

Gerald J. Kathol

1921 - 1997



Gerald “Gerry” Kathol was born on a farm near Harington, Nebraska in 1921, attended a country school near Bow Valley, Nebraska, and completed his secondary schooling at Harington High School, where he graduated in 1939. He was active in football and track, and was state champion in the 440 yard dash.

Upon graduation, he decided to enroll in the University of Nebraska. With a scarred suitcase, held together with a red strap, he hitchhiked to Lincoln. After paying out \$75,000 in tuition and books (money saved over a three year period by doing hard labor around Harington), he had \$7.00 left to begin his college career in civil engineering. He later switched his major to geology.

Gerry really enjoyed school, but said it was a struggle. At times he held down four jobs. He continued his football at Nebraska, playing for three years as an end. He played in 1941 in the Rose Bowl against Stanford and was captain that day. Fifty years later, he still had the game ball in his office.

In 1941, shortly after Pearl Harbor, Gerry enrolled in the Army Air Force Cadet Program. He attended C.T.D. at Southern Illinois University, and eventually

graduated from twin engine advanced at Ellington Field, Texas. His crew went through phase training in the B-24 at Biggs Field, El Paso.

On 27 September 1944, Lt. Potts' B-24 as one of nine planes from the 702nd BS lost in Germany while participating in the disastrous Kassel raid of that date.

Their ship was badly hit and burning when Lt. Potts rang the bail-out bell. The bomb bay doors were jammed shut and the rear of the bomb bay was a mass of flames. Some of them headed up the tunnel to the nose, but Gerry and the engineer, Sgt. Roger Scott, went back on the flight deck to try and exit from the top hatch. Scott was boosting Gerry up when the wing tanks exploded and the ship disintegrated.

Gerry found himself straddling the nose and going down, so he cut loose and opened his chute. He was wearing a backpack chute, and unfortunately, only one of the leg straps was fastened. When the chute opened, the terrific jerk resulted in a dislocated hip. It was found out later that Sgt. Scott was blown clear, and survived. Five of the other crewman, including Lt. Potts, were killed.

In the meantime, several had been captured near Lauchroeden and a few were delegated to pick up the dead bodies of fallen comrades. Later that evening, when picked up by a Wehrmacht truck filled with wounded men from the 445th. Some of them were in very bad shape, with terrible wounds. Among them was Gerry Kathol lying near the tailgate in considerable pain. They took them to a hospital in Eisenach and carried them to an emergency room on the second floor.

Gerry spent the ensuing months until December 18, 1944 in various German military hospitals. At that time he was transferred to the airmen's prison camp at Sagan in Poland. On January 27, 1945, as the Russian army approached, the camp was abandoned, and the prisoners were marched in sub-zero temperatures toward the west. They arrived at Spremberg, and were packed in boxcars. After three days of misery, they arrived at a camp in Nurnberg on February 4th. There was bombing day and night, and very little food. There were 200 men in barracks built for 100, and 450 men for two faucets in the washroom. They endured this for about a month. On April 4th they marched out of camp toward Mooseberg. Gerry had developed blood poison in his hand, so he was given priority to ride in a Red Cross truck. At about noon on April 29, 1945, the Mossberg camp was liberated by the 14th Armored Division of Patton's 3rd Army. A most happy day.

Upon his discharge from the service in 1945, Gerry returned to the University of Nebraska, where he completed the work for his degree in geology in 1946. During the time, Gerry and Gomer Jones also coached the ends on the University of Nebraska football team.

After graduation, Gerry obtained a position as a geologist for Mobil Oil Co. He worked for them until 1950, at which time he and a fellow geologist and long-time friend, Warren Tomlinson, started their own company TOMKAT, Ltd. In the intervening years, Gerry was active in exploration for oil and gas, purchase and operation of oil and gas properties, operation of rotary drilling and service equipment, etc. When Mr. Kathol and Thomlinson split, Mr. Kathol founded the public company, Kathol Petroleum, Inc. He also was chairman and major shareholder of Flexweight Corp., manufacturers of oil tubes and drill pipes.

SOURCE: "Remembering an Old Friend" by George M. Collar (445th). Second Air Division Association, Eighth Air Force Journal. Volume 36 Number 4. Winter 1997.

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