

Journey to Freedom and Beyond

Robert M. Slane

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Colonel Robert Slane led a charmed life one might say. But it wasn't the kind where everything's nice and easy; his great good fortune was to live through a series of horrors in which other people died in vast numbers.

Slane joined the Army Air Corps on August 5 1941 his eighteenth birthday eager to get into the coming war. His heart beat so fast from the excitement that he couldn't pass the physical examination for three days. Slane applied early on for training as an "enlisted pilot" but it took him just over two years to qualify as "first pilot" and second lieutenant. Soon he was on a B-17 flying across the Atlantic to his duty post.

A fuel leak terrible weather forgotten navigation charts and almost running out of gas made that flight to England a harrowing trip—but Slane and his crew got there. On arrival Slane's first bombing assignment ended with an emergency landing in a field not far from the base when again fuel ran out. German fighters downed the plane on its second mission and Slane then spent a year and a half in prisoner-of-war camps.

The bulk of this book traces Slane's constant efforts to escape his captors and his persistent failure. The Germans moved the prisoners around particularly as Allied forces gradually moved into Europe and pushed toward the camps. In most camps life was uncomfortable but bearable and his experiences included long marches from one place to the next occasional trips in crowded trucks and one long ride in a "forty-and-eight" boxcar. Exhausted and wounded men dropped out often to be executed. Slane lost weight and suffered injuries but kept moving.

Finally freed by U.S. soldiers he returned to the States to find that "the girl he left behind" had been faithful. Lucky man! He had constantly feared that his infrequent mail would include the infamous "Dear John" letter so many servicemen received. Soon married he chose to stay in the newly constructed U.S. Air Force and later flew combat tours in Korea and Vietnam.

But one more catastrophe occurred during those years. On a long trip involving simulated attacks on special targets in 1956 mechanical failure suddenly brought down Slane's B-47. He did his best to get his crew members out before the crash but only he survived.

Like many other military memoirs this one lets readers know what war is really like. It's well written and the photographs and maps included will help readers visualize the scenes in the camps and aboard the planes. Slane's story will fascinate anyone looking to learn more about the lives of the men who fought in World War II.

CARTER JEFFERSON (January 9, 2009)

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