

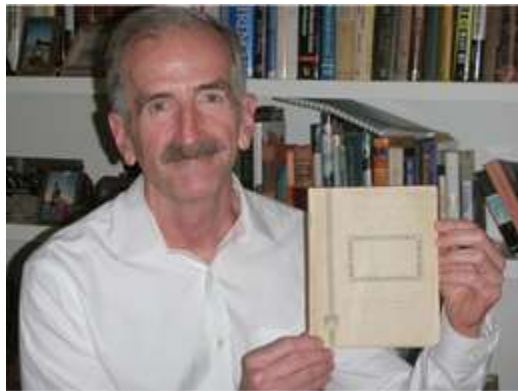
WWII POW Diary



Ferguson with daughter Laura Katherine in Texas in early 40's

On his first birthday spent as a POW in Nazi-occupied Romania, Army Air Corps Capt. Clay Ferguson penned a few thoughts on growing older. “Today I am 24 years old,” he wrote in a prison diary dated Dec. 27, 1943. “I never thought I would live to be so old. It’s hard to believe that I am approaching middle age. I suppose a man’s life goes pretty fast from now on.” There are reasons Ferguson may have felt like an old man. Less than four months earlier, the B-24 bomber on which he served as navigator, The Boomerang, was shot down during a daring raid on the Ploesti oil fields in Romania. All 11 crew members survived and were taken prisoner, but Ferguson suffered severe injuries.

He was later awarded the Distinguished Flying Cross.



Robin Watters, a retired Navy rear admiral, shows the 60-page diary written by Capt. Clay Ferguson. Watters’ family found it among the possessions in their Bellevue home after Watters’ father, John Watters, a retired Air Force colonel, died.

In the diary — discovered in Bellevue two years ago among the possessions of a retired Air Force colonel who died at 101 — Ferguson tells of the poor food and clothing received by the POWs, the boredom and the cold. He mentions failed escape attempts by other prisoners, and prisoners he believes act badly. Touchingly, Ferguson describes his longing for his wife, Polly, and baby daughter back home in Texas —

although he would split with his wife not long after the war. “I think that Polly and the rest of my family (are) thinking of me,” Ferguson wrote on Christmas Eve 1943. “As long as they do, I’m happy.”

Ferguson and more than 100 other POWs in Romania were liberated in late summer 1944, and he lived until 1976. But his POW diary is now being read for the first time by members of his family — or, perhaps, by anyone. Jennifer Ricou found the diary when she was sorting through a large collection of military memorabilia belonging to her late father, Col. John Watters, an officer with the Offutt-based Strategic Air Command. He and his English-born wife, Jean, had retired in Bellevue in 1970. They died two months apart in 2018. She shared it with her brother, Robin, a retired Navy rear admiral who lives in Rhode Island. “I said, ‘Holy cow, how did he get this?’ I can’t figure it out,” Robin Watters said. He knows of no connection between his father and Clay Ferguson.

John Watters, who joined the Army in 1940, had flown 25 missions aboard B-17s in England during the war. He was serving in a staff position in London when Ferguson’s group was freed from the POW camp in Romania. Robin Watters speculated that his father — who also was a navigator — somehow got the diary during his wartime tour in London. Perhaps he met Ferguson, or interviewed him. “It’s a mystery that went to the grave with him,” he said. Watters read the diary and was impressed with the man who wrote it. “He’s a really admirable guy, doing his duty, and in incredible pain,” he said. “It is this unvarnished look that you don’t often get.”

Clay Ferguson was taken prisoner during one of the biggest and most spectacular air raids of World War II, Operation Tidal Wave. On Aug. 1, 1943, 178 twin-tailed B-24 Liberators took off from Benghazi, Libya, on a 2,400-mile raid against a cluster of oil refineries in and near Ploesti. Sometimes referred to as “Hitler’s Gas Station,” they provided a large portion of the oil that fueled the Nazi war effort. Fifty-four of the bombers crashed or were shot down, killing 310 crewman. Another 190 — including Ferguson — were taken prisoner in Romania, which was under German occupation. Ferguson’s crew was part of the 398th Bomb Group, known as the Sky Scorpions. Ferguson had only five missions under his belt when The Boomerang took off. Their assignment was to cripple a refinery in Campina, 18 miles from Ploesti. The mission was a success; the refinery was destroyed and knocked out of production for the rest of the war. But the Sky Scorpions lost six of 29 aircraft to enemy fire, including The Boomerang.



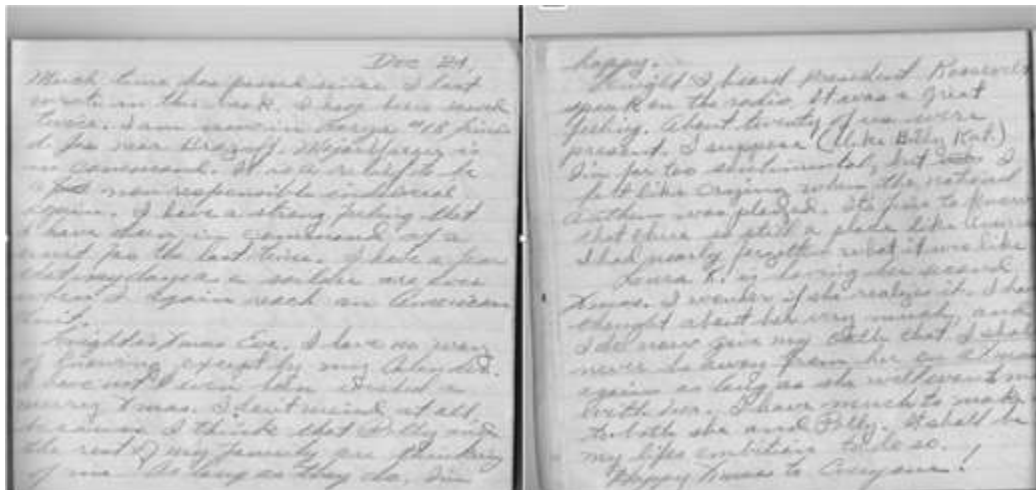
B-24 Liberator Sandman (left), silhouetted against smoke from a bombed factory in Ploesti, Romania during the Allied raid of Aug 1, 1943. The Aquila refinery (right), known to pilots as White Five, in flames as a result of the raid.

Ferguson’s diary doesn’t describe the crash. But his son, Peter Ferguson, said his father in later years told him that a shell fired from the ground exploded near him, inside the aircraft. The plane crash-landed, leaving Ferguson trapped in the wreckage for 12 hours. “He was unconscious. When he woke up, he was kind of disoriented,” said Peter Ferguson, 73, who lives in El Cajon, California. “He said he saw a hand

hanging down in front of him, and it had his ring on it. He bit it, and it hurt. That's how he knew it was still attached."

Clay Ferguson's diary describes him as the officer-in-charge at his POW camp. In the first entry, dated Oct. 24, 1943, Ferguson said he met with a Red Cross committee he described as "very nice, but there is little they can do for us." He also wrote a letter that day requesting the help of diplomats from neutral Switzerland. "Everyone is extremely well, except for some with extreme burns and broken bones," Ferguson wrote in the diary. In entries during the rest of October, he described a meeting with the Swiss legation and visit from a Roman Catholic cardinal sent by the pope who gave each of the prisoners a bottle of cognac. "I thanked him for us all and shook hands with him," Ferguson wrote on Oct. 29. "Imagine me shaking hands with a cardinal!"

In November entries, Ferguson writes that his painful broken leg has been reset for the sixth time. He also notes that he and most of his airmen are sick. "Nine-tenths of the men here have dysentery," he said. Ferguson wrote a love poem to his wife in the diary Nov. 15 (their wedding anniversary) and mused about his daughter the following week, on her birthday. "Laura K. is over a year old now. She'll grow up fast from now on," he said. In the same entry, Ferguson described a failed escape attempt in which some of the men dug a tunnel beyond the fence from beneath one of the buildings. Of the eight who tried to flee, six were recaptured and two killed. "It seems incredible that a man should live through what we have, and then be killed by a few soldiers," Ferguson wrote.



Entries from Ferguson's diary as a prisoner-of-war in Nazi occupied Romania. He missed his wife Polly and his daughter, Laura back in Texas

The next week, more of the POWs tried to escape but were captured and badly beaten. One man had 45 gashes on his back, Ferguson said, and others had their heads split open with rifle butts. He was also told that the next person who tried to escape and was caught would be shot. This outrage was protested to the Swiss legation," he wrote, "but it does not help." In early December, Ferguson and eight other men were transferred to a military hospital 40 miles away. They were confined to a single freezing room; their clothes and shoes were taken away, and the room had only a small stove for heat. On top of that, the soldiers were given only a half loaf of bread and a plate of potatoes to share among the nine of them. Ferguson was incensed enough to start a hunger strike. "I told the guard that if the Roumanian government could not feed all of us, then they would not feed me," he wrote on Dec. 2. "I have not eaten today, nor do I intend to untill (sic) every man here is fed. ... There are some things a man cannot honorabl(y) accept." The Romanians provided more food, but the other conditions did not improve. Most of the men were sick or still wounded.

“I say no soldier can say he is a man until he knows how he will act under intense and utterly helpless pain,” Ferguson wrote on Dec. 3. “Most of us now know, in our own hearts, what kind of man we are.” In subsequent entries, Ferguson laments the lack of news from the prisoners’ families. He mentions writing a letter to get Red Cross packages released for the men. “I would give my soul for one letter from home,” he wrote on Dec. 5. The diary describes his joy when another officer, also from Texas, receives a cablegram from his family. His spirits also pick up when the cast is finally removed from his leg, and when the Red Cross parcels finally are released.

On Christmas Eve, Ferguson reports that he has been moved twice and has yielded command to a higher-ranking officer, Maj. William Yaeger. He describes his relief at being a “non-responsible individual again,” but also laments that he may never again lead troops. “I have a fear that my days as a soldier (sic) are over when I again reach an American unit,” he wrote. That Dec. 24, 1943, entry is one of the diary’s longest. Ferguson reflects on his family, and wonders if his daughter — who is just over a year old — realizes that it is Christmas. “I have thought about her a lot,” he wrote. “I do now give my oath that I shall never be away from her on a Xmas again as long as she will want me with her. I have much to make up to both she and Polly. It shall be my life’s ambition to do so.”

Ferguson also says that a group of about 20 officers were allowed to hear a radio speech by President Franklin Roosevelt. It stirred up emotions. “I suppose I’m far too sentimental, but I felt like crying when I heard the national anthem,” he wrote. “It’s fine to know that there is still a place like America. I had nearly forgotten what that was like.” By New Year’s Eve, some of the POWs received mail from their families, but Ferguson had not. He writes that the camp commandant has allowed the prisoners to buy whiskey and champagne with their pay allotments, and some of the men are getting drunk. But he skipped the revelry to write another reflective post in his diary as the year 1943 is ending.

“It has undoubtedly been the worst year of my life, and I have made several very important mistakes, which I shall never repeat (sic),” Ferguson writes, without describing them. “I wanted to write ‘I love you’ to Polly. Somehow I know she is thinking of me tonight — even if she hasn’t written to me.”

After the New Year, there are only four diary entries over nine months. In the first, dated March 14, 1944, Ferguson vents at length about internal trouble among the POWs. He compares the camp to a “kindergarden” and blames the problems on a small group of men he describes as “rotten apples.” He complains that they openly defy orders from himself and Yaeger and cause frequent disruptions. Ferguson’s description shows a camp where frustrations with captivity are clearly boiling over. “Most of the men here are like children,” he writes. “They break out the windows, break furniture, throw bottles and stove wood inside quarters, and above all keep up such a constant childish roar of useless noise that no one can sleep. They make life miserable for us all.”

Ferguson describes nearly coming to blows with a lieutenant who refused his order to stop throwing bottles down a hallway, and cursed at him when Ferguson told him he was under arrest. “I told him that sometime I was going to beat the hell out of him for it. I mean it,” Ferguson told his diary. “When he was leaving (the lieutenant) yelled that it was a ‘dam(n) good revolution.’” Two weeks later, he reports that he and Yaeger have been transferred to another camp, at their own request. It is next to a railroad line, and he can see that many civilians are leaving the area on heavily loaded refugee trains.

Ferguson’s last substantial diary entry is dated May 31, 1944, and it notes more friction between officer and enlisted POWs. Much of it is related to the officers’ higher pay, which allowed them to buy more and better food. Ferguson said he suggested pooling officer and enlisted pay so the soldiers could be better fed, but the officers at first wouldn’t agree — not until he insisted. He also wrote that he saw American bombers attacking the Ploesti refineries again. “It was a beautiful sight,” he said.

Ferguson's last entry is dated Aug. 25. It is brief and cryptic. "Much has transpired," he wrote. It certainly had. Romania's King Michael I, just 17, joined with several political parties in a coup to overthrow the country's pro-Nazi dictator Aug. 23. Two days later, Romania declared war on Germany, prompting sporadic fighting across the country but allowing the POWs some freedom of movement since their captors had suddenly become their allies. The senior American officer, Lt. Col. James Gunn — who had been a prisoner just six days — took advantage of the chaos to plan an escape. By chance he met Romania's top flying ace, Captain Constantin Cantacuzino. Cantacuzino and Gunn hatched a plot to steal a German Me-109 single-seat fighter plane and fly it to the American-held base in Italy where Gunn had flown from.

Gunn spent the dangerous journey stowed in a cold, dark, cramped compartment while Cantacuzino flew. When they landed in Italy, Gunn informed authorities where American POWs were being held in Romania. He and Cantacuzino worked with authorities on a plan to gather the imprisoned American airmen at an airfield and fly them out using a fleet of B-17 bombers. They completed the dangerous mission over German territory, rescuing more than 1,100 American POWs without any casualties.

Ferguson makes no mention of the escape in his diary, but he almost certainly took part in it. A POW debriefing form Robin Watters obtained from the National Archives shows that Ferguson had flown from Italy to London on Sept. 9, a week after the escape. "I don't know for sure that Clay was one of the POWs who escaped via the operation," Watters said, "but it fits." The debriefing form revealed new information about the extent of Ferguson's injuries. The diary mentions only his broken leg, but he also suffered a head wound and paralysis on his right side.



Clay Ferguson in 1956

Not much is known about Ferguson's personal life immediately after the war, either. But it's clear that the reunion with his family was a bumpy one. Peter Ferguson was born in 1946, but he said his parents divorced when he was a baby. Clay Ferguson quickly remarried and started a new family. Peter, who grew up in California, didn't meet his father until he was 14. He said Clay Ferguson remained in the Air Force until the late 1950s, when he lost his flying status after developing diabetes and reluctantly retired. He bought a ranch in his native Texas.

Peter Ferguson spent several summers during his teen years at his father's ranch. He hated the heat and the grueling work, but he had a friendly relationship with his father's second family, including three half siblings. Only one is still living. He said his father told him a bit about his World War II plane crash and captivity. Clay told how material from his parachute had embedded in his back after the shell exploded on

the plane, causing small pieces of silk to emerge from his skin over the years. “He had injuries he still complained about,” Peter Ferguson said. “I remember he could bend his elbow completely the wrong way.” Clay Ferguson died of diabetes-related complications in 1976 after a series of amputations on his foot and leg. Peter wishes now he had quizzed his dad more about his wartime experience. “It’s just that I didn’t even know enough to ask questions,” he said.



Peter said he was stunned to hear from Robin Watters earlier this year about the journal he had discovered. With the help of a friend, Watters tracked him down using information found on the website [Ancestry.com](https://www.ancestry.com). So far, Peter hasn’t shared the contents with his living siblings. That includes Laura, the little girl Clay doted on in his writings. Despite the oath he swore in his diary, he spent few if any Christmases with his wife and daughter. “I didn’t ever know he had any type of feelings like that,” Peter Ferguson said.

Laura is now 77 and lives in Southern California. She never reconciled with her father, Peter Ferguson said. He hasn’t yet told her about the diary. “My sister has always held a grudge, like he chose another family and not us,” he said. “She doesn’t remember him at all.” He said the diary does show him another side of his father — an officer who truly cared for his men. “I don’t think we noncombatants can really understand what it’s like,” Peter Ferguson said. “There’ll never be another generation like that.”

[Source: Omaha World-Herald | Steve Liewer | August 30, 2020 ++]