

The Hard Way Home

Flight Magazine, Summer 1996



Bruce Carr stands by "Angels Playmate" during WWII

The dead chicken was starting to smell. After carrying it for several days, 20-year-old Lt. Bruce Carr still hadn't decided how to cook it without the Germans catching him. But, as hungry as he was, he couldn't bring himself to eat it. In his mind, no meat

was better than raw meat, so he threw it away. Resigning himself to what appeared to be his unavoidable fate, he turned in the direction of the nearest German airfield. Even POW's get to eat. Sometimes. And aren't they constantly dodging from tree to tree, ditch to culvert. He was exhausted!

He was tired of trying to find cover where there was none. Carr hadn't realized that Czechoslovakian forests had no underbrush until, at the edge of the farm field, he struggled out of his parachute and dragged it into the woods. During the times he had been screaming along at treetop level in his P-51 "Angels Playmate," the forests and fields had been nothing more than a green blur behind the Messerschmitts, Focke-Wulfs, trains and trucks he had in his sights. He never expected to find himself a pedestrian far behind enemy lines.

The instant antiaircraft shrapnel ripped into the engine, he knew he was in trouble. Serious trouble. Clouds of coolant steam hissing through jagged holes in the cowling told Carr he was about to ride the silk elevator down to a long walk back to his squadron. A very long walk. This had not been part of the mission plan. Several years before, when 18-year-old Bruce Carr enlisted in the Army, in no way could he have imagined himself taking a walking tour of rural Czechoslovakia with Germans everywhere around him. When he enlisted, all he could think about was flying fighters.

By the time he had joined the military, Carr already knew how to fly. He had been flying as a private pilot since 1939, soloing in a \$25 Piper Cub his father had bought from a disgusted pilot who had left it lodged securely in the top of a tree. His instructor had been an Auburn, NY, native by the name of Johnny Bruns.

"In 1942, after I enlisted," as Bruce Carr remembers it, "we went to meet our instructors. I was the last cadet left in the assignment room and was nervous. Then the door opened and out stepped the man who was to be my military flight instructor. It was Johnny Bruns! We took a Stearman to an outlying field, doing aerobatics

all the way; then he got out and soloed me. That was my first flight in the military. "The guy I had in advanced training in the AT-6 had just graduated himself and didn't know a damned bit more than I did," Carr can't help but smile, as he remembers; "which meant neither one of us knew anything. Zilch! "After three or four hours in the AT-6, they took me and a few others aside, told us we were going to fly P-40s and we left for Tipton, Georgia. "We got to Tipton, and a lieutenant just back from North Africa knelt on the P-40's wing, showed me where all the levers were, made sure I knew how everything worked, then said 'If you can get it started, go flying,' just like that! "I was 119 years old and thought I knew everything. I didn't know enough to be scared. They didn't tell us what to do. They just said 'Go fly,' so I buzzed every cow in that part of the state. Nineteen years old and 1100 horsepower, what did they expect? Then we went overseas."

By today's standards, Carr and that first contingent of pilots shipped to England were painfully short of experience. They had so little flight time that today, they would barely have their civilian pilot's license. Flight training eventually became more formal, but in those early days, their training had a hint of fatalistic Darwinism to it: if they learned fast enough to survive, they were ready to move on to the next step. Including his 40 hours in the P-4 terrorizing Georgia, Carr had less than 160 hours flight time when he arrived in England.

His group in England was to be the pioneering group that would take the Mustang into combat, and he clearly remembers his introduction to the airplane. "I thought I was an old P-40 pilot and the -51B would be no big deal. But I was wrong! I was truly impressed with the airplane. I mean REALLY impressed! It flew like an airplane. I FLEW a P-40, but in the P-51, I was PART OF the airplane, and it was part of me. There was a world of difference."

When he first arrived in England, the instructions were, "This is a P-51. Go fly it. Soon, we'll have to form a unit, so fly." A lot of English cows were buzzed. "On my first long-range mission, we just kept climbing, and I'd never had an airplane above about 10,000 feet before.

"Angels Playmate"

Then we were at 30,000 feet and I couldn't believe it! I'd gone to church as a kid, and I knew that's where the angels were and that's when I named my airplane 'Angels Playmate.'

"Then a bunch of Germans roared down through us, and my leader immediately dropped tanks and turned hard for home. But I'm not that smart. I'm 19 years old and this SOB shoots at me, and I'm not going to let him get away with it.

"We went round and round, and I'm really mad because he shot at me. Childish emotions, in retrospect. He couldn't shake me, but I couldn't get on his tail to get any hits either.

"Before long, we're right down in the trees. I'm shooting, but I'm not hitting. I am, however, scaring the hell out of him. I'm at least as excited as he is. Then I tell myself to calm down.

"We're roaring around within a few feet of the ground, and he

pulls up to go over some trees, so I just pull the trigger and keep it down. The gun barrels burned out and one bullet, a tracer, came tumbling out and made a great huge arc. It came down and hit him on the left wing about where the aileron is.

"He pulled up, off came the canopy, and he jumped out, but too low for the chute to open and the airplane crashed. I didn't shoot him down, I scared him to death with one bullet hole in his left wing. My first victory wasn't a kill; it was more of a suicide.

The rest of his 14 victories were much more conclusive.

Being red-hot fighter pilot, however, was absolutely no use to him as he lay shivering in the Czechoslovakian forest. He knew he would die if he didn't get some food and shelter soon.

"I knew where the German field was because I'd flown over it, so I headed in that direction to surrender. I intended to walk in the main gate, but it was late afternoon and, for some reason, I had second thoughts and decided to wait in the woods until morning.

"While I was lying there, I saw a crew working on an Fw 190 right at the edge of the woods. When they were done, I assumed, just like you assume in America, that the thing was all finished. The cowling's on. The engine has been run. The fuel truck has been there. It's ready to go. Maybe a dumb assumption for a young fellow, but I assumed so. So, I got in the airplane and sent the night all hunkered down in the cockpit.

"Before dawn, it got light and I started studying the cockpit. I can't read German, so I couldn't decipher dials and I couldn't find the normal switches like there were in American airplanes. I kept looking, and on the right side was a smooth panel. Under this was a compartment with something I would classify as circuit breakers. They didn't look like ours, but they weren't regular switches either.

"I began to think that the Germans were probably no different from the Americans in that they would turn off all the switches when finished with the airplane. I had no earthly idea what those circuit breakers or switches did, but I reversed every one of them. If they were off, that would turn them on. When I did that, the gauges showed there was electricity on the airplane.

"I'd seen this metal T-handle on the right side of the cockpit that had a word on it that looked enough like 'starter' for me to think that's what it was. But when I pulled it, nothing happened. Nothing.

"But if pulling doesn't work, you push. And when I did, an inertia starter started winding up. I let it go for a while, then pulled on the handle and the engine started."

The sun had yet to make it over the far trees and the air base was just waking up, getting ready to go to war. The Fw 190 was one of many dispersed throughout the woods, and at that time of the morning, the sound of the engine must have been heard by many Germans not far away on the main base. But even if they heard it, there was no reason for alarm. The last thing they expected was one of their fighters taxiing out with a weary Mustang pilot at

the controls. Carr, however, wanted to take no chances.

"The taxiway came out of the woods and turned right towards where I knew the airfield was because I'd watched them land and take off while I was in the trees.

"On the left side of the taxiway, there was a shallow ditch and a space where there had been two hangars. The slabs were there, but the hangars were gone, and the area around them had been cleaned of all debris.

"I didn't want to go to the airfield, so I plowed down through the ditch, and when the airplane started up the other side, I shoved the throttle forward and took off right between where the two hangars had been.

At that point, Bruce Carr had no time to look around to see what effect the sight of a Focke-Wulf erupting from the trees had on the Germans. Undoubtedly, they were confused, but not unduly concerned. After all, it was probably just one of their maverick pilots doing something against the rules. They didn't know it was one of OUR maverick pilots doing something against the rules.

Carr had problems more immediate than a bunch of confused Germans. He had just pulled off the perfect plane-jacking; but he knew nothing about the airplane, couldn't read the placards and had 200 miles of enemy territory to cross. At home, there would be hundreds of his friends and fellow warriors, all of whom were, at that moment, preparing their guns to shoot at airplanes marked with swastikas and crosses-airplanes identical to the one Bruce Carr was at that moment flying. But Carr wasn't thinking that far ahead. First, he had to get there, and that meant learning how to fly the airplane.

"There were two buttons behind the throttle and three buttons behind those two. I wasn't sure what to push, so I pushed one button and nothing happened. I pushed the other and the gear started up. As soon as I felt it coming up and I cleared the fence at the edge of the German field, I took it down little lower and headed for home.

"All I wanted to do was clear the ground by about six inches, and there was only one throttle position: full forward.

"As I headed for home, I pushed one of the other three buttons, and the flaps came part way down. I pushed the button next to it, and they came up again. So I knew how to get the flaps down. But that was all I knew.



"Angels Playmate"

"I can't make heads or tails out of any of the instruments. None. I can't even figure how to change the prop pitch. But I don't sweat that, because props are full forward when you shut down anyway, and it was running fine.

This time, it was German cows that were buzzed, although, as he streaked cross fields and through the trees only a few feet off the ground, that was not the intent. At something over 350 miles an hour below tree-top level, he was trying to be a difficult target, but as he crossed the lines, he wasn't difficult enough.

"There was no doubt when I crossed the lines because every SOB and his brother who had a .50-caliber machine gun shot at me. It was all over the place, and I had no idea which way to go. I didn't do much dodging because I was just as likely to fly into bullets as around them."

When he hopped over the last row of trees and found himself crossing his own airfield, he pulled up hard to set up for landing. His mind was on flying the airplane.

"I pitched up, pulled the throttle back and punched the buttons I knew would put the gear and flaps down. I felt the flaps come down, but the gear wasn't doing anything.

"I came around and pitched up again, still punching the button. Nothing was happening and I was really frustrated."

He had been so intent on figuring out his airplane problems, he forgot he was putting on a very tempting show for the ground crew.

"As I started up the last time, I saw the air defense guys ripping the tarps off the quad .50s that ringed the field. I hadn't noticed the machine guns before, but I was sure noticing them right then.

"I roared around in as tight a pattern as I could fly and chopped the throttle. I slid to a halt on the runway and it was a nice belly job, if I say so myself"

The FW-190 in which Bruce Carr made his way home

His antics over the runway had drawn quite a crowd, and the airplane had barely stopped sliding before there were MPs up on the wings trying to drag him out of the airplane by his arms. They didn't realize he was still strapped in.

"I started throwing some good Anglo-Saxon swear words at them, and they let loose while I tried to get the seat belt undone, but my hands wouldn't work and I couldn't do it. Then they started pulling on me again because they still weren't convinced I was an American.

"I was yelling and hollering; then, suddenly, they let go, and a face drops down into the cockpit in front of mine. It was my Group Commander, George R. Bickel.

"Bickel said, 'Carr, where in the hell have you been, and what have you been doing now?'" Bruce Carr was home and entered

the record books as the only pilot known to leave on a mission flying a Mustang and return flying a Focke-Wulf. For several days after the ordeal, he had trouble



The FW-190 in which Bruce Carr made his way home

eating and sleeping, but when things again fell into place, he took some of the other pilots out to show them the airplane and how it worked. One of them pointed out a small handle under the glare shield that he hadn't noticed before. When he pulled it, the landing gear unlocked and fell out. The handle was a separate, mechanical uplock. At least, he had figured out the important things. Carr finished the war with 14 aerial victories after flying 172 missions, which included three bailouts because of ground fire. He stayed in the service, eventually flying 51 missions in Korea in F-86s and 286 in Vietnam, flying F-100s. That's an amazing 509 combat missions and doesn't include many others during Viet Nam in other aircraft types.

What makes a fitting ending to this story is that there is no ending. Bruce Carr is still actively flying and routinely shows up at air shows in a P-51D painted up exactly like Angel's Playmate. The last original Angel's Playmate was put on display in a museum in Paris, France, right after the war. There is no such thing as an ex-fighter pilot. They never cease being what they once were, whether they are in the cockpit or not. There is a profile into which almost every one of the breed fits, and it is the charter within that profile that makes the pilot a fighter pilot-not the other way around. An make no mistake about it, Col. Bruce Carr is definitely a fighter pilot.

Stallion 51 Note:

We are sad to say that Bruce Carr, long time friend and guest of Stallion 51, passed away in April of 1998 at the age of 74. We are proud to have known this true American hero and fighter pilot.