



Dawn Trimble Bunyak. *Our Last Mission: A World War II Prisoner in Germany.* Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2003. xxviii + 259 pp. \$34.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8061-3547-2.



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Vernacular Commemoration: An Autobiographical Narrative of an American's Experience as a POW in World War II Germany

In the information provided in the press release on Dawn Trimble Bunyak's presentation of Lawrence Pifer's life-story, the reader is promised an "enthraling story of an average enlisted man's struggle to survive in the face of hopelessness, with only his strong faith and pride in country to sustain him." Fortunately for scholars and lay readers interested in American soldiers' experience in World War II, or in autobiographical narratives of America's recent past and Americans' interaction with other cultures, this well-worked volume of popular history lacks the Fourth-of-July patriotic overtones promised by the publisher.

Instead of a pointed message, we are presented with the complex life story of an individual, Lawrence Pifer, a Pennsylvanian of German descent who served as an Army Air Corps radio operator and ball turret gunner on a B-17 bomber during the Second World War. During a raid in March 1944, Pifer escaped from his crashing airplane, parachuting into German territory. Captured by civilians, Pifer was handed over to the German army and remained in POW camps until he was liberated by British

forces in May, 1945. The narrative is based on a series of interviews that Bunyak conducted with Pifer (her uncle), between 1998 and 2002. The author presents her subject's entire life story, showing as much interest in the periods before and after his war experience as in this pivotal period in his life. Bunyak employs a direct, narrative style, sketching descriptive passages to interpret Pifer's experiences in wartime Germany. Nonetheless, one has the feeling that all elements that have been added to the narrative as Pifer actually related it are things he knew or could have known. At times, the reader can identify passages that are clearly close adaptations of what Pifer said in the interviews due to the colloquial language they employ.

Dawn Trimble Bunyak is an independent historian who worked as a public historian and historic preservationist while earning her master's degree in history. She was motivated to write this book by her personal relationship with her uncle who served as a father-substitute while her own father fought in Vietnam. Through this uncle's stories and his need late in life to confront his

experiences as a POW, she came to learn a great deal about the average American man's experience in the European theater during World War II. In publishing this account, she reaches out to both veterans and the younger generation, hoping to stimulate similarly productive exchanges between other former POWs, their families, and their communities. Consequently, the subject of how Allied soldiers experienced German prisoner of war camps is approached from the perspective of the American present and from that of a public historian's interest in spurring on the (American) national as well as local cultural practice of remembrance.

In view of these goals, the reader will perhaps be surprised to find that the author's narrative is ambitious, as she strives to synthesize four years' worth of interview material and enrich it with further primary and secondary sources, all the while maintaining a readable style that pays as much attention to retaining the narrative shape of Pifer's autobiography as to contextualizing individual events within its development. The complexity and ambiguity of Pifer's narrative as conveyed by Bunyak distinguishes it from the many autobiographical accounts of Americans' incarceration in war and, indeed, from the great majority of oral histories of the American WWII POW experience. As a coherent and subtle representation of a non-Soviet soldier's incarceration in German POW camps and of an American airman's reaction to the end of the war in Germany, it should also interest historians of Germany.

After a conflicted childhood on the border of poverty, high school graduate Pifer lacks real goals or ties. Restlessly seeking a job and moving from town to town, Pifer finally finds his calling, inexplicably drawn to the famous Uncle Sam recruitment poster that seems to speak to him personally. Enlisting in the U.S. Army Air Corps in late spring 1942, Pifer hopes to satisfy his appetite for adventure by becoming an aerial gunner. Unfortunately, his high test scores qualify him for radio-training instead of gunnery school, meaning that he has to underperform in this second round of training in order to be assigned to a flight crew and not to a ground station. This episode, as well as an anecdote about beating his instructor in skeet shooting, are elements typical of Pifer's tale. He presents himself as a protagonist able to manipulate his surroundings despite unexpected hurdles, using both his technical and social skills at every turn. Though he was assigned against his will as an instructor at a training school for bomber crews, in Fall 1943, Pifer's superiors finally make it possible for him to join a B-17 bomber crew heading for Europe.

The interview material and letters written from the airbase in England paint a picture of disillusionment. Bunyak presents the reader with complex everyday and combat detail, indicating how Pifer's experiences quickly dampen his naive enthusiasm for air battles. Initiating a mechanism that will haunt many veterans for decades, the Army Air Corps policy demands that the crewmembers report professionally, forget the horror, and carry on. However, the impressions of death and destruction, which shock the bomber crews so, remain limited to the losses the Air Corps suffers from German forces above ground. The narrative makes it clear that what happens after the bombs leave the hatches, what the people on the ground experience during an Allied air raid, does not interest the airmen in the least. Pifer's pivotal experience, the one that provides the book with its title, is the first instance in which the young airman's tenacity cannot help him. When, during the battle of Berlin in March, 1944, his crew's B-17 is hit by enemy anti-aircraft weapons and cannons mounted on Focke-Wulf fighters, Pifer struggles to perform his duties as gunner while watching two of his crewmates die of wounds. Although he survives his bailout from the crashing B-17, an injured leg and nearby German civilians prevent him from setting out for the safety of Spain. He and the other surviving crewmembers are rounded up and turned over to the German army.

In 1980, the U.S. Veterans Administration estimated the total number of American soldiers captured by Germany during World War II at 95,532. Figures dating from late 1945 indicate that roughly one third of these POWs were airmen, while the other two-thirds had been captured as ground troops.[1] As the first American air raids over Germany started in Summer 1942 and did not attain daily regularity and massive scale until 1943, most of the captured airmen experienced the *Heimatfront* behind German lines well after the Wehrmacht's first blitzkrieg successes had faded into the past.[2] Unlike the majority of ground troops, captured airmen spent an interval between the loss of their aircraft and their entry into official Wehrmacht custody that can be described as a sort of limbo. During this period, which might begin with an escape from a crashing bomber, as in Pifer's case, the airmen left the combat zone and were often exposed to the unpredictable reactions of German citizens, the first people they were likely to encounter. If they were not fatally assaulted by civilians who often saw them as mere terrorists, they entered the POW camp system. Some of the camps (spread throughout German territory) were established by the Wehrmacht especially for Army Air Corps personnel (Stalag Luft). The lay literature on these camps

consists mainly of accounts of incarceration and indicates that the treatment and supplies prisoners received was dependent on a number of factors. The location of the camps and the regime established by their respective commander were important, as were contingent factors such as the progressive collapse of the German war effort and the country's infrastructure.

Committed to a Berlin hospital because of his broken leg, Pifer subsequently experiences the bombing of the German capital, as well as its furious residents who try to harm him. The downed airman attempts to regain control by refusing to sign confession papers or provide any information whatsoever about his mission. Once again, the author synthesizes her uncle's narrative with historical background, detailed information about the camp system, and primary source material related to Pifer's case. It is not until Pifer leaves the processing camp at Frankfurt by train that his transport group is confronted with the tortured passivity of those on the receiving end of the Royal Air Force's bombs. Bunyak's long description of this raid on Frankfurt and its aftermath offers impressive immediacy and marks her subject's change of status from intrepid gunner to a trespasser behind enemy lines burdened by "the weight of guilt" for his role in the human suffering meted out to German civilians (p. 89). Because she incorporates so much detail from interviews with Pifer, the author transmits to us the narrative structure of the story of personal development Pifer has built for himself in the process of overcoming his experience.

At this point in the narrative, Pifer's odyssey through the German camp system begins. At first, he is transported to Stalag Luft 6 in eastern Prussia, near the old Lithuanian border. Although the POWs know they are lucky to be in a well-run camp, their experience is "filled with disease, hunger, brutality, despair, and boredom" (p. 109). The depiction of everyday life in the camp is detailed, informed by background information, and full of the names and doings of prisoners and guards, confirming much published material about the experiences of non-Soviets in German POW camps. Bunyak's narrative takes on its singular quality through the description of the forced moves from one camp to the next, necessitated by the advance of the Red Army and the collapse of German infrastructure.

This final period of the war in the European theater is one which is just beginning to be explored by military historians in microstudies.[3] The reader is offered insights into how the German civilian population's flight from the East, as well as the authorities' progressive loss

of control over the course of events, was observed and shared by the POWs on their way from an abandoned camp to a new one. Pifer's narrative thus associates the POW experience with that of bombed-out and fleeing German civilians, while nevertheless, because of the central structural role of the raid on Frankfurt, refusing to equate the two groups, thereby maintaining a fascinating tension and ambiguity. At the same time, we are given an impression of the curious mix of Wehrmacht improvisation and organization involved in prisoner transport. Equally new and interesting are the reconstructions of the German military personnel's conduct during these marches between camps. Pifer is thrust into a short but terrifying, obviously pre-planned gauntlet, during which a large group of shackled prisoners is forced to sprint through stabbing bayonets and attacking guard dogs. Constrastingly, a "black" march lasting almost three months until May, 1945, is undertaken under the supervision of occasionally almost benevolent guards, but nonetheless brings the exhausted prisoners to the brink of starvation and death from disease. Near Wittenberg, the march columns are surprised to encounter British troops, who liberate the prisoners without resistance from the German guards.

Unlike many war narratives, Pifer's story does not end with the end of hostilities. Although Pifer is able to regain the seventy-five pounds he lost during his incarceration, he finds that his mental recovery requires more time than it takes to pass through the repatriation camps, return to the States, go through debriefing and journey home. Bunyak recounts the former POW's disappointment at the reactions of his family and friends, and reports how traumatic memories of captivity return to haunt his new life, further isolating him. Frustrated by the conflicts arising on the post-war labor market, Pifer returns to the Army Air Corps, creating a successful career for himself there until he retires in his mid-forties. At this point, the story comes full circle—Pifer returns to his youthful dreams of becoming a rural mail carrier and independent farmer. As the reader learns in Bunyak's preface, her uncle could not truly put the experience of captivity to rest, instead actively making it a part of his identity by joining the Ex-American Prisoners of War.[4]

Our Last Mission speaks to a number of issues of current interest to both scholars and the general public. As an autobiographical narrative, it joins a body of literature on American soldiers' experience of World War II.[5] While the eyewitness perspective makes life as a American POW in Germany palpable, it also provides an uncommon outsider's perception of the last months

of the war in Germany, collapsing the strict boundaries between American and German the war required of its participants. Bunyak has been careful to include a wide breadth of Pifer's perceptions and interpretations, enabling the reader to follow the development of his response to the world around him. The author gives us access to all facets of this man's life by not focusing on the war exclusively, but instead providing us with a "before" and "after" framework which helps us to understand Pifer's conceptualization of his life story as well as his behavior as the events he describes unfold. Readers familiar with the literature on the practice of oral history and, more specifically, of narrative interviews thematizing the Second World War, will find echoes of approaches developed by Lutz Niethammer, Alexander von Plato and Gabriele Rosenthal.

Pifer's narrative confirms the typological process described by Fritz Schuetze, according to which American WWII veterans tend to have interpreted their war experience as transforming them into more capable adults.[6] Pifer repeatedly thematizes his triumph over adversity and ill-will: he forces his own father to choose between his children and a stepmother worthy of a Grimm's fairy tale; his determination to fly for the Army Air Corps finally pays off; finally, of course, his will to survive prevails—first as a downed airman in enemy territory, then as a powerless POW exposed to the chaos of a collapsing society. The narrative explicitly juxtaposes Pifer's role as a bomber pilot in causing the human suffering and material destruction he observed on German territory with the increasing misery in the German camps. Although Pifer is, to this day, sure that the training he received in the Army Air Corps marks a change for the better in his life, he also clearly needed to ruminate about the effectiveness of the Anglo-American air war against German cities. In this way, the book makes a surprisingly subtle contribution to current debates in the Anglo-American and German scholarly communities on Joerg Friedrich's book *Der Brand* from the perspective of an average American.[7]

However, the book is not conceived above all as a narrative of WWII experience. Bunyak's primary interest seems to lie in the historical specificity of the POW experience and the fate of former POWs in U.S. society after World War Two. Overall, there is surprisingly little serious historical literature on prisoners of war, and in particular on the fate of non-Soviet prisoners of the Germans in the Second World War's European theater. What literature is available is seldom discussed in general works on combat experience or the history of World

War Two.[8] The context for this book is thus its author's perception, confirmed by Arnold Krammer's foreword, that the groundswell of activity generated by former POWs needs to be met with more public recognition.[9] Only since the Vietnam veterans' movement took upon itself the rehabilitation of veterans of that unpopular war have former World War Two POWs, told upon repatriation simply to forget their experience of incarceration, [10] been able to build on this success and resist the label of weakness, failure and lack of soldierly fortitude.[11] By sharing her uncle's tale, Bunyak seeks to encourage a more open discussion of POWs' place in contemporary U.S. society less so in the public sphere than within families and local contexts (p. xxviii). Pifer's story fits very well into this effort because he reads his life narrative as the repeated surmounting of obstacles through sheer tenacity and drive—the structure of his autobiography flies in the face of popular misgivings about American soldiers captured by the enemy.[12] As one of the victor nations, the United States experienced more difficulty integrating its returning POWs into the triumphal national narrative than did Germany, where in the first post-war years the former soldiers still held by America, Great Britain, and, above all, the Soviet Union quickly became a public symbol for a national as well as private mode of remembrance that presented all veterans as victims mishandled by both the Hitler regime and its enemies.

In contrast to the German veterans' movement, the public presence of which has shrunk almost to nothing over the past twenty years, the U.S. defeat in Vietnam produced a politically innovative veterans' movement that challenged state claims over the definition of commemorative practice. Similar to the first efforts of Vietnam veterans to make public commemoration of that war's dead possible, *Our Last Mission* did not "originate in any drive to honor the nation-state," but rather seeks a way in which former POWs, in speaking out about their own life stories, can give these a communicable meaning, thereby reintegrating themselves into local communities.[13] In this way, this book reflects the development commemorative practice has undergone since nations started remembering their pasts.[14] The most recent phase of this process was initiated after the end of WWII, in which not only national armies, but also civilian populations, suffered great human losses. Whereas to that point commemorative practice had taken the war dead as its object, now, in Europe, America and Asia, the civilian and military survivors of the war were to be honored through commemorative rituals and structures.[15]

The national versions of the cult of the veterans were often initially structured by strict rules of in- and exclusion, but these were soon challenged by smaller social groups: women, racial and sexual minorities, and former POWs.

Parallel to the opening of veterans' culture to new social groups, commemorative practice was wrenched out of the hands of official national culture and localized. Individuals and groups developed smaller-scale, more intimate forms of remembering in order to imbue past events with meaning for individuals living within local contexts. In the United States (as elsewhere), this "personalization of memory" has led to the growth of memorial cultures specific to localities, to groups defining themselves by criteria of ethnicity, and to families. Lawrence Pifer's narrative and its transformation into a book exemplify this new movement now dominating memorial practice. Pifer and Bunyak have moved the focus of attention away from the national significance of veteran status to its importance for one man representative of a group still suffering due to its experiences in a war that ended fifty years ago, often unacknowledged by those around them. In this way, the personalization of memory, the growth of interest in family history, and the increasingly interactive, do-it-yourself quality of American public history have all contributed groundwork for this book.[16]

Despite this apparent reclaiming of history for the construction of smallest-scale social identities, the issue of the POW experience has yet to be resolved in the American consciousness, if we are to judge by Pifer's narrative. It asks complicated questions about what place memories of the POW experience in WWII have in American society today, offering a plea for the personal dimension and the individual veteran's need for acknowledgement rather than positing the "dogmatic formalism" of ostensibly "timeless and sacred" official national memorial practice. Such "vernacular" narratives contain many details, nuances, and ambiguities reflecting the complexity of war experience and about the values according to which veterans fashion their own autobiographies around key experiences that cannot be reflected in official commemoration.[17] Therein lies this narrative's main value to professional historians of Germany.

Although the complexity of the subject matter and its implications suggest the exceptional nature of the sixth grade class in which Bunyak's cousin used *Our Last Mission*, one could imagine assigning this book in high school (p. xxviii). In undergraduate courses, it could generate fruitful discussion on a number of topics such as combat experience and its autobiographical significance,

commemorative practice in contemporary American society, the bombing of civilian populations in World War Two, and the larger issue of war and society. For scholars specializing in combat experience or autobiographical narratives as historical sources, the book's value as a primary source drops. The lack of footnotes (even when it is clear that Bunyak has relied on secondary literature to explain or generalize what her uncle experiences) and the adaptation of the raw interview texts into a single reworked narrative that keep the book from meeting professional standards, of course ensure accessibility for the general public and specifically for veterans and their families, this book's two intended reader groups.

Nonetheless, scholars familiar with primary source ego-documents (e.g. interview transcripts, letters, diaries, memoirs), in particular those pertaining to World War II, will recognize many of their characteristics and motifs in Bunyak's synthetic text. Krammer's wide-ranging foreword provides interested readers with a good deal of related literature and provocative associative thought. Overall, *Our Last Mission* makes a much-needed improvement over the standards of much of the memoir and even oral history literature available on both American soldiers' POW experience and Allied air warfare against Europe in World War II. For enthusiasts of the history of aerial weapons technology, the book offers lots of technical information about the B-17 itself and its use in training and combat. Bunyak has availed herself of a good amount of source material that allows her to reflect the professional interest Pifer still has in his calling as a bomber radio operator. In this way, the book both provides plenty of details for those who crave them while at the same time reflecting its subject's life-world accurately by making this insider knowledge accessible for uninitiated readers.

Notes

[1]. David A. Foy, *For You the War is Over: American Prisoners of War in Nazi Germany* (New York: Stein and Day, 1984), pp. 12-13.

[2]. For the development of the Anglo-American air war against Germany, see Horst Boog, *Das Deutsche Reich in der Defensive: Strategischer Luftkrieg in Europa, Krieg im Westen und in Ostasien 1943-1944/45*, Das Deutsche Reich und der Zweite Weltkrieg, vol. 7., ed. Militärgeschichtliches Forschungsamt (Stuttgart: Deutsche Verlags-Anstalt, 2001), pp. 3-137. For an excellent analysis of the development of the operational strategy behind the air raids, see Tami Davis Biddle, *Rhetoric and Reality in Air Warfare: The Evolution of*