

# Lines from Linda

by Linda Ayers Turner Knorr



## "LASSIE COME HOME"

### The Ghost Bomber

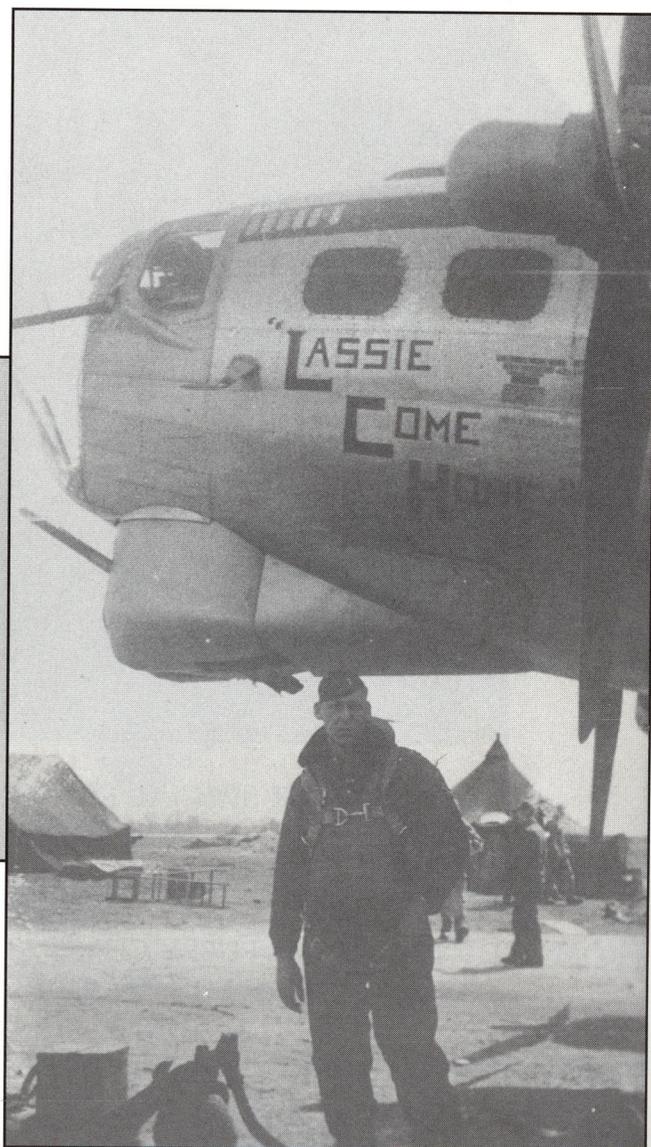
Harry Jensen was a 1st Lieutenant and bombardier in the 8th Air Force and flew out of England during World War II in a B-17 bomber named "Lassie Come Home". On May 13, 1944 he was shot down on his 19th mission. It was to have been the longest raid of the war, from England to Posen, Poland. The formation was attacked by over a hundred Luftwaffe fighters in the area of Stettin, Germany. The plane was hit, and a fire developed in the left wing. The wing of a B-17 contains 2700 gallons of highly flammable gasoline so you can't stay around too long!

The entire crew parachuted out and a frightened young Harry Jensen was captured when he hit the ground near Ginst at Ruggen. Lt. Jensen spent a year as a P.O.W. at Stalag Luft III. The camp was located at Sagan, 90 miles southeast of Berlin, and was the principle German camp for allied Air Force officer prisoners of war. The movie "The Great Escape" was based on the drama that unfolded in March 1944 when fifty of seventy-six escaped Stalag Luft III prisoners were executed by the German Gestapo. They had gained brief freedom by tunneling under the barbed wire fence. Harry Jensen was a survivor of both infamous forced marches from Sagan to Nuremburg, and later from

Nuremburg to Moosburg. There are other interesting stories, and one is the story of how the plane got the name "Lassie Come Home". Also Harry's experience on his first weekend pass and its coincidental relationship with June Lockhart, the star of the TV series, "Lassie", as well as other TV series and films. Here

is a letter Harry wrote to her in August, 1989: **"Dear Ms. June Lockhart:** Last Monday morning I saw your guest appearance on the "CBS Good Morning" Show and was happy to learn that a new Lassie

1st Lt. Harry D. Jensen stands beside his plane, "Lassie Come Home," moments before taking off on what was to be Lassie's last mission



series is going to begin. It brought back some memories that I would like to share with you. In 1943, I was an aviation cadet stationed at Santa

Lt. Harry D. Jensen



Ana, California. I received a weekend pass and, along with another cadet, went to Los Angeles. We were standing on Hollywood Boulevard waiting for a bus when a large limousine pulled up, the window rolled down, and a distinguished gentleman asked if he could give us a lift. It was your movie star father, Gene Lockhart. We accepted, and in the course of the conversation, he asked us where we were going. We told him that we were invited to a dance that evening. He also inquired as to if we had hotel accommodations. He then graciously offered us a card with his address on it and told us he would be glad to put us up for the night, and not to worry what time we arrived, he would still be up.

After the dance we took a cab to your house and your father answered the door. He invited us in, showed us downstairs to the family room where two cots were made up. He brought us each a cold beer and we talked a while. He said good night after telling us he would have breakfast about 10am the next morning.

I remember having breakfast in a room with large windows overlooking a beautiful landscaped yard.

And now is where you come in. You entered the room and poured us our coffee and I recall you were wearing a beautiful negligee. Well, our eyes popped out, and in later years, whenever I saw you on TV or in the movies, I would always remind my wife, "Vi, she once served me coffee in a beautiful negligee". In those days there was a popular one-hour program on Sunday radio. Your father arranged to get us studio tickets for the broadcast. It was a memorable weekend, one which I have never forgotten.

The story doesn't end there. I went on to receive my wings and commission and was assigned to B-17s. We were assigned to Langley Field, Virginia for final training before going overseas.

One night some of the other officers of our crew and I went to the post theatre and saw the movie "Lassie Come Home". After the show I said to them, "If our bomber will try as hard to come home from a mission as that dog did to get home, we ought to be a cinch to finish our twenty-five missions. Let's name our plane 'Lassie Come Home'".

For eighteen missions Lassie *did* come home, sometimes shot full of holes with an engine (or paw) missing. But on the 19th mission we were shot down by the Luftwaffe over Germany, and I wound up in Stalag Luft III - the same prison camp that was featured in the movie "The Great Escape" featuring Steve McQueen. None of us blamed Lassie. There were just too many German fighters, and we were set on fire. Lassie stayed up long enough for all of the crew to bail out safely.

I hope you find this interesting and wish you success in your new series. As Bob Hope would say, "Thanks for the memories".

Sincerely, **Harry D. Jensen**  
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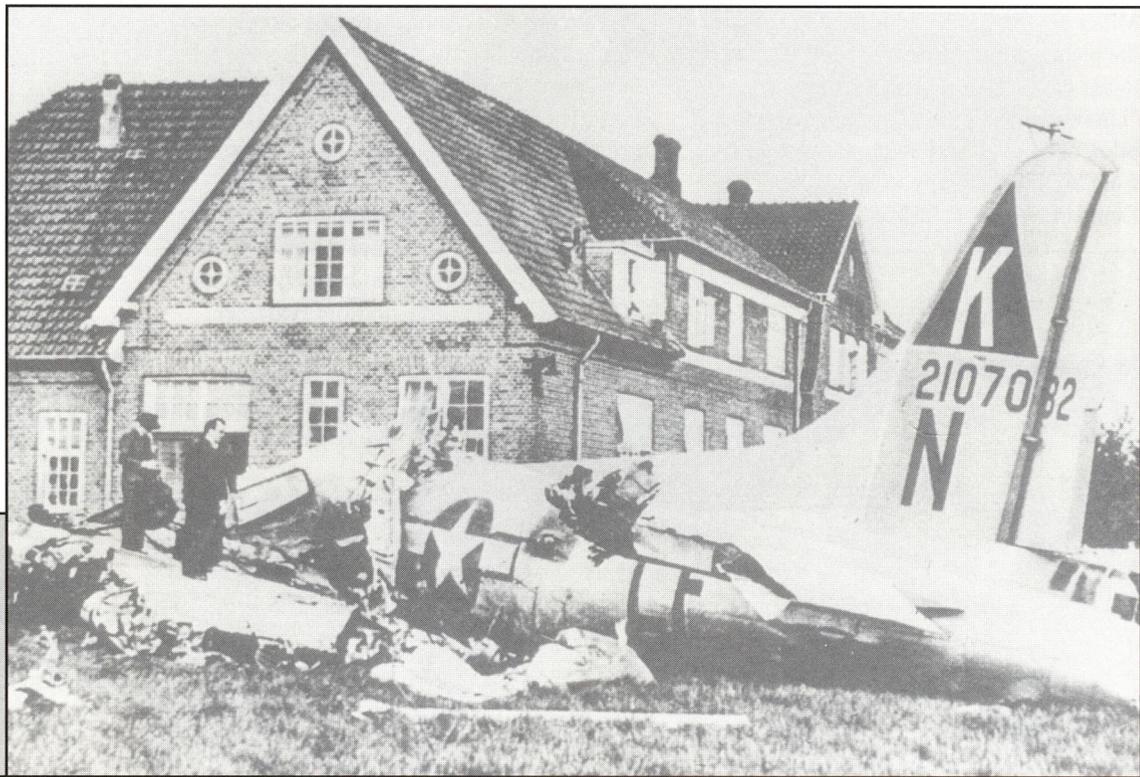
June phoned Harry after receiving his letter and was fascinated with the story. She denies the negligee, saying she was only seventeen and probably had on a robe. Harry told her that he knew the difference. June and Harry now correspond.

However, now comes the most amazing story, involving a series of events which truly proves that truth is stranger than fiction!

Here is the story as Harry told it to me this summer at Mackinac Island...

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The pilot Robert M. Dunn Jr. and I were the last to leave the plane. Before bailing out, he set the plane on automatic pilot, and we jumped out through the open bomb bay doors. The last I saw of the plane from my



The crewless B-17 "Lassie Come Home" bomber after it crashed into Store Heddinge Hospital in Denmark

parachute, it was on fire and flying straight and level. I assumed that it would soon explode. Now, over forty-six years later, I have found out what finally happened to Lassie.

Last Christmas, our tail gunner, Sgt. James Miller, who lives in Bremerton, Washington, sent along with his card a picture story of the German occupation of Denmark. Working for Miller were two employees, one a Latino and the other a Dane. They knew of Miller's war experience, and he had told them he was in the 379th bomb group which was identified by the marking, a large triangle K on the tail of the plane, being from Kimbolton, England. The Latino, while visiting a paper recycling center in Bremerton, found the book and brought it back for his co-worker the Dane. He, in turn looking through the book, saw a picture of a B-17 that had crashed in Denmark. He showed it to Miller who identified it as a bomber from our group. This was five to six years ago. Miller made copies of the picture and filed them away. He and I are members of the 379th Bomb Group WW II Association. They recently released to its members information on the bombing raids by the group and other information that was previously classified as confidential.

We both received copies of the casualty report of our last raid on May 13, 1944. On it was listed the date of the mission, the target, the names of the crew, and the serial number of the plane #2107082, which was also displayed on the tail of the plane. Miller compared this number with the one in the picture from the book, and was amazed to see they were the same. Our plane "Lassie Come Home", flying on automatic pilot, without anyone in it, managed to fly from Stettin, Germany to Store Heddinge, Denmark where it crashed. Through the

Danish Consulate in Chicago and from a Scandinavian Airline official who lives in Denmark, I obtained additional information. Here is the official story as translated from a Danish report.

379th Bomb Group  
526th Squadron  
1st Division  
Kimbolton Huntingdonshire,  
England

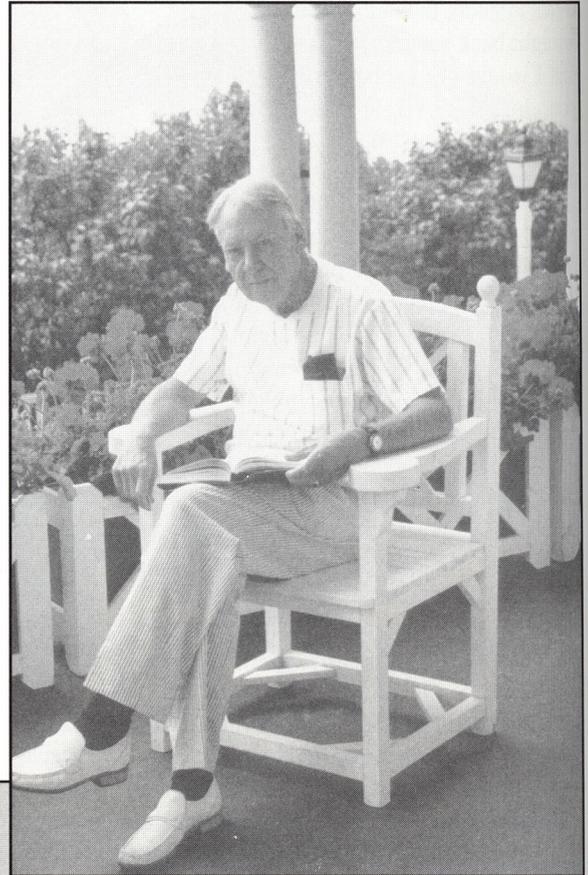
Two hundred seventy-two B-17s from 1st Bomber Division flew into Stettin and Stralsund. Ten were lost. During the return flight the formations were attacked by German fighters and B-17 #42-107082 left the formation with left wing on fire and two feathered engines. At 15:30 the pilot, 1st Lt. Robert M. Dunn Jr. gave the order to leave the aircraft and all nine crew members jumped. All landed safely near Gingst at Ruggen and were shortly caught by the Germans who couldn't find the wreck.

After further research, the Germans concluded that the plane proceeded over the Baltic Sea and exploded. The aircraft did proceed over the Baltic Sea, but all the way to Stevns, Denmark where you could hear noise from engines at 17:30. The aircraft was circling over the clouds and was heading directly at the town, Bjaelkerup, but it hit a power mast and changed direction. Then the aircraft hit some trees and, once again, changed heading and hit a supply house, which was smashed. The plane didn't stop, but proceeded through a garden

Harry, relating this story to me at the Grand Hotel on Mackinac Island

until it collided with the hospital building at Store Heddinge. Six kids were evacuated as they were afraid of fire and explosion, but the

Harry relaxing after another BIS win, Covington, La., with Ch. Tip 'N Chips Foolish Pleasure



only damage was a stairway in the building.

Yes, Lassie was just like her namesake. She tried to get

back to her home in England, but crashed in Denmark. Maybe she knew I was a Dane, both my parents having been born in Denmark, and that someone there would help her. I'll never know, and I'll never forget her.

As Lassie the movie star celebrates her fiftieth birthday this year, Harry Jensen returned to Denmark on May 13th to commemorate the forty-eighth anniversary of the fate of his "Ghost Bomber". There he met, for the first time, six of the people who were at the site of the crash - including the ninety-year-old nurse in whose room "Lassie" intruded. Harry and Vi Jensen own Kimbolton Kennels in Western Springs, Illinois, and have bred and shown English Springer Spaniels for many years. Currently they are ringside collecting Best In Show ribbons from the Great Pyrenees Ch. Tip'N Chip's Foolish Pleasure they co-own with Judith G. Cooper.

This story has been written from the hospital room of my father, Roy Ayers, who even more courageously than Lassie is fighting to come home.

*Linda Ayers Turner Knorr*

