

# “Coincidences”?

By Jim Kurtz  
Author of *The Green Box*

Robert Russell Kurtz was born January 8, 1919, in Akron, Ohio. Along with his family, he moved to White Plains, New York, in 1933. Margaret Florence Luther was born May 19, 1921 in Cleveland, Ohio. In 1928, she and her family moved to White Plains. Although Bob and Peggy didn't know each other as children in Ohio, their paths would "coincidentally" cross in 1941 in a church in White Plains. A year later, on March 28, 1942, they were married.

Robert was drafted into the United States Army on July 23, 1941. Less than five months later, the United States was at war. For close to a year, he trained as an artilleryman in the United States Army Coast Artillery at Camp Davis in Holly Ridge, North Carolina, but his desire had always been to become a pilot, so he applied for pilot training and was accepted. In June 1942, he was assigned to flight training in California. Over the next nine months, he trained at three different air bases: Mather, Ontario, and War Eagle. In April 1943, he was ordered to Marfa Air Base in Texas, where he was joined by his wife and a son, Bob, born that February.

After months of rigorous training, 2nd Lieutenant Robert R. Kurtz was awarded his pilot's wings, and sent to Casper, Wyoming, for heavy bomber training. There, it was discovered he had a deviated septum, which could interfere with his ability to breathe the oxygen he would need at altitude, so his training was briefly interrupted by surgery to correct the problem. On June 8, 1944, two days after D-Day, he shipped overseas and was assigned to the 15th Air Force, 55th Combat Wing, 780th Bomb Squadron, 465th Bomb Group based in Pantanella, Italy.

On August 3, 1944, his B-24 bomber, nicknamed *Sugar Baby*, was shot down on Kurtz's 20th combat mission over Ehrwald, Austria. Lieutenant Kurtz bailed out and was immediately captured by German soldiers to become a prisoner of war (POW). He spent the remainder of the war in three different POW camps before being liberated by Patton's Third

Army on April 29, 1945, just days before Germany surrendered to the victorious Allies. In mid-May, he was on a troop ship heading back to the States and a reunion with his wife and young son. One of the few things he carried back was a small, green Army-issue box, which promptly got tucked away in the attic.

Over the next seven years, Bob and Peggy would add three more boys to their brood: Bill in 1946, John in 1947, and the youngest, me, in 1949. The Kurtz household was a wonderful and loving place to grow up in, but everything was about to change.

On March 28, 1952, on the 10th anniversary of my parents' marriage, my father suffered a massive heart attack in the middle of the night and passed away. There have been many "coincidences" in my life; many, as you shall soon see, have been joyous ones. But the fact that my dad had to die at age 33, on my mom's and his 10th anniversary, ranks as the worst one on my list.

In the course of my journey to learn about the man I lost even before I was old enough to call him "Daddy," there have been many "coincidences." But I keep asking myself, were they mere coincidences? To me they've been more like fate or karma. Through every one of the experiences I am about to relate, I've felt my father's presence. It was as though he was sitting on my shoulder, accompanying me and sometimes guiding me on the journey to finally get to know the father who was taken from me when I was only two years old.

1957-1967- My first exploration of the green box in our attic was as an eight-year old. After my father's passing, there were two unspoken rules in our household. One was never to ask my mother about my father. Every once in a while, one of my brothers or I would want to know something about my dad, but when we asked my mom, her eyes would well up and she would cry, unable to answer our questions. We

learned to stop asking. The second rule was that the green box in the attic was strictly off limits. We knew we were never to open it. My three brothers were older and observed the unspoken rule. They all had memories of our dad, especially my oldest brother, Bob Jr. I didn't have a single memory of my father, but I had an idea that whatever was in that green box might change that.

One hot August afternoon, when my brothers were all out playing and my mom was vacuuming, I snuck upstairs into the attic with a flashlight. I'll never forget coming around the corner of the unlit space, unable to see anything. Suddenly the beam of my flashlight lit up a shiny green metallic box and my heart stopped. My fingers felt like they were burning as I slowly opened the lid and I realized, even as an eight-year old child, that my life would never be the same.

For the next ten years, I spent countless hours furtively rummaging through the contents of that green box without my mother's knowledge or consent—awestruck, but clueless as to the meaning of the medals, telegrams, love letters, and other unrecognized items it harbored. It would be more than 50 years before I finally felt at liberty to ask my mother questions about its contents.

1967-2000- For 33 years, the green box was put on the back burner. I went to college, found employment, got married, raised two sons, and went on with my life, seldom thinking about that box and the treasures it might hold.

2000- My brother Bill had always been interested in dad's wartime experiences but, like me, he had little information to work with. My father had said next to nothing about his military service to anyone, including my mother. Bill decided he would attempt to locate surviving members of our father's original bomber crew. His diligence was rewarded with responses from Joe Spontak, George Britton, and Lee

Englehorn, the navigator, bombardier, and gunner, respectively, on *Sugar Baby*. Bill shared their information with me, and told me how to get in touch with an Austrian citizen he had run across in the course of his research, a man named Gerd Leitner. Leitner had invited my brother to come to his home town of Ehrwald, but Bill was unable to accept the invitation, and suggested Leitner contact me instead.

2001- I received an e-mail from Gerd Leitner, informing me that he had organized a commemoration of the air battle that had raged in the skies over his tiny village on August 3, 1944. As a boy, he had witnessed eight American B-24 bombers and five German fighters get blown out of the sky in 30 seconds. The co-pilot on one of those bombers was my father.

Gerd Leitner and a fellow Austrian, Keith Bullock, had done extensive research on the events of that fateful day, and had compiled a list of all the American and German airmen involved in that battle, or their next of kin. Leitner invited me to attend the commemoration, and if I wavered at all, it ended when I learned that Joe Spontak, who my brother Bill had told me was the navigator in my dad's crew, would also be there. I accepted Gerd's invitation and arranged for my son Mike and me to travel to Austria. My objective was to learn more about the father I never knew, and I hoped to solve some of the mysteries in the green box. Little did I know I would accomplish that and so much more.

August 3, 2001- Mike and I arrived in Ehrwald. Events over the next 36 hours changed the course of my life and enabled me to start filling in the pieces of the puzzle that defined my father's wartime experiences.

Gerd Leitner introduced me to Oscar Bösch, one of the German fighter pilots involved in the battle over Ehrwald on August 3, 1944. He told me he was the pilot who had shot down my father's plane and said he could prove it. Bösch explained that every B-24 Liberator had a specific

color and letter designation on its tail. Then he told me he had seen the big red “H” on my father’s B-24 in his sights, and I knew he was correct. Through my research, I had previously learned that the tail of my dad’s bomber, *Sugar Baby*, had indeed sported a red “H.”

I met Hilde Richter, who witnessed my father’s capture by German soldiers. As an eight-year old, she and her family were having a picnic at the base of the Alps when all hell broke loose above them. She told me she saw my father pull a baby shoe out of his bomber jacket and show it to his German captors. He spoke no German, but evidently he hoped one of those German soldiers might be a family man and take pity on him. It worked.

I met Joe Spontak, the navigator who trained with my dad in the States and who fought alongside him in the skies over Germany and Austria. He shared many stories and anecdotes with me that eventually found their way into *The Green Box*, the book I wrote to tell the story of my journey to find my father.

Gerd Leitner led us on a hike 6,300 feet up in the Austrian Alps, to a site local Austrians call the Brendlkar. It was where *Sugar Baby* came to rest. All but the tail gunner, Charlie Sellars, had managed to bail out before the bomber exploded in mid-air and crashed into the mountain-side. Leitner led me to the area where the nose of the plane crashed. We cut a piece of the co-pilot’s seat, where my dad had sat, out of the wreckage and I brought it back to the States.

On the way back down the mountain, a fellow hiker named Debbie Beson told me her father credited Bob Kurtz with having saved his life in the air battle. Her father was Tony Jezowski, a substitute gunner on *Sugar Baby*. When the bomber was hit, his parachute cords got tangled in the interior wreckage. As my father was ready to bail out, hers yelled for help. Even though the airplane was on fire and plummeting towards

earth, my dad went back in and freed the tangled cords, and they jumped out through the open bomb bay doors at the same moment. Five seconds later, *Sugar Baby* exploded.

July 2009- As part of my effort to experience as much as I could of everything my father had gone through during the war, I went skydiving on my 60th birthday. Falling towards earth at 120 mph, I felt the fear he must have felt, although thankfully I was spared the trauma of finding German soldiers with weapons on the ground in Mesa, Arizona, when my feet finally hit the ground!

August 2010- I returned to Ehrwald, this time with my wife Julie accompanying me. Our trip to Europe included stops in France, Italy, Germany, and a scheduled hike, once again, to the Brendlkar on August 3, the anniversary of the air battle. Once we reached the crash site, Gerd Leitner handed me a wedding ring, telling me it had been given to him by a fellow Austrian who had found it there 66 years earlier. Because of research I had done on *Sugar Baby's* crew, I knew it must have belonged to Charlie Sellars. There were only three married crewmen on the bomber that day: my father; John Cooper, the radio operator; and Sellars, the tail gunner. My dad and Cooper were captured and ended up in POW camps where the Germans let them keep their wedding rings. Therefore it had to have belonged to Sellars, the one crewmember who never made it out of Dad's bomber the day it was shot down.

When I got home, I went online, hoping to discover something about Charlie Sellars' life before he was killed in action. I was really hoping to locate someone, preferably a next of kin, to whom I could return his wedding ring. It turned out to be a futile and frustrating search. I remember closing my laptop when my phone "coincidentally" rang. It was Brigadier General Jim Anderson, an acquaintance I had made the previous summer. I explained my dilemma to him, and although he

himself could not help me, he gave me contact information for a childhood friend of his, Carole Williams, who had taken up military genealogy as a hobby. I called Carole and gave her what little information I had on Charlie Sellars (name, rank, and serial number). She called me the next day with a list of three of Charlie's living siblings. His wife had died in 1970, but a brother Ken lived in Fulton, a suburb of Syracuse, New York, only four hours from my home in Massachusetts. I called Ken and told him about his brother's wedding ring. At first he was suspicious, probably thinking it was some sort of scam. Eventually he believed my story and invited Julie and me to his home. The next week I gave him Charlie's wedding ring. It was a somber moment when I shared with him what I knew about the air battle in which his brother Charlie had been killed in action.

The next day, Ken brought me to his childhood home to show me where he, Charlie, and five other siblings grew up. It was a tiny farmhouse that had been shut down years before, and the only key to the house was held by a caretaker who stopped by every other month to make sure everything was secure. Ken apologized to me because he knew that I was hoping to take a look inside the home where *Sugar Baby's* tail gunner lived before shipping overseas. As we went to leave, a pick-up truck "coincidentally" pulled into the driveway. It was the caretaker, who had not stopped by in over two months, but chose that morning to go check the farm. Even Ken shook his head when we started discussing the odds of our being there the same day as the caretaker. We were thus able to go inside and look around. It was a great moment for both Ken and me.

July 2012- I received a call from Dad's navigator, Joe Spontak, telling me that George Britton, the bombardier on *Sugar Baby*, was living in Boca Raton, Florida. I had read or been told that George had passed away a few years earlier, and evidently I never thought to ask Spontak whether he had contact with George. I called George and asked if it would be all



right if I came to Florida to visit him. He was in ill health, but knowing how important it was for me to learn more about my dad, he told me to come on down, and I was on a plane the next day. We spent hours together as he related stories about the experiences that the two men had shared in their stateside training, as well as the many hours they spent together in combat over Europe. As I was leaving, I found out George had never received the Purple Heart he earned for being wounded in the air battle that day. I contacted his local Congressman in Florida, and through persistence, which included numerous phone calls, in August 2012, George was finally awarded the medal he so clearly deserved.

May 2015- *The Green Box* was published.

October 2016- Julie and I traveled to New Orleans for a reunion of Stalag Luft III survivors. Stalag Luft III was the German POW camp where my father spent five horrible months in 1944. Only six former POWs were physically able to attend the gathering in New Orleans; none of them had known my father. Afterward, we were sitting in the airport gate area in New Orleans, waiting to board our plane home, when I noticed an elderly African-American in a wheelchair.

He had on a hat inscribed with the Tuskegee Airmen logo. I knew from my research that my father's Bomber Wing was often escorted by the "Red Tails"—P51 Mustang fighters flown by Tuskegee Airmen, so I went over and thanked him for his service. I had returned to where Julie and I were sitting when I began to squirm in my seat and Julie asked me what my problem was. I told her there was one more question I just had to ask that Tuskegee Airman. Having decided to see if one more coincidence might be in the cards, I went back to where he was sitting and asked him if he had kept flight logs from his service in the European Theater of Operations (ETO). He said he had, so I gave him the date (August 3, 1944) and the mission my dad was on when his B-24 was

shot down, and asked him to please check his flight records when he got home. The next day that Tuskegee Airman called and said yes, he had flown fighter support for my father's Bomb Group that day. He was, "on his wing!"

A couple of months later, that same Tuskegee Airman, Colonel Charles McGee, graciously invited me to his home in Bethesda, Maryland. As I glanced around his living room, I felt as if I could be standing in the National Air and Space Museum. Among all the photos and memorabilia, there were pictures of the Colonel with five different U. S. Presidents.

[You might be familiar with Colonel McGee if you watched the Kansas City Chiefs play the Forty-Niners in the Super Bowl—he was one of the 100-year-old veterans at the coin toss before the game. You also might have seen him two days later when President Trump introduced him at the State of the Union address as Brigadier General McGee; the President had promoted him to that rank at a White House ceremony earlier in the day.]

October 2016- In a commercial airliner, I landed on the same runway in Casper, Wyoming, where my father had shot approaches while training on heavy bombers 72 years earlier. I spoke to a group at Casper College about *The Green Box* and afterward a woman approached me with tears in her eyes. I had mentioned in my talk that my father was grounded for a few months due to a deviated septum—the breathing problem I alluded to earlier, which could have interfered with his ability to take in needed oxygen through a mask while at altitude. Eventually, he had it operated on at Casper Air Base and was allowed to resume flying. She was weeping, she told me, because her father had been the only surgeon at the base from 1943-45. Therefore, he had to have been the surgeon that operated on my dad. Another "coincidence"? Or something more?

January 2017- I received a phone call from a 95-year-old veteran, Jay Milnor, who lives in Brooksby Village, an assisted-living facility in Peabody, Massachusetts, where my mother spent the last few years of her life. While watching closed-caption television in his apartment, he came across a program that featured a speech I'd given the previous Memorial Day at Brooksby about *The Green Box* and my father's experiences as the co-pilot on a B-24 Liberator. Jay invited me to visit him. He told me he'd been a waist gunner on a B-24 during WWII and said that after watching my speech, he felt the need to talk about his own exploits with someone who might understand what he had gone through.

I visited him the next day and we became fast friends and remain so to this day. Jay had been stationed in Italy as part of the 15th Air Force, the same as my father. He had a wonderful scrapbook and an impressive collection of memorabilia; in a way it was his own "green box." He also had a log of the missions he flew in 1944, and as I looked at them, they struck me as familiar. Hoping that what I found would confirm my suspicions, I asked Jay if I could borrow his list of missions. Back at home, I pulled out my father's list of missions and compared them with Milnor's. My father's Bomb Group flew out of Pantanella, Italy. Although Milnor had been a member of a different Group, based in Cerignola, he had flown in the same formation, to the same location, on the same date as my father, not once, but four different times!

Astonished, but not really surprised by these "coincidences," I decided to check Colonel McGee's flight logs as well. No surprise there either. As a member of the Tuskegee Airmen, he had flown fighter escort on all four missions. Coincidence? Hah!

March 2017- A friend of mine living in Washington, DC, sent me a link to an obituary that had appeared in the *Boston Globe*. Frederick Irving

was an American diplomat in Iceland and Jamaica in the 70's, and like my friend, was a graduate of the National War College. My friend, who had read *The Green Box*, called my attention to some similarities in the obituary between Irving's WWII service and my father's.

Irving was a navigator on a B-24 Liberator that flew missions out of Italy in 1944. He was shot down the first week of August, captured by the Germans, and eventually was held in a German POW camp. That sounded eerily close to Bob Kurtz's story, and having become used to "coincidences" leading to more coincidences, I decided to do a little more research.

I learned that Irving had written an autobiography, with the first few pages detailing his WWII experiences and the remainder about his diplomatic service. My friend also mentioned that he thought Irving's son lived in the Boston area. That was all I needed to hear. Within a week, I located the son, Richard Irving, a social worker living in Winchester, Massachusetts. I called him and he agreed to meet me, saying he had a "green box" of his own, one that contained his father's WWII memorabilia. Appropriately, we met on Veterans Day, and in the next hour or two, our conversation revealed stunning similarities between our fathers' WWII service that to this day I find hard to comprehend.

My father was shot down on August 3, 1944; Irving was shot down on August 8. Both were interrogated and processed at Dulag Luft, Oberursel, Germany. Both were assigned to Stalag Luft III in Sagan, Germany, my father arriving on August 16th, Irving less than a week later. Richard Irving showed me his father's registration form from Stalag Luft III. It was identical to my father's, right down to the same German interrogator's handwriting and signature. The Germans were impeccable record keepers, so as Irving and my father were moved from POW camp to POW camp, their records followed them. In the

days after their liberation in Moosburg, the POWs were asked if they wanted to have their original interrogation forms from Stalag Luft III and most did. Richard Irving and my father both requested their forms and brought them back to the States. My father was prisoner #7247, Irving #7313. Only 65 other prisoners were processed in between.

There were four compounds in Stalag Luft III. My father was assigned to the North Compound, which was comprised of 98% Royal Air Force (RAF) British officers, so he was in a distinct minority. A few days later, Frederick Irving was assigned to the same North Compound. As both were among the 2% minority, it's not hard to imagine that not only did they know each other, but that they might well have become good friends.

In his book, Irving described events that occurred from August to December, 1944, at Stalag Luft III in language that closely mirrors my father's descriptions. Irving described their evacuation the night of January 29, 1945, from Stalag Luft III, exactly as my father experienced it. What they both called "the Forced March" had begun; my father, Fred Irving, and 11,000 fellow POWs were marched into the night in a blinding blizzard. There was over a foot of snow on the ground and temperatures were sub-zero. They walked over ten miles, first to Muskau, Germany, where they spent two nights in churches, barns, and industrial buildings, and then on to Spremberg, Germany, where they were herded into cattle cars for a three-day trip, with only one stop to relieve themselves, before continuing by rail to another POW camp in Nuremberg. Fred Irving and my father both described that trip as the worst three days of their lives. I have often wondered how big a part the brutality and degradation of those three days played in my father's premature death. I suppose it's a question for which I'll never have a definitive answer.

After Nuremberg, they were marched to Moosburg, a POW camp that held over 130,000 prisoners. Finally, on April 29, 1945, they were liberated by General George S. Patton's Third Army. Every detail in Irving's book is identical to what I have discovered about my father's experiences. They must have not only known each other, but probably endured this unforgettable chapter of their lives side by side. I wish I could have met Frederick Irving prior to his death. What stories might he have told me about my dad?

July 12, 2018- I had just gotten off the phone with my younger son Brian, after wishing him a happy 35th birthday. It has always intrigued me that he shares that birthday with my grandson Nate and my wife's mother. I've always been kind of a "numbers" person. Looking for something to do, I decided to go over some of my research on Frederick Irving after having met with his son Richard on Veterans Day the year before. As I scanned his flight logs for the bombing missions he flew out of Venosa, Italy, one mission leapt out at me. It was a mission to Nimes, France, on July 12, 1944, exactly 74 years before. I smiled at the serendipity of the date and then thought, heck, why not check the other flight logs I had for my dad, Jay Milnor, and Colonel McGee?

First I checked my father's logs, and sure enough, on July 12, 1944, he had left his base in Pantanella on a bombing mission to Nimes. More checking revealed that Jay Milnor and Colonel McGee had also been in the skies over Nimes, France, on that day.

Four years earlier, the only thing I knew about Nimes, France, was that my father had flown a bombing mission there. In January 2017, Jay Milnor contacted me out of the blue. We became good friends when he shared his WWII service experiences with me, including his giving me a copy of his bombing missions. In 2018, I met Colonel McGee, purely by chance, in the New Orleans Airport, and weeks later he shared his flight logs with me in his Bethesda home. Not far from his home lives my

good friend, also named Jim Kurtz (coincidentally, of course), who steered me to the obituary of Frederick Irving, which eventually led to my meeting his son and sharing his father's "green box." What are the odds that these four airmen, three of whom I had never heard of less than three years before, all met up in the skies over Nimes, France, on July 12, 1944, and that the same date, July 12, would be the birth date of my son Brian, my grandson Nate, and my mother-in-law Josephine? It's a little bit difficult for me to chalk all that up to coincidence. I feel like something or someone is guiding me on this journey.

June 2018- While shopping in a local supermarket, I noticed an older gentleman in the checkout line wearing a hat inscribed "WWII Veteran" and with a logo depicting a B-24. He was with his daughter and they were about to leave the store. I abandoned my grocery cart in mid-aisle and rushed over to thank him for his service. The B-24 logo naturally grabbed my attention, so I asked him to tell me a little bit about his service in the Army Air Force during WWII. He seemed surprised that I was interested, but after I explained that I had written a book about my father's experiences as co-pilot on a B-24 in the war, he opened up some. His name was Bob Cleverdon and he told me that he would soon be 97 years old. As a member of the 8th Air Force, 392nd Bomb Group, based in Wendling, England, he had been the lead navigator on heavy bomber missions flown primarily into France and Germany in late 1944.

As we said our goodbyes, I asked his daughter if it would be possible to continue our conversation at a later date. I also told her I wanted to bring him a signed copy of *The Green Box*. She said she would have to get back to me, needing to talk it over with her dad first. She wasn't sure he'd want to talk about the war; most veterans do not. She also told me that although his mind was sharp, his eyesight had been failing him recently. I gave her my card, hoping that Bob and I could get together again soon, but not really all that optimistic about it. Thankfully, I was wrong.

The next day his daughter called and said her father was excited about having met me and had agreed to allow me to read *The Green Box* to him. I was thrilled! I asked for their address and was speechless when she gave me the name and number of the street they live on. Not only do Bob and I live on the same street, but he's only eight houses away!

As I've gotten to know him better, I found out that he had attended Bowdoin College, but only for one year, deciding it just wasn't for him. Another Bob, my father, also attended Bowdoin. He too only lasted for one year. Hmmmmm.

My neighbor Bob and I have become good friends. He has shared all his WWII memorabilia with me—scrapbooks, yearbooks, letters, photographs, and much more. He is very proud of his service, as he very well should be. We have since finished reading *The Green Box* and have begun a new book, the memoir of a lead navigator who also flew out of England as a member of the 8th Air Force. Listening to the two books has brought countless memories rushing back to him—something for which he is very grateful.

January 2019- Having succeeded in getting his long-overdue Purple Heart awarded to George Britton, I began a quest to see Bob Cleverdon awarded France's highest honor, the Legion of Honour. I knew it was an award he was eligible for because he had flown missions into France. To start the ball rolling, I requested that the French Consulate in Boston send me all the appropriate forms for Bob's application. Luckily, Bob is a "pack rat" and had kept almost all of his military records. With the help of his daughter Lisa, we found all the data needed to complete the application. The French Consulate had told me it could be up to a year before we might hear from them, and I begged them to expedite the process, as Bob had just celebrated his 97th birthday. All we could do was wait.



June 2019- I received an e-mail from the French Consulate in Boston, stating that the application and forms we'd sent in had been approved and that on July 14, 2019, the French Legion of Honour would be presented to Bob Cleverdon. Quatorze Juillet is a national holiday in France, Bastille Day, and the award ceremony was to be held in Cambridge, Massachusetts, at the French Residence. Two other WWII veterans were also slated to be honored with the medal. I was so proud of Bob, and so honored to be part of the process. I could not think of any man who deserved this tribute more than he did. And to think it all began with a chance encounter in the aisle of a neighborhood grocery store . . . a mere coincidence, some might say.

July 14, 2019- Bastille Day was celebrated at the French Residence in Cambridge. My wife Julie and I attended, along with more than 200 other invited guests. Needless to say, the highlight of the day for me was watching France's Consul General, Arnaud Mentre, pin the French Legion of Honour on the lapel of Bob's suit. I will gladly admit to shedding a tear or two in that moment. To be honest, I had mailed in the completed forms without much hope of success, but felt that if I didn't at least try, it would nag at me for the rest of my life. Now there is a happy ending—a well-deserved honor for a man who put his life on the line so that future generations of Americans and Frenchmen could live free.

August 2019- As I planned my third (and probably last) trip to Europe, my paramount desire was to fill in the remaining pieces of the puzzle that made up the man, my father, Robert Kurtz. Equally important was the opportunity to spend five days with my son Mike, who had accompanied me on our first trip to Ehrwald, Austria, in 2001. Never would I have imagined how those two scenarios would blend together to create memories that will stay with me forever.

August 3, 2019- We climbed once more to the Brendlkar, the crash site of my father's B-24. Our ascent began in horrible weather, rainy and cold. It took longer than we had anticipated, but as we hiked over the last ridge and peered at the wreckage of *Sugar Baby*, the clouds parted and suddenly the sun shone brightly. It seemed like a sign of some kind. Then, for whatever reason, I looked down at my watch and saw it was 11:55 am. The sun came out at the exact minute when 75 years before, my dad's bomber had crashed into this very spot, the Brendlkar.

Those of you who have read my book or talked to me know that I have felt my father's presence many times. When the sun miraculously appeared, I felt him. On our hike back down the mountain, we stopped at an inn for a rest and our guide told us it was the very spot where my father was first brought by the German soldiers who captured him. I felt his presence once more.

August 4, 2019- My son and I traveled to Moosburg, Germany, once the site of Stalag VII-A. My father and 130,000 other POWs spent their final days of captivity there, most of them sick, all of them starving, and sadly, many dying. By April 29, 1945, most of them had given up hope of survival. Then American tanks from General George Patton's Third Army appeared on the horizon.

After a brief firefight with the Germans, the gates opened and those men inside were free. My dad's navigator, Joe Spontak, told me years later that Patton had ordered his men to shoot down the flags of the Third Reich that were flying from the two steeples of a local church directly outside the barbed wire of their camp, and to raise the Stars and Stripes in their place. Spontak told me it was known as the moment that over 100,000 men cried.

When my son and I arrived in Moosburg, we were surprised to see that no monument or marker existed at the previous site of Stalag VII-A. We

were, however, able to stand outside the church whose steeples had flown the Nazi flag for so many years. I tried to imagine what must have been going through my father's mind as they raised the American flag and he and all his fellow POWs dared to believe they would be able to go home to their loved ones after all.

August 5, 2019- We traveled to Zagan, Poland, the site of Stalag Luft III, where my father had been a POW for close to six months. The curator of the museum there, Marek Lazarz, led Mike and me into the pine forest that surrounded the camp, and after a short walk, he told me to stop in my tracks. He said I was standing on the foundation of Hut 122 in the North Compound of Stalag Luft III. My legs began to tremble and I felt a chill up and down my spine. I knew immediately what his next words to me would be: "This was the foundation of your father's hut." Here, once again, I felt my father's presence . . . what a perfect ending for a perfect trip.

September 2019- I feel that my journey is finally ending. I am not likely to ever find "closure" and to tell the truth, I am not seeking it. Rather than closure, the events and experiences I have been fortunate enough to discover about my father have brought me "closer" to him. For more than 50 years I knew practically nothing about my dad. Now I know him better than anyone, except, of course, my mother. Is that a coincidence? What do you think?

A bit of a postscript here. Recently I received an email from the other Jim Kurtz (or TOJ, as we affectionately call each other). It included an article he'd received from a friend of his, Annette Tison, about a mission flown by the 392nd Bomb Group stationed in England as part of the 8th Air Force. On September 18, 1944, the 392nd flew a low-level mission to re-supply airborne troops that had been inserted in Holland as part of Operation Market Garden. The mission was fraught with danger as the bombers flew only 50 feet off the ground and were

subject not only to the usual anti-aircraft fire, but at that altitude to small-arms fire as well. Only 40 planes of the 392nd were dispatched that day, a relatively small number for a mission, and three of them failed to return.

The mission sounded oddly familiar to me, similar to one I thought I might have heard about from Bob Cleverdon. It was at least worth a walk down the street to find out. Bob and I sat down together in his home and as soon as I explained that I was wondering if he might have been involved in a low-level mission into Holland, his 98-year-old eyes lit up. Without even having to check the list of missions he flew in the fall of 1944, his reply was this: "It was September 18th and I remember it like it was yesterday. I was lead navigator on the first of the 40 planes that morning. We flew so low you could actually see people's faces up close!"

A coincidence? Of course not. After talking to Bob Cleverdon, I need to rescind my previous statement about my journey possibly ending. The truth is, I hope it never ends.