

MOLESWORTH CHAPLAINS

303RD BOMBARDMENT GROUP (H)
MOLESWORTH, ENGLAND
1942-1945

Our Beloved Chaplains, who sustained our faith, were Reverend **Merritt O. Slawson** (Protestant) and Father **Edmund Skoner** (Catholic).



Father Edmond Skoner conducting Evening Mass

A CHAPLAIN'S MISSION AT BASE (AND IN ENEMY SKIES?)

by Jack Slawson

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My dad, **Merritt O. Slawson**, served as Protestant chaplain with the 303rd Bomb Group at Molesworth from April, 1943, to the end of World War II. Chappie, as he was popularly known, has passed on. A few years ago, while he was still able to travel, he visited my home, took me aside, and gave me a detailed first-person account of the crash of the B-17 *Winning Run* in England after the mission to Stuttgart, Germany on September 6, 1943. He told what it was like coming in over the channel with an engine out, dumping excess weight overboard, trying to maintain altitude, barely clearing the coastline, running out of fuel and crashing at an RAF fighter base. This conversation was unembellished and meant to tell me something.

When he had finished, I asked, "Were you on *Winning Run* on that mission?"

"What do you think?"

"I think you were. Why won't you tell me?"

"I made a promise."



CRASH OF WINNING RUN

The 427BS B-17 came down on a small RAF fighter field after running out of gas on the return from Stuttgart, Germany, 6 September 1943. Pictured at the crash site, L-R standing, Jake James (P), Howard Ness (N), William Watts (E), Walter Witt (B) and Life Magazine correspondent Frank Scherschel. Kneeling are Jesse Tripp (TG), Angelo Longo (BT), Albert Martel (LWG), A.J. Hamilton (R) and Frank Misiak (RWG). Chaplain Slawson said that he was in the picture – out of sight behind the tail section.

If, indeed, my father was on the Stuttgart mission, the promise made was that he would never tell that Jake James, the pilot, had taken him along. There would have been official repercussions. Dad would have to have stayed out of sight after evacuating the B-17, and then alluded that he arrived at the RAF fighter base on a flight from Molesworth sent to pick up the James crew, Chappie and Jake James both remained in the service after the war. Jake died in 1974.

Chappie hinted on occasions over the years to having flown "a few" missions. He explained that he was counseling a young airman one day and said to him, "I know what you're going through." The combat crew member replied, "No, sir. You don't." My father then realized that he couldn't adequately minister to the needs of the men at Molesworth if he never experienced what it was like to engage in aerial combat.

I was never able to get specifics from Chappie on these clandestine flights. Several times, he pointed out to me one of the guns in the side of the B-17's nose compartment saying, "That was my gun." He never claimed to having hit anything, but said with obvious pride, "Enemy fighter pilots knew that the gun was manned and working."

When my mother passed away last year, I inherited a small clear plastic heart suspended from a fine gold chain. She had worn it frequently, and it was known to the family as "The Heart of Winning Run." My father had fashioned it out of a fragment of Plexiglas from the nose cone of *Winning Run*.

Chaplain Slawson first wanted to be a doctor but the economics of the depression did not allow that to happen. He did manage to work his way through college and during the latter part of his studies "got the call" to become a preacher and continued his education into the ministry. His first parish was a tiny church in the town of Canal Point, Florida. This was not a rich parish and he was often paid in kind (produce, chickens, etc.).

When the U.S. entered WWII he began trying to get into the service, and after a time, the Methodist Commission on Chaplains gave its blessing to his request. He was commissioned as a 1st Lieutenant on June 27, 1942 and assigned as Chaplain for the 322nd Bomb Group, a B-26 outfit then training at MacDill Air Force Base in Tampa, Florida. He moved with the Group to England in late 1942, crossing the Atlantic on the Queen Mary. He was with the 322nd until April of 1943 when orders came transferring him to the 303rd Bomb Group. He remained at Molesworth for the duration of the war.

His stories after the war didn't dwell on tragedy, more often ringing with humor about life in military service, common themes among veterans. He would always express extreme disgust at the very mention of Spam, Brussels sprouts or mutton. Apparently these were the staples of life

for a long time after he reached England. Mud was also frequently mentioned with a pronounced lack of enthusiasm.



Chappie Slawson

Chappie was a down-to-earth type, a "people person." His type of ministry was not pushy or stuffy. He had a sense of humor and was one helluva a preacher. His time at Molesworth was the defining period in his life.

His monthly activity reports give a statistical accounting of various actions. The August 1943 report, a typical example, notes 14 religious services conducted. Other activities, noted as "personal contacts," include 20 hospital visits, four visits to control tower personnel, four hanger visits, six barracks and day room visitations, four visits to the YMCA hut, six visits to guard posts, 10 visits in Officer's Club lounge, eight orderly room visits, five welfare cases, 16 visits on line and 11 attendance's at meetings of combat crews (briefings and interrogations).

In the folder with the monthly activity reports is a copy of a letter dated 6 November 1943, to the Office of the Chaplain, Eighth Air Force, titled REPORT OF ACTIVITIES AT BRIEFING OF COMBAT CREWS. This letter outlines how he operated. He was available before and after the briefings, went to early breakfast with the crews and from there to the briefing room. He was available for personal prayer or prayer with a crew at the plane. He accompanied the ambulances to the end of the runway when the planes returned and if there were wounded, he went with them to the hospital. If there were no wounded, he went to the interrogation and mixed with the men.

One of the things he did was to scratch the names of crewmen on British pennies and then give the coins to the named individuals before missions with the admonition "bring it back." After the war he had a box filled with little envelopes, each containing a penny and annotated with the name of an airman and other brief data. Over the years he presented many of the pennies to the original crew members and gave others to individuals who would appreciate their significance. I was the recipient of one of the pennies. Chappie gave it to me stating that it was the coin with the highest mission count in the box. This particular penny went back to war in 1967/68. The penny's luck held. I still have it and never travel without it!

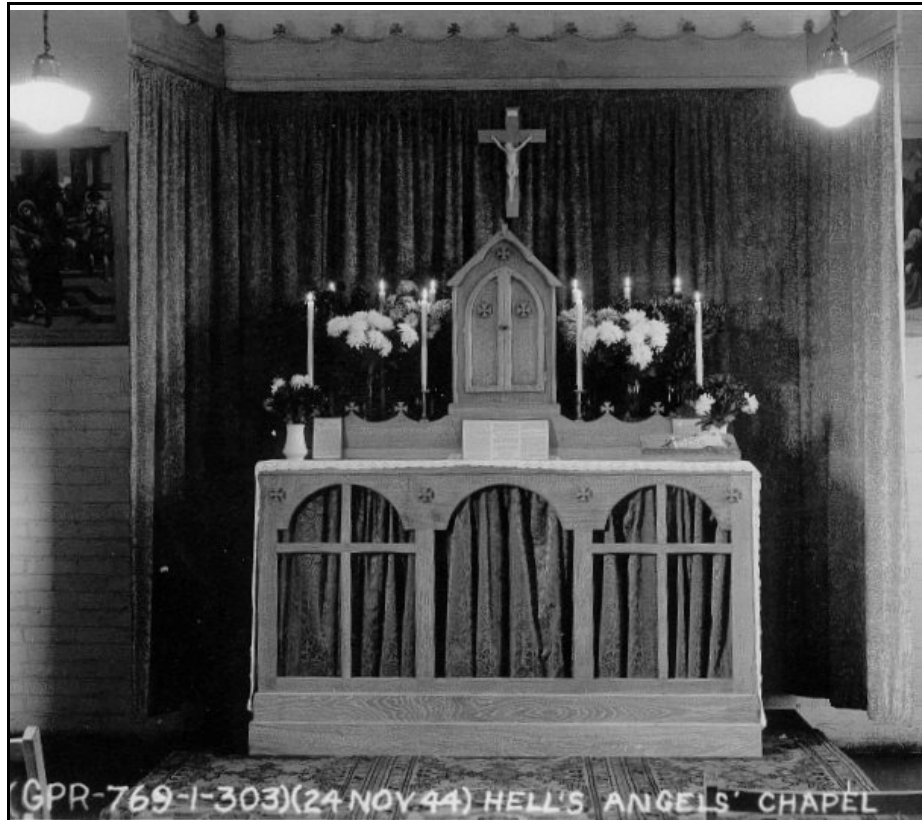
It was not widely known that Chappie was a pilot in his own right. In the archives I have accumulated is his pilot's log book. The first entries are dated in August 1944 and show dual time as a student in Army Cub L1 flights originating from Molesworth.

I suspect that he flew on many a B-17 practice flight and know that he had certain special buddies who catered to his love of flying. He especially talked about Jacob C. (Jake) James. Chappie and Jake did some B-17 "driving" together and one incident was recited frequently over the years. They were setting a B-17 up for landing and the closer they got to touchdown the more Chappie hinted to Jake to let him take over and land the bird. Jake sat there with his arms folded shaking his head "no" to each admonition. Finally, he relented, and Chappie got the bird down. Afterwards, Jake told the emotionally exhausted chaplain, "You had it made and I wouldn't have let you get in trouble."

Another oft told tale was about a B-17 practice flight with Chappie logging time at the controls. It appears that the copilot was down in the nose with the navigator and bombardier. Then

the pilot climbed down with them, making it a foursome. The others exclaimed "Who the hell is flying this plane?" The pilot replied, "The chaplain."

Chappie owned several aircraft after the war and I often flew with him. He had single engine land and seaplane ratings, as well as glider at one time. His friends at Molesworth taught him good fundamentals!



Molesworth Chapel — 24 November 1944

Among the archives is another folder labeled E.T.O GRAVE REGISTRATIONS & FUNERALS CONDUCTED. It is almost 1/2 inch thick and provides a somber reminder of the hazards of aerial combat. I know that Chappie was affected by having conducted so many funerals.

He was transferred back to England in April 1951. He took the family to Molesworth once to show us where he had been stationed during the war. I was 11 or so at the time. There was a British caretaker who appeared at the gate and, after hearing that Chappie had been there during the war, asked if he wanted to come on the base and drive around. Chappie declined, with thanks. I wondered about that at the time. Now I think I understand. The emotions he would have felt had he gone back to the chapel would have been too much.

The depth of his emotions about the Molesworth period is illustrated by a ritual that he followed throughout the remainder of his military career and carried over into his ministry following retirement. Every Christmas Eve he held a special communion service in memory of the men who did not come back from missions. For this service he used the same small portable communion set that he had used at Molesworth to give what turned out to be the last communion to so many men.