THE TRAIN TRAVELER

S/S Peter Seniawsky's Remarkable Escape from Germany

A Tough and Hair-Raising Two Months

October 4, 1943 - Right waist gunner Seniawsky (384th BG/ 545th BS) was aboard B-17F 'Ruthless' when returning from mission to Frankfort. With fuel tanks nearly empty the pilot, Lt. G.F. Kauffman, Jr. ditched 'Ruthless' in the North Sea. The entire crew was rescued in short order by patrol boat HMS Drifter.

October 14, 1943 - Seniawsky's crew was assigned to a new bomber, B-17F 'Big Moose,' one of 257 B-17s ordered to attack the German ball bearing plants at Schweinfurt. This was a hard-fought and costly mission later known as "Black Thursday." 'Big Moose' reached the target, dropped its bomb load, but it was disabled by German fighters on the return leg. With both left engines on fire the pilot ordered the crew to bail out. Seniawsky and two other crewmen managed to "hit the silk" in Germany (65 miles east of Metz, Alsace, France).

Over the next several weeks he crawled on his belly, hid where he could do so, walked and rode trains, evaded capture and traversed Germany, France, the Pyrenees Mountains and neutral Spain to Gibraltar. Remarkably, he never managed to contact the French Resistance, but he did receive help from conscripted workers and from civilians along the way. Seniawsky evaded capture, substantially on his own, in Germany and occupied France. Seniawsky was, arguably, the only American airman to do so in the entire European Theatre of Operations. He returned to his base at Grafton-Underwood on December 1, 1943.

Official Decoration: Silver Star

Unofficial Memberships:

1. The Caterpillar Club - for bailing out of a combat damaged aircraft
2. The Winged Boot Club - for walking to freedom from behind enemy lines
3. The Gold Fish Club - for surviving an aircraft ditching in water

Summary of Escape and Evasion Report No. 239

DAY 1

- Seniawsky jumped from 20,000 ft. but he delayed deploying chute until about 5,000 ft.
- As armed German farmers searched his drop zone, he concealed himself in thick bushes, where he remained "frozen" until sundown.
- As he crept from his hideout to walk stealthily in the forest, a military search party opened fire. He went down with his face in the dirt, as bullets hissed over his head.
- Evading that search party, he walked all night, remaining concealed in the dense undergrowth.
- About midnight he walked into another search party. After standing face to face with a German officer, he slipped away, rolled into some bushes, and the search party lost track of him. A soldier passed him only a few feet away.

DAY 2

- As he entered a large town, ground fog concealed him. At dawn he wearily searched for a hiding place to get some sleep and found a large (although cold and damp) haystack. He was awakened at sunrise by the noise of a German search party and remained shivering in the haystack.
- Late that night he crawled from the haystack and proceeded on his belly to the edge of the field. Moving south, he filled his canteen at a pump by a barn. A dog appeared and barked loudly. Seniawsky ran down a side street to evade the dog, which eventually lost interest. He barely evaded on oncoming car by flinging himself behind a fence.

DAY 3

- At dawn Seniawsky hid in a large tree with dense foliage. Wedged in safely, he slept all day. That night he dismounted the tree to walk carefully in a westerly direction, as guided by his hand compass. Dogs howled and barked occasionally, but none chased him.

DAY 4

- Before dawn he climbed into a hayloft to hide. The only food he could find was some scattered apple peelings on the ground.
- Seniawsky's rations were exhausted.
- Late in the afternoon, anxious to keep moving, he slipped from the hayloft and proceeded into a large wooded area. It was a mistake - a farmer spotted him. Thirty minutes later, four men started scouring the woods where he was hiding, and they found him. Thankfully, they were French conscripted workers, who were willing to help. They gave Seniawsky food and whiskey. Suitably refreshed, he was on his way again.

DAYS 5-6

- Seniawsky moved furtively, dodging soldiers and civilians and ready to hide instantly with the slightest sound or a distant sighting.
- He stole what food and water he could find.

DAY 7

- At the edge of a field (near the French border) he stumbled into a man and a girl. After a long moment of silent staring, they met to discover that the girl was French and the man was a Serbian conscript. The man and girl warned Seniawsky that he needed to hide until dark, when they would return to guide him into France.
- At sundown he saw the Serb running toward him with a package, which turned out to be bread, butter and sardines. The Serb, however, urged Seniawsky to leave immediately to avoid capture. There would not be guided border crossing. Seniawsky ran off to the south.

DAY 8

- Before dawn he hid in a barn. Seniawsky was convinced by now that the German's were searching specifically for him. With that thought he spied a heavily armed German patrol with fixed bayonets, as it approached the barn. He dropped into a hole in the barn floor and covered himself with hay.

Despite two soldiers who passed within inches of his head, the patrol searched the barn without success.

DAYS 9-11

- Working his way closer to France, Seniawsky drank from streams and slept in open fields, abandoned shacks and, preferably, barns. As German troops were everywhere, he was fast becoming a nervous wreck, reacting fitfully at every sudden sound or flash of light.
- A conscripted Polish worker spotted him in a field and waited to make contact until both men were hidden in the brush. Seniawsky's decent Polish helped them communicate. That night the friendly Pole brought him food, found a barn for sleep and provided directions to the French border.
- The Pole advised, however, that his chances for success were grim. In order to reach France he had to cross several high barbed wire fences guarded by sentries and vicious dogs.

DAY 12

- In the dark Seniawsky eased beneath the first and second fences on his back and covered the 100 yards between them on his back. He crawled on his stomach over the next 200 yards and passed underneath the third fence, just as clouds obscured the moon. He clambered to his feet and ran; he was on French soil.
- The next morning, he decided to walk brazenly along the streets of several towns. He certainly looked like a weary workman. As soon as he identified himself as an American air crewman, the French townspeople were "wonderful." They gave him food and sufficient work clothes so that he could discard his tattered flight suit, which was promptly burned. For the first time since he parachuted from the sky, Seniawsky was able to bathe and shave.

DAY 13

- In the French towns through which he walked no one took notice of him. A Frenchman moving south joined Seniawsky. As the two men walked along a country road, they flagged a passing truck for a ride to Nancy. After the ride a Polish conscripted worker joined them on foot. The Polish worker convinced his fellow travelers to join him at a nearby restaurant. Other diners included Russian, Polish and Serbian conscripts. Seniawsky thoroughly enjoyed the plentiful food.
- The party was disturbed, however, when a French detective arrived and eyed the group with suspicion. Seniawsky started talking boisterously in Polish, and the detective left the premises without checking for papers.
- He met a French boy, who offered to share his room for a safe night's sleep.

DAY 14

- The next morning he unabashedly walked along city streets, stopping at street corners shoulder to shoulder with German soldiers and local residents.
- Early in the afternoon he bought cake in a bakery and shoved most of it into his pockets for later consumption. He joined a queue to buy a movie ticket and slept several hours in the theater.

- In the evening he found a bar and ordered a beer. His clumsiness dealing with French currency caught the attention of of a German soldier. Seniawsky offered a loud toast to the suspicious German soldier, who annoyingly shook his head, as he walked out the door.
- Seniawsky proceeded to the local railroad station and with his meager French purchased a third class ticket to Dijon. He passed the time walking in the area and taking a nap on a railroad station bench. There was no problem boarding the train.

DAY 15

- The train pulled into Dijon at noon; however, Seniawsky faced a probable French police check of passengers' papers. He carefully slipped into the Dijon station restaurant and waited for the police to finish their business. The police left an hour later without ever confronting Seniawsky.
- He bought a ticket to Lyons and stood in the vestibule during the entire journey. At Lyon he ran to a ticket window to purchase a ticket to Marseilles. Despite his determination to stay awake, he quickly fell asleep in his third class seat enroute to Marseiles.
- At Marseilles a large force of gendarmes met all debarking passengers. Upon leaving the train he walked gingerly away from the police checkpoint. Seniawsky joined a group of railroad workmen and slipped away into a side street. In minutes he returned to the station, walking nonchalantly past the police. He bought a ticket northbound to Avignon which was scheduled to depart the following morning. To avoid being seen loitering, he sneaked underneath the station platform and slept soundly until sunrise.,

DAY 16

- Upon awakening Seniawsky brushed the dirt from his clothes, bought a bunch of grapes from a street vendor for breakfast and safely boarded the train to Avignon at 7:30 AM. In Avignon the streets crawled with German soldiers. Seniawsky had his toughest test in more than a week. Playing his role as a poor, grubby worker to avoid provoking suspicion, he melted into the crowd. He bought 12 small cakes at a bakery stall and stuffed the cakes into his pockets.
- After more than two weeks of successfully evading capture, Seniawsky felt no qualms about returning to railroad ticket windows. He purchased a ticket to Sète and boldly started a conversation with an old woman in broken French and Polish. With what he learned from the woman and with reference to the timetable he surmised that he would have to change trains enroute to Sète.
- As the trains carried him uneventfully toward the southwest of France, his luck took a turn for the worse. He lost his way, as he tried to reach Perpignan, which put him in a risky position, as he would be forced to dash madly through a station along the route to catch a night train to Narbonne. As Seniawsky feared, an openly curious and somewhat hostile conductor confronted him. Before the conductor could press him for identification papers, he shook the conductor's hand enthusiastically. The conductor looked down, saw a 100 franc note in his palm and walked away to check other passengers.
- One narrow escape followed another. As he slumped in his seat at one end of the passenger car, two German soldiers at the other end decided to check papers. As the soldiers were busy studying credentials, Seniawsky scurried from the car into the open vestibule, clutched a handhold and held himself to the swaying train for 30 minutes. No one noticed him plastered to the side of the car, and when he returned to his seat, the Germans were gone.

DAY 17

- At Perpignan he slept from midnight until dawn in the station waiting room. Then he eluded arriving police by slipping out a side door. Within an hour he had walked well outside of town. With the help of his compass and road signs Seniawsky headed toward Céret. Outside Céret he was hungry and weary, so he stopped at a small cafe for a bowl of soup. The woman owner was friendly, and he decided to take a chance. He revealed to her that he was an American. She warned him not to enter Céret, as the Gestapo was everywhere, and guided him to an isolated mountain road heading due south.
- Many hours later, exhausted and cold, he reached the ridge of the mountains. Just ahead was a small shack, and he stumbled through the door in search of warmth and a brief rest. Panic welled up in Seniawsky. The shack was occupied. In the dim light he saw an old man seated on a bench. He sat beside the old man. Once the man understood that he was an escaping American airman, Seniawsky was relieved. The old man thrust a bottle of wine and a bag of chestnuts into his hands. Seniawsky ate and drank gratefully.
- As dusk fell, he continued his journey. His hopes were raised as never before. For in the distance, nestled in a valley was a small town showing its lights without caution. It must be Spain!
- All night he crawled down the mountainside, but this was the most dangerous leg of the trip. German Army patrols were everywhere, many including dogs. At the slightest sound Seniawsky froze in place. Then he proceeded carefully when the coast was clear.

DAYS 18-24

- Just before dawn after a successful night of evasion he walked directly in the hands of two soldiers. They were Spanish soldiers! Senawsky was jubilant. They hustled him to a nearby prison, where he was interrogated for hours.
- Later that day he was transferred to another prison in Figueras, where he would remain for about a week.

DAY 25

- Seniawsky cheerfully greeted the American Consul, who obtained his release. He was transferred to Gerona.

DAY 26-40

- After traveling from Gerona to Barcelona, Saragossa, Ahlama and Madrid he stepped onto British soil at Gibraltar.

DAY 43 (12/01/43)

- S/S Peter Seniawsky walked into the operations room of the 384th Bomb Group, Grafton-Underwood.