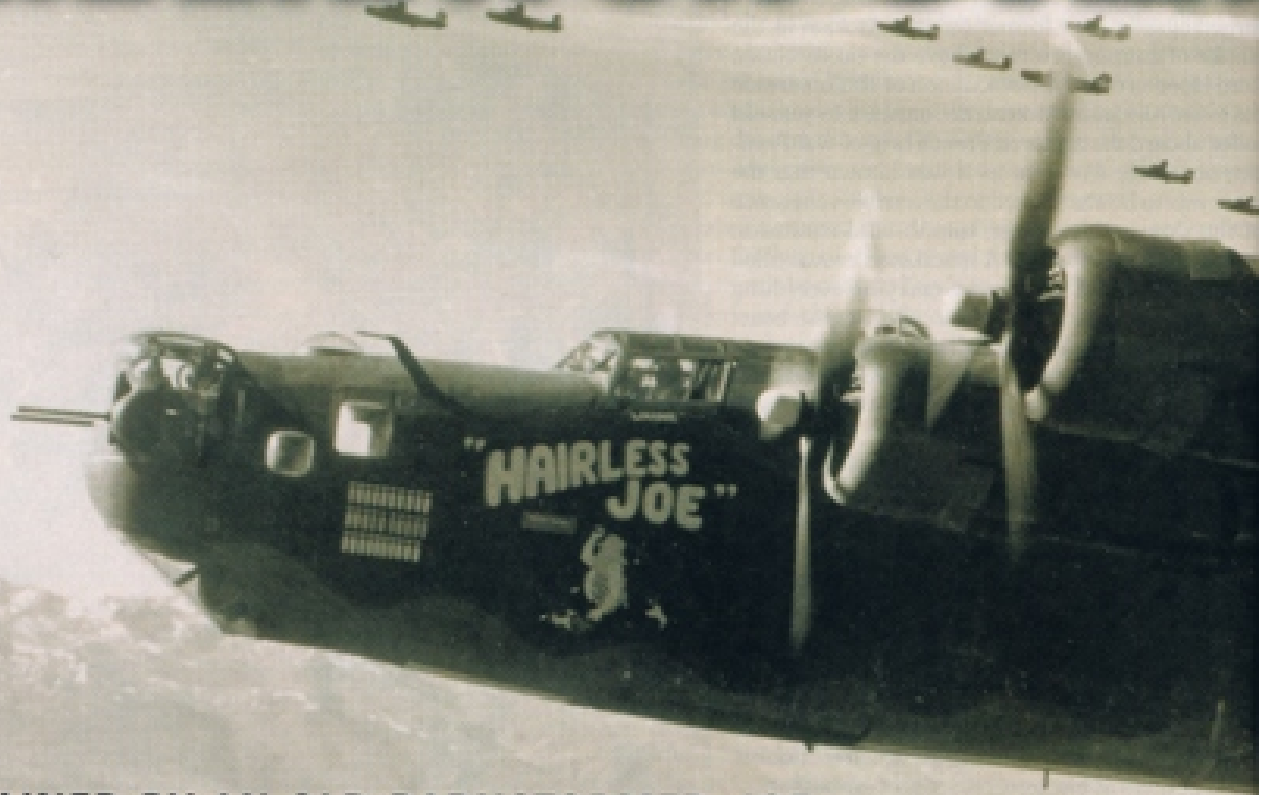


I N T E R V I E W

LIBERATOR OVER



TRAINED BY AN OLD BARNSTORMER, JOE COLSON EXPERIENCED TOIL AND TERROR FLYING A CONSOLIDATED B-24 OVER ITALY AND ROMANIA. BY ROGER STEINWAY

When the U.S. Army Air Corps accepted the Boeing B-17 Flying Fortress in 1937, the plane was a pioneering development in heavy bombing. Four years later, with World War II raging, came the Consolidated B-24 Liberator, the four-engine hammer that would help break the back of Adolf Hitler's Reich.

Joseph E. Colson got to know both planes well. He helped build the B-17 as a young war worker in 1941-42 and flew the B-24 on combat missions with the 454th Bomb Group (Heavy), commanded by Lt. Col. Horace D. Aynesworth, over Italy, Germany and south-eastern Europe in 1944-45. He remembered flying the Liberator as hard work: "It takes a lot of muscle and concentration to wrestle

EUROPE



Hairless Joe, a Consolidated B-24H Liberator of the 738th Squadron, 454th Bomb Group (Heavy), Fifteenth Air Force, flies a mission from Corignola, Italy. Inset: *Hairless Joe*'s pilot, 1st Lt. Joseph E. Colson, in 1944 (Photos: Joseph E. Colson).

a B-24 into flight position, then group formation, then wing formation and finally the bomber stream. It's quite time-consuming, and it's only the beginning of the mission." Colson took time to discuss his wartime experiences with interviewer Roger Steinway for *Military History*.

MILITARY HISTORY: When did it become clear that America was gearing up for war?

COLSON: During my senior year in high school, 1939, some of my friends had joined the National Guard, and a neighbor of mine, Hubert Dawson, had been wounded and endured gas attacks in France during World War I. The U.S. Army also held war games near my town of McCleary, Wash., in the summer of 1940. I was walking to work and saw a gun emplacement guarded by soldiers. On closer inspection the "cannon" turned out to be a giant fir tree log!

MH: How did you get your job at Boeing?

COLSON: Friends heard that Boeing was training sheet metal workers in Abenden, Wash. After the training, we were given jobs at the Boeing plant in Seattle.

MH: What was your job at Boeing?

COLSON: Building the B-17 Flying Fortress, working in the body shop. Later I went to wing assembly, specializing in installing a main part of the underside of the wing. I was lead riveter on this assignment. When a Douglas A-20 Havoc made a crash landing at Sandpoint Naval Air Station, I was part of a Boeing crew that went to Sandpoint on the two-week repair job.

MH: Do you remember December 7, 1941?

COLSON: Yes. I was rooming with a local family—Carl and Mary Lewis. We had returned from church, and the radio was reporting an attack on Pearl Harbor in the Hawaiian Islands.

MH: Why did you enlist in the U.S. Army Air Forces (USAAF)?

COLSON: On December 8, all the Boeing workers who were in the National Guard lined up to turn in their company tools. They had been called to active service overnight. It wouldn't be long before I would be drafted. My decision was to enlist in the

Ten days after the 454th Group's deputy commander, Lt. Col. James A. Gunn, was shot down, he was flown back to San Giovanni airfield in a Messerschmitt Me-109G by Captain Constantin Contacuzino.

USAAF and put in for ground support—mechanic, clerk or whatever I qualified for. I wanted pilot training, but some college education was required. The USAAF recruiter told me that the college requirement for pilot training had just been waived, however, so I applied for the aviation cadet program. Training began in the late summer of 1942 at Santa Ana, Calif. The class completed preflight by the end of October. Primary flight training was at Cal-Aero Flight Academy in Ontario, Calif. Both Cal-Aero and Polaris Flight Academy were civilian schools. Our instructors were kind of a motley crew. Mine was an old barnstormer and Ford Trimotor pilot. He was constantly yelling at me: "Don't fly like I do. Fly like I tell you to." However, he did know what he was doing and could fly acrobatics under the hood. ["Under the hood" refers to a darkened cloth canopy that was used for instrument flight training.]

MH: What aircraft did you fly in primary and basic training?

COLSON: The two-seat Boeing-Stearman PT-13 biplane was used for primary training. I loved the old Stearman. It was very stable. We did have some washouts and a few training accidents, but no fatalities at Cal-Aero. We also did some simulated flying on the Link Trainer, which looked like a little airplane sitting on a rotating platform. After 60 hours of primary instruction on the Stearman, we went to Polaris in Lancaster, Calif. In basic flight training we flew the Vultee BT-13 Valiant, more commonly called the "Vibrator." This was a two-seat monoplane with twice the horsepower of the Stearman. It also had a two-speed prop and wing flaps. We were expected to learn instrument flying, night flying and formation flying.

MH: Where was your advanced training?

COLSON: I went to Douglas, Ariz., southeast of Tucson. I was assigned the Cessna AT-17 Bobcat, which we called the "Bamboo Box Kite" because of its fabric covering and wooden structural members. However, it was a modern twin-engine trainer with variable speed props, retractable landing gear and electric wing flaps. I finished and became a second lieutenant in June 1943.

MH: What was your next assignment?

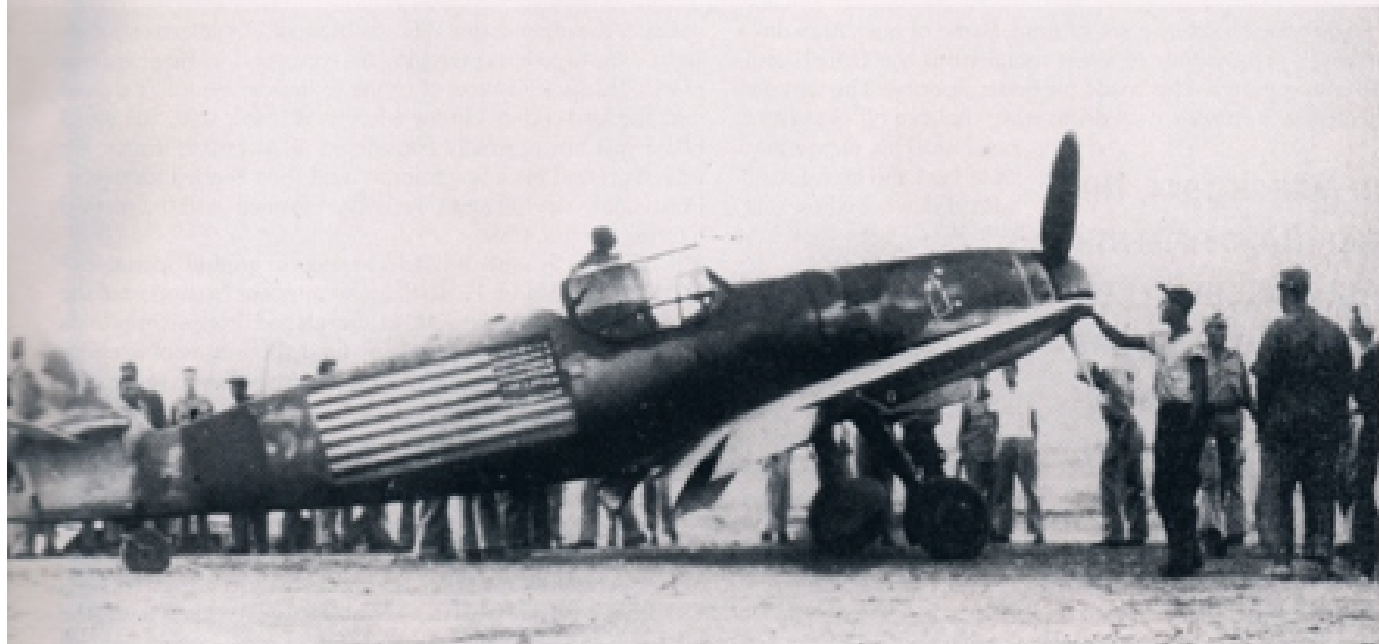
COLSON: I reported to the 39th Bomb Group, Second Air Force, at Davis-Monthan Field outside Tucson. I was told that this group flew twin-engine bombers,



ROBERT COLSON



Hairless Joe and other B-24s of the 738th Bomb Squadron make their way through enemy anti-aircraft fire, in a painting by Jack Connelly.



but when I got there all I saw were four-engine Consolidated B-24D Liberators. This was the early model without the nose gun turret. I was trained on these.

MH: When was the 454th Bomb Group ready for combat?

COLSON: The higher-ups were pushing hard for more groups to join the Fifteenth Air Force in the Mediterranean. In early December 1943, I was assigned a brand-new, Ford-manufactured B-24H, Serial No. 42-25228. By the time we got overseas it was named *Hairless Joe*, after a character in the Li'l Abner comic strip. My friend David "Pete" Phillips and his B-24 crew stuck pretty close to our crew. They named their plane *Lonesome Polecat* after another Li'l Abner character. Ironically, both planes were lost to enemy action while being flown by other crews.

MH: What was the route to Italy?

COLSON: We loaded up with my crew, four ground crewmen, spare parts and office supplies. This was the first time I flew a "heavy" aircraft, and it made for an interesting experience landing in bad weather—low clouds and rain—at Mitchel Field in New York City. It didn't help any that the plane's compass was off by several degrees. I also failed to adjust my altimeter to the barometric pressure at Mitchel Field. The result was that we were out of position as we came through the clouds on our approach. We made a rather solid landing a good distance down the runway. The planes were serviced and then we flew to Miami Beach, Fla. The next hop was to Borinquen Field in Puerto Rico. My crew snuck a case of rum aboard the plane there. We then flew to Atkinson Field in British Guiana. It was there that the secret orders were opened and we learned that Oudna No. 1 in Tunisia was our destination. From Atkinson Field we continued down the coast to Belém, Brazil, and then to Natal. We crossed the Atlantic to Dakar, French West Africa, in just under 11 hours on December 26. Hundreds of Africans were building a runway there. Their equipment consisted of sticks to tamp down the earth. They worked in unison to a rhythmic chant.

MH: Was the trip across Africa uneventful?

COLSON: We were supposed to fly to Marrakech, French Morocco, but Saharan sandstorms made us land at Tindouf, Al-

geria. This was a French Foreign Legion outpost and town straight out of the movie *Bean Geste*. The runway was hard desert marked off with oil drums. The locals came out to help us get our planes started the next day. They pulled the props around a few turns to move oil through the cylinders. This is difficult hand labor, but they thought it was great sport! We passed out cigarettes and candy to them. Unfortunately, *Hairless Joe's* No. 1 engine had a carburetor problem, and we needed parts from Marrakech. The repair parts arrived, and one of my passengers, line crew chief Master Sgt. Constantino and my flight engineer Asa Hodges got the engine going. We flew to Marrakech, then to Oran, Algeria, and finally made it to Oudna on January 3, 1944.

MH: Did the 454th begin combat operations?

COLSON: No, but the enemy was certainly aware of our presence. Axis Sally welcomed us to Africa during one of her radio broadcasts, calling us "Colonel Aynsworth's boys." We got an even more surprising welcome on the flight to join the 304th Bomb Wing at Cerignola, Italy, on January 26. A German Focke Wulf Fw-190 fighter aircraft buzzed our group off the heel of the Italian boot. The pilot must have been on a reconnaissance flight because he didn't shoot. We didn't shoot at him because our .50-caliber machine guns weren't loaded.

MH: Wasn't it odd going into a combat zone unarmed?

COLSON: We hadn't been briefed to expect enemy activity. The Fw-190 could have mowed down several planes. It had to be a snafu.

MH: How were the conditions at Cerignola?

COLSON: Wet and muddy. Eight officers shared a tent. The ground was so soggy that the wind blew the tent pegs out and

WE WERE SUPPOSED TO FLY TO MARRAKECH, FRENCH MOROCCO, BUT SAHARAN SANDSTORMS MADE US LAND AT TINDOUF, ALGERIA.

the dirt floor became a sea of mud. Some of our crews did a midnight requisition of sheet metal from the British anti-aircraft gunners. This made for better flooring. The tent was heated by a cut-down oil drum stove that ran off of aviation

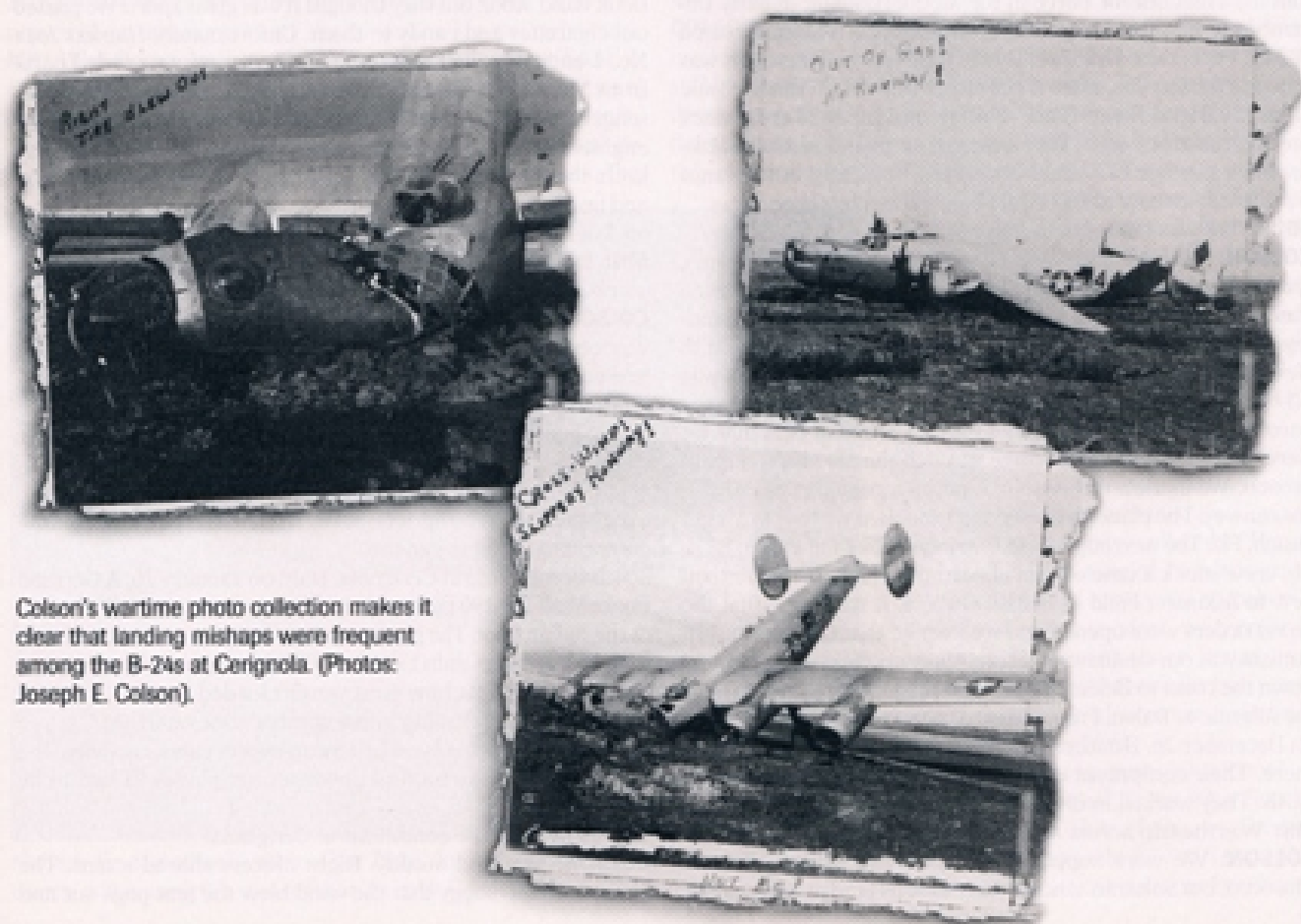
IN MARCH 1944, THE EIGHTH AND FIFTEENTH AIR FORCES MADE A MAXIMUM EFFORT AGAINST GERMAN AIRCRAFT PRODUCTION.

gasoline. This produced a lot of heat and occasionally burned down a whole tent. **MH:** When was your first combat sortie? **COLSON:** On February 8, 1944, there was a mission to bomb Orvieto Airfield just north of Rome. We bombed from 12,000 feet, which we considered too low. We encountered no enemy fighters, and the anti-aircraft fire was light. The Germans probably knew we were coming, because there were only a few planes on the field. Our inexperience really showed on a mission to the Anzio beachhead on the 17th. I was flying the left wing, or No. 3 position, for Colonel Aynesworth. The practice was for each plane to drop its bombs after the lead plane did. Aynesworth flew right past the AP [aiming point] without unloading his bombs. We did a second run over the target, and I noticed his bomb bay doors wouldn't open. The No. 2 plane [right wingman of the leader] didn't drop bombs either. I found

out after the mission that this was because of a defective bomb-sight. Aynesworth was wagging his wings and waving his arms at me. This was his way of trying to inform me that I should take the lead. I didn't know what he wanted, since the No. 3 plane was not normally considered an alternate leader. We milled around for a few minutes and then headed for home. Fortunately, the Germans were too occupied with the ground fighting around Anzio.

MH: Did you fly other missions to support ground operations? **COLSON:** On March 15, we flew two missions in support of the attack on Monte Cassino. Allied aircraft had dropped hundreds of tons of bombs, and the Army fired thousands of artillery shells on the place, but the Germans were holed up in the tunnels and rubble of this ancient mountaintop monastery.

MH: What about enemy fighter activity? **COLSON:** Fighter opposition depended on what targets the bombers were going after. There was coordination between the Eighth Air Force in England and the Fifteenth Air Force in Italy. If Fifteenth Air Force bombers were going after an aircraft factory while Eighth Air Force bombers attacked rail yards, then we would probably have more fighters to deal with. If it was the other way around, then the Eighth had more enemy fighters vectored against it. In March 1944, the Eighth and Fifteenth air forces made a maximum effort against German aircraft production. Our mission on March 19 was to hit an aircraft factory and rail yard at Klagenfurt, Austria, but bad weather forced the group to turn back and bomb a shipyard in Italy. We were sup-



Colson's wartime photo collection makes it clear that landing mishaps were frequent among the B-24s at Cerignola. (Photos: Joseph E. Colson).



posed to draw off German fighters from attacking Eighth Air Force bombers. I suppose it worked, because German fighters hit us long before we reached the target.

MM: How rough did they make it?

COLSON: I saw one B-24 was shot down by rockets launched from a twin-engine Junkers Ju-88. The crew bailed out, and Axis Sally gleefully reported their capture that night. An elite outfit of Messerschmitt Me-109s also attacked. Their propeller hubs were painted in very distinctive black and yellow spirals. The report later said about 40 fighters attacked us. Those guys were good. *Hairless Joe* lost power in one engine, and we could not keep up with the group. Stragglers were on their own at this stage of the war. Enemy fighters poured in on us. I could hear the chatter of my gunners' .50-calibers. They did their job and were credited with a confirmed kill. My co-pilot, Joe Trainor, pointed out some low cloud cover. I put the nose down and went

into a dive. The airspeed indicator went past the red line—around 300 mph. We leveled off in the clouds for a while. When we poked our nose out of the clouds there were no enemy or friendly aircraft in sight. We bombed a small rail yard in southern Austria and headed back to Cerignola.

MM: How much damage did *Hairless Joe* sustain?

COLSON: Most of the fabric on the left elevator was gone. There were numerous holes from anti-aircraft fire and hits by the fighters. The worst of these was a hole made by a 20mm cannon shell that exploded above the fuel cell in back of No. 2 engine. Hot fragments burned a hole in the self-sealing material of the cell

big enough to put your finger into. We were lucky there was no explosion. Of the 28 aircraft that took off from our base, only seven returned. Many made emergency or crash landings at other bases in Italy. Ground crew chief Earl Kelchner told me at the 1984 reunion that I knelt down and kissed the ground after we parked the plane. I don't recall doing that. [Colson was awarded the Distinguished Flying Cross for his actions on March 19, 1944.]

MH: Did your group return to bomb the targets in Austria?

COLSON: We returned on April 2. There was less fighter opposition, offset by more intense and accurate flak. Combat damage to the aircraft and crew was totally unpredictable. One small fragment can be mortal. My bombardier, Clyde Campbell, was killed while flying a mission with another crew. A tiny shell fragment severed arteries to his heart. Another time a small piece of hot shrapnel hit John Faron, one of my waist-gunners. It went through his flight boot and the sole of his inner shoe, where it lodged against his foot, leaving only a nice burn welt. We wore flak vests and steel helmets over enemy territory. I suppose one got used to it, but fear was an unseen crewman on every plane.

MH: When you went on these missions did you have fighter escort?

COLSON: When we first got to Italy we were frequently escorted by Lockheed P-38 Lightnings and Republic P-47 Thunderbolts. Later, in 1944, long-range North American P-51 Mustangs became available, and we were certain of escort all the way to the target. As German fighter opposition became weaker, escort fighters would peel off to protect crippled bombers that had fallen out of formation. We were always glad to have fighter escort.

MH: Did you fly any missions to the heavily defended oil fields around Ploesti, Romania?

COLSON: My 25th mission on June 6, 1944, was to bomb the rail marshaling yards at Brasov near the Ploesti oil complex. Fighters and flak heavily defended it, but I have little recollection of the mission. My 26th mission was to bomb an ordnance depot in Munich, Germany. My log entry ends with "Wow!" Lots of flak and fighters over Munich and Regensburg in Germany, also Vienna, Linz and Graz in Austria.

MH: When were you taken off combat status?

COLSON: I was transferred in June for reasons unknown. They sent me to the RAF base at Heliopolis, Egypt, to learn the British way of flight control around their airfields, but these were never put to use when I returned to the group. An interesting aspect of the trip was being invited to the king of Egypt's private open-air nightclub. King Farouk made an appearance. One of his aides handed him a shotgun. Birds were released, and his majesty proceeded to blaze away at them!

MH: When did you return to Italy?

COLSON: I returned in August 1944, as Romania was surrendering to the Allies. Sometime after the surrender we had a visit from a fighter that buzzed the base and then got into the landing pattern with gear down. It was an Me-109 with a large American flag painted on it. The 109 taxied right up to Group Headquarters, and Lt. Col. James Gunn climbed out with a Romanian pilot in tow. [The pilot was Romanian ace of aces Captain Constantin Cantacuzino.] Gunn was our deputy group commander,

who had been shot down over Romania [on August 17] while I was in Egypt. Gunn's flight led to Fifteenth Air Force shuttle missions to pick up Allied prisoners in Romania.

MH: When did you return to combat duty?

COLSON: I did a wide variety of things at Group Operations, including check test flights on repaired planes, ferrying personnel and taking new crews on practice missions. In December I discovered that I could return home quicker if I finished out my combat tour [35 missions] by flying another nine missions. My old crew had been scattered. Clyde Campbell was dead. Joe Trainor was at Fifteenth Air Force headquarters. Two of my enlisted crew completed their tours and rotated home. Four of my enlisted crew were interned in Switzerland after an emergency landing, but escaped and returned to the States. Joe Richardson had been shot down with Gunn, but evaded capture in Romania and made it to Turkey. Since I had no assigned crew, I flew six missions as co-pilot for Pat Grimes, the 738th Squadron commander. The other three missions I flew as lead pilot with new aircrews. My final mission was to bomb the shipyard at Trieste on February 20, 1945. I flew a total of 31 complete missions, with four aborts being credited because of the depth of enemy territory penetrated.

MH: What was your assignment on returning back to the States?

COLSON: I went to Air Transport Command at Long Beach, Calif., and flew cargo and personnel in Douglas C-47 and C-54 transports. I also ferried new aircraft, and it was in this capacity that I flew new B-17s. I had built them—it was only fitting that I should fly them. The sad part was that after delivery most were immediately stripped of their weapons and vital equipment and put into storage. The vast majority of them were cut up for scrap after the war.

MH: How did the B-17 compare to the B-24?

COLSON: The B-24 was a hotter airplane and handled quite differently from the B-17. I was landing a B-17 in Dallas, Texas, in August 1945. It was very hot outside—still 90 degrees at midnight. I lined up on the runway and flared out to land, but the plane just floated down the runway. The ground heat was reflecting up under the B-17's broad, kiselike wings, causing more lift than I imagined. I tried to land it like a B-24—snap back the control column and high-speed stall the plane onto the runway. All this did was make the B-17 gain altitude while slowing the airspeed. We eventually made a rather solid landing.

MH: Did you continue flying after the war ended?

COLSON: I left the Air Force Reserve as a captain in 1947, when my hearing deteriorated. I have flown small aircraft a couple of times. The last time was with a co-worker in 1973. He let me take the controls, and it was fun to see that the "feel" was still there.

MH: What are your thoughts about the "Greatest Generation"?

COLSON: We were all afraid and just wanted to complete our missions and get home. I wouldn't trade the time I served my country for any amount of money, but I wouldn't want to go through it again. **MH**

*Regular contributor Roger Steinway teaches history at Stratford High School in Houston, Texas. For further reading, try *Winged Victory*, by Geoffrey Perret.*