

Joseph James Walter

Walter enlisted in the Eighth Air Force as a gunner on a B-17. On the crew's fifteenth raid to Schweinfurt, the plane sustained flak damage, and as they fell behind the rest of the squadron, German Focke-Wulf 190s strafed their aircraft. After bailing out, Walter landed in an apple tree where the farmer and his father came out and helped him get out of the tree. As he was getting out of the tree, one of the men took a picture of him, and a copy is on display at the National Museum of the Mighty Eighth Air Force. The farmer asked Walter if he wanted to surrender to Germans, to which he quickly said no. The farmers took him to their barn, where they hid him in the loft with a large number of boxes. The Germans searched the barn and the surrounding area, but they were unable to find him, and they left. After this first escape, Walter was smuggled across France and Belgium with the help of the French Underground. One of the people he stayed with during his evasion attempt was Dr. Charles Kremer, who was captured by the Germans two weeks after Walter left his house. Dr. Kremer was interrogated by the Germans and taken to the Liege and was executed for harboring enemy combatants. Walter eventually made it across the Pyrenees and into Spain and was smuggled back to England. He managed to evade capture and make it back home safely thanks to the bravery of people like Dr. Kremer, who defied the Germans and choose to help the Allied airmen.

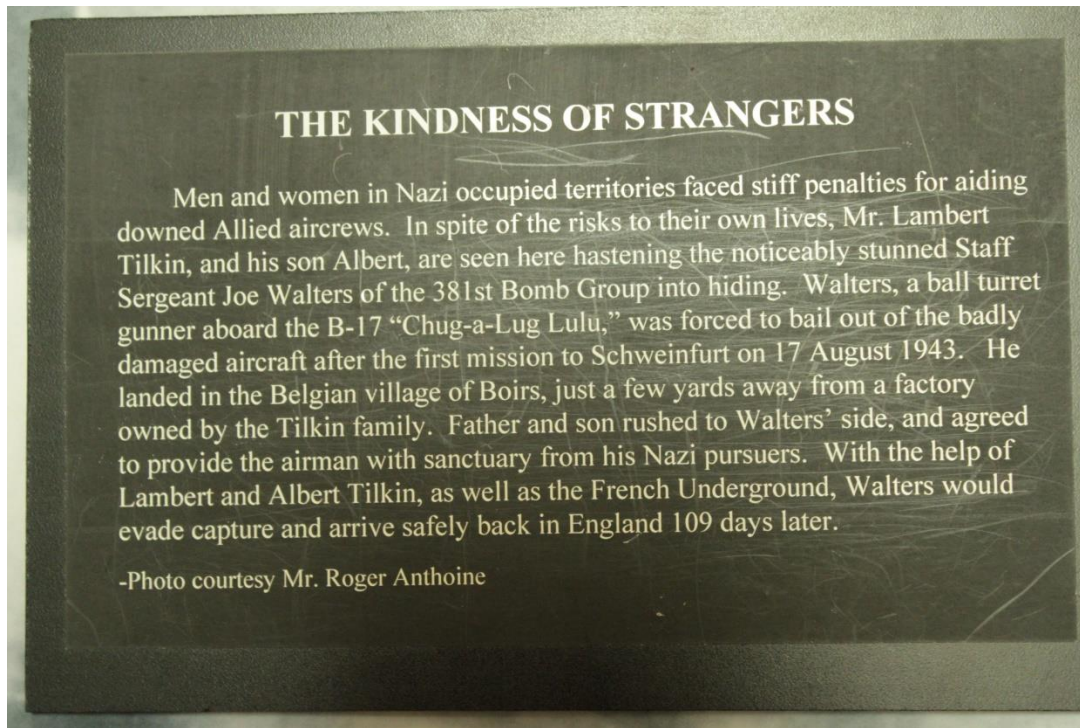


Figure 1 Text Panel detailing "Joe" Walter's evasion experiences. National Museum of the Mighty Eighth Air Force.

Robert Vickers:

Vickers was a bomber pilot whose plane was hit by flak during a bombing mission near Dresden. Unable to continue flying, the crew bailed out of the aircraft as it crashed near the French village of Marville.¹ Upon landing safely, the crew was almost imprisoned by the French civilians, for they thought that the airmen were German paratroopers. A French girl around ten years old, according to Vickers, taking English at the school in the village, was able to persuade the Frenchmen that they were indeed Allied airmen. A Red Cross ambulance came to pick up the wounded airmen, and Vickers got the villagers to assist him in getting his copilot down from a fence that he got stuck when he initially landed.

¹ This village was written in the transcript as Moavialle, but the name did not have results in internet searches. Marville is the most likely candidate as it is in the North-Eastern part of France near the border of Luxembourg.

David Greene:

Greene was a navigator on a bomber that was heavily damaged by flak during a mission to Misburg, and they attempted to make it across the English Channel. The plane was losing too much altitude, and they managed to crash land in a French vineyard. As soon as they landed, they were greeted by two trucks, driven by members of the Free French of the Interior (FFI). The FFI took the airmen to a nearby farmhouse and fed them. One of the resistance fighters went to Reims to alert the Allied forces that they had American airmen; a British lorry came and picked the men up.

Norman Grant:

Grant was Navigator in the U.S. Eighth Air Force. He and his crew flew out on August eighteenth in an old B-24 to bomb a German fighter base. While the airmen originally saw the mission as a “milk-run,” the bombers encountered heavy flak upon their arrival. Grants’ pilot was killed, and the nose gunner died from flak.² Grant recalled that while he was trying to help Johnny Dale (nose gunner), the bomber was hit again, and the co-pilot called for a bail-out. Grant immediately gathered his parachute and jumped out of the plane, as he assumed that the other crewmen managed to jump out. Unfortunately, he was the only one to survive as the others died from the explosion of the plane.³ Grant was bothered by the fact that he was the lone survivor, as he often thought about how he could have done things differently to save his friends.

² Norman’s pilot name was George Washington. They were hit after moving to another position in the formation when Lt. James L. Glaze in the lead plane was shot down. Page 6 of Norman’s oral history.

³ The Germans told Norman of his crew’s fate after he was captured, although he believed it was a lie. He discovered it was the truth when his wife told him of their deaths after returning from the war.

He spent the fifty-plus years following the war looking for any information regarding his crewmen's fate.

Donald Hanson, a neighbor of Grant's, helped him as he was active in recovering missing aircraft from World War II.⁴ Eventually, they managed to conclude that the plane had crashed near Pierrepont-sur-Avre, which inspired Grant to write a letter to the mayor to ask for assistance in getting closure about the crew. He was overwhelmed by the French peoples' desire to help, as the mayor had the letter published and broadcast on radio shows to see if anyone had information.⁵ Grant, after all these years, learned that the Germans lined up the bodies of the airmen in an open field, and a German officer saluted them before walking away. The Germans said there would be no funeral service for the airmen, but the French people overruled that declaration. The priest in town held a mass for them, and the carpenter spent the night before the service making caskets for the airmen. As his plane crashed, Grant landed in a field near the village and was eventually captured by members of the Hitler Youth, and he was driven to a local jail. As he rode past, the French people waved, cheered, and flashed the victory V to him. He was eventually taken to Stalag Luft III.

⁴ Norman did not specify when Donald came along to help Norman search for his old plane.

⁵ A more detailed account of this story is on pages seven and eight of Norman's oral history.



Figure 2 Photograph of Grant and his crewmates. He is the second man on the right in the back row. Grant was the only crewman to survive the mid-air collision, as he had bailed out before the accident. National Museum of the Mighty Eighth Air Force.



Figure 3 Text on the monument the French villagers erected to honor the crewmen that died in the mid-air collision. National Museum of the Mighty Eighth Air Force.