually we're watching television together. You must have been reading those.

Corman Bean: I went 50 years and I didn't even think about this, but the last four or five years I've done more thinking about it, and have had so many different reminders come about.

This one is titled “Amen.”

Amen

*Oh, all you fallen fliers who've done battle in the sky
You've seen your ships a burning and you've seen your buddies die
You've watched tracers spitting from a fighter's wicked snoot
You've fumbled for a ripcord and felt the popping chute*

*You've lost your friends and freedom
You've lost both limbs and blood
But through it all you're a better man
With a stronger faith in God*

That says it pretty well.

Millie Bean: This is the most he's talked in a long time. You caught him on the right day.

Corman Bean: When I got shot down, I had one of these little wallet-sized pictures of Millie, and we had a kid in prison camp that got hold of some art supplies, and he drew portraits for us. And he drew that one from that little wallet-sized picture. He drew it of Millie.

Millie Bean: And you brought that back from prison camp.

Corman Bean: I carried that carefully all the way out of prison camp and all the way home.

Millie Bean: My granddaughter says, “Is that really you, Grandma?”

Aaron Elson: How many children do you have – you said you've got five boys and a daughter. And how many grandchildren?

Millie Bean: Ten, and two great grandchildren.

Aaron Elson: Did you have a lucky charm?

Corman Bean: If I did it didn't work. Well, it did work. I had a two dollar bill that I had been saving for a long time, and why I took it with me in the Army I'll never know, but I started this “short snorter club.” It was common then that guys used an uncommon bill or a foreign currency, and had it signed by the various people that they flew with as they crossed borders or went from one continent to the other. Of course the Jerries confiscated it. It was foolish to have had it on my person. Short snorter is what they called it. But I didn't have anything other than that. And that wasn't a lucky charm, particularly, it was just a record of where we had flown.

Well, let's see. We've gone into prison camp, and went all the way to Camp Lucky Strike. Can't be much more. The General Douglas MacArthur I think was the name of the troop ship that we came home on. They put prisoners of war on it and filled it to capacity, and then we were semi-comfortably bunked. But after that they opened it to any Army personnel that had orders or were free to go home with the understanding that you'll have to find a place to sleep, it may be

on the steel deck but if you want to get on this ship to go home, come aboard. So we had several hundred guys on there that had no place to stay or no little area to call their own on board, but they all got fed. We spent eight or nine days on the water coming home. Got back to Newport News, Virginia, and as soon as I could get freed up I called Millie back in Fargo. I guess that's still the most expensive phone call we ever made, but we talked well over a half hour. And it was during that time that I learned of many, many buddies from back home that lost their lives during the war.

Aaron Elson: What about the six guys you went in with?

Corman Bean: Oh, we all went to Jefferson Barracks, and there we got split up a little bit, but four of us were together in Jefferson Barracks. Two of us went to Eau Claire together, and then we were split up at Eau Claire, so I didn't wind up in real training with any of them.

Aaron Elson: Were any of them killed?

Corman Bean: One of them was my best man, who strangely enough also became a navigator, but he didn't get to navigation school until later on in the war, and he went over to Europe as a navigator on a B-24 or a B-17. He flew his full missions and came back home.

Another one that was a close buddy that I went in with stayed at Jefferson Barracks due to pneumonia and never did get to combat. Another one I didn't see again until after the war and we were living in southern Minnesota and lo and behold, he was working for Dow selling farm chemicals, I was working for Standard Oil of Indiana selling farm chemicals, and we wound up as competitors. He later on moved to Midland, Michigan, and we moved to Saginaw, and we got connected once again, and it was he who was very largely responsible for my going to work for Dow. He drowned in a swimming pool at the age of 37.

Eddie Deutsch went in with us, went to training, he was killed in the war, in the Air Force. I don't know which part he was in.

Millie Bean: Cormie's the only survivor of the whole bunch.

Corman Bean: Well, now, yeah. There were five of us that were really close, but none of us were killed in the war. I'm the only survivor now, since the war. The other four are dead. I can't think of any other anecdotes, can you, Millie? We went all the way through college training detachment, gunnery school, advanced navigation, Kasper, McCook, overseas. It seems ironic, in many ways, you know, they trained us very, very hard for a year and a half and we got in 16 flights in combat.

Aaron Elson: When you were with him in training, what was your routine like?

Millie Bean: I had a little college diploma that said I was a graduate and I just was very aggressive and found a job each place I'd go to. But I never hesitated to leave when he would leave.

Aaron Elson: How were the living accommodations?

Millie Bean: They were fair.

Corman Bean: She didn't live in Army accommodations. She had to find her own.

Millie Bean: I can remember, though, that they wouldn't allow single women on trains, and I know, when I'd want to follow him to a base on a different train, I'd see a single man standing over there, and I'd say, "Would you please be my husband until we get on the train?" So I got on the train at least once that way. Or I never would have gotten on the train.

Aaron Elson: I didn't know that they did that.

Millie Bean: I don't know why, what they thought a single woman was going to do.

Corman Bean: Well, the trains were so crowded, they didn't have room for singles. The trains were filthy dirty. We had ridden those trains in peacetime, before the war, a little bit, and they were spotless, I'm talking about the Northern Pacific. And we came home together once from Denver, and I'll tell you, the trains were just filthy.

Millie Bean: Terrible. One interesting thing was they had a prisoner of war meeting in the city of Minneapolis and Fargo was 250 miles from there, so I went over with a girlfriend, and they were telling about the things they were doing to the prisoners of war over there, like if they couldn't get a ring off a finger, they'd cut off the finger. I had many nightmares about that. I was hoping that his ring that I had given him was loose. There were just a lot of things, and you know, you're dumb, when you're 20 and 21, those things are impressive.

But we both had a lot of faith.
