

454th True Stories

# Bombing Missions

## and related stories



Compiled by the Editorial Committee:

Joseph F. Chalker, Director Historian

John F. Thomas, Editor of Newsletter

Vaughn Marker, Director Past President

**454<sup>th</sup>**

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# 454<sup>TH</sup> BOMB GROUP (H)

## BOMBING MISSIONS

### AND

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2003

## Preface

The original intention in assembling this collection was to publish, in their original form, those stories which were consolidated with others on the same subject in "454<sup>th</sup> MEMORIES." To those would be added others which had been submitted after the printing of that volume. However, there were so many interesting stories not previously published, that a lack of space has led us to try not to include any stories that were in "MEMORIES."

Included are a few stories not directly connected with missions as, for instance, the official narrative of the events of the first combat mission, a sequel of the Bari explosion, the sabotage story, the story of the "Silver Bird," and the recounting of being "on the other end" of the Ploesti bombings.

If what you read here stimulates a memory of what happened to you many years ago at San Giovanni Air Field, put your thoughts on paper, on tape, or have someone in your family record them for you and send them on for our archives. With the emphasis now being placed on preserving these anecdotes on a national basis, it behooves us to make our own collection of these events. When we take off on that final mission, those memories will be lost to posterity forever, unless they are recorded in some way.

The Editorial Committee

GROUP MISSION #1, 8 FEBRUARY 1944  
ORVIETO AIRDROME - ORVIETO, ITALY

HEADQUARTERS 454<sup>TH</sup> BOMBARDMENT GROUP (H) AAF

8 February 1944

- FIRST COMBAT MISSION -

February 6<sup>th</sup>, 1600 hours. "First Combat Mission Tomorrow" - the electric message issued from the C.O.'s office and chilled the spines of S-2, S-3, S-4 and their sub-departments. At once the carefully trained, long impatient machinery of Headquarters and the Squadrons, was flung into high gear. By dawn next morning every detail however trivial must be mastered, every potential contingency considered and parried - for there are no "second chances" in war.

Upon earnest Lt. Colonel AYNESWORTH, Commanding Officer, and levelheaded Major JAMES E GUNN of Kelseyville, California, Deputy Commander, lay the ultimate responsibility for the success or failure of the mission. Tomorrows first combat mission would provide the acid bath for the intensive months of training at AFFSAT, McCook, and Charleston.

The Field Order introduced the mission ominously - "German counter offensive activity against the beach-head at ANZIO has increased until, on 6 February, it constitutes a serious threat to the Allied forces engaged. After an initial period of confusion resulting from the surprise of the Allied landings, the enemy has succeeded in reorganizing his defenses, and is now heavily counter-attacking, with tanks, artillery, and A/C, in a determined effort to drive our forces back into the sea."

The Field Order continued with the operational plan - "36 B-24's (plus spares) of the 454<sup>th</sup> Bomb Group, will attack ORVIETO A/D and dispersal areas, with 500 lb. bombs at 1230, with the objective to render the landing area inoperative by post holing, and to destroy the enemy A/C at present using this A/D as a base for operations against the Allied Beach-head at ANZIO." Understanding looks were exchanged. Things were getting serious enough on the Rome beach-head to warrant calling our Group into action - before anyone expected - in order to destroy the enemy airfield.

Throughout that night the lights in the old winery that served as Group Headquarters burned busily. Quickly the mission began to take shape as orders and instructions poured in and out by messenger and telephone.

Major MELVIN J. YARSKY of Pittsburgh, Pa., S-3, tackled his big operational job with his Asst., Capt. JOHN L. PINNEY of Chicago, Ill., navigation chief Capt. WYMAN M. WARREN of Wichita, Kansas, and bombardier chief Capt. JAMES E. MCCONNELL of Anderson, S.C. They studied the precise instructions with experienced eyes "36 B-24's (plus spares) of the 454<sup>th</sup> Bomb Gp will attack ORVIETO A/D and dispersal areas, Italy.

TARGET: ORVIETO A/D.

SECONDARY TARGET: GROSSETTO A/D, ITALY.

BOMBER RENDEZVOUS: SAN GIOVANNI at 10:30a at 5000 ft.

FIGHTER RENDEZVOUS: PALMAROLA ISLAND at 10,000 ft. at 11:25 a.

This time must be strictly adhered to.

ROUTE OUT: PALMAROLA ISLAND, 42°10'N, 11°20'E, IP, TARGET.

INITIAL POINT: TUSCANIA.

TARGET TIME: 12:30a.

BOMBING ALTITUDE: First wave 20,000 ft.

Second wave 20,500 ft.

BOMBING FORMATION: 2 waves of 18 ships each with squadron second elements Iceland right and left. Lead



squadrons' second elements echelon right.

TARGET ELEVATION: 1640 ft.

RALLY: Left to 215 degrees magnetic.

ROUTE BACK: 42°10'N, 11°20'E, PALMAROLA ISLAND, Base

3. a. P-47's will afford overhead cover along route from PALMAROLA ISLAND to target and return to that point.

x. Bomb load ten 500's per plane with .1 sec. Nose and .025 sec. tail fuses. Intervalometer setting 300 feet.

4. Omitted.

5. Brief all crews on SOI 19-3. Radio silence to target. Command 6440. VHF Chanel "B".

Collective call sign for bombers FRONTROOM. Collective call sign for fighters SURETHING. VHF Channel "B" for bombers, Channel "A" for fighters.

Capt. Warren would now plot the route to Orvieto Airfield - west from our base at Cerignola to the sea, North West along the coast and then abruptly into enemy territory. Here Capt. McConels bombardiers would do some business studying every land mark and angle. Their route was plotted squarely across Lake Bolsena to the target 8 miles North. The target was located approximately 80 miles East of Napoleon's erstwhile home, the Island of Elba.

The weather officer, pleasant Lt. KENNETH M. GRASSE of Chicago, Ill. reported to Wing HQ's in town for a weather conference.

Capt. STANLEY J. GAWELKO of Chicago, Ill., communications chief, strained his overworked section of 45 officers and men to the limit assigning call letters and codes to every squadron and airplane, arranging for three bombers to report back to him in code the spot observation of the bombing results and weather over the target. Friendly fields along route and their secret codes were registered, direction finding stations, radio beams and ranges, available channels for air-sea rescue work and operational aids all had to be evaluated, their codes ascertained and prepared for the mornings briefing. Meanwhile these men behind the scenes were operating the field tower (open to the 30°F four winds), keeping electric current operating from the portable generators, the field telephones and switch board working and the teletype manned.

Major MICHAEL G. DUBROW of Merion, Pa., S-2 section beavered in their subterranean lair in the vaulted wine cellar working out the mission briefing. The route was inscribed in dark blue upon the large scale map of Italy at one end of the room. The photo interpretation officer, Lt. FRANK E. ORR of Ventura, California, indicated the fine points on the reconnaissance picture of the target. It looked very neat and serene laid out in orderly hangars, and buildings and flat turf. The enemy fighters attacking our beach-head were circled in their symmetrical revetments and concrete aprons. Across this picture the harsh black bomb line was slashed and the bombing area drawn in. The flak areas and A.A. batteries near the route were indicated by red circles and enemy fighter plane strength in the vicinity weighed and analyzed.

Capt. ERNEST L. WITHERS, JR. of Waynesville, N.C. to whom fell the privilege of the first briefing made a careful check of enemy tactics and markings. Lt. DONALD O. GRAVES of Urbana, Ill. and his 17 photographers coordinated their plans for aerial photography and assignments of cameras and cameramen. Lt. RICHARD J. STERN of Kansas City, Mo., map expert quietly gathered together the significant large scales of the critical areas and detailed target charts of the Orvieto Airport. The administration problems involved were cleared over Capt. KEMP S. BURG of Dallas, Texas humming desk. In the adjacent room Lt. JOHNSON E. STORY of New York City, in charge of reports, organized all his material against the morrows commitments which he knew would hit him fast and furious when the crews returned for interrogation. The escape and prisoner of war section tallied out the ingenious little escape kits which every airman would receive. It contained among other things \$48.00 of U.S. currency, compass, escape maps on cloth, endurance tablets, concentrated rations and other aids for an airman grounded on enemy territory.

But outside S-2 and S-3's spectacular sound and fury, S-4 was trudging in mud doing a great jog

- unheralded and unsung. Through that sleet drenched night the men of S-4, the truck drivers, airplane mechanics, the armorers, and ordinance specialists gasoline supply filled the insatiable bellies of our 4 engined monsters with bombs, guns, ammunition, gas, oil - they tested the engines, the oxygen, the fuel lines - they kept 'em flying.

Back in Group Hq's the C.O. called his staff together in the small hours of the morning and reviewed the blueprints of combat with piercing eyes. The four squadron Commanders reported all in order. There was Capt. JAMES O. JAMISON of Sequin, Texas of the 736<sup>th</sup>, Capt. HERSCHEL 'DEACON' CARITHERS of Athens, Georgia of the 737<sup>th</sup>, Capt. CORWIN C. GRIMES of Olean, N.Y. of the 738<sup>th</sup>, and Capt. TOMLINSON, FRANKLIN E. of South Orange, N.J. of the 739<sup>th</sup>. 40 planes and crews were alerted. The flying formation studied and decided upon. Navigation, bombing tactics, weather, communications, intelligence, supply - had mastered the last detail of the great planning problem.

In his nearby tent, Chaplain THOMAS G. HEPNER of Herndon, Pa. had written his opening prayer. Then the C.O.'s telephone rang; it was Wing. Tomorrow's mission was canceled!

February 7<sup>th</sup> 1300. The following A.P. dispatch came over our teletype: "Make no mistake about it - every officer and man on the Anzio beach-head knows he's in for a battle of existence. Hitler is throwing the book at our troops. Our holding is very, very small and there is no point within it that Nazi guns cannot reach. Unfortunately our air power is grounded by the miserable weather. The hell our-----" The dispatch made gloomy reading. Tempers were short.

1900 hours. Wing phoned - the mission was on for tomorrow.

February 8<sup>th</sup>, 0700 hours: "Attention!" The 450 men in the crowded briefing room rose to their feet and C.O. and his staff strode grimly to their reserved seats at the front of the room. The young serious faces strained towards the rostrum - a nervous tension saturated the room.

"It is with grateful hearts that we come before Thee, O God; we thank Thee for the gifts and benefits which we have received and enjoyed. We Pray for direction and guidance in striving to keep and preserve that which we believe is right. Help these young men to know that they are going forth in the interest of others because others have gone before on our behalf. Give them faith, strength, and courage in order that they might have strong hearts and unselfish desires. May Thy blessings attend them as they continue to sacrifice for others. Be with them on this day, and during the days to follow, for we ask it all in Thy Name, Amen."

THOMAS G. HEPNER,  
THOMAS G. HEPNER, CHAPLAIN

The Colonel rose: "Target for today - Orvieto Airfield, Capt. Withers briefing for intelligence. Capt. Withers uncovered the map exposing the secret route to the target and turned to the attentive "Combat Crews" giving his intelligence briefing -

ORVIETO A/D (AIRDROME)

Located at approximately 42 deg 44'00"N - 11 deg 59'30"E. 7 miles West by North of ORVIETO, 7 miles North of LAGO DI BOLSENA. The airdrome lies on a plateau, with flat almost treeless country to the W and S; to the N and E the ground drops away steeply, becoming broken and wooded. Dimensions: The A /D is oval. NE/SW 1600 yds. NW/SE 1300 yds. The boundary markings are faintly visible. Surface: The surface appears good. A drainage pattern is visible at the N end. The name ORVIETO is seen near the N perimeter. Runways: None. Facilities: Hangars, Four hangars, all 340' x 130' and all with servicing aprons. Two are situated on the N perimeter, and connected with each other by a taxi-track; two are situated at the SW corner, with a connecting taxi-track under construction. There are 4 refueling points in front of the hangars on the North boundary. Other buildings: The main

airdrome buildings are situated at the N end. Ammunition stores: There is a small ammunition store on the hillside 200 yds. outside the N perimeter. A short distance to the N are two quarries, in which there is a possibility underground storage. All these sites are connected to the airdrome by a tarmac road. M/T: Approximately 12 M/T are seen around a building at the main A/D entrance, outside the N perimeter. Dispersal: Three large blast shelters are situated on the perimeter near the hangars at the SW corner; two more are under construction in the same area. There are 5 open A/C shelters on the West boundary. Recent photography reveals that none of the blast shelters were occupied, almost all of the A/C being lined up in front of the hangars on the perimeter. Access: Rail - The Rome/Florence railway passes through ORVIETO. Road: The Castel Viscardo/Castel Giorgio (secondary) runs along the W perimeter of the A/D. From Castel Giorgio (2 miles S) there is a main road communication with ORVIETO, ROME, FLORENCE, AND TERNI. From Castel Viscardo ( 1 ½ miles NNE) a new road is under construction, leading directly into ORVIETO. Activity: Photographs of the 30<sup>th</sup> of January reveal 19 S /E Fighters (possibly Italian) dispersed around the perimeter, to the N in front of the two main hangars, to the N, and to the SE. Previous Attacks: The A/D has been frequently attacked with much damage to installations. No recent attacks have been reported."

After Withers statement of the importance of the target, the lights snapped off, the target chart and picture thrown on the screen and explained in detail. Lights again and Withers continued. -  
Enemy Air Order of Battle

<u>AIRDROMES</u>	<u>FIGHTERS</u>	<u>DATE OF COVERAGE MILES</u> <u>FROM TARGET</u>	
ORVIETO	19 (Possibly Italian)	30/1	
TITEERBO A/D & Sat. #1 and #2	43	29/1	20
RERUGIA	1	18/1	35
GUIDONIA	5	20/1	64
FIRENZE/PERNTOLA	9	18/1	85
SEINA/MALIGNANO	22	27/1	53
SEINA/PIAN DEL LABO	<u>11</u>	27/1	56
	TOTAL 110		

2. Pinpoints: Two 4 gun heavy batteries are pinpointed on the railroad SE of ORVIETO approximately 16 miles from the target at 568/463 and 570.491. The main Florence/Rome RR line is to be avoided as it has been subjected to frequent attack and may now be defended by heavy RR flak.

3. Situation: German fighter and fighter bomber activity in the Rome area has shown a steady increase since 3 February. On the 5<sup>th</sup> February 70 to 80 enemy fighter bombers sorties were flown, mostly over the beach-head, and in the CASSINO area. Preliminary reports of 6<sup>th</sup> February indicate further increase in German Air Force activity with 36 fighter-bomber sorties in the CASSINO area, and sharp attacks against the beach-head, where Allied forces are now meeting stiff aggressive opposition, with some consequent loss of ground. As a key part of this counter offensive the German Air Force, having recovered somewhat from being caught off balance, is continuing to move A/C into operational range of the beach-head, occupying A/D's and L/G's in the ROME area which have not shown any appreciable activity in some time. Extensive coverage on the 29<sup>th</sup> January of Central and NE Italy revealed a considerable change in A/C disposition, with a shift of strength to bases within range of the front lines. Part cover of ORVIETO A/D on that day showed 16 S/E fighters, as compared with 2 on the previous cover, 27 January.

4. Tactics: At AVOAMP pm 28 January the 99<sup>th</sup> Bomb Group reports that enemy pilots seemed to fight as individuals, and with the exception of three or four, were unskilled and uneager. There was a distinct lack of co-ordination and no appearance of any formation or plan of attack or team work.

5. Markings: On 28 January the 99<sup>th</sup> Bomb Group at AVIANO encountered ME 109's painted

gray and silver, some had red spinners, some had black trimmings; Two ME 109's were back with white bands around the fuselages near tail surface.

6. Prediction: Despite the strength of E /A in the target area it is a strong probability that none will be encountered as they are pretty well preoccupied with their primary mission of attacks against Allied ground forces and purely defensive sorties. In addition their attention should be distracted by units of the 12<sup>th</sup> Air Force operation in close support of our ground forces, and attacks against objectives N of the target. These bombers should flush any fighters available for interception before the B-24's of the Wing cross the coast on their way in to the target."

Major Yarsky then took the stand for S-3. The formation chart was displayed and explained. The planes would take off at 0930 at 45 second intervals, rendezvous over field at 1030 and bomb target at exactly 1230. P-47's would provide top cover weaving back and forth to maintain speed. If one was disabled it would need protection from the formation in trying to get back to the base. Most important point - fly a close formation - - enemy fighters are looking for stragglers. Col. Aynesworth would lead the 1<sup>st</sup> wave, Major Yarsky the 2<sup>nd</sup>, Major DuBrow, Group S-2 would go as observer.

In quick succession communications and weather advanced their poop. Weather would be nip and tuck over the target probably about 6/10 coverage.

The main briefing then broke up into its component parts. Pilots, Navigators, Bombardiers, Radiomen all reported to their departments for specialized instruction. The gunners were briefed separately in their crucial task.

0800 - All pockets ere emptied and the contents checked at the S-2 desk. Then enemy must have no clues in the event of capture.

0930 - Lt. Col. AYNESWORTH took off, leading the Group.

1030 - Directly overhead on the prearranged minute flew our 40, B-24's in perfect formation. It was an inspiring sight raising a great hope - that they blast hell out of the airfield and return safely - every one.

1400 - The vibrant throb of 200,000 flying horse power turned expectant eyes to the sky. Had they all returned? The first wave thundered over majestically - all intact. The ships peeled lazily off one by one glistening in the sun. The second wave followed closely - 38, 39 - 40! Every plane had returned to its home base.

1430 - The first 2 1/2 ton trucks dumped their loads of buoyant combat crews in front of the interrogation room. The American Red Cross, in the person of a sweet young thing imported fresh from the U.S.A., distributed hot coffee and doughnuts in eager hands. The crews were then politely but firmly detached from the circle of envious airmen (who had not been included in the days mission) and herded into the S-2 lair. They paused briefly before the hot News desk which phoned a flash report to the Wing A-2, Suave Lt. Col. Herschel Williams of N.Y.C.: "None of our A/C missing - 40 A/C dropped 400 x 500 lbs bombs on target - bombing results excellent - airfield believed knocked out - no injuries to personnel".

From Hot news each crew was assigned to one of the ten S-2 interrogation posts. Quickly the pertinent facts of the mission were ferreted out by the Intelligence interrogators. Every trifling observation was evaluated and co-ordinated as pieces of a giant jig-saw puzzle. Popular S-2 Capt. Vickers questioned Pilot MacChristian and Bombardier Cyril Bozak, the latter a night club operator before the war. "Just like a practice mission back in Charleston - never saw an enemy fighter except on the ground", said Mac. "Beautiful bombing - every G.P. squarely on the pin-point", confirmed Cy. "Plenty good photographs over target," Major DuBow observing for S-2 reported that he never felt safer in his life with the P-47's operating as top cover. "The bomb bursts were a thrilling sight - one stroke erasing the field. From over 20,000 feet the bursts looked like tiny pebbles dropping on a dusty road." Said another - "there was no flak - we knocked out that field so fast they never knew what hit them."

During the interrogation several interested ears flapped within comment range of the crews. The Public Relations officer, Lt. THOMAS H. JONES, of Cleveland, Ohio sent several newsworthy items to Air Force for national release. Capt. Abrahamson, (armament officer listened for technical



failures. Major Lucas, group flight surgeon studied the crew for subtle signs of nervousness or pilot's fatigue.

Meanwhile Lt. Grave's photo lab developed the aerial photos and shot them into Lt. Frank Orr photo interpreter who's trained eye analyzed the damage inflicted. Lt. Smith and Matthinson of the Statistical department incorporated mountains of figures into their technical report of the mission. Among their statistics: 60,000 gallons of gasoline had been consumed on the mission.

Long after the last crew had been interrogated Lt. George Stamm was drawing up his Confirming Mission Report. Its summary:

1. 454<sup>th</sup> Bomb Group - At 0900 hours, 40 B-24's took off to bomb ORVIETO A/D AND DISPERSAL AREAS, Italy. Escort was provided by P-47's of the 325<sup>th</sup> Fighter Group. None returned early. 40 A/C dropped 400 x 500 lb. (100 tons) G.P. bombs (.1 x .025) on target at 1225 hours from 19,400 to 12,500 ft. 40 A/C returned to base at 1410 hours. RESULTS: Excellent pattern of bombs on A/D majority of bursts with perimeter track, with landing area well post-holes. Revetments on SE side of field well covered. Scattered hits on Hangars at N end of field, Rendezvous with P-47's of 325<sup>th</sup> F.G. was made at 1124 at PALMOROLA Island. 32 additional P-47's picking up formation enroute, escorting the bombers to the target and on return route to briefed point of departure. No enemy A/C were seen or encountered, and there was no flak. ENEMY SHIPPING: At 1210 hours one 300 ft. M/V anchored in harbor and 4 medium M/V's at docks at GIVITAVECCHIA. There were no other observations. WEATHER: En-route and return scattered to 6/10 overcast from 5000 to 12,000 ft. CAVU over target. FIRST PHASE BOMB DAMAGE REPORT

ORVIETO A/D ITALY: 454<sup>th</sup> Bomb Group. 8/2/43. 1224 Hours 400 x 500 lb.  
(.1 and .025) G.P. bombs

Photos of incomplete bomb cover and small scale. 18 Serviceable A/C present including 17 S/E fighters and 1 medium A/C.

3 S/E Fighters Destroyed  
3 S/E Fighters Damaged

Airdrome is well covered with at least 115 craters post-holing landing area, probably rendering field unserviceable. Two hangars on southwest perimeter received severe blast damage. (Bomb Fall Plot Issued)

The 454<sup>th</sup> Bomb Group had won its first victory. An enemy airdrome lay smouldering - inoperative. Tomorrow our boys on the bleak beach-head at ANZIO would face that much less enemy air power. Meanwhile, our own tired airmen slept thru the drone of trucks reloading our aircraft with gasoline, ammunition, and bombs for the next mission.

(Copied from the original report.)

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GROUP MISSION #3, 16 FEB 44  
RAILROAD BRIDGE - CECINA, ITALY  
"BAPTISM OF FIRE"  
Leon O. Burke (738)

This was to be an "on-the-job" training mission. It was the third mission for the 454<sup>th</sup> and the second mission for me. We were to bomb a railroad bridge at Cecini, Italy. It was well behind enemy lines, but not deep in his home territory. We were strategic bombers and this was more of a tactical target to help our ground troops whose front lines were only a relatively few miles from our San Giovanni Base. We would lie in our pyramid tents at night and hear the muffled artillery firing mingled with the soft sound of rain on our tents. We felt for those poor GIs in their water-logged, muddy foxholes; but while we slogged about in the mud of our olive grove and in the chow line, we at least slept on clean, straw-filled mattresses on GI canvas folding cots. Luxury is a relative thing! It was thought that we

might encounter some flak, but few, if any, fighters were anticipated. They were thought to be concentrating their strength about the more vital targets of their war machine further north. Flak, to me, was still an image on the movie screen. I had yet to see the real thing.

I suppose I was somewhat eager to put my training into use and to shorten the war so that I could get on with the rest of my life. Nevertheless, I felt that the present was a very exciting and generally enjoyable chapter. Given the world's status and the fact that we were at war in Europe and Asia, I couldn't imagine anything I would rather be doing at this time than being in the Army Air Corps, flying the "big ones". We were fighting for a just cause against an enemy of recognized, consummate evil.

Cadet school had been a grand experience. Who could hope to be associated with a finer collection of highly selected young men of all parts of the USA! They were very homogenous on the surface in their splendid uniforms, but from many diverse back-grounds and with diverse individual characteristics beneath the surface. It was exhilarating! I loved the "spit and polish", the learning, and the discipline. I could tolerate the hazing from the upper classmen as a small price to pay for the prize of becoming a military pilot. I knew it all led to combat and the risk of my life, but, meanwhile, I made a game of it. I could "take anything they could dish out".

Now that we were a Group with full combat crews and ground support, the diversity had increased, but the mutual respect was growing and maturing as we learned to work together as a team.

Sgt. Dick Miller was our Crew Chief and one of the finest young men I've come to know. He was the sort of pleasant, confident, unassuming individual who went about his duties quietly and efficiently. He had the rather shy smile of a man at peace with himself and the world. He was the sort of man you could trust with your life; and we did - mission, after mission, after mission. I had total confidence in him and in that excellent craft the Warrior Maiden. Without him and his crew, I'm not sure I would be alive today. I think he was somewhat typical of the other ground crewmen that I came to know.

I had been fortunate to be assigned to fly the first mission with the Group to bomb Orvietto Airdrome. On starting up the engines of the Warrior Maiden, a generator on #3 became inoperative. We watched our chance to fly the first one fade as the Group faded into the distance. We felt like a virginal bride left at the altar. In record time, Dick and his crew had replaced the part and we were ready to fly. By this time, the Group was 20 to 30 minutes ahead of us. Since fuel consumption would not be a problem, I elected to catch up with the Group and was allowed to try. By increasing our air speed, I felt I could catch up with the Group and tag onto it, and drop our bombs on target. The Warrior Maiden and some of the sister ships received at the same delivery were somewhat faster cruising after you got her "on step" than others of the same model I had flown. We passed up Group after Group, looking for our distinctive tail markings with the lower half of each oval vertical stabilizer painted white and with a small diamond in the upper one-half. Things had worked out well. I joined our Squadron and dropped bombs with the Group. I flew home feeling like one of the "big boys", or perhaps a "man among men"!

After I was more seasoned, I don't think I'd have taken this chance, especially not on a mission deeper into the enemy. Fighters would have found us an interesting, delectable morsel. After a quick "feeding frenzy", we'd stand a good chance of being just another tally on the nose of some Luftwaffe pilot's fighter.

But today, the sky was blue, the air cold, the ship trim and the engines droning happily in the faintly pulsating rhythm of the quartet in close harmony. She was alive; and so were we! We weren't naive or stupid, just inexperienced and eager to learn. I knew the risk of our portion of the war and knew that parts, or all of me, might never come home again. Yet, deep inside, I expected to be one of the survivors.

At altitude as we neared the IP, frost was forming on the plexiglass of the interior of the cockpit. I had never seen this phenomenon before, and it never occurred again. 2<sup>nd</sup> Lt. Philip Millis, the Co-Pilot, kept it fairly well cleared away. As long as I could see the lead ship out of my left window and maintain a good tight #2 position I really didn't need to see forward at this time. We were adjusting our



formation so that each squadron would pass over the target separately, one squadron after the other, in a "column of boxes". Our leader would adjust our position correctly. Have faith in the leader! 1<sup>st</sup> Lt. Jerry Bradbury, of Bridgeport, Maine, was usually the Squadron flight leader on the days when we were both flying. I had known him ever since Advanced Flying Cadet School. We were friends and I did trust him. It was a trust that proved to be well justified.

After turning at the IP as we neared the target, I did notice, however, that one plane from the squadron ahead, and very slightly above us, had some difficulty and had lagged back to a 2 o'clock position. He appeared to be getting everything under control and was making his way to the left, back to his vacant position on the left of the rear echelon leader of his squadron. He would pass somewhat lower than his squadron to come up on the left of the last ship of his squadron. I made a mental note to watch out for possible prop wash turbulence from him at or near the target and devoted myself to flying formation while taking quick glances to follow the messages that 2<sup>nd</sup> Lt. John "Johnny" Rakestraw was sending away of the P.D.I. needle as he used his bombsight in case we became the Squadron leader.

Suddenly, without warning, everything appeared red and almost simultaneously, I felt concussion impact our ship from the front. My flak suit thumped my chest forcefully. This was suddenly very personal. The first response was to personalize what was happening. For split seconds, the mind reacts and absorbs as much information as possible in order to react properly. My first thought was that we had been hit by flak and that I had probably been hit in the head, and that the red was from seeing through blood. Immediately, I realized that the color wasn't from blood and that I wasn't wounded. But surely, they must've blown the whole nose off of my ship. My eyes had turned far enough by this time to see the nose and it was still there! However, just beneath the rear of the squadron ahead of us, whose bombs are falling away, against the blue sky was a fireball of black smoke and flame of billowing fury. It was already larger than the wing span of a bomber, expanding extremely rapidly in all directions. It was only seconds away from us and at the site of our drop zone. Debris began to emerge from the fireball in all directions at tremendous velocity, appearing to enlarge and accelerate toward us as we flew toward it. The largest pieces are directly ahead and level with our wings. Without doubt, we would hit them in split seconds. No time to climb, dive, or turn right.

I roll her over till the wings are almost vertical to the ground; feed in rudder to control altitude; push the wheel forward to maintain alignment and jam the throttles full forward to maintain forward speed. Almost immediately, the ship shudders from the impact of multiple chunks of debris striking it. We are surrounded by black smoke; then blue sky. Ahead, the forward squadron is departing and letting down to the left, toward the sea. As rapidly as possible, I roll back as she continued to tremble all over like a frightened, wounded creature. The controls still work and I swing back into the #2 spot as quickly as possible to get our bombs away in the pattern. The lead appears to have remained stable with autopilot locked into the bombsight. But above us was the open bomb bay of #3 ship which apparently had also had to maneuver. It's time for bombs to drop in split seconds. The bombs, in their rack above us, are crystal clear in the winter sky between the white line on either side of the belly of the ship.

"Please don't drop them now!"

(Later, I learn that "Jerry" Bradbury in the lead ship had also rolled to vertical and received much of the concussion underneath his wings and along his ship's belly; fortunately, since the wings can tolerate much greater "G-forces" in an upward direction than from above. Though sustaining damage, he rolled back into level in time to let us reform our formation on him and get our bombs away.)

Rapidly, #3 settles into his slot on the lead's left wing as we all start to release our bombs simultaneously. The bombs seem to hang suspended beneath the ship's belly, flying almost parallel with their surrogate mother for a brief period, reluctantly departing her belly, then arching downward and seeming to drop behind us as they respond to the silent, relentless, undeniable urge to return to Mother Earth. Meanwhile, we start a sharp turn left and reduce power to let down toward the sea to the west.

"So that's flak?"

This is deadly serious! I knew, abstractly and intellectually, that they would try to kill us, but now I felt it in my "guts".

How I love those silver wings! But just now, they seemed like cheap "Tinfoil", or at least the silver was tarnished.

Some of the glamour was gone forever; so, irretrievably, was a piece of the innocence of youth. Earth truly is our mother. We came out of her and she continually draws everything to her bosom. Without her pull, there would be no atmosphere, nothing to fly in. There would be no life as we know it. Like children at play, we seem to exert our "independence". Yet, no matter how high or fast we may fly, the very act of flying is controlled by her. Her pull is, at the same time, both our threat and our salvation. We are bonded with her for this mortal life. Sooner or later, she draws us back to her surface for sustenance and, eventually, back into the earth from which we came.

The intercom crackles and springs to life. Excited chatter starts up. What happened? I interrupt and ask for damage assessment reports. Each station checks in, one by one. The Nose Turret is cracked and filled with frigid wind. The Nose Gunner, Sgt. Thomas R. "Tommy" Leitch, has oxygen. He is conscious and evacuates the turret with a "walk-around" bottle and without serious frostbite. There is a deep indentation in the leading edge of the wing root just outside the cockpit between me and the inboard propeller tip. A very narrow space----. If it had been only a few inches to the right----! The skin of the wing isn't torn, unless it's torn and hidden beneath the deicer boot, though the indentation must be 2 to 3 feet deep and may extend back to the main wing spar. The wing seems structurally sound.

There is a continuous shuddering vibration throughout the craft. It is forceful, persistent, and unvarying in its intensity. It is not violent. The engines haven't interrupted their harmonious rhythm. The controls are responsive; but I feel the vibrations in the wheel. The Top Turret, Sgt. Glenn L. "Pappy" Seager, and Waist Window Gunners, Sgt. Albert R. "Tex" Luttrell and Sgt. Leroy R. "Red" Rizor, report damage to the horizontal stabilizer of the tail between the large oval verticals and their rudders. The horizontal stabilizer has been crumpled moderately as if squeezed front to back by a giant hand. As nearly as we can tell, it is securely in place, at least for now! Will it hold or will a few hours of vibration tear out its rivets and bolts or fatigue the metals to a breaking point? The elevators seem intact and aren't binding in the small range of motion necessary to fly the plane at cruising. I don't choose to depart the formation and test them further over enemy territory. I'll be content to hold formation and fly, feeling as if I'm "walking on eggs". It's better than testing, creating stress, and then maybe walking home. For now, we'll hold formation and vibrate our way on home. The gauges are okay. The gauges still give normal, reassuring messages.

Those who were looking forward during the bomb run can now excitedly give their reports. It seems the ship that was lagging behind the squadron in front of us, in trying to cross over to lift into his place in the left rear, had passed beneath the second echelon leader and his right-hand wing man as the bombs were released. About three bombs seemed to have struck the ship and at least one or more of them must have spun off its arming vane and was armed. The fuel exploded, and who knows what else! The large debris level with us probably was wing tips, engines, and possible wheels, which we fortunately had evaded. Apparently we had flown through the center of the explosion and hit the spherical sheet of exiting debris as we entered and exited. Probably, we had survived because most of the pieces had moved out of the center, leaving the central area clear to us except at entry and exit points.

The controls held and we landed without incident. Thank God for good engineering and a conscientious assembly crew. God bless "Rosie, the Riveter".

Dick Miller and his crew replaced the damaged elements of the tail assembly rapidly and the Warrior Maiden, no longer a virgin, was soon back in service.

At debriefing, we get more details, and with mingled rejoicing for those who checked in safely and grief for the crew that didn't, we learn that the Bombardier was a close friend of 2<sup>nd</sup> Lt. John W. "Johnny" Rakestraw. They had been in the first Armed Forces Draft of the war together and, as Infantrymen, were on their way to the Philippines when Pearl Harbor was bombed. They were turned back and were in Hawaii for awhile and went to Cadet and Bombardier School from there together. He

missed the torture of the Bataan Death March! This was quick! He never knew!

It is with mixed feelings against this backdrop of grief that I am relieved to learn that the explosion wasn't a usual burst of flak. Later, I was to see an awful lot of flak; but nothing as awesome as that first explosion!

Some things are so sudden and so very final!

I pray for those who didn't come home and gratefully thank God that we did.

I still like my wings!

The enemy awaits. I'll meet him ----- soon enough!

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#### MEMOIRS

David Fishman (738)

February 24, 1944: We finally received orders at Langley Field, Virginia, that we had finished our staging and were ready for Overseas Duty.

Our orders were to proceed to Mitchel Field, Long Island, to pick up our B24 Bomber and fly it to our Overseas Destination. We didn't know where until our orders were opened one hour after we left the Continental American coast.

Our orders called for Italy. We weren't surprised, as we were heading south. Our fuel stops were West Palm Beach, Trinidad, Belem, Natal, Dakar, Marrakesh, Algeria and Tunis and then on to Cerignola, Italy, our final destination. We left Mitchel Field March 1<sup>st</sup> and arrived in Italy, March 14<sup>th</sup>. We were scheduled for our first Bomb Mission on March 17<sup>th</sup> 1944 and the target was Vienna, Austria.

The target was overcast and bombs were dropped, not knowing whether you were bombing cows or their industrial park. There went my theory of "Pin-Point Bombing". Carpet bombing was the way to go. When the lead plane opened their bomb bay doors, we did the same. When the lead plane dropped their bombs, the Bombardier toggled his bombs out of the plane, without sighting.

On March 19<sup>th</sup>, our target was Klagenfurt, Austria, and the Germans were waiting for us. The anti-aircraft fire was very heavy; planes were going down like giant flyswatters. When we finally got out of range of the anti-aircraft guns, then came the fighters. Our intercom was shot out and our hydraulic lines were shot out, so there was no way we could contact one another. Our bomb bay doors were in an open position due to the hydraulic system being inoperative. A German fighter flew alongside of us, dropped his flaps and just pumped his guns right into our left wing. I was in the top turret. He looked at me and I looked at him, but was unable to depress my guns to get at him. Then he smiled at me and flew away.

When I thought it was safe, I got out of the turret to assess the damage. I found, to my amazement, that the number three booster pump was hit and pumping gas onto the flight deck. Luckily, the hydraulic system was out and the bomb bay doors were open, otherwise we would have had a hundred gallons of gas in the bomb bay. With everything soaking wet with gas, including my clothes, I felt this plane was a flying bomb. I spoke to the Pilot and filled him in as to what was happening. I then had him shut off all electrical switches. This does not affect the engines, of which only three were running at that time. I had everything that wasn't nailed down thrown out, including the radio transmitter, spent shells, 50 caliber bullets - these all went out into the Adriatic Sea. Those on the flight deck knew we were going to ditch. I knew we were going to run out of gas, because I wasn't able to transfer the fuel. I was afraid to turn on the electrical power, because I felt that any electric current or spark would blow the plane. The B24 was known to blow up.

I tried to reach the boys in back, but it was impossible to walk the catwalk with the bomb bay doors open. I told the Pilot I was unable to get to the back. There was name calling between us. He then decided to go to the back himself. I sat in his seat. He was riding Co-Pilot, because, being the second mission, he was being checked out by a Pilot with more experience. He was back minutes later

and I asked him how he made out. He admitted he could not make it to the back of the plane.

The plane was losing altitude and I asked the Pilot to reclaim his seat. His answer was, "You're doing fine. And, as a washed-out flying cadet, you always wanted to fly." He refused to sit back in his seat. I asked the Check Pilot, a Captain, to order him to take his rightful position. I really did not want to be strapped in that seat when we hit the water. When he was ordered by the Captain, he finally took his position.

When I got up, I prepared the flight deck for ditching. I threw out everything that was loose, including parachutes and guns, then opened the emergency hatch.

The plane was brought down as if it was making a landing on a runway. The water entered the plane like one gigantic wave because of the open bomb bay doors. The nose of the plane went down. Those of us on the flight deck were under water. I didn't think we were going to survive and I almost accepted my fate, when the nose of the plane popped up and there was about ten inches of air space from the top of the water to the top of the fuselage. I stood on my toes to reach the air space and sucked in gobs of air. In the interim, the Radio Operator and Bombardier got sucked up into the emergency hatch and got stuck. It seemed like forever, but they finally got free and climbed out.

I rolled out into the water, while the others were sitting on the plane, and, to my surprise, the B24 was floating. Another surprise was the gunners in the back of the ship were all sitting on the wing. It seemed that they didn't realize that we were ditching and they were at the side window when we hit the water, which came rushing in and swept them out onto the wing.

I yelled to the people sitting on the fuselage to get the life rafts, but it seemed that they never learned how to release the rafts. Finally, after much yelling and instructing, the life rafts were freed. There were no oars in the rafts, so we had to hand paddle our way away from the plane, as I was afraid that, should the plane go down, we would get sucked in with it. It took about five minutes, then the plane seemed to fold in half and plunged straight down.

One of the planes that saw us go down sent our position to the Air/Sea Rescue Command. After three hours of drifting in the Adriatic, we heard noise that sounded like a power grass mower. We thought the noise was from an old fishing boat, but didn't see anything on the water. We did have a flare gun and I shot off a flare. Minutes later, there on the horizon, we saw an old pusher type sea plane, without cowling, so we saw the sparks from the old radial engine with every spark plug exposed to the elements. He landed near us and taxied to where we were. An Aussie Sergeant, who was the Pilot, told us that the plane could hold only three people, besides the Pilot and Engineer.

Five of the gunners had little slivers of flak imbedded in their skin, but weren't bleeding; so we insisted that he take the five, which he did. He told us, if he was unable to get back before it got dark, we would have to stay in the water until morning. We knew we were behind German lines and the drifting was westward. We thought of the possibility of washing up on shore where we didn't want to (because of the possibility of becoming prisoners).

It was getting darker and we had some concern, when we heard a sound that sounded like a lawn mower. I then shot another flare and he came right at us. He told us to hurry, as it was getting really dark. The five of us packed in the hull, standing one behind the other, wondering how the hell this thing was going to fly.

The first thing Sergeant Pilot did was to take out a bottle of rum and told us the tradition was that each take a drink, so the plane could take off. After we go through with the tradition, he revved the old engine up and expected the plane to take off. After three or four tries, he throttled back and asked three of the heaviest of us to go as far front of the hull as we could and, when he revved up again, to jump in unison so that the plane would rock and bounce and hopefully become airborne. The sea was very calm, the nose slammed down and bounced up into the air. We were finally airborne.

The ride took about one hour. It was pitch black when we landed at a Headquarters outfit of the British 8<sup>th</sup> Army. The landing in black-out was rough. The thought that went through my mind was... "I made it this far. But trying to save me would probably kill me."

The next morning a Colonel gave me his British woolen uniform, because my clothes were still



wet. They put us into an open truck, then drove back to our base. We gave them a barrack bag full of cigarettes. They were so pleased we were asked to drop in again. (No way.)

It took about two weeks before we flew our next mission. At that time, I was having a problem with my Pilot, who was naturally the leader of the crew. When we were on a tough mission, he would get a far as the I.P., then turn back complaining that one of the engines was throwing oil. Going back alone, to me, was the most dangerous thing he could have done. I would argue with him that, even though he would eventually lose the engine, to stay with the formation for the protection they would give him. This happened several times and then I told him I would rather not fly with him any more. He notified our Commanding Officer, who then came to my tent to tell me that, if I refused to fly with him, he would send me to Anzio Beach to dig graves. I told him I would rather dig someone else's grave than have them dig mine.

The next mission was Ploesti. I was replaced by another Aero Engineer. I was told he had pulled out of formation again to head back by himself, but this time he didn't make it.

I was transferred to another Squadron, where I was assigned to finishing Pilots without crews.

September 22, 1944: I flew my last combat mission to Munich - #51. I was ready to go home.

Footnote: In the early part of August on a raid to Ploesti, with Lt. Col. Gunn leading the raid, he was shot down and taken prisoner. He was the highest ranking officer the Romanians had. He was given some freedom and was able to contact a Romanian Ace Pilot, with 84 downed Allied planes, and persuaded him to fly him back to his home base. They painted an American flag on an M.E. 109 and took off for Italy. Lt. Col. Gunn was stuffed into a luggage compartment on the plane and fastened with a cover plate. When he flew over our base, wagging his wings, we were surprised to see a 109 coming in for a landing. He braked to a stop, the Pilot got out with a screwdriver in his hand and said, in broken English, "I have your Colonel," and proceeded to loosen the screws of the luggage compartment and out came the Colonel, feet first.

The Russians were moving on to Bucharest. A decision was made by the American Command to fly into the city and bring home as many of the prisoners as they could find.

The next day, thirty-eight B17's were flown into Bucharest, where they picked up eleven hundred men, some on crutches, some on stretchers, and took them back to Italy. Then they were sent home.

I don't know if any of the boys I flew with were in that group. But what I did hear was that the captured officers were taken back to Germany with the retreating Army and many of them never made it. My Pilot didn't. He's buried in Germany.

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GROUP MISSION #5, 25 FEBRUARY 44  
MARSHALING YARDS - FIUME, ITALY  
From a letter to F. Bradley Peyton, III  
Julian P. Pruett (737)

I am a member of the 454<sup>th</sup> B.G. Association and one of the early replacements to the Group, having joined it in Charleston in November, 1943 with the O. L. Whitworth crew. We were assigned to the 737<sup>th</sup> Sqd. After arriving at Charleston, we became a part of it and made the journey through N.Y., West Palm Beach, South America, Africa and to our Base in Cerignola on Jan. 26, 1944.

As the Group started it's missions, I and one other member of our crew, was used as "fill-ins" or replacements on other crews resulting in our having a couple more mission credits than the rest of the crew. I flew on the first Group Mission on 2-8-44 to an airfield at Orvieto, Italy but the others of my crew did not fly. We flew as a crew on Feb. 14-17-22-24 but completed only two of these missions due to weather conditions.

The purpose of this letter is to discuss the next mission flown on the next day, Feb. 25, 1944, as I again flew as a replacement and I think it was with your crew, even though you were 738<sup>th</sup> and I 737<sup>th</sup>.

The others of my crew did not fly this mission but the events of that day are still quite vivid in my mind and for some reason I would like to know who I flew with that day. When I describe my recollections, I am certain you will be able to tell me if I flew with you and your crew.

The Gunner position I flew was Right Waist and we were on our way to Regensburg but turned back deep into the mission and bombed Fiume instead. The flying time that day was 7:30 and we were given credit for 2 sorties. On the way out, we observed perhaps eight German fighters at about 3:00 position flying quite a distance away from us but parallel to us and heading in the same direction. These planes slowly passed our formation and then turned into us for one head-on attack. They came through the Group and shot down three '24's, one of which was the plane flying on your right wing that day. The left wing broke away from the fuselage, two chutes were seen as it fell and it exploded as it hit the ground. As the planes started their head-on pass, someone in the plane rather excitedly announced they were coming in and you sternly told him "shut up and start shooting". The planes were ME-110's, I believe, and the Ball Gunner shot one down. I thought I had "shared" but could not be sure and never filed any sort of a claim. Also on that day my oxygen hose became disconnected and I became quite disoriented. The other Waist Gunner saw my distress and quickly recoupled the hose, perhaps saving my life. I don't even remember his name.

After bombing Fiume, we returned toward our base but not before a rather serious concern over remaining fuel supply. It seems to me that we made preparation to bail out but, as it turned out, we made it back without further incident.

At the de-briefing, we learned that a Major Yarsky was missing and most everyone was trying to find anyone who might have seen his plane go down. I never knew whether it was his plane I saw go down or not but am glad to see his name in the "Directory" and to learn he did survive.

That, then, is the end of my recollections of that particular day and mission. If any of what I have related rings a bell with you so that you can tell me whether I flew with you on that mission I would appreciate knowing about it.

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GROUP MISSION #12, 19 MARCH 1944  
AIRDROME - KLAGENFURT, AUSTRIA

(A letter to Mrs. Donita Morrison Troglio, daughter of Donald S. Morrison, Co-Pilot on the Peters crew, KIA on above date, from Thomas A. Inman, Radio Operator on the same crew.)

Dear Donita:

Your letter of February 24 was received yesterday. You were given the wrong zip-code, therefore the delay.

I met your father in Clovis, New Mexico where our crew was formed. I was the Radio-Operator/Gunner on the best crew the U.S.A.A.F. ever had. I liked your father a lot, as did every member on the crew. He was an easy going, kind man who always kept calm, even under extreme conditions.

Although it has been 55 years since our last mission, my memory of it is clear. Hardly a day has gone by that it has not entered my mind. My normal position was at the radio table directly behind your father, however, on this last mission, I was in the nose gun turret, separated from your father, Peters, the Pilot and Shipley, the Engineer/Gunner.

Our primary target (Steyr, Austria) was overcast, so we made a big turn and headed for the alternative, south. Flak was heavy and we were hit, dropping our bomber back - a bad place to be. Over the inter-com, I could hear your father and Peters talking, trying to get the most out of the engines to try and keep up with the group. Then Squires, the tail gunner came on announcing fighters were coming in from six o'clock. He sounded real sad when he said, "Oh no, they shot off our left stabilizer"



(Tail) I couldn't see what was going on behind me, but I could feel the hits and when I swung the turret far left I saw the wing getting ripped up. The order to bail out came. I couldn't tell if it was from your father or Peters. This was the last I heard from anyone on the inter-com. I managed to align the small opening in the back of the turret and pull myself out. The plane was rocking but still upright. I found my chest-pack ('chute) and clipped it on just before the plane winged over and went into a spiral. My exit was through the nose wheel door. It took me a long time to get out. I opened the 'chute immediately, hit the ground and was captured while pulling in the 'chute. This was near Graz, Austria and I must say a beautiful place in the mountains.

Myself, nor any of the other crew members, could see what was happening in your father's position on the flight deck. Several days later, while being held in a jail cell, someone brought a "walk-around" oxygen bottle from our plane to show. These containers were small, about the size of a large cantaloupe, and used if one went to another location on the plane. (Our altitude on missions was usually 22,000 - 25,000 feet.) There were a number of bullet holes in the small surface, so that gives you an idea of the fire power from the German fighter.

Your father was a real hero. He didn't have to be there in aerial combat - he could have grounded himself at any time. The true heroes are dead.

Sincerely,  
Tom Inman

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THE STEEL CROWN  
Billy J. Jacobs (737)

On March 19, 1944, 5h3 304<sup>th</sup> Bomb Wing, consisting of four Bomb Groups that included ours, which was the 454<sup>th</sup>, was dispatched to bomb the Ball Bearing Works at Steyr, Austria.

After an early briefing to acquaint the personnel as to conditions we might be faced with including weather, Wing formation, rendezvous, etc., we soon found terrible weather conditions and were never able to secure our assigned Wing position for the mission. My duty was flying Co-Pilot for my Squadron Commander who was leading our Bomb Group, and it was his decision to proceed to the target, come what may.

The trip to the target was normal, excluding the unfavorable weather, We had a good approach and dropped our bombs at this point, felt good about our effort. We started our descent from about 23,000 feet for the trip back to our home base and, before you could say "Jack Sprat," we faced big problems.

Momentarily, we were being attacked by numbers of ME 109 German fighters full circle. The intercom was busy calling approaches by Hermann Goering's crack fighter group from 6 o'clock, 9 o'clock, etc. It dawned on me that neither Capt. Carithers or myself had doffed our steel helmets, which we kept close by on combat missions, and I reached down and put the Captain's on his head backwards, which caused it to extend more forward than normal, which turned out to be a blessing for his safety. In a very brief moment, I saw a 109 approaching from 12 o'clock dead level with us. My first thought was that he was going to join us in the cockpit, when suddenly he pulled up and dropped a discharged spent shell case that pierced the windshield in front of the Captain. The windshield had a hole in it about the size of a quarter, and I thought, "Oh boy, too bad for the Captain." At about this time, the yellow nose (their prop spinners were painted yellow) 109's left us. The Captain was out cold, and I turned the Captain's head toward me and discovered a plump knot on his head above his eyebrow about the size of an apricot. Fortunately, at this time the German fighters broke off, then the crew members moved the Captain out of the seat, on the flight deck, and he regained his senses. Then Captain James Brothers, sticking his head up in the Navigator's astrodome, said "Put the nose down and let's get the hell out of here," which we did - Post Haste.

Memory tells me that we started this mission with 16 planes and seven returned to our base. Some landed at alternate bases, some didn't make it. My hat's off to all for a gallant effort and a hell of a battle. At interrogation, we accounted for seven 109's shot down and nine probables. Our crew did an outstanding job; we had very few missions completed at the time, and our Group had only been operational two months prior to this mission. I give extreme credit to our crew - Captain Carithers; Captain Ford, Bombardier; Captain Brothers, Navigator; Sgt. Jimmy Rowland, Engineer and Top turret Gunner, with an apology for the rest of the crew members whom I am unable to recall. All in all, it was rockum sockum day that will live with us as long as we are on this planet.

Back at our base, I learned from Maj. Joe Bloomer of 304<sup>th</sup> Wing Operations, that I had been put on orders to go to Cairo, Egypt and be one of the Pilots that would fly Averell Harriman (the Ambassador to Russia) between Cairo and Moscow. Later, it was decided to send Captain Carithers instead, because of his condition after the confrontation with the spent shell case. He did Pilot duty for Mr. Harriman 'til WWII conclusion.

The purpose of this story is not to get a shot at the Pulitzer, or recognition on my part, but to relate our purpose to defeat a terrible enemy for the good of all mankind. History will record that we were right and, should the future present a similar challenge, we will meet it with the same intensity and effort.

Things were never bleak for me as far as my tenure with the 454<sup>th</sup> Bomb Group or the Air Force is concerned. I was made Squadron Commander by Col. James F. Mears in June of 1944 and served 'til March 1945. I was a very young lad then, and this duty helped me to grow in mind and stature and was good for my being in later life. During my tenure, the Squadron lost three crew members. "Happy" Wolf and two of his gunners over Yugoslavia, returning from a German mission in the Squadron's very favorite plane "Old Ancient and Honorable", #264. This plane was donated to the 737<sup>th</sup> Squadron by "The Ancient and Honorable Artillery Co. of Massachusetts". My hat's off to "Happy" and his crew. I'm proud to have served with such a great group of fine aviators and supporters. Lastly, I will never forget the gallant part the steel hat played in the life of WWII soldiers. It was very, very utilitarian.

"So Be it"

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GROUP MISSION #23, 12 APRIL 1944  
ASSEMBLY PLANT AND AIRDROME - BAD VOSLAU, AUSTRIA  
From "Diary Of A Waist Gunner", by Everitte Barbee (737)

The target - ME109 Fighter plant - Bad Voslau, Austria, just south of Vienna. Got up for briefing, ate breakfast, then went down and out to our plane (RAGGED BUT RIGHT). We were expecting up to 300 enemy planes that day and I think most of them were there. We carried 1,000 rounds extra ammunition. Take off as usual and climbed to altitude on the way. First saw flak in Yugoslavia off to our right a ways, another Group got it. It looked pretty heavy and accurate altitude.

We were just nearing Lake Balaton when the 1<sup>st</sup> P-38 came up about 16-18. Almost right afterwards, the 1<sup>st</sup> German planes started to attack. They lost their 1<sup>st</sup> - crashed right at the edge of the lake. Planes were swarming around everywhere. FW190, ME109, 210 & 110 sometimes JU88. Our Nose Gunner, Howard Carpenter, counted 17 twin engine planes making a head-on attack. I never took time to count. P-38s had already fought and gone home or somewhere. I didn't see them again. After a few passes, we got caught in some heavy ant-aircraft fire. JU88 were outside flak area firing rockets into formation. I honestly believe there were 100 planes right around us. Airplanes all over the sky. Flak shells, rockets, and canon exploding everywhere. The air was black with smoke. We had just dropped our bombs when something exploded right at us. The whole plane shook like having run into a wall. Dave, a camera man with us, fell to the floor of the plane, holding his head. I picked him up, he only got sand in his eyes, but thought he was hit. Our plane was out of control for a little while and we

went right smack through our right Sqdn. Side-ways. The concussion threw parachutes & ammunition on ball turret and Roland Beucher was jammed until I could pull them out. When I came back to my gun, after helping Beucher, out right in front of me was an ME109 not more than 20 yds away. I could see the big cross on it's side and the German pilot just sitting there. I am sure he was dead. I started firing - he was cruising on by the same way we were going. I could see my tracers going through his plane. He was gone before I could see too much damage. Fielder said he came right up under the tail and he didn't see him until too late to shoot. The Nose Gunner never did see him come up there. Our plane was pretty well shot up, gas, oil, & hydraulic lines were shot out and one side of our plane was black with engine oil, gas was spraying off the wing & into bomb bay. The plane right behind us got a direct hit and winged over & over, flame covering it. F. S. Fielder began to yell he had one - he pulled off to our right, he said, with fire pouring out. One German plane exploded almost over us., a single engine. A JU88 started an attack from low at 8 o'clock - both Beucher & myself were on it. He never got it finished. He headed back down, only slightly damaged if any. I saw no smoke from it although he started winding down. Another B-24 caught fire. I saw 5 parachutes, some saw more. Bob Fielder claimed a German plane that came in high & exploded just as he passed our plane. I have no idea how many they lost, but I feel pretty sure some were shot down by their own anti-aircraft fire. Part of the time their fighters would come through their own shell fire to reach us.

We lost 4 of our planes, including Lt. O'Connor's crew. They trained with us at Charleston. Only yesterday, Eddie Trinsky of his crew, and I, played base ball or, rather, practiced together. John Reed, Aldridge, Mackin, Rochmire, Lunzford, West & Kelly. These I knew. I don't know if any got out of their plane, for we lost our place in formation which was going every where. All planes seemed pretty well mixed up - Germans, too. Oil, gas & hydraulic lines were shot from #3 engine on "RAGGED". Holes as big as my fist through cowling, knocking pieces off - starting at bottom right on through the top. I believe there were at least 100 holes through our pane. 10 holes came right near me. 3 hit the camera, one control cable shot into. The ball turret was hit. The leading edge of the rt. wing was hit pretty bad & the stabilizers were shot up some. Before we got across the mountains coming home, from the bomb bay on back was greased with hydraulic fluid, gas & oil. We were the last plane in. We landed with very little flaps. Had to crank down landing gear. We ran right on off the end of the runway. The ambulance came out, but we didn't need it. Had our picture taken.

Murray Cohen (737)

As soon as we reached the initial Point for the bomb run on Bad Voslau and Phil took over at the bomb sight, I left the navigation table and looked out of the small side window at the target below to spot and pinpoint the gun emplacements, on a photo that I had. However, I spotted what looked like another formation of B-24s at exactly our altitude and flying at 90 degrees from us on a collision course. I assumed that they were going to hit a target near us and then turn off, so I returned to observing the target.

When Howie Carpenter announced from the nose turret that 17 enemy planes were approaching us directly in front, I immediately got up on my battery box and looked out through the Astrodome (a transparent plastic dome used to shoot the stars). I was just in time to see the first ME-110 fly about 5 feet over my head and realized that this was the formation I had seen at our altitude and that the twin tails of the ME-110s and the sun in the distance made them look exactly like a formation of B-24s.

It was then that we were hit by a rocket that exploded just under our #3 engine and knocked it out completely doing all kinds of damage at the same time. Everitte's description of this entire mission in his diary is perfect.

Since we had lost our #3 engine with holes and leaks in the wings and fuel tanks, we had no hydraulic power, with fluid and gas in the bomb bays and no power to climb, we headed home. We continued to lose altitude from the original 25,000 feet. When we neared the Alps, Ed asked if we wished to bail out now, but we all agreed to stay with the plane. After crossing the Alps, I remember Ed

and I searching for passes through the Yugoslav Mountains so that we could reach the Adriatic Sea. When we did reach the sea, I asked Ed if he thought that we would have to ditch the plane and he told me, in no uncertain terms, that we would not. I thought that he wanted to spare the crew any further fears. I told him that if there was any thought of ditching to let me know immediately so I could send position reports to home base every few minutes, that way Air-Sea Rescue would be able to locate us and send rescue helicopters or boats. I didn't care too much for that, for it would also enable the Germans to locate and attack us. Luckily, we did regard the Adriatic as more or less friendly territory, but we had to be prepared for all eventualities.

When we were finally over our air base, and the crew had cranked down the landing gear by hand, our biggest worry was whether or not the wheels were down and locked. So we all braced ourselves for a crash landing. I looked out over the Pilot's shoulder at the fast approaching runway about four seconds before landing and I must confess that this is the one and only time I really prayed to GOD on all those dangerous missions I had flown. I actually heard myself saying "MY GOD" out loud and have never forgotten it. Whether or not that and all the other prayers said by the crew that day helped, the plane did land and the gear was locked. However, since we had no brakes, the plane rolled off the runway and eventually stopped. We all jumped from the plane and ran as far as we could in great relief.

What looked like the entire Group came out to the plane to greet us. The V.I.P.s in a Jeep and the rest on foot. But the first one to join us was the dog that Franks and the boys had raised and he actually jumped up on me to say hello.

Apparently, the crews who had all returned long before us had reported that we were blown up over the target and were therefore reported as Missing in Action.

One more thing that I did learn was that Franks, the planes' Chief Mechanic, and the Ground Crew had painted special markings on the bottom of the plane and knew exactly when we returned from a mission.

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GROUP MISSION #25, 15 APRIL 1944  
MARSHALING YARD - BUCHAREST, RUMANIA  
CRASH ON TAKE-OFF - 15 April 1944

A letter to the Historian by Harvey P. McClanahan - Power Turret Mechanic (737)

Joe: Several years ago I gave you what I thought was the "time of flight cam" from the ball turret Sperry gunsight along with the story of how I happened to have it. There was a "hole" in my narrative as I didn't know the crew.

I will attempt to repeat the events as I remember them. (If you find my "original" narrative and there are differences, charge them to old age and a failing memory.)

On the fateful day, the a/c were taking-off North-South, making the left turn and climbing out to the North. George Chamberlain and I were working on the lowered ball turret of an a/c "down for the day".\* We heard a "runaway prop", looked up and saw the a/c banked to the left. Either No. 1 or No. 2 prop was feathered and the a/c crashed into the side of the hill between the 737<sup>th</sup> Sqdn. area and the "Line". The fuel load exploded on impact.

I suggested to George that we move to a drainage ditch West of the hard stand. We watched the a/c burn and saw the crest of the hill lined with spectators. The spectators suddenly disappeared and we saw the flash of a bomb exploding. We immediately lay down in the bottom of the ditch. The shock wave passed over us along with a few pieces of debris.

We heard later an officer in a Jeep warned the spectators on the hill that the bomb load was about to explode and they headed for the olive grove. When the bomb exploded, the shock wave knocked a few off their feet.



After the flames subsided and it was determined there wouldn't be another explosion, a line was formed to pick up the remains of the crew. (That's when I found the cam).

The cause of the accident was listed as Pilot Error: The "good" engine on the same side as the "runaway" was shut down while the a/c was in a bank.

The crater was pointed out to replacements to emphasize carelessness could kill as easily as flak and fighters. The crater was still there when we left Italy.

The a/c was a "G" model with the nose turret operated from the ship's hydraulic system. The Crew Chief was T/Sgt. Robert E. Rudd. The a/c hard stand was the first South of the taxiway after turning off the runway. (The hard stand was used by the "meat wagon" when landing South).

The a/c had the reputation of being a "lemon". It would do strange things unexpectedly; some even said it tried to fly backwards. The best pilots in the Squadron, accompanied by the Line Chief, et al, flew it in an effort to track down its peculiarities.

I believe Joe Powers, Ralph Pellegrini and Johnnie Massey can corroborate the preceding.

\*The "a/c down for the day" is another story but not relevant to the accident.

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MEMOIRS OF A POW IN ROMANIA 1944  
Richard B Williams + Robert B Ralston (739)  
1995

FROM CERIGNOLA TO BUCHAREST - 1944

The 739<sup>th</sup> Bomb Squadron, 454<sup>th</sup> Bomb Group made up of B-24 Liberator Bombers arrived at our base near the little town of Cerignola, Italy on January 25, 1944. We set up our operation in what had been an orange and olive grove. We lived in tents large enough to accommodate four cots and an inverted 55-gallon steel drum in which we burned high octane aviation fuel for heat. Some poor souls got the fire too hot and saw their tents and all their possessions go up in bonfire style. There were no more than three or four permanent buildings in the area so most of our activities took place in tents of various sorts.

Our first mission to Orvieto Air Field was over northern Italy and fairly close to Lake Nemi, the subject of the painting by George Inness which hung in the parlor at Sunny Crest and provided a clue by which I could let the family know approximately where I was based.

Thirteen missions later I thought I was over the hump, but my superstitious tendencies got the best of me when I rolled out of my sack in that pre-dawn darkness on April 21, 1944. "Completed thirteen missions," I thought. "That should be a good omen." I was tired and rather hoped the mission would be scrubbed because of weather but it wasn't. I had an odd feeling and it wasn't good.

We hastened through breakfast, briefing, and all other preliminaries and boarded our B-24 which we called "Bugs Bunny" for our Navigator, Bob "Bugs" Ralston. In a short time we were airborne and forming for our mission. As we circled, we saw thick black smoke billowing up - one of the crews had apparently turned into a dead engine and crashed. It was rough but we couldn't stop for that.

By now we were headed toward the spur of the boot and there was the Adriatic Sea beyond. Before very long we could spot the coast of Yugoslavia. We continued to climb and the temperature began to drop, but we were wearing our fleece-lined jackets, our flack suits, and steel helmets over our fleece-lined flight helmets. As we passed over the mountains of Yugoslavia, we saw those beautiful P-38 fighters flying cover for us. Unfortunately, they were not going all the way. We continued on over the tip of Bulgaria and across the Danube which we could barely see because of the increasing cloud bank below us. Everything seemed to be going too well. We had seen neither enemy fighters nor flack.

As we approached the target area, which was the marshaling yards in Bucharest, there was a thick layer of clouds below but we flew on. The Lead Bombardier had opened his bomb bays and we

followed suit. His first string of bombs could be seen and now it was our turn. "Bombs away!" I called over the intercom and closed our bomb bay doors. Now we were making our turn and heading for home. I thought "this is too easy!" and sure enough it was. At that moment all hell broke loose. Three fighters attacked us. Our gunners were firing away at the fighters and I thought we were holding our own when suddenly there was a crash. I saw stars, literally. Something had hit the back of my head. The plane lurched and seemed to be heading into a dive at high speed.

I looked at Bob Ralston and saw blood running out of his left eye, I grabbed a compress and tied it over his eye - then tried to communicate with the rest of the crew. I could get no contact. The intercom and oxygen systems had been knocked out and the passage to the flight deck blocked. I felt the back of my head. Whatever had hit me had ruptured my steel helmet and lodged in my skull, where it remains to this day. Already blood had soaked through the bandage on Bob's eye.

Bob and I made a quick decision. I attached his parachute to his harness and then attached mine and opened the nose wheel door. I tried to get him to jump but he balked and insisted I go first. To this day neither one of us could tell you who jumped first. A report I have seen said Bob went first, but Bob thinks I went first. The oxygen had been knocked out so neither one of us was very clear. From that point I remember nothing until I came to and found myself floating toward the ground. It was absolutely quiet - no sound of anything. "Why don't I hear birds?" I thought. Then the silence was broken by a Romanian yellow nose ME109 fighter which headed toward me. I did not know what to expect. I had heard stories of American airmen who parachuted over Bulgaria and were shot at by the Bulgarian fighter pilots. One million thoughts went quickly through my head as I hung there. Fortunately, this Romanian pilot was not blood thirsty. Anyway, he went on giving me his prop wash which made me swing violently. He circled two or three times, each time coming close enough to give me his prop wash and make me swing more violently. As I got close to the ground he went on his way.

At about one hundred feet the earth seemed to rush up to meet me. This being my first and only jump I had not known what to expect. I landed in a plowed field which softened the impact. I pulled in my parachute and quickly headed for a hedge row between two fields, much as a child hides by pulling a pillow over his head. But it didn't matter because a group of peasants in the field had seen me and, armed with pitchforks and shovels, they approached. I took off my Bombardier wings and pushed them deeply into the earth. The peasants waved in a manner that made me think I was to go away, but they were waving for me to come to them. I got up and we started toward each other. They were a friendly band of peasants who kept saying "Fratres American Nemfs, (Nazi) nui bun." All this meant that they liked the Allies and did not like nor trust the Nazi's. In spite of their feelings, they were afraid of the Nazi's and would never offer to help Allied airmen escape.

The group of peasants was friendly and chattering like crazy and over and over again I heard "Fratres American, Nemfs, nui bun..." All this as we walked along a dirt road to a little peasant village with its gaily decorated buildings. As we reached the village we were met by Romanian soldiers who escorted me to the town hall which was their headquarters. All of the peasants who had brought me in, followed right along. Once inside, they offered me some "Easter bread" and milk. They then gave me a piece of cake and some goat's milk. I was managing to drink the goat's milk but I must have made a face because they asked me if I would like some sweet milk. I said "Yes, thank you," and they put some sugar in the milk.

After much jabbering they offered me a drink of tsuica. I accepted and they sent a pretty young girl out to get it. She was dressed more like a city girl and I figured that she was a refugee from Bucharest rather than a peasant or country girl. She came back with a water tumbler of what looked just like "white lightning" from Shifletts Hollow, near Charlottesville, Virginia.. She took a sip supposedly to show me that it wasn't poison, then gave it to me. The tsuica was good and at that moment hit the spot. She did too! She was pretty and I wanted her to stand by.

In a little while a man dressed in civilian clothes came in. There was much conversation in Romanian between this man and the soldiers. Then he turned to me and said, "Come, I am taking you to Headquarters."



The two of us climbed into an open-bed horse drawn wagon and started what seemed a long slow ride to the next village where there was some kind of Nazi headquarters. Once started on this journey, this man said, "You are lucky! For you the war is over." I didn't figure it out nor did I figure him. He went on to say that he had worked for the ABC Clean Heat Corporation in Chicago (probably as a salesman, if at all, for he never stopped talking). It was a rough dirt road with many ruts and by the time we reached our destination my rib or ribs had begun to hurt like everything and I had trouble getting my breath. I had broken the ribs jumping out of the plane when I hit the sides of the nose-wheel door opening. Until this time I had not been conscious of my broken ribs. Anyway, they helped me out of the wagon and into the headquarters where they allowed me to lie on a cot. There were two or three Nazi officers who talked to my "clean heat friend(?). I could make little out of their conversation. The tsuica may not have been poison but it seemed to have had the effect as well as the look of "white lightning."

Before long we were joined by other airmen that had been captured that day. This was when Bob Ralston and I got together again and I had his 24-hour navigation watch which thoroughly confused the Romanians with its 24-hour dial.

By now it was beginning to get dark. We were taken to a railroad station and the Romanians kept saying "Choo, choo Choo choo." at least I thought they were saying "Choo, choo" it seemed to make sense. After all who hasn't said "Choo, choo" at some point in his life when he was referring to the old steam-driven locomotive?

It was dark when the train pulled in and we were loaded into one of the box cars. There were civilians, mostly peasants, in the car, but peasants or city folk, we could understand when they shook their fists at us and shouted, "Gangster American!" Our train ride was to Giurgiu (Choo, choo). It was not a long ride and when we arrived we were taken to what seemed like a makeshift garrison. I can remember the dimly-lit room with high ceilings and a line of bunks with straw mattresses. It was here that Bob and I started our search for the rest of the crew. This amounted to asking other airmen who came in. No one knew anything. Floating down in my parachute I had seen numerous fires from crashes and wondered if any had been our plane.

We got little if any sleep that night - my ribs were giving me a fit and we didn't know what was ahead for us. I guess I questioned our decision to jump, but we couldn't change that now.

Early in the morning we were awakened and marched to a garage where we met other POW's. Bob mentioned this because he remembered seeing a '37 Ford, 4-door Cabriolet with brand new Goodyear tires. Also in the garage, a Romanian Sergeant threw a chair at one of the guys with an injured leg. We had to restrain one of our guys from killing the S.O.B. From the garage we were taken to the hospital in Giurgiu.

First we were taken to the basement where we were stripped of our clothes and each of us was put in what looked like a large oval galvanized tub. Peasant women who worked in the hospital bathed us. We were then given hospital gowns and taken up to a large ward-like room. It was a bright, cheerful room with big windows which let in the warm sunlight.

After some time the doctor came around. He was a rather large man, possibly in his late forties, tastefully dressed - almost a Brooks Brothers traditional. He stood at the foot of my bed and with a warm smile greeted me, "Hello Richie, my little Yudi." At first I wondered why he singled me out as a Jew. Then I remembered that we had been stripped and bathed and apparently the peasant women had reported everything - (in Romania, only Jews were circumcised). Anyway, it became a little joke and our pretty petite nurse (we called her Mistress Tina) who was in training to become a doctor stood at the foot of my bed rubbing one finger on the other like one child teasing another, said "Yudi, Yudi, Yudi." "Aw, gowan, Tina," I said. She stopped. "Mistress Tina to you, she said, half joking. At least they were warm and friendly.

Dr. Ionescu Militiade was a friendly sort, much like people back home. He was above all a gentleman. He used to bring his young son of about ten or twelve to see us. Together, they would bring cigarettes and American magazines. In a 1939 issue of "Town and Country," I found a picture of

my good friends, Charlie and Elizabeth Hooff of Alexandria, Virginia. Also, I found a picture of Moe Clark of Orange, Virginia in "Spur".

While in the hospital, I had a reaction to a tetanus shot given for the wound in my head. Dr. Ionescu took blood out of my arm and put it into my leg. Then he said that I should have milk or in Romanian "lapte." A little while later a peasant girl was on her hands and knees washing the floor. When she came between our beds, Bob Ralston got her attention and pointed to me saying "Lapte, lapte!" Whereupon, she bared her breast and cupping it in her hand said "Lapte, lapte." We could still have fun and Bob Ralston was a great one for that. One morning, Dr. Ionescu was talking to us and said, "I want to thank your for destroying the University of Bucharest." Remembering we bombed through an overcast sky and depended on the accuracy of the Lead Bombardier - just one man, I am not surprised. I just didn't understand what Dr. Ionescu meant when he said "I want to thank you."

Following is my first letter to Mother and Father from the hospital.

April 25, 1944

Mr. and Mrs. Lewis C. Williams  
5315 Cary Street Road  
Richmond, Virginia  
United States of America

Dear Mother and Dad:

I am a prisoner of war in a Romanian hospital and will be moved to an internment camp in the near future. The Romanians are giving us very good treatment. The chief surgeon is excellent and very nice to us. The Romanian Red Cross lady brings us cigarettes and this paper. There are two magazines (American - 1938) "Town and Country" and "County Life." In one I found picture of Mo Clark and in the other I found an announcement of Charlie Hooff's wedding. Bob Ralston is with me now and we pray that it will continue that way. Please don't worry. I am in good health and pray that you all are. You might get in touch with the Red Cross at home and find out about sending packages. I would like toilet articles, cigarettes and candy but of course the Red Cross can tell you all about it. It seems to me John Skelton was Vice-Consul to Romania some years back. Is this not true/\* Outside the lilacs are just beginning to bloom and the forsythia is in full bloom. They remind me of home.

My love to you both and all at home.

Devotedly,  
Richard

2nd Lieutenant Richard B. Williams  
O-752731

American Prisoner of War  
c/o Red Cross of Romania

(\* John Skelton Williams, Jr., was Vice-Consul from 1921 to 1924.)

Altogether, we were in the hospital between two and three weeks. It seemed longer but everyone there was very friendly. On one occasion, Dr. Ionescu's young son brought us some beer which was a welcome treat.

One night shortly before we left the hospital for Bucharest, Dr. Ionescu had some steaks cooked for us. This was really quite a change from the spinach soup that we usually had.

The following is a report of Earl W. Parker, Staff Sergeant, AAF, No. 182169965, Nose Gunner in our airplane:

"On 21 April, while flying over the capitol of the country involved, three fighters attacked at 11:00 o'clock. Shooting fast, they hit with three 20 millimeter shells. At that moment, the interphones went out. I turned my turret in so that I could see the navigation compartment in order to let them know that the interphones were out, and I saw Lieutenant Williams bandaging the head of Lieutenant

Ralston. Blood had already soaked through the bandages. I turned front to see the fighters and then, none coming in, turned rear once more and saw that the nose wheel doors were open. Lieutenant Williams was putting a parachute on Lieutenant Ralston. He called for me to come into the compartment, which I did, and I stood behind Lieutenant Williams while he helped Lieutenant Ralston over the nose wheels and into the well. Lieutenant Williams jumped immediately after him. Williams did not appear to be injured. I did not see the parachutes open.

Note: Bob Ralston believes that I centered Parker's nose turret so he could get out. Bob later got a report from C. W. Weir, who was the Pilot, that the Flight Engineer managed to work his way through the passageway from the flight deck and then stopped Parker from bailing out.

Five planes lower down reported seeing the men passing, with parachutes opened. There is no supposition as to why they jumped, except that Williams thought Lieutenant Ralston was so wounded that he needed to be gotten out, and he jumped in order to take care of him, or that their oxygen went out. AAF says under those circumstances, their chances of being a prisoner are enormous or they may have trekked off and are now hiding trying to make their way out of the country.

A letter was also sent to my mother from Harriette Vaden of the American Red Cross in Italy whose parents knew my parents. Harriette was from Richmond. The letter read as follows. (Censored by H.S. Vaden A.R.C.)

To: Mrs. Louis Williams  
Cary Street Road  
Richmond, Virginia

From: H.S. Vaden A.R.C.  
A.P.O. 785 c/o P.M.  
New York, N.Y.

May 29, 1944  
Italy

Dear Mrs. Williams,

I have wanted to write you so often in the past 5 weeks but have been unable to do it until I knew you had been notified by the War Dept. that Dick is missing. I remember the raid only too well. I was at the 454<sup>th</sup> that afternoon and watched our planes come in. The first crew down told me about Dick and it wasn't easy for me to finish serving the rest of the boys. As soon as possible I asked a friend of Dick's what happened. It seems that Dick and his friend Bugs had to jump from the plane because their oxygen supply was shot away and they couldn't get back up into the rest of the ship probably due to the entrance being blocked due to an exploding shell. Also Bugs was slightly wounded and we figure Dick felt he had to get him out. All communication with the rest of the crew was gone so he couldn't talk to his pilot. Dick and Bugs both jumped and their chutes opened. I know this. Several of the gunners on board were wounded, but Weir (pilot) brought the ship back after throwing nearly all the equipment out. The ship was badly shot up and Dick and Bugs did the only thing they could. Dick had given Bugs first aid and bandaged him up. This is about all that any of us know and we are sure that they are all right. The Red Cross usually notifies you in 6 weeks when boys are made prisoners. Sometimes it takes longer.

Mother wrote me that she and Dad had been to see you. I'm so glad that you managed to see each other and I hope you will often.

I talked to Dick the night of April 20<sup>th</sup>. The next day was his 14<sup>th</sup> mission. He is a grand person and you have all the reason in the world to be proud of him. I'd love to hear from you.

Sincerely  
Harriette

#### GIURGIU TO THE SCHOOLHOUSE IN BUCHAREST

When we entered the hospital the Romanians had taken our G.I. shoes and left us with our fleece-lined flight boots. Their belief was that it would help discourage any escape attempts. Well, the



fleece-lined boots were not very comfortable in warm weather, not to mention their total lack of support for our feet.

Bob Ralston and two other POW's and I were discharged from the hospital - probably to make room for more injured POW/s - and we were taken to a garrison in Giurgiu which looked like it might have been a military school of sorts. It was late afternoon when we arrived at the garrison, and we were fed soon thereafter - a really light meal. After all, the Romanians did not have an abundance of food. Following the supper, such as it was, we were put in a barred room with floor boards about halfway to the ceiling so we could not stand erect. Well, we did want to sleep so we wouldn't be doing much standing.

That night the four of us were sitting in semi-darkness - the hospital had been so much more pleasant with its sunny exposure - when three Romanian officers came into our room. We didn't know what to expect, but they were pleasant and invited us to come into a larger, meeting type room with a big table in the center and a single dim light hanging over it. Of these three officers, one was a Major and the other two were Captains. The Major, like so many Romanian officers who talked to us said he had spent many years in the United States. In any case, they all spoke English and appeared to have pro-Ally leanings.

These officers spread a big map of Europe on the table and pointed out the fronts. They told us that Hitler was headed west and was determined to cross the English Channel. "Who," they asked "is going to stop him?" "We are, we Allies are" we answered almost in unison. We Americans had a convincing way about us because we were proud of our country and our people - at home and abroad - were filled with confidence. We believed in US and we had a purpose. We were a cocky foursome and the Romanian officers seemed to like us.

These officers brought up a point that night that has always interested me. They indicated that they would like to see the Allies come up through Turkey and the Dardanelles into the Balkans and Eastern Europe. I don't know whether they also told us or I learned later, that Churchill wanted the Allies to use that route, but Stalin and Roosevelt vetoed it.

The officers visit ended on a friendly note. It seemed obvious to me that they did not like their relationship with the Nazis. I don't think they had much trust for the Russians either. They seemed to be searching for some kind of reassurances. Maybe over-confidence even in our own situation helped.

We had a reasonably good night's sleep on the straw mattresses - bed bugs and all. The next morning we were awakened and loaded into a pick-up truck for our transfer to Bucharest. It was a bright sunny day and our trip took us through the beautiful rolling countryside that looked much like Albemarle, Orange, and Madison, my favorite Virginia counties. After all, it was early Spring, and everything looked gorgeous with no signs of the ravages of war. The trip of approximately 50 or 60 miles was uneventful but that beautiful countryside made me feel just a little homesick.

Our destination was the Iron Guard Barracks in Bucharest. There were already many allied airmen there - mostly American - who were being held for interrogation by the Romanians. In other words, it was a kind of holding point for the POW's before sending us to "the Schoolhouse" which was designated "Lagarule de Prisoneri No. 13." In the garrison we were held in a large room with many double-decker bunks. Every time we wanted to go to the latrine, which was outside in another building, we had to get a Romanian guard to go with us. All the guards were Romanian but there were some German soldiers billeted in the barracks.

On one of these trips to the latrine I ran into some young German soldiers washing up. I will always remember one particularly good-looking young German who gave us a friendly greeting and spoke very good English. This young fellow was about average build with curly blonde hair and a winning smile. He was ever so eager to learn about Hollywood and the movie stars. I told him all I could remember about the studios and night clubs from my two visits there. I think his ambition was to get to Hollywood as soon as the war ended. My Romanian guard who could understand nothing became bored with the whole proceedings and kept tapping me on the shoulder and motioning me back to the security area. I have thought of that young German many times over the years and have wondered

where he wound up. I saw him maybe once again while I was in the barracks.

While we were in the Iron Guard Barracks, we were interrogated by a Captain Christie. He was an overweight Romanian captain who spoke good English and had cooked up a good story to try to get us to talk. He claimed to have lived and worked in Detroit for some time before the war. I don't remember whether he explained his return to Romania. He wanted to impress me with the fact that he had lived and worked in the United States for many years. He started talking about things he thought might be familiar to me hoping to get me into a friendly talking mood.

In trying to trick me into telling him something, Captain Christie claimed to know all about our crew. I knew nothing and what Captain Christie told me made no sense at all. Later, comparing notes with Bob Ralston, we decided that he was telling us the same story which we found rather ridiculous.

The second day of our stay in the Iron Guard Barracks, one or two American fliers had tried to escape. Apparently, they had made their way to the countryside where they had run into peasants working in their fields. Most Romanian peasants liked the Allies and were very friendly, but they were afraid for their own safety and were not likely to help Allied airmen escape. Fearing that they themselves might become involved and be severely punished they would turn the would-be escapees over to the Romanian authorities. In this case, the fleeing fliers were turned over to Romanian soldiers who returned them to the Iron Guard Barracks where they were placed in solitary confinement.

After about three days at the Iron Guard Barracks, we were moved to the Schoolhouse-"Lagarule de Prisoneri No. 13" - which was on the southside of Bucharest. It was a fairly large building not unlike some of the older school buildings I have seen in this country. The basement or ground floor was a little over half above ground level. Therefore, there were steps from the street level up to the main entrance. It was a typical main entrance to a school building of that size and age. You can be sure we never used the main entrance.

Off to the left of this entrance as we faced the school, there was a tall fence with barbed wire running along the top. Close to the building there was a gate in the fence opening into a side yard. Immediately to the right inside the fence was a side door into the building which opened onto a landing with steps to the first floor and to the basement. This door was used for anything and anybody brought into the building. We were taken through this side door and onto the first floor where we were checked-in. The Romanian Colonel who was in charge of the prisoner of war camp had his quarters on this floor. He was terribly overweight and could bellow like a bull. It was said that he would eat a dozen eggs each morning for breakfast and could eat a whole leg of lamb at a sitting. It turned out he was awfully lazy and we didn't see much of him.

From the main floor there were wide marble steps to the basement, and there was a wide marble staircase to the second floor. We were escorted up these steps to our room which was on the front of the building and overlooked the street. There was a park across the street and a Greek Orthodox Church about half a block up the street.

The room was bright and sunny and had three rather large windows, wooden casement type, with black paper tacked to the inside of the windows themselves for black-out. The openings had barbed wire instead of screen wire, and that might have been an advantage because I feel that having no screens more air would come in, and we didn't worry about flying insects anyway. There were about 10 old iron beds in this room and each had a straw mattress complete with bed bugs. With 10 of these beds in the room, there wasn't much space to walk around. Usually there was a Romanian guard in the hall outside.

The hall outside our room was rather wide and there was a table with a light over it. What better place for a bridge game which was going on all the time. Bridge seemed to be the popular game and had many kibitzers. Since there was only one deck of cards and one table large enough, bridge was the popular game and that was the popular place to be if you knew bridge.

Passing the card game, we would run into a large fairly narrow washroom with a line of wash basins along one wall. Usually two Russian barbers were set-up by the opposite wall (they, too were prisoners). They understood no English but appeared to know Romanian and had an excellent sense of



humor. They had a line they thought was real funny, and one or the other would say it with an uproarious laugh "F\_\_\_ 'em and feed 'em fasoli, ok? F\_\_\_ 'em and feed 'em beans, ok?" It was funny the way they said it and they seemed to have so much fun saying it over and over.

On the opposite side of the hall from our room there was a large auditorium complete with stage. In this auditorium, we started having church services almost every Sunday. With the help of Romanian Princess Catherine Caradja, the American prisoners were given a few Anglican prayer books for the services, and maybe one or two hymnals. Because there were so few hymnals, some of us bought notebooks (they were real small) in the canteen and copied some of the hymns in them. One particular hymn that I copied in mine was "The King of Love My Shepherd Is." I tried to write as much of it as I could because I remembered that mother had told me at some time that it was one of her favorite hymns. Not knowing whether I would find one of the prayer books at any other time, I also copied the 91<sup>st</sup> Psalm in my notebook. I read it every night before I went to bed. It gave me strength.

I believe one of the POW's in our room conducted the services. If I am not mistaken this fellow had planned to start training to become a Baptist minister right after the war. In any case, I think almost all of the POW's attended the services.

We may have had barbed wire on the windows and a Romanian guard at the door, but our room, crowded as it was, was bright and sunny. In the mornings we would first go downstairs to the mess hall to get our breakfast, which usually was imitation tea and brown bread. We all sat at bench-type tables. After we finished breakfast, most of us returned to our rooms and tried to get busy about something. One of our roommates, Lewis Armistead of Beacon Hill, Boston, when forced to jump from his aircraft, had grabbed a book that "he just happened to have with him" on his last mission. The book was "So Little Time" by J.P. Marquand. It was a delightful book and very much in demand. My turn came and I borrowed it.

On one bright sunny morning after breakfast I picked up the book and settled in to do some reading. Just then I heard the wailing of the siren outside, and the guards inside the building started yelling "Alarum! Alarum!" Outside our window we could see people scurrying through the streets to the air raid shelters shouting, "Adipost! Adipost!" Some of the air raid shelters, such as they were, were located in the park across the street from the Schoolhouse. Actually, many were no more than slit trenches which offered very little protection against bombing raids.

We didn't stand at the windows very long and watch, we headed for the basement on the run. Most of us had wooden shower clogs for shoes so you can imagine the clatter we made as we ran down the two flights of stairs to the basement. When we reached the basement, some would huddle under the marble table for protection - and later reflected on how stupid we were. If the table had cracked and large pieces of marble fell on us, we really would be hurting. Many of us would sit on the floor with our backs against the wall and our knees drawn up under our chins. Some of these bomb strikes were right close and I can remember that after a string of bombs had hit we might find ourselves about six feet away from the wall. The concussion as the bombs exploded bounced us right across the floor. "Were you scared?" someone would ask. "Was I?" Was all I could answer. What do you think? In the area of the park across the street there was an anti-aircraft gun which we called "Snapping Jack." That of course added to all the sound and fury. Finally when the "all clear" sounded, we heaved a sigh of relief and climbed back up the stairs to find some kind of activity. The bridge game outside our room was already in session, kibitzers and all. The truth is it was almost a continuous operation.

I went right back to our room and picked up "So Little Time" with the idea of reading 'till lunch time. At lunch we again went down to the mess hall. Often lunch consisted of bowls of what looked like unflavored macaroni with paprika sprinkled over it and some more brown bread. Some of the guys wouldn't touch the macaroni and would slide it down the table to me. I ate it because it was filling and I was usually hungry. Also, I didn't lose nearly as much weight as some of the others. We learned that we had to watch the brown bread because one or two of the fellows had found glass in it. The lunch and dinner meals varied a little. Sometimes we might have choppa (onions) and apa (water) with brown bread. Possibly we might have spinach soup with the usual brown bread. Often we had goats milk



cheese with cucumbers and brown bread. On rare occasions, we might get a very small piece of mutton - chewable if we were lucky, otherwise it was gristle.

For some time the kitchen and mess hall were run by the Russian prisoners. They got what they wanted and the Americans got the leftovers. The Russian prisoners also seemed to have more freedom. One afternoon I looked out a window and saw four or five Russians walking down the street with a Romanian guard. Well, finally, we got a senior American officer in charge of the kitchen. He had some of the American enlisted POWs helping him and our food got right much better.

On sunny days at times when we were not expecting the 15<sup>th</sup> Air Force, we spent a lot of time looking out of the windows waving to the people on the streets. There was always something going on. Occasionally, there would be an open-bed wagon filled with the round loaves of brown bread stopped by the side gate waiting for someone to take the loaves in. There never was any cover on them.

Frequently, there was the peasant farmer in his open wagon riding by. We figured he must be a Greek Orthodox because he would start crossing himself, making the sign of the cross, when he reached the far side of the church and by the time he reached the Schoolhouse, his hand was going almost straight up and down and he was laughing so hard he obviously wasn't worried about that. He just kept that hand going up and down while he waved to us with his other hand. He came by so often we felt we knew him and began looking for him.

Every city or town no matter where it is, has some pretty young girls and Bucharest, the "Paris of the Balkans", was no exception. Of course the young girls liked to walk down the street by the Schoolhouse with all us young fellows waving and yelling to them. There were two who walked by often, usually in the afternoons. One afternoon when they were walking by, it started raining but they didn't seem to mind. They started skipping instead of running and they were soaked through their pretty white blouses, which were almost "see through" anyway. You know all the guys at the windows liked that.

Some of the Romanian words and phrases that Ed Lyman taught us fit right in when these girls walked by. Ed was a P-51 fighter pilot who was downed on a Ploesti raid and wound up in the Schoolhouse. He started teaching French and Romanian to those of us who wanted to refresh French and learn Romanian. Taking the classes was both fun and interesting. Some of the best lines we learned in Romanian were: "N'am vazut niceodate o dimnisora asa da frumoasa" meaning "I have never seen a girl so beautiful." Another was "Ce placere Pentru ochu" meaning "What pleasure to the eyes," and of course "buna dimeneata" meaning "Good morning." These are just a sample of the lines we learned thinking we might yell at the young girls as they walked by the Schoolhouse. Believe me, we tried out some of the sentences. All this was usually done in the afternoons because the day air raids usually came before noon.

Also in the afternoon, the POW's who wanted to were allowed to go out into the side yard. That was one way of getting some exercise. Princess Catherine had gotten a basketball for us. There were various activities going on every day. For instance, there was an effort by one group working in teams to dig out underneath the Schoolhouse. Here the work was slow because the tools were poor and it had to be done when any guard on duty was out of earshot. To be honest, I learned about this activity through the grapevine. It was something that had to be kept very quiet.

After supper each night there was always the question of whether or not the R.A.F. (Royal Air Force) would come over. These raids and the raids by the 15<sup>th</sup> Air Force during the day always worried us. However, the Romanians thought that both the 15<sup>th</sup> Air Force and the R.A.F. knew where we were and avoided us just like they had missed the Red Cross freight car which had been parked in the marshaling yards for some time because it had a big red cross painted on top.

When the R.A.F. came we would hear the wailing of the siren then the guards would start shouting "Alarum! Alarum!," and we would hear people outside running down the street shouting "Adipost! Adipost! Just as they did in the daytime raids. As usual we would run for the basement. Again, we would try to sit on the floor with our backs against the wall and our knees drawn up under our chins. As during the daytime raids, the concussion of the bombs would cause us to bounce across the

floor. That was a bit frightening but there was another aspect. The R.A.F. used "screamers" on their bombs and that really was scary. After the "all clear" sounded, we heaved a sigh of relief and most of us lit up a cigarette. We probably smoked many more cigarettes after these raids, but these cigarettes were the Nationals - a Romanian cigarette which was about half the diameter of an American cigarette and made with really dry black tobacco. The Nationals came in little paper packs made of coarse paper without any foil or cellophane. When our supply was low and the canteen was closed so we couldn't buy any we would smoke what we had, butt it and save the butt. The next time we wanted a cigarette we would smoke the butt. When the butt got too short to hold, we would butt it again and save the tobacco. When we had saved enough of the tobacco we would burn a cigarette paper off one of the guards and "roll our own". By the time we smoked that hand-made cigarette, the tobacco was really black and strong.

We tried to keep busy about things when we were not sitting out air raids in the basement. Americans can do all kinds of things if they set their minds to it. Someone suggested monopoly. Well some of the fellows got together and built a monopoly board with almost all the little details. Many heads are better than one and, with suggestions from all, this turned out to be a pretty complete game.

One day some of us were in our room having a bull session and the Red Cross lady came in and gave each of us a card to write home. She said we could send four cards or one letter a month to our families. I noticed Glenn Johannsen started writing right away and thought he might have some good ideas of things to write home about. I said something to him and he showed me his card on which he had started writing "I'm alright, alright, alright, alright, \_\_\_\_\_." He said that was all he was going to write. I couldn't believe it, though, in a way, it did make some sense.

Some of these "bull sessions" were right much fun. After all we did have a good group of roommates. Among them were Bennie Lindley, Bob Lynch, Glenn Johannsen, Lewis Armistead, Bob Ralston, John Botkin, Julian Currie, Bob Cheesman, Jay Blanchard, I think Roy Johnson from Georgia, and I can't remember the others. Naturally, the subject right often settled on girls. I'll never forget Bennie Lindley sitting on the edge of his bed saying, "Boy, when I get home I'm going to keep my wife barefoot and pregnant and in the kitchen." I hadn't heard that saying before, and the feeling with which he said it sounded really funny. (I must admit I have heard it often since then.)

After some weeks, we discovered that there actually was a shower room in the basement, and we were going to get a turn to take a shower, Boy, that sounded great! When we got to the shower room we found three or four showers about eight feet above the floor and though the water seemed to go in all directions, the shower even trickling was a welcomed sight. The showers didn't get rid of all the lice, but they may have helped a little. In any case they were kind of refreshing.

Our little friends which stuck to us, sometimes caused a comical sight. Two or three fellows would be standing talking to each other when suddenly one would loosen his belt, unzip his fly, and start scratching. If he happened to be near a bed he would drop his pants, sit on the bed, and really go to work with great intensity. So you see, as far as the little critters were concerned the showers didn't do much good.

The Romanian government had to pay us something. In one of my little notebooks I had written "6000 Lei rec'd through June 30" under that I had written "3000 Lei July 2." You can tell I am not sure what they paid me but whatever it was it enabled me to buy some of the pastries and cakes from the Romanian who ran the canteen for us. Of course he also stocked a few other things. Some of the things I found listed were "cig", "pastry", "nugat", "beer", "roll", "matches", "cig holder", "cake", "ice cream", "note books", and "paper". All these items with, I believe, the price in Leis I had written on one page in the notebook. There were others on another page but these items give an idea of what was sold in the canteen. The canteen manager said the pastries and cakes were made by the same bakery that made them for the Royal Palace. Whether that was true or not, these pastries and cakes were delicious and he had a hard time keeping them in stock.

We had been in the schoolhouse for some time when four Romanian princesses came to talk to us. One of them was Princess Catherine Caradja, but I am not sure nor do I remember who the others

were. The auditorium was pretty-well filled, and these ladies gave the impression that they were not happy with the Germans. One of them told us of the horrible times they had with the Russians during World War I and they decided to try the Germans this time. They found the Germans to be no better. She said it was "Either the frying pan or the fire." These ladies couldn't express it openly, but I believe they wanted us to understand that their sentiments were with us.

I mentioned above that one of the princesses who came to talk to us was Princess Catherine whose mother had started an orphanage in Romania. When her mother died her grandmother took it over. In 1919, she felt that her grandmother was tired so she took over. Her orphanage estate was not far from Ploesti. In the low level raid of August 1943, one B-24 crashed on her estate. With the help of some of her orphans she was able to extricate one crew member who had been left for dead. A couple of German soldiers came up at that time and tried to take the badly burned American officer, but the Princess held on to him. She then took the prisoner to an orphanage hospital for treatment of his severe gasoline burns. Princess Catherine did what she could to help the American POW's of this low level raid of August 1943. She referred to them as "her boys" and visited the camp when she could. I believe the POW camp was at Timisul. Those of us who became POW's from the high-level raids of 1944 did not see the "Low Level POW's" almost until we were freed.

After hearing the Princess talk, we went about our ways trying to keep busy about something. Princess Catherine was one of those who insisted that we were prisoners of the Romanians and not the Germans. There had been some Romanians as well as some Germans who thought that we should be turned over to the Germans. Romanian Premier Antonescuc was one of these and, worse than that, Antonescuc's wife wanted American POW's to be taken out in the woods and shot. As it was we tried to keep busy (between the raids by the 15<sup>th</sup> Air Force and the R.A.F.) so we wouldn't have thing like that on our minds.

One would not guess the crazy things we did to keep our minds occupied. In the evenings, we preferred to have our lights out and our windows open. I will never forget one amusing night we recognized that there really was a distinct difference between the low level POW's of 1943 and us, the high level POW's of 1944. We realized that we had brought along with us some of the finest natural gas producing equipment available. This night we produced what might have been called operation "Blow Torch" or by today's standards "Operation Flame-Out." These "blue light" activities would take place at night during black-out and would light up the sky (room that is). In any case, I really don't think the R.A.F. could have spotted it. There was one flaw in the equipment. It had no anti-syphon device and one poor POW got singed. That closed down the operation for that night.

Toward what became the end of our stay as POW's, the Red Cross supplies finally came through. We were really glad to see them. Some of the things we received were shirts and pants, cigarettes (better than the nationals we had been smoking) and Woodbury soap. I think the Woodbury soap brought the fat Romanian Colonel out of his quarters for a rare visit. We hadn't seen much of him but when he smelled that soap he hung around begging anyone he could prevail upon to give him "just one bar." Aside from the soap, the Red Cross did bring us other things that we really welcomed.

On August 17, 1944, Colonel James A. Gunn, who only a short time before had assumed command of the 454<sup>th</sup> Bomb Group at Cerignola, Italy, was shot down on one of the Ploesti missions. John Porter and Jack Benett from the 739<sup>th</sup> Squadron were shot down on the same Ploesti mission. They were all held in a temporary Ploesti confinement facility then taken to an interrogation camp outside Bucharest and finally to the permanent POW camps. The officers arrived at the Schoolhouse POW camp about the 20<sup>th</sup> of August. The enlisted men were held in a camp on the opposite side of the city. Colonel Gunn found upon arriving at the Schoolhouse that he was the senior officer.

Somehow at sometime a radio had been acquired, but all the POW's didn't know about it. Each night it was brought out to listen to the BBC news broadcasts. The night of August 23, 1944, it was learned from a news broadcast that King Michael of Romania had announced that his Nation had capitulated to the Allies. This was really joyous news and you can bet it was not kept quiet. The Schoolhouse went wild. Actually, what I first heard was the Michael and his mother, Queen Helen had



invited Antonescuc, the Prime Minister, to the Royal Palace and had set a trap for him. When he came into the Royal Palace, they sprung the trap and took Antonescuc prisoner. There were all kinds of stories running around, but one thing we knew, they had overthrown Antonescuc, the Nazi Puppet.

The next morning, August 24, 1944, we were first assembled by a Romanian Army Colonel who advised us to remain in the prison camp until further notice. You can imagine how well these instructions were followed when the gates were opened and we were no longer restricted to the area. Soon after the Romanian Colonel left, Princess Catherine came to the Schoolhouse. She spoke to the officers and she was not as elated as one might think she should be at the news. She didn't like the Nazis but she feared the Russians. I have said over and over that I did not trust the Russians. In most reports, the Russians having started a drive down from the northeast were given credit for bringing about the armistice and liberating the American POW's. I always understood that the Romanians pushed the Nazis back toward the northwest. There was much ground fighting. The Romanian paratroopers were used along with other Romanian troops because in pulling back, the Germans had destroyed the Romanian planes on the ground. So the paratroopers had nothing in which to fly.

On the morning of August 24<sup>th</sup>, we heard the loud wailing of the air raid sirens. Shortly afterward, there was the bursting of bombs. The Germans kept up this indiscriminate bombing for about three days and nights. During one raid, Bob Ralston and I were outside the Schoolhouse talking to a Romanian girl who used to walk by the Schoolhouse and wave. We ran to the adipost (slit trench) in the Park. We had given the girl some chocolate. After the raid she took us to a bombed out building, and her mother cooked some eggs for us. They were the first eggs we had had for a long time. Realizing that the slit trench was no protection we went to the Schoolhouse basement for the next raid.

In the middle of Bucharest the Germans had made a mess of the Royal Palace and also had wrecked the Royal Shelter hoping to get King Michael. He wasn't there! He had gone to an unknown destination. Another of the German targets had been a large residential area. The residents had run to the slit trenches for safety. Many were killed when the slit trenches were blasted out of the ground. The buildings were hardly touched.

Realizing that the American and Allied Prisoners of War were in a dangerous position with the indiscriminate German bombing and the street fighting, Colonel Gunn worked to get the Romanians to agree to move the POW's to another camp a few miles outside of Bucharest.

After reaching an agreement on moving the POW's to a camp outside of Bucharest, Colonel Gunn tried to get a plane to fly to Italy to arrange for the evacuation of the POW's and prepare a plan for a strike against the Germans who were operating out of Banasea Airfield, a few miles north of Bucharest. Suggesting the strike against the Germans at Banasea helped Colonel Gunn persuade the Romanians to arrange a flight for him to fly to Italy.

Preparations were made for a Romanian pilot to fly Colonel Gunn out of Popesti Airdrome in an ancient Savoia Marchetti. Along with the Romanian pilot, there was a crew of two Romanian enlisted men. The enlisted men were wearing sidearms because apparently Colonel Gunn wasn't trusted. The Savoia Marchetti took off from Popesti Airdrome but returned after about 20 to 30 minutes. Supposedly, it had engine trouble.

When Colonel Gunn alighted from the plane at Popesti Airdrome he was met by a Romanian Captain named Constanti Cantacuzene, Commander of a fighter group and an excellent pilot. He was also a cousin of Princess Catherine Caradja. He offered to fly Colonel Gunn to Italy if he would ride in the belly of a Messerschmidt. Colonel Gunn agreed. Captain Cantacuzene spoke such excellent English that he and Colonel Gunn had no trouble communicating.

The radio equipment was removed from the belly of the Messerschmidt and American flags were painted on either side of the fuselage. Fearing that information on their flight would reach the wrong people, Captain Cantacuzene put out word that they would leave at dawn the next morning, August 28.

When the flags were completed - and almost dry - Captain Cantacuzene helped Colonel Gunn climb into the radio compartment as if to try it out. The opening to the compartment was rather small and when Colonel Gunn was inside Captain Cantacuzene slipped the cover plate over the opening,

fastened it, climbed into the cockpit and they took off to Italy that afternoon, August 27.

They landed at the San Giovanni Airstrip, home of the 454<sup>th</sup> and 455<sup>th</sup> Bomb Groups. The flight from Romania to Italy may have been uneventful, but we must not forget that Colonel Gunn was stuffed in the belly of that Messerschmidt without oxygen, with no way of seeing out, and no way of getting out in an emergency. We know the Lord was watching over them.

After they landed, Colonel Gunn and Captain Cantacuzene were given something to eat, and then hurried off to the 15<sup>th</sup> Air Force Headquarters at Bari, about an hour's drive. There plans were made for strikes against the Germans at Banasea Airdrome and for the evacuation of the prisoners of war.

The next day, the 99<sup>th</sup> Fighter Group made a strike against the Germans at Banasea Airdrome followed later by bombardment units of the 15<sup>th</sup> Air Force. They destroyed the Germans at Banasea.

Many stories circulated about the arrival of Colonel Gunn and Captain Cantacuzene in Italy. One was that Captain Cantacuzene was given a brand new P51 and returned to Bucharest. Colonel Gunn started to take off for Bari in the ME109 but was confused by the German instruments and ran off the runway at San Giovanni Airstrip. This really was one wild story.

Part of the plan for the evacuation of the prisoners involved Captain Cantacuzene. He flew a P51 fighter plane to Popesti Airdrome accompanied by two other P51's. Captain Cantacuzene landed at Popesti and signaled to the other two P51 pilots that it was still safe for the evacuation. Those two P51's climbed to a safe altitude and relayed the message on to Bari.

The first two B-17's with P51's flying as escort arrived. These B-17's brought in a liaison party which included medical officers, OSS, and others to prepare for moving the approximately 1,200 POW's.

Most of the POW's, including many from the Low Level Ploesti Raid of 1943, were in the camp outside of Bucharest and we were waiting for the flights of B-17's to come in and pick us up.

Though more of the POW's were from B-24 Squadrons than the B-17 Squadrons, I understood that B-17's with their tail wheel could cope with the rough runway of Popesti Airdrome better than the nose wheel of the B-24's. It didn't bother us because we just wanted to get out.

While we were waiting, I thought of the great job the Romanians had done in taking control. I always believed that they pushed the Germans out to the northwest and kept us out of the hands of the Russians whom I didn't trust anyway.

Our day for evacuation was 31 August 1944. We were taken by truck or bus to Popesti Airdrome to await our turn to board the B-17's as they came in. They landed, pulled up, cut the two outboard engines, and a group of 20 ran out and boarded. Each B-17 had been equipped with boards for seats in the bomb bays which accommodated 20 men. We had been divided into groups of 20 while we waited.

Many Romanian soldiers had come out to see us off and many had insignia or other items that they offered as souvenirs for trade. I discovered that I wasn't much of a "horse trader" and I don't remember what I wound up with.

Our turn came and we ran out to the B-17 that was taking our group of 20 to Bari. We had a beautiful trip and we thanked God for that. He was with us all the way.

When we landed in Bari, about the first thing we had to do was take off our old dirty clothes and get dusted or sprayed to get rid of those pesky little lice that we picked up in the prison camp. After the change of clothes and dusting for lice, Bob was taken to the hospital in Bari where they kept him overnight because of the injury to his eye.

The first night in Bari, we slept in tents and on cots with mosquito netting on a kind of frame around each cot. I had just gotten to sleep when there was an air raid alert. The siren woke me and I jumped off the cot and got myself thoroughly entangled in the mosquito netting. I wound up under the cot wrapped in the mosquito netting.

From Bari we were flown back to our groups and taken to our Squadron. The day after we got back, Froggie de Bordenave (my brother-in-law) who was the Navy Chaplain at Naples drove over to see me. He said, "I didn't know what to bring you, but the supply ship had just come in so I brought you a half crate of California oranges and a fifth of Seagrams VO!" That night we had a party. Harriette Vaden one of the Red Cross girls who served our group asked us to come in to her place. She lived on the



outskirts of Cerignola, not far from our Squadron. Froggie, Bob Ralston, John Porter, Joe McAllister, and I went to Harriette's. We had a lot of fun, much of it "catching up." Joe was one of the pilots in the 739<sup>th</sup> Squadron and not a POW, but he and Harriette, having been around the 739<sup>th</sup> Squadron while we were away, helped us in our "catching up." Froggie may not have been around the 739<sup>th</sup> but he had moved up from Palermo, Sicily to Naples while we were gone and he had a pretty good idea of what had been happening in the area during the past Spring and Summer. He wowed us all with his stories of playing poker with the Navy pilots and winning all their money. Joe McAllister, a good Texan, really couldn't believe it, but he thought so much of Froggie in that short time that he hitched a ride to Naples with him the next day.

I don't remember dates too well, but orders dated 7 September 1944 ordered us released from the 454<sup>th</sup> Bomb Group and directed us to report to the C.O. of Replacement Depot No 7, for trans-shipment via surface transportation to the United States.

Well we went to Replacement Depot No. 7 and Froggie was on the ball. He looked me up immediately and asked me to bring a couple of friends and come have dinner with him. I got Bob Ralston and John Porter and Froggie came down and picked us up. I wrote "came down" because Froggie, the Skipper of the Port, and Executive Officer lived in a villa overlooking Naples harbor.

That night we had a fancy three or four course dinner with a white table cloth and all. We may have had finger bowls too, but I don't remember them. After dinner, the seamen brought us liquor and set up a movie for us to watch. I don't remember the name of the movie but I do know that it didn't get to Richmond until two or three months later.

The movie was on two big reels so there had to be an intermission while the reels were changed. The Skipper said to Froggie, "Padre, don't you think we ought to have drinks around while the reels are being changed?" What a nice intermission that was! I will go on and say the evening was a real treat to these former POW's. On our way back to the Replacement Depot, Froggie drove us around Naples and pointed out the Naval Officers Club and Enlisted Men's Club. Froggie, amongst his other duties as Chaplain, was in charge of these clubs and had to use up any surplus money that was made. He would use all he could to make them pleasant then he would put them on free beer for about two hours every late afternoon.

We didn't spend much time in the Replacement Depot. We were put on one of those troop ships, the S.S. Athos, and headed for the United States. We landed at the New York Port of Debarkation, Fort Slocum. There, we had to get some new uniforms and I remember Bob Ralston and I got a lot of help from two nurses. The place that sold the uniforms couldn't fit them in time for us and a couple of nurses offered to fix them. You can be sure we said "yes". Well, Bob and I did take them, I think, to the Glen Island Casino that night. We had fun and Bob and I even sang "Mr. Moon" for the crowd. We were glad to be back in the good old USA.

When we left Fort Slocum, Bob was scheduled to go to the AAF Redistribution Station #1, Atlantic City, New Jersey, and I was to go to Redistribution Station #2, Miami Beach, Florida. Though we went to different redistribution stations, we have kept up with each other and still continue to do so.

#### EPILOGUE

As one of the Americans captured and imprisoned in Romania said of Princess Catherine Caradja, she was the "the best friend an American POW ever had." Princess Catherine used her influence to arrange for the downed Americans to be held in Romania rather than be sent to Germany. She was a frequent visitor to the POW camps in Timisul and Bucharest. After King Michael announced the capitulation of Romania, she not only wanted to help get the American POW's back to Italy, but she wanted to keep them out of the hands of the Russians as well as the Germans.

Princess Catherine continued to work with the foundation for orphans which her mother had built and she had taken over in 1919. She worked for them through the Communist (Red) invasion of 1944 and in the ensuing Red government until 1949 when the Communists took over and she lost

everything she had. She remained in Romania until 1952 when she escaped to the West.

In December of 1955, Princess Catherine was able to come to the United States. During the ensuing years she traveled to all 50 states trying to find "her boys"- the former prisoners of war in Romania. Through her encouragement, they formed The Association of Former Prisoners of War in Romania. The Association has been operating for several years and has a reunion annually. She traveled around the country by bus looking up former prisoners of war in Romania. She always attended the Association's meetings and always had a strong message: "Americans, cherish and protect your freedom. You who suffered its loss for a time should know and remember how precious it is, and how necessary it is to safeguard it." For 20 years, she went from town to town in this country speaking of freedom and the dangers to it. How fortunate we POW's were to have had someone like Princess Catherine trying to help us. I will never forget how lucky Ginny and I were in June 1983 to have Princess Catherine come to Richmond and spend a wonderful weekend with us.

In many respects it might seem that I was supposed to visit Romania. As I mentioned in my first letter to Mother and Father from the hospital in Giurgiu, my first cousin, John Skelton Williams, Jr., was Vice-Consul to Romania from 1921 to 1924.

After World War II, my brother Murat was sent to Romania as First Secretary of the Legation. He and his wife Joan were there from 1947 or 1948 until the Fall of 1951. Most of the time he was Charge d 'Affaires.

There was one more connection, slight as it may be, involving indirectly another relative. Col. Henry Anderson of the law firm of Munford, Hunton, Williams and Anderson was appointed Chairman of the Red Cross Commission in Romania in 1917. The Williams in the firm was my Uncle Randolph Williams. While in Romania, Colonel Anderson was quite taken with Queen Marie and she with him but he returned to Richmond and to the firm in 1918.

NOTE:

After the overthrow of Communist leader Nicolae Ceausescu in late 1989, Princess Catherine was invited to return to Romania. A farewell dinner was held in her honor in San Antonio, Texas on May 18, 1991.

Her granddaughter Princess Brianna Caradja and daughter Princess Alexandra live in Paris. Her granddaughter Brianna flew into Texas and took her to Paris where Princess Catherine stayed with her daughter Princess Alexandra until she was strong enough to continue on to Bucharest.

In 1992 Princess Catherine was able to return to Bucharest after 40 years of exile and there she could celebrate her 100<sup>th</sup> birthday. She had an apartment at St. Catherine's Crib Orphanage in Bucharest. St. Catherine's Orphanage had been founded by her mother in 1877.

Princess Catherine Caradja died on May 26, 1993 in Bucharest, Romania at the age of 101 years. The following autobiographical sketch written by Princess Catherine Caradja

#### PRINCESS CATHERINE CARADJA

I was born in Romania in 1893; my mother - Princess Cantacuzene, my father - Prince Kretulesco. When I was three, he took me off to an orphanage in England under a false name. After my mother's death in 1906 he moved me to France under my real name. Helped by an aunt I escaped to Romania in 1910, and the courts gave me to my mother's family. In 1914 I wed Prince Caradja, then World War I started. When in the fall of 1916 half of our country fell to the Germans, I fled to the free side with 2 children, one year old and 10 days old. Six months later I started with a 30 bed hospital for typhus cases and later, myself caught the fever. In the fall of 1918 after the Armistice, I returned to Bucharest.

Through the bitter years of searching for me, my mother had built a Foundation for orphans. The motto: "A mother who lost her child, for children who lost their mother." After her death, her mother took it over. In 1919 after those war years, I found her tired and I took over. I built up the foundation and added a foster home section in 12 villages near our estate. In 1920 I had our third

daughter. In 1933 I lost a child of 17 after a short illness in Vienna. My eldest was killed, with her husband, in an earth-quake in 1940. My last child escaped to the West in 1948.

I worked with the Foundation through the Nazi occupation in 1940 and the bombing by the Allies of the oil refineries. My land was nearby. I had a plane crash there. I helped that crew and 100 other surviving flyers in their POW camps in 1943 and 1944, also the over 1000 others who fell then. The Foundation now held 3000 children. I worked for them through the Red Invasion, in the fall of 1944, and the ensuing Red Government till 1949, when all was taken over by the State Offices and I lost all that I still had.

With nothing now to hold me, I accepted my last daughter's offer to try to get me out. After several attempts, I escaped in early 1952. Then I gave over 160 talks in France about "Life Behind the Iron Curtain". Every summer in London I spoke on the BBC networks. I spent the winter of 1954 to 1955 in Algiers after an earth-quake, organizing some child relief for a friend, also giving talks in Algeria and Morocco, stressing there the persecution in all our Captive Nations of all religions, even the Moslem minorities.

At last I got leave to come here in December of 1955. Since then I have spoken in all 50 states and all of Canada and have seen 90 of my first POW's and about 700 of the other, later fallen ones.

For twenty years I went from town to town here, without any time off, speaking of freedom and the dangers to it. Now I travel only half time, January to March and July to September. I live in Kansas City the rest of the year, continuing to speak there.

The Freedom Award of the Order Lafayette was awarded to me in 1966, in 1977 I received the one from the Valley Forge Freedom Foundation.

I feel that the only way I can be of service to our Lost Countries, is to tell the Free World about the "Worth of Freedom", showing conditions in the Captive nations and so encouraging the still Free World to protect and defend that Precious Freedom.

(Signed) Catherine Caradja

Princess Catherine Caradja  
Armour Home  
8100 Wornell Road  
Kansas City, Missouri  
64114  
(no date given)

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GROUP MISSION #30, 23 APRIL 1944  
AIRDROME AND AIRCRAFT FACTORY - BAD VOSLAU, AUSTRIA  
Donald W. Jones (738)

I was on the mission of April 23 to Bad Voslau. Hugh West, our AC, was the alternate lead and when the lead plane had bomb-sight trouble, Capt. West and Lt. James Thorpe, our Bombardier, took over and they both received the DFC for what they did. When I got back to the states, the first paper I bought had a picture of the a/c factory destroyed at Bad Voslau. About all I remember of that mission was a black wall of flak, but all we had was a small hole in "Miss Maggie". The only mission we really had trouble on was a "milk, run"?) to Turin in Italy. There were seven bursts of flak and that seventh one got us. The bombs had just left when we heard a big explosion. It went through the fuel tanks of #3 engine and also knocked out the electric motor for the hydraulic system. We feathered the prop to #3. Gas was pouring into the bomb-bay, so I turned off the fuel valve to that engine but, in reaching up to turn it off, I turned off #2 by mistake. When the pilots yelled at me, I saw right away that the fuel pressure to #2 was zero. They had pushed the throttle and turbo all the way on and when I turned the

fuel back on to #2, it took off like it was going to come off the wing. I got some pretty dirty looks from the pilots - the fuel pressure gauge was right in front of the co-pilots face. We were afraid to try to go all the way home with all that gas flowing around, so we opted to land on the island of Corsica. The first runway we came to was an Aussie Spitfire base. I wound down the landing gear and Lt. Last pumped down the flaps. We had full pressure in our hydraulic accumulators, which we saved for brakes. So we landed with no problems. We were flown off in a C-47 and a B-25 and were back at San Giovanni in a couple of days.

We were sent home on rest leave, and when we got back to Italy, Gen. Twining got up and said if we didn't want to fly any more combat, we didn't have to. Since I had survived the crash with Capt. Winburn (I was between the two who died), I figured I had used up most of my nine lives and came back home.

January 30, 2003 ...When the signal came to start engines, we finished our check list, and I guess we all breathed a sigh of relief, for we were now starting on our first mission - the tension of the unknown was beginning to break as we each began our familiar routines.

Despite the forebodings brought on by the Captain who commanded "Rosie" today, this first mission went well. I flew a good bit of the way to the target so he could judge how well I could hold her in formation. As we approached the target, he took over and I could see black clouds around our level over toward the target. The target was a Marshaling Yard in the center of the city of Bucharest, Romania. As we approached closer to the area, I could make out individual puffs of black cloud, and could see them form - this was flak I was told, and today it was quite a thick blanket over the target area as we turned on the IP and headed in.

About this time, I noticed fighters dead ahead coming toward us right through the flak, and I could see bright flashes along the leading edges of their wings as they fired at us. I thought, this is it - real combat - they're firing those flak guns and those ME-109's are shooting at us. Our gunners opened up as the 109's came within range. As we approached the release point and opened the bomb bay doors, the 109's flashed by us still spitting forth from their wings - one rolled over and made a split-S maneuver as he approached us, disappearing below. I don't think he was hit, as he seemed to be in complete control with no evidence of smoke coming from him.

We dropped our bombs and, as we turned left off the target, I took the controls. Looking down, I could see smoke and fires from the bombs dropped before us, and see the exploding bombs probably from our Group. Still the black puffs dotted the skies, some so close you could see the flash, and it seemed impossible that they could miss us, there was so much of that stuff all around, but we didn't get hit. I looked back and could see a long line of aircraft coming in at the target, and I wondered just how many others were getting their baptism up here today. The flak followed us for a ways off the target, but we never saw anything more of the fighters. When we got back after 8 hours of flying, we found we did have some minor damage - there were two deep cuts in the tire of our left main gear, like slits with a knife, probably caused by flak. Now mission number one was over, and we all knew what to expect for we'd seen both - flak and fighters. We'd been fearful and apprehensive - downright scared sometimes - but we'd made it. This was not the last time we'd know fear either. There would be other missions, some easy (milk runs) and some tough, very tough, but unlike our Captain on this first mission, we had a determination and a belief that we'd make it - most of us did.

When we stepped down out of the bomb bay onto the ground, it really felt good, and there to greet us was a very welcome Jeep with our Flight Surgeon and the shot of whiskey offered to everyone. Not all took it, but I have to say that, after a long day holding formation and being on oxygen, you're tired and that shot always seemed to put some pep back in us. Then it was off to Headquarters for debriefing where, before we began, the Red Cross girls dished out coffee and doughnuts. These really hit that hungry spot that soothes the hollow empty place in the stomach. Most of us got to the point where this was more welcome than the shot.

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GROUP MISSION #50, 27 MAY 1944  
OVER THE FRENCH RIVIERA; TARGET: MONTPELLIER A/D  
Leon O. Burke (738)

It was one of those days where there was no horizon as we flew westward over the Mediterranean to Southern France. Above, there was a small disk of bright blue sky, and below, a small, dull, blue dish of the sea. All else was milky white of varying degrees and the sun lay somewhere behind us where there was a milky glow in the early morning hours. The visibility improved as the sun moved more nearly overhead and as we neared the south coast of France, but considerable haziness remained with no horizon.

Pilots in CAVU flight conditions depend upon the horizon for orientation and today, there was no horizon. The lead ship could use auto-pilot and/or fly instruments for orientation, but all others had only reference to the lead ship to orientate them. It was difficult to keep an eye on the artificial horizon while trying to watch the lead ship and fly formation. Those flying to the left of the leader could more readily sneak a quick look at the artificial horizon, where as those flying on the right hand side of the leader had difficulty maintaining their visual reference to the lead ship and trying to turn their head quickly to see the artificial horizon instrument and then turn back to the lead ship again without losing reference. Vertigo was a true hazard in such situations! Occasionally, as a wing man focused on the lead ship, his position would become skewed and he would ride higher than normal. In this unusual position, he would feel the lead ship was turning toward him and would attempt to adjust power and turn the controls to compensate, only to find himself "cross-controlling" and having a terrible time maintaining position. His plight was evident to those behind him who could see that he was flying with one wing low in a banking maneuver, but moving in a straight line ahead with the lead ship. This was truly a confusing, and most disagreeable, uncomfortable situation for the wing man. To recover, he would have to pull out of formation briefly, orientating himself to the group, and creep, embarrassed, back into position. It was a long and tiring flight under these conditions.

If I recall correctly, there was one "Pathfinder" radar bombsight equipped late model B-24 for the Group which we were all to follow and toggle our bombs when we saw his bombs start to drop. We had been briefed that we should not expect much fighter opposition since supposedly only a few veteran combat Luftwaffe pilots were in the area instructing new pilots. Flak was supposed to be light, the heaviest concentration was at a certain point along the coastline, which we were to avoid. Our Navigator, Lt. William A. "Sandy" Sanderson, had proved to be an excellent navigator, though one who didn't care for military demeanor or formalities. Nevertheless, he was borrowed from us by the Group to fly and navigate the lead ship from time to time, so that, today, he wasn't scheduled to fly on this mission.

We had a borrowed Navigator that day - one that I'd known in the USA and who was especially conscientious. He was the sort who was rumored to have taken his sextant along to "open post" to practice shooting the stars on the balcony of the Gunther Hotel, in San Antonio, during navigation School, while most other cadets were stimulated by their sexual gender and hormones to search out female companionship. Definitely, he was stimulated by the female also, but navigation came first! In combat, I especially valued a conscientious Navigator who would help direct us if the lead ship was hit and could get us home by the most direct route if we became a wounded straggler.

As we approached the coast, the Navigator complained over the intercom that the Group Lead (perhaps trying to make up lost time, or off course due to the visibility problems) was taking us directly over the one spot along the coast that we were to avoid because of its capability to produce heavy, accurate and intense antiaircraft fire. There was no plane within miles of our formation to the right or left.

The first wave of bombers of our Group crossed the coast without seeing a burst of flak. We were only yards behind them as the second wave. Suddenly, the sky was full of flak with red flashing centers and rapidly expanding, dark, black smoke. It was at our altitude and slightly high, and directly

ahead at 12 o'clock. With the first burst, the cockpit was filled with tiny flashing lights from a multitude of plexiglass fragments from the approximately 2" hole that appeared in the mid-windshield between the copilot and me. We felt the glass hit our A-2 jackets and one stung and scratched my right wrist between glove and jacket. For a second or two, the sunlight on flying plexiglass fragments looked like Christmas tree tinsel. (That's as close as I ever came to getting the Purple Heart. It's an award I hoped never to receive.)

Instinctively, I ducked, creating a smaller target, and simultaneously kicked right rudder and wheeled her vigorously into a steep turn to unoccupied sky to our right. There was no reason on earth to stay in the #2 spot for the next couple of minutes or so. The IP (Initial Point) and target were a long, long way off. Plenty of time to reassemble if we were in flying condition.

As I ducked, warm, moist air from within my A-2 jacket was forced up about my neck and the Mae West vest into the cold air of high altitude, creating a small condensation "steam" cloud looking like smoke. The Copilot called out, asking if I were okay, and then the intercom to part of the ship was knocked out. The last thing some of the crew heard was, "Burke, are you hit?", accompanied by a violent, rapid turn to the right, creating an anxious moment for some of them who were wondering if the ship was out of control. Almost immediately, as soon as I knew I was a few hundred feet to the right of that burst, I leveled out rapidly and straightened myself up in the seat as a tiny piece of "spent" flak struck the windshield squarely between my eyes, leaving a cone-shaped hole with a tiny, full thickness defect. A jet of frigid air struck me in the face and reminded me for the rest of the flight how grateful I was that this annoyance wasn't the large "live" flak fragment that hit us first. The first burst had incapacitated the nose turret and cut the oxygen hose to the Navigator, who was quickly becoming anoxic and was mumbling that no "Jerry" was going to keep him from navigating. The nose gunner, Sgt. "Tommy" Leitch, on an oxygen walk-around bottle himself, rescued the Navigator and bought him to the flight deck, and got him hooked up to the ship's oxygen, from which point he could resume navigating without the electronic aids ruined by the flak at the Navigator's station.

About this time, "Jonesy" (Sgt. W.D. Jones, of Blunts Creek, North Carolina) reported in by intercom in his usual calm, unexcited and somewhat monotone voice. (We could hear him sometimes on a mission begging the enemy fighters to come in closer so he could get a burst off at them, while we prayed that they'd never get close to us.)

"Lt. Burke?"

"Yes, Jonesy."

"There was a plane got hit back here."

"Are they all right? Did anyone get out?"

"There were a couple of fellers."

"Did their chutes open?"

"One fellers did."

"Well, what about the other one?"

"Reckon he hit the water and drowned."

"Jonesy" chuckled dryly, and without mirth, as he realized the absurdity of a man falling 20,000 feet without his chute and drowning.

The crew along the flight deck "broke up" in laughter spontaneously as they realized the incongruity of the situation. There was no lack of sorrow or grief for the crew just shot down or the individual members involved. How well we realized that "but for the Grace of God" it would have been us! But the dam broke on our keyed-up emotions and a trick of our minds, and exploded as laughter; not an uncommon response as a form of relief in tense moments. There are reported cases of mortally wounded men laughing at the ridiculous incongruity of the situation creating their circumstances.

We reformed our group rapidly about the leader of our wave and dropped our bombs as scheduled.

It was along trip home. I wished I had my sunglasses which I had somehow, uncharacteristically, left at the base. But the annoying fine, cold jet of air in my face was welcomed as I

regarded the large hole between the Copilot's head and mine. I was grateful to my Creator for my good fortune, and that I was able to be grateful.

After briefing, we found out which crew had been lost. It was from another Squadron of our Group. There was great sense of personal relief, mingled with sorrow, for the lost crew that night! It seemed that no target was without its sorrow! One could only hope that the mission had been successful and was shortening the war. The price of victory was high, not only in the sky but on the earth, and in the sea!

Our Group would get a replacement crew; but nothing could ever replace a single one of the fine young men we lost! The loss of their family exceeded anything we could imagine; even when we thought in terms of that loss to our families.

We accepted the replacements with gratitude and a sense of responsibility to them. We knew, by our experience, their naivete. We realized lessons they were to learn in the school of experience, and some of the losses they would suffer. We were, in a sense, like "older brothers" with hard-won knowledge we would like to convey to them as gently and protectively as possible. Regardless of their chronological age, somehow the replacement would always be the "younger brother". Combat matures youth rapidly and "age" is related to maturity.

We would fly our remaining missions with unseen companions who would grow in number proportionate to our losses. Those we had lost were no longer with us bodily. They were with us in our subconscious, and sometimes conscious, minds; as is the way of the recently departed companion. We were reluctant for them to leave us! Years of the cares and joys of living have caused them to fade from our conscious mind most of the time during the day-to-day events of living. Yet, in unguarded moments, at unexpected times, or when our minds go back to former days, they live again. They live in their youthful vigor! Now they are companions to brothers who now are many decades older and who, in their minds, for awhile, are also young again.

I understand that it is pleasant today on the French Riviera. I wonder if the relaxing socialite of today realizes the price paid for that real estate.

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GROUP MISSION #64, 13 JUNE 1944  
BAYERISCHE MOTOR WORKS - MUNICH, GERMANY  
Norman P. Stoker (738)

Everything routine - takeoff, assembly. Flying position 7. Turn on IP. B-17 formation above and well in front. Light flak directed at B-17s. Approaching target, heavy flak. #3 prop over speeding. Held formation and brought over speed down with feather button. Over speed recurred - again brought down to RPM below other engines. Would not hold. Held formation for bomb drop as prop again ran away. Dropped out of formation. Cut power #3 engine. No help. Engine/prop running wild, shaking throughout aircraft. With a heavy jerk, the engine froze and prop stopped flat against the airstream. Fighters attacking another Bomb Group at our 10 o'clock position. Heavy action. B-24, probably hit by enemy fighters, rammed another B-24. Looked like it was happening in slow motion. Both went down. We entered a cloud. Returned to base on a course to the East of the main bomber stream and over the Adriatic - hopefully to avoid enemy intercept - successful. Pulling 2350 RPM and 43" MP. Landed without further incident at Giovanni. Cause of prop malfunction - flak punctured prop dome - small hole - lost all fluid...

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GROUP MISSION #75, 7 JULY 1944  
ARMAMENT WORKS - DUBNICA, CZECHOSLOVAKIA

Nick Yezdich (736)

This is about T/Sgt Nich Yezdich, S/Sgt Walter Benner and Lt. Maurice Terry.

On July 7, 1944, we bailed out over Slovakia - which was a puppet state of the Germans. I was slightly wounded and placed in a hospital at Trencin, Slovakia - with a few other Americans who were also wounded.

I was there for about ten days, then flown to the airport of Bratislava - then by car to Army barracks at Bratislava. There were about 25 American POWs at the barracks - including some from my crew. After two weeks, we were moved to a very small camp a few miles out of Bratislava.

We were imprisoned there til about Sep 5, 1944 when the Slovaks, who had enough of the Germans, opened up the gates and told us to take off.

We took off in small groups, Walter Benner, Maurice Terry and I were in such a group.

The next morning the Germans were looking for us. Luck was with us and we evaded them. A few days later we ran into some Slovak Partisans in the hills and they gave us a ride in a flat bed truck - twice the size of a pickup. We had to be careful as there was always the danger of German patrols.

Later on we had a ride in an oversized row boat which was used as a ferry operated by pulling on a cable stretched across a 25 yd wide river.

Two or three days after we met an old couple in the forest who gave us a lift in there cart pulled by two oxen.

A few days later we were on a train - which took us about fifteen miles - we were packed like sardines - but it beat walking. The people at that time were pro-American, so it was easy to get a ride. Later on, when the Germans were getting rough with them, their attitude changed.

We arrived in Banska Bystrica the last week of Sept. The OSS was there and they took care of us - food, lodgings, and etc.

Oct 7, 1944 six B-17s landed with 32 P-51s flying cover. The B-17s were unloaded with equipment such as bazookas, ammunition - medical supplies and gasoline for the Slovaks. Then about 26 American flyers were loaded and flown to Italy.

The OSS stayed, they had a mission - which I found out later was ill-fated. Many of the POWs that the Slovaks left go Sept 5 were captured by the Germans and put in there POW camps.

Our adventure may seem like the movies, but it was scary.

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GROUP MISSION #82, 20 JULY 1944  
MAYBACH AIRCRAFT ENGINE FACTORY - FRIEDRICHSHAFEN, GERMANY  
Jack C. Schreck (739)

Taking off from Cerignola, Italy, our crew on "Borrowed Time" was leading the 15<sup>th</sup> Air Force on a mission to Friedrichshafen, Germany on July 20, 1944.

We were leading the mission because we had "Mickey" radar on our plane. We could drop bombs thru clouds and the other planes would drop their bombs when we dropped ours.

Over the target we had three engines shot out by flak. (Friedrichshafen was where they trained the anti-aircraft gunners for Germany's defense).

Our whole crew bailed out over Switzerland. We all got out alive. This was my 45<sup>th</sup> mission.

I hit on a barn roof and fell 15 feet on a cement sidewalk on my back. When I came to, there were five Swiss men pointing guns at me, and I found myself prisoner of war.

The Americans were put under guard and, if they were caught trying to escape, they were put in a camp and put on bread and water. I couldn't figure that out because the Germans, French, English, Italians and Russians could come and go as they pleased.

I found out later that the American Government was paying the Swiss Government \$200.00 a



month to keep us there and the Swiss didn't want to lose the income.

I was made commanding officer of the enlisted men's camp in Wengen, Switzerland. I escaped in December 1944 and ended up back in Italy.

Colonel Tomlinson was made military attache and he was the one who was responsible for me going to Wengen (thanks Tommy).

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GROUP MISSION #86, 25 JULY 1944  
HERMANN GOERING TANK WORKS - LINZ, AUSTRIA  
Norman P. Stoker (738)

Same routine. Get up. Go to Mess Hall. French toast (bread fried and served with flavored water). Looked forward to C-rations - especially the cheese. Briefing, takeoff and assembly. I think forming up in that circle, is a rather "trying" part of the mission, especially if you are on the inside of the turn looking into the sun and the ship you are forming on has slowed. Real easy to stall with a heavy load - so - flaps.

IP - fighters reported by crew. About a minute into bomb run #3 engine hit. Dropped out of formation - continued bomb run in descent at tail end of formation. Over target, lost #1 engine. Dropped bombs (toggle) about 10 seconds after formation drop. Set a course (Navigator - Arthur Frantz) to West of bomber stream from the Island of Vis off coast of Yugoslavia - held by British - fighter base in Adriatic. Engine operation #2 and #4 OK. Crew told to lighten aircraft by throwing all possible over board. Power normal - continuous 2550/45 in shallow descent. Uneventful until about 30 minutes out of Vis. Tail Gunner, Frank Doerr, called two fighters (specks) at 6 'clock. Lucky - P-51s went right on by. Guess low on fuel. Radio Operator, Paul F. Fuller, contacted Vis tower. Land to West. Turn on approach, #4 engine back firing - pulling take off power 2700/49 to hold altitude. See B-24 3 engines approaching Vis from West. Co-Pilot Kenneth M. Hall, notes same - appears may be landing approach - head on. No alternative - our part - had to land to West - other B-24 goes around and bails out - crew all safe. One stated bailed out because landing could have been a disaster - no hydraulics and no brakes. Little high on approach due to mountains around field. Pulled off all power - full flaps and gear - opened cowl flaps - feathered props offered no drag. Flew onto end of runway 140 MPH - hit brakes - dirt runway - chunks torn from tires but stopped - all safe.

Spent nite on Vis - artillery fire in distance. C-47 to Bari next day. Truck to San Giovanni. Been reported as missing in action - someone debriefed seeing us drop out and chutes. Bombardier, Christopher G Newberger, not on this trip - very happy to see us. Had looked after our gear refusing to believe we were not OK. Surprised Squadron Doc and a few others as we trucked thru Cerignola and saw them on a balcony - waved. During debriefing, one Group staffer (Major) asked why we did not return to home base on 2 engines. He was ignored..

From diary of F. Kent Vosper (739)

This may be the most interesting part of our overseas tour. We were flying B-24's out of Cerignola in southern Italy. This was to be our last mission (although we weren't aware of that when we took off). We had a number of new men. When a replacement crew came overseas, they were divided out and put with experienced crews. So, I had a different Co-Pilot, Navigator and Waist Gunner that day. Our target was to be the Hermann Goering Steel Works at Linz, Austria. We didn't feel it was a particularly tough target, but you never know. On a previous mission, our target was Venice in northern Italy. We had been informed it was a "milk run" but anti-aircraft guns had been moved to a higher elevation in the mountains, so we received a deadly surprise and were very lucky to get back to base. The damage to our aircraft was so severe that it never flew again.

Back to the Linz mission - we had our briefing and had gotten off the ground and had circled over the Adriatic, flying over water because that's where we preferred to be in relation to the anti-aircraft guns on the ground. Everything went normal until we got to the top of the Adriatic or a little above, where we had prop governor trouble on the #3 engine. We were forced to drop out of the formation and finally got our prop governor operating on #3 engine after a brief interval. We used a little extra power and eventually we slipped back into number 7 position in our Squadron. (One reason I'm mentioning this now is that we never did get credit for this particular mission. I guess apparently the Tail Gunners in 5 and 6 position did not recognize us, but regardless, we were there.)

As I remember, we climbed to 31,000 plus and our fighter escort picked us up to the top of the Adriatic and brought us into the target at Linz, Austria. There, when the flak started coming up, they disappeared. This was normal, as there was no use in our fighters getting knocked down by a lucky shot. We, of course, didn't have to worry about German fighters either because they would also have been destroyed by indiscriminate anti-aircraft fire.

I don't know what you know about flak, but it's much like field artillery - each shell is fused to go off at a predetermined altitude. Anti-aircraft gunners tried to determine at what altitude you were flying and fuse the shells to explode at the bomber formation altitude. The shells would then explode, breaking up into pieces measuring about 1-2 inches long by 1/2 inch wide, which is what would knock down aircraft. The flak was bad that day, but it wasn't particularly worse than any other time, so we were surprised when the lead ship of the Group didn't drop its bombs on Linz. We had been briefed to follow the lead ship example so we didn't release our bombs either. We never got back to our base again, so I never really did know the reason why we didn't release our load. If we had unloaded then, we probably would have made it back to base and saved "Vesper's Vultures" a lot of grief.

From there we proceeded to our alternate target, which was a marshaling yard in Salzburg. We arrived over Salzburg, but we didn't drop the bombs there either. Instead, we made a pass over Salzburg and turned back toward Linz, Austria and that's where we were clobbered. One of the most difficult things for the German gunners to determine was the exact altitude that the Bomber formation is flying. But, by that time, the Germans had our altitude down pat. Usually they flew a German fighter along side of our formation to radio our altitude and if that happened that day, I really don't know. If our fighter escort wasn't there to chase them away, the flak could be very accurate. Probably what did happen was that our fighter escorts were low on fuel after all the extra flight time and were unable to protect us. We finally did drop on Hermann Goering Steel Works and turned for our home base.

After "bombs away", we'd use evasive action, which is simply zigging and zagging and loosening up our formation. Whether it really helped that much I don't know, but it sure relieved the pressure on our nerves. We weren't flying directly into the flak, but just trying to get out of there. So we were just off the target a short distance when we received a couple of hits by anti-aircraft. We lost #2 and #3 engines immediately and was never able to get #2 back in. We lost our top turret, which was knocked out completely, and the windshield in front of me was completely knocked out. We had been flying over 30,000 feet and the temperature was 60 degrees below zero so with a 200 mph wind coming through the cabin you can imagine the problems we had in the cabin of the B-24. The good news was that we didn't have anyone killed and that no one, as far as we could determine at that time, was severely wounded.

We lost quite a bit of altitude immediately and we may have lost as much as 10,000 feet, I really don't remember. Eventually the Engineer got a piece of plywood and got it locked in place, replacing the windshield in front of me (which really helped out). We dropped out of formation and, of course, we headed for home. There was a decision to make then - whether we should go to Switzerland and be interned or should we try to get home and fly more missions? (Once you went to Switzerland, you were interned for the duration of the war, but you did spend a pretty relaxed time.) But I determined that we'd better try to get home and so we headed for Viz.

Viz is an island in the middle of the Adriatic if you would like to look it up on the map. Sometimes it's spelled Viz and sometimes Vis. On their little island they had a crash strip and you could

slide in damaged aircraft there. We were never to get to Viz, but I guess there were lots of B-24's and B-17's that were piled up alongside the runway. Viz served a useful purpose as it saved many crews from perishing that would be returned to Italy to bomb again. Anyway, we proceeded to fly south toward our own base, but had a number of problems. I never was able to know the full extent of our damage because we bailed out before we had the opportunity to look our plane over. We flew through the Alps, not over the Alps, as we had peaks on both sides of us. It was a hairy situation. I may be making it sound worse than it actually was, but it was bad.

After we flew through the Alps, we got to the top of the Adriatic. The Germans always had guns on the coastline of the Adriatic and they always took a few parting shots at us. I remember the flak was thick there, but we got through that. We were out over the waters of the Adriatic and headed toward Viz or home. It wasn't too long, probably an hour, that the Engineer said we couldn't transfer any of our fuel to our main cells. It was regular procedure on a mission that we would drain our wing tip internal tanks and transfer gas to the main tanks. We carried 1,000 gallons internally in our wing tip tanks and we usually transferred 500 gallons of fuel to the main cells on the way to the target and 500 on the way back. Apparently the lines had been severed within the wing, so we couldn't transfer the second 500 gallons. We did have quite a bit of wing damage, but were still flyable. Another problem we had was we could never feather the propeller on #2, so it was windmilling out there, causing a lot of drag and really hurting our air speed.

When we discovered we were rapidly running out of fuel, we knew we couldn't get to Viz. So it was decision time again. Northern Italy was controlled by the Nazis. Yugoslavia's hills were controlled by the Partisans and the roads, cities and villages were controlled by the Germans. I made the decision to make a 90 degree turn into Yugoslavia. We looked for an area on the map that was 75% safe (in other words, if we bailed out in an area, we had a 75% chance of getting in with the Partisans. Then perhaps, with their cooperation, we would be returned to Italy). All this time there was an overcast over the Adriatic and Yugoslavia, but fortunately, as we were coming up on the coastline of Yugoslavia, we saw coastline through a couple of holes in the clouds, we then felt pretty safe that we were over land. We flew on another five minutes and prepared to abandon ship.

On a B-24 there were three places you could exit. There was a nosewheel door which lifted up, the bomb bays, plus a rear hatch that opened up, all places where we could bail out. We all had parachutes available. The crew wore the parachute harness, the flight suits and all the equipment. The crew didn't wear a parachute all the time, but kept their chutes very close to them so they could snap it onto their chest harness. If it didn't drop out, they could pull their chute out and get it to open up. The Pilot and Co-Pilot had what was called the "handkerchief pack", which was on our backs at all times. It was about 2-1/2 inches thick, and probably 18"x 24" square. We wore it all the time because we might not get a chance to grab a chute and snap it on.

As we prepared to abandon ship, the idea was that everybody would bail out at the same time and arrive on the ground in the same area. We had a few problems here, too. As I gave the order to abandon ship, I had rushed back from the Pilot station where I was keeping the airplane's wings level and doing the many things a Pilot does, to go out the bomb bay. Here my Navigator and Nose Gunner were coming out from underneath the flight deck, so I had to go back to keep the ship straight and on level flight to permit their bailout. They'd had a problem.

I was to find out later that somebody had urinated on the nosewheel door. A lot of times, if you were to relieve yourself, that was the only alternative, as flights were 6-8 hours long. Even though we had tubes that we could use, sometimes these tubes would freeze up and you were forced to use the door. That would freeze immediately and prohibit you from opening the doors to use as a bail out exit. So they came back to use the bomb bay doors and, by that time, everybody had been off the intercom so nobody could warn the others of this distressful situation.

So I went back to straighten up the aircraft. I'd given them a little time to get out and, when I came back, the Navigator was still standing on the catwalk. (The catwalk was about ten inches wide and extended the center and length of the bomb bay. The bomb bay was probably ten feet by the width of

the airplane, which was probably about eight feet.) Anyway, he was standing on the catwalk and I assumed that he was afraid to go out, so I pushed him. We may have been in a nose-down attitude and probably picked up a little speed because it would be natural for me to trim the aircraft so that it wouldn't stall out and I probably trimmed it out nose down.

After I pushed him out, I went out immediately. One thing I noticed upon exiting was all of a sudden it was quiet. The noise of a B-24, with four Pratt-Whitneys roaring, was considerable and, of course, I bailed out with a helmet over my ears. The first thing I noticed was how quiet it was. I didn't pull the rip cord on my chute, but waited and fell through the overcast. I knew we were probably at about 14-16,000 feet, and realized that the mountains came up to 5 or 6,000. Even though I would have to look at a map to see if that is correct, I knew we were at a pretty high altitude and I had quite a bit of time as I fell through the overcast.

We had read and discussed the chapter on bail out, which instructed you on how to get your feet toward the ground before pulling the rip cord. I was apparently falling head first and worked at this maneuver for quite a while, but nothing seemed to work. I had read the chapter quite thoroughly, but this was the only experience any of us on the crew had in an actual bail out. They never gave us time to experience a bail out because they were too afraid of us breaking a leg, thus holding up our military career. They wanted us overseas fighting, not in a hospital. I couldn't get my feet toward the ground and I thought "That's enough of this," and pulled the rip cord.

That snapped me into position in a hurry. The sensation of falling was not as unpleasant as I expected. Under the circumstances, I was happy to be rid of the airplane as I expected it to blow up, or at least to burn, as there was gasoline leaking everywhere. We were fortunate to have had time to get out. A sensation I experienced on the way down was that I wasn't falling, but just floating around. I've heard other first-time bail-outs express the same thing - that they worried and felt that maybe they weren't falling because everything on the ground didn't seem to get any bigger. This happened to me, too. I thought, "Gosh, maybe I'm just floating around up here." Then I noticed that things like trees were starting to get bigger.

I was landing in a mountainous area. These weren't craggy mountains, but there were trees growing over the top of them. All of a sudden, I noticed the trees were getting bigger. It seemed that the earth was coming up to meet me rather than me dropping to meet it. I suppose this was a first time experience, so maybe a lot of others have felt that way too. It seemed like as soon as I noticed that things were getting bigger, "Whammo!", I hit the ground. The snow was about three feet deep, so we had quite a cushion to fall into.

The biggest surprise for me was on the way down (today it's kind of funny, although it was very serious then). You remember that I was the last one out of the plane, As I fell, the parachute blossomed over the top of me and I couldn't see overhead, only out and down. Well, here came an airman in a parachute falling more rapidly than I was and, to say the least, I was very surprised. He had all his flying equipment on and I couldn't see who he was, but when he went by I could see the top of his parachute. There were three to four panels ripped out of his chute and that apparently was the reason he was falling considerably faster than I was. I thought "Who in the hell is that?" But, when I saw the rips in the parachute, I knew it was the Navigator I had pushed out. The difference was that I had fallen free quite a distance and he had opened his chute immediately. After getting on the ground, he told me he'd pulled his rip cord right away, before he started dropping. Since the aircraft was flying around 250-300 mph, he was traveling with the speed of the airplane and popped some of the panels out when he pulled his rip cord. With the panels ripped out, he had gained rapidly on me on our downward fall.

When we got on the ground, he was pretty angry, to say the least. We really didn't know each other that well because this was his first mission and he'd been placed on my crew only that morning, although I had visited with him shortly before he got in the airplane. Anyway, he was angry and I said "Well, I thought you were scared to bail out." He said "Hell no, I wasn't scared to jump out, I was just saying my prayers." And I told him, "Well, you could have waited and said your prayers on the way down, like I did!...."



GROUP MISSION #97, 15 AUGUST 1944  
BEACH #264B (INVASION) - SOUTHERN FRANCE  
Norman P. Stoker ( 738)

Night formation practices not all that much fun. You gotta be careful - vertigo and the little blue light on top of the ship you are flying on seems to move around. Don't get a fixation on it. In preparation for 97, flew night formation practice. Had not flown at night since crossing to Africa from Brazil. Black as pitch and on instruments from lift off.

No sleep prior to mission 97 for most of us. Been up since early morning 14 August 1944 mission to Savona, Italy. Mission 97 is our 4<sup>th</sup> in a row - had a one day break 11 August 1944.

Objective - to bomb the beach at about daybreak prior to invasion landings. Take offs start about 2:30 hours - we are last in line for South take off 28<sup>th</sup>. 1 ship ahead when a B-24 flies into the ground and explodes about 1/2 mile after TO. Terrain rises gradually - warm night - little or no wind - probably just flew into ground. Explosions - little or no wind. Explosions - aircraft in front aborts. Explosions dying down - hold brakes - full power stabilized - start take off run. Put a couple of extra inches on MP Lift off - on instruments - CP notes passing over burning B-24. Maintaining steady climb indicating 120 MPH - did not increase airspeed until 1000. No flying into ground. Formed up and proceeded to target. Could not Dr - cloud cover.

Had taken a couple of pills handed out by Doc to combat sleepiness. Never again - They wore off about 30 minutes, prior to landing. Extreme fatigue - relieved to get back on the ground without incident.

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GROUP MISSION #98, 17 AUGUST 1944  
ASTRA ROMANA OIL REFINERY - PLOESTI, RUMANIA  
Norman P. Stoker (783)

"Hearty breakfast"- briefing - another day trip to Ploesti, but with a switch. Bomb in a column of Squadrons. Gunn leading - Arthur Frantz, one of Lead Navigators on Gunn's ship. Flying #4 in the formation with Ken Fry on one wing and ? on other. Routine climb enroute and to IP. Turned on bomb run. No flak. Column in front dropped bombs - no flak. Couldn't believe - Ploesti and no flak. 30 seconds to bombs away. Shell burst nose lead ship - second shell burst #2 engine lead ship. Flak all over the place - and aircraft 1, 2 and 3 out of control. Salvaged bombs. Evading out of control aircraft by climb and left turn. Crew noted numerous chutes and falling aircraft - set course for base - checked damage. Crew reported numerous shrapnel holes. No serious damage. Set course South of main bomber stream return route with one B-24 on right wing and one on left. Subsequently, other aircraft left formation. Continued on course selected and approached base from South. Maintaining altitude of 5000 feet. Low fuel indications two engines. Possible fuel loss? Checked flaps - OK, checked gear - nose and left main OK. Right main - stuck. Recycled - same. Used emergency system - no response. Pulled on cable - it came out - cut by flak. Crew given option to bail out - no takers. Photographer popped his chute in tail section. Cleared by tower for landing. Crew in crash positions. Tower - "Don't land on the steel planking." Agreed - no sparks necessary. Fry had landed prior without hydraulics and was at far end of runway. Touched down left main - held nose wheel off - rolled left aileron to hold right wing up. When nose wheel touched down - lowered right wing - cut engines when wing touched, applied brakes, alarm bell and all exited safely. Aircraft later returned to flight operations. Heard report of 273 shrapnel hits/holes - mostly small - of the 10 aircraft on the bomb run, 3 returned. Two landed at home base and one at Bari.

Note: Arthur Frantz, Navigator on Gunn's aircraft, bailed out safely, as did most of Gunn's crew, and achieved POW status. Our crew, less Frantz, flew on to complete 6 more missions and our tour with

3 doubles and 3 singles the last being 3 Sept. 1944, Szajol, Hungary.

W. B. "Bill" Schuyler (739)

I was appointed Nose Gunner on the crew of John Norton. On August 17<sup>th</sup> 1944, Ed Mitnik and I were scheduled to fly to fill in with the crew of Lt. Clark, as his crew was missing two members, from the loss on previous mission.

Our target was the Ploesti Oil Fields in Roumania. As Nose Gunner, I had a good view of what was ahead of us. This being my first mission to a well protected target, I had never seen such a barrage of black smoke, so I pressed my intercom button and asked about the black smoke, about the time we turned on the I.P., so I didn't get a reply. A part of my job was to inform the Bombardier when the Lead plane opened it's bomb bays, and when the bombs were released. We didn't have a bomb-sight in our plane. Also, I'd call when the bomb bay doors were to be closed.

We lost an engine on the bomb run. There were a lot of holes, but no injuries to members of the crew. As we headed for home base, we had trouble with another engine and could not keep up with the rest of our formation. Fortunately, we had a good fighter escort most of the way home, enough that the enemy gave up on getting us. I was ordered to vacate the nose turret and go back to the waist, also Ed was told to get out of his ball turret.

We unloaded everything we could tear loose, even waist guns and ammunition, to lighten the load. We even latched on our parachutes, expecting to bail out. Although the second engine finally gave out and was feathered before we reached an emergency air strip near the beach of Italy. After touch down, another engine gave out as we rolled down the runway. An Engineer Officer was amazed that we had only one engine when we stopped. The officer had a tractor tow the plane to a junk area and a truck took us back to our base.

When we were appointed to be "Lead Crew", as I was assigned to Waist Gunner so that a spare Navigator would go into the nose turret. Soon after I became a Waist Gunner, we had a 500 lb. bomb hung up in a bomb rack. I was given about a 20" screwdriver and ordered to shed my parachute and go into the bomb bay and break loose the latch holding the bomb in the forward bay. The space between the stanchions was too narrow for a mid-sized man to pass through, even side-ways. As soon as the bomb fell, the Bombardier closed the bomb bay doors. Going back to the rear of the plane sure was better than going along the bomb bay catwalk with the doors open.

Later, we made a couple of missions with clusters of anti-personnel bombs. The first time we had these units, two bombs slipped out of the clusters. Again, I shed my chute and went into the bomb bay and carefully took it to the compartment door and gently gave it to Joe Anthony, Waist Gunner, and he carefully worked his way to a waist opening and tossed it out. While Joe was doing that, I went back and got the other bomb and delivered it to Joe. These bombs probably weighed only 15 or 20 lbs. We hauled these only a couple of times.

In January 1945, our Navigator, Jim Guant filled in on another crew as the rest of us didn't fly that day. The crew that Jim was with was shot down into the Adriatic. There were no survivors.

While on the Isle of Capri for R & R, I met and later, in 1946, married my wife, Edie. She and some other WAC/s were housed in the villa of Count Chiano, son-in-law of Mussolini.

From a letter to Corwin C. "Pat" Grimes (738) by Paul R. Hallman (738)

....I flew with the crew of James A. Kirtland. We came over as a replacement crew in April of '44. I had flown 41 missions when we were shot down on Aug. 17<sup>th</sup> of '44. Kirtland had finished his 50<sup>th</sup> the day before, so our crew had to be split up. I was to finish mine with Capt. Porters' crew. (This was my first mission with a different crew.) On Aug. 17<sup>th</sup> we were flying a Mickey Plane and flying Alternate Lead to Col. Gunn.

Our target that day was Ploesti. I think our target was refineries, but as we were going in, Col.

Gunn had a direct hit from AA, so we took over Lead and shortly we had a direct hit in the nose. This hit killed Lt. R.W. Thompson, Navigator, who was on my original crew. Also killed Lt. Leslie Matthews, Bombardier.

Lt. R.W. Thompson was from McCall, S.C. Was married, had no children. After I came back home and was discharged from the Air Force, my girl friend, who is my wife of 45 years, went to visit Thompson's mother. Thompson was the only son of a widowed mother. He had one sister now living somewhere in the Washington area.

Lt. Leslie Matthews was, I believe, from Michigan. Les was married, had a daughter 6 months old that he had never seen. I talked to Les' wife about 2 years ago. She had remarried and now is living in Oregon. His daughter is married and has 2 daughters. So, what a strange thing a war is. I still ask the question of Why?

The other crew members on that day were Capt. Porter, Pilot, Joe Greene, Co-Pilot. We had 3 Navigators, Lt. R.W. Thompson, who flew Nose Turret, Lt. Frantz and Group Navigator Henry A. Conway. Lt. Leslie Matthews, Bombardier, Brown was Engineer, now deceased. Radio Operator Alfred Peccia, Tail Gunner, Doyt Bartz, deceased. Waist Gunner Arthur Hamner and myself. Also Joe Greene died several years ago.

I have been in contact with several of these. James A. Kirtland I have talked to. Lt. Henry Conway, Arthur Hamner, others of our Group. Lt. Robert F. Ragan, Bombardier on my crew. Kenneth Wineberg, Navigator who was shot down also flying with Gunn.

After being shot down, I was burned and spent all of my time over there in a civilian hospital outside of Ploesti, along with 5 others which included Capt. Wineberg, Alfred Peccia, and I do not recall the names of the other three. We were later freed by the Russians and gotten back to our Squadrons and, from there, back to the States. It was a very lasting experience....

From the handwritten notes of Allen H. "Barney" Marshall (737)  
Transcribed by John Marshall

These are thoughts and facts of the mission on my 28<sup>th</sup> birthday, after I have arrived back at the field. The place and some technical facts I must retain in my head until it is permissible to record them, probably after the war.

At the briefing, I learned the place of the target and enough things to know that it was a tough mission. And I had heard enough talk about the target previously to know it was tough. However, in spite of things I had heard of how hellish flak could be, and pictures I had seen, etc., I still had never gone thru bad flak and consequently did not feel much different than I had when we approached the target in my previous missions.

As we flew to the target, it occurred to me that I might be injured or forced down in enemy territory or that I might even be killed. The latter thought I threw aside quickly. I guess everyone thinks that no matter what happens, he won't be among those killed. I myself had a feeling that there would be men killed that day and I was sure that each one thought he would not be among them. Then I thought, since this was true, I guess I could be among them at that.

And the thought came to me that because of the difference in time between the place of my birth and the target, I might not be quite 28 - I would possibly miss it by a few hours. And I could just see the people back home reading that I had been killed or was Missing In Action on my birthday. One had plenty of time to think going to a target.

As we approached the target, there was smoke visible which must have been caused by the bombing of someone ahead of us. And there was the usual series of smudge fires which serve to smoke-screen the target. I was in no way prepared for the events of the minutes and hours which were to follow, due largely I suppose, to the fact that I had never yet been on a really tough mission. However, I don't believe the veterans of many raids and of many tough targets expected this one to be as tough as it turned out.

The few planes ahead of us had begun to go over the cloud of smoke when I saw the first flak. It was between that box and ours and slightly below and not close enough to worry one very much. I called over the interphone "here is the first handshake of the reception committee". It seemed only seconds later that all hell broke loose and the flak became incredibly intense and accurate right after that one burst.

Many thoughts flashed through my mind, probably in a matter of only a few seconds. I thought "how can flak ever be worse than this is, how can any plane escape without damage, and without at least one person in each crew being killed or injured," and I thought of all the dangers of the cursed stuff, how it could score a direct hit on our plane and explode it, how it could explode in the bomb bay detonating the bombs which hadn't been dropped yet, how pieces could come tearing through almost any protection we had and kill or maim me. I recall feeling to see if my escape kit was in the left breast pocket of my coveralls, thinking it might be the thing that would stop the flak after it had penetrated everything else and headed for my heart.

I lowered my head once, because it didn't seem that I could look at the stuff any longer and remain sane. It almost seemed that I would be killed if I first looked at it. And I remember thinking that if I look up, actually my head will be only a little above the metal of the turret cradle and the stuff could come down anyway and go through my helmet. Actually I don't believe I was brave enough to look up, but something made me do it, probably the thing inside me that makes me want to know everything about everything.

Probably my head wasn't down more than a second or two. When I looked up, it seemed that the stuff was worse than ever, and the lead ships hadn't dropped their bombs yet. It wasn't long-how long I have no idea, probably seconds again-until I could see planes-it seemed like every one of them-with one or more engines smoking. The lead planes ahead of us seemed to be having trouble, and even though there were no evidences of smoking engines, it seemed that they were doomed.

Somewhere-I can't possibly list these things chronologically, a chute came hurtling back from one of the lead planes, one whose wing it seemed to me was hit by a burst and was losing big pieces. The chute was partially opened already and the person in it looked limp and broken and dead. And in an instant thought it came to me that he would surely be dead with the flak bursts filling the air with such lethal pieces. I said my only word during the actual bomb run when he drifted by our plane. I said "shit" in such a way that I must have been thinking "what kind of a war, what kind of a world that gives a fellow such a fate" and I think I meant my exclamation-it just happened to be that word-to be a prayer for this fellow. Bursts were so close they could be heard-a sound like nothing else on earth, maybe the mind makes it seem this way-and I could see black pieces of jagged metal leaving the burst. Naturally, I couldn't make out that they were jagged and metal, but that I knew already. I remember thinking how can we possibly escape going down, or how can it possibly happen that I don't get killed by some of these pieces.

Seeing several planes in all directions, with one or more engines smoking, I looked back more than once to see if there were any visible hits on our plane. One time it seemed there was heat coming up from the bottom of my turret and I looked down expecting to see a fire caused by something or the other, but there was nothing amiss.

I remember seeing some of the lead planes dropping their bombs and it seemed hours before we dropped ours. When we dropped them, it seemed that we should be out of the flak. I guess it was wishful thinking, but it was just as thick and accurate as ever. Sometime, about here, another chute came by, but there seemed to be no one in it. It looked like a back pack and I thought of this at the time and I thought it must have belonged to one of the pilots. It came to my mind that possibly someone had failed to fasten his leg straps and when the chute opened, it pulled away from the wearer, and I could imagine him hurtling down into the smoke and flak with nothing to break his fall. Then I thought maybe he was blown from the plane and his body blown apart so much that the chute left the plane, possible with the upper torso in it. It went by our plane so fast I didn't see it for long, but I thought all these things in a flash.



I could feel the movement of the ship, caused by exceptionally close bursts and one burst I remember better than any. It was probably this one that threw the piece through the left side and behind the nose turret, and which did all the damage to our left engines and gas lines.

Even after we dropped our bombs, we were in flak a long time, even long after we had made a sharp turn in another direction. I remember thinking about here sometime that one plane, which had two engines smoking before bombs away, was still not much worse off and he was evidently making it all right. But before long, I could see it no longer.

Shortly after we dropped the bombs, the Ball Gunner announced that we had a gas leak and it was verified by the Waist Gunner and the Engineer. I couldn't see the nature of the leak, nor the seriousness of it from my position, but flak was still heavy and I knew the grave danger of a bomb bay full of fumes and flooded with gasoline. We were ordered to turn off our turrets, but I had turned off every one of my switches when I heard the announcement of the leak. I did it without thinking what I did, almost.

Shortly after we knew of our leak, a plane, evidently hit and partially out of control, came sliding toward us. It seemed that we couldn't possibly escape being hit by it. I recall the Co-Pilot telling the Pilot to watch it, but I believe the other plane went under us, without any evasive action on our part.

Someone said something about the formation not being very good and there were planes scattered everywhere, some hit, I knew and doomed. Flak was still intense and accurate and once I almost yelled out, "let's get away from here." I don't know whether I would have pushed the interphone button or not if I had gone far enough to cry out. I could look back to our former course and see the clouds of flak smoke thinning out, and in all directions around us the black clouds of recent and close bursts.

We had just begun to join the formation again when we found out about our leak, and even though I didn't know much about it, I didn't think we could remain with them. Truth is, I thought something would happen to our plane any instant. All this time I was taking it all in, scared to death really, and thinking countless thoughts, many of which I will never be able to recall. My turret doors were still closed and had anything happened I would have had a devil of a time getting out, probably. My feet are so big and my boots so bulky that it always takes some maneuvering to extricate them from the turret. But I don't recall once thinking about how I would get out if I had to in a hurry.

It is impossible for me now, only a few hours later, to describe exactly how I felt during these minutes of flak danger. My heated suit didn't work, and I was shaking with cold hours before the target, but never once during the danger did I shake with cold or fear. But I was scared, not the kind of fright I have ever known before. It was the first time in my life that my life was actually in danger and I knew it was. I have had an escape or two in my life, but I wasn't aware of the danger until it had passed. The flak lasted 3 or 4 times as long as it usually lasts, which is plenty long anytime, and it seemed we were in it for hours.

The flak had tapered off to only an occasional burst when the Pilot said we would be unable to go with the formation due to the trouble. Someone spotted some planes behind us, fighters, which I could see and with our turrets inoperative and gas leaking badly, it seemed here was another danger just as great. I remember the Pilot asking how well we were in the formation (for protection if they were enemy fighters). We were far to the right of it and there seemed to be no planes close on our right, so we were actually in a lousy position. Nothing happened, however, and we finally had to leave the formation altogether.

By this time the bomb bay was floating-quite a bit of gasoline and the plane was full of fumes. I could smell the stuff in my oxygen, or through my mask at least. The Pilot said we would go lower after we got into safer territory and transfer the fuel, but I somehow thought we would never make it. Even though the turrets were turned off, I could imagine a spark from something causing an explosion.

After we were far behind the formation, more planes were spotted and I could see them. There were 9 of them and they were almost level with us and out of recognition range. But they were cutting [?] up like I didn't think our escort would be doing. (I probably imagined this.) I was scared that they

would be enemy and that they would attack us, struggling and crippled as we were (we couldn't do much maneuvering with gasoline sloshing about the way it was), and that tracer bullets would either explode us or start a fire too fierce for escape. But we were not attacked. But there was still several hours of flying ahead of us and anything could happen yet.

I worried more about explosion and fire than anything else, and I prayed that we would get back or that we would escape death at least. I prayed for everyone who had been with us. And I prayed for that fellow who had gone by in the parachute. We could see a plane burning and falling back by the target somewhere, and I prayed that there was none in the plane, that they had all escaped. This was a prayer, I believe the first since I was little, where sometimes during it, I didn't find an undertone of thought that I didn't know how to pray and that I didn't deserve to have it answered and there was an undertone of thought which said that there was nothing to praying and nothing to answer them. I had prayed an hour or so before the target, but not like I prayed now. And I thanked God for having taken us through the danger that was the flak.

For a long time, an hour really, I guess the leak remained bad, but I seemed to worry no longer about an explosion and fire. Now I was sure that we would have to bail out, and I tried to imagine how it would feel and would I be able to find any of the other fellows after landing. I worried lest I be taken a prisoner instead of being able to hook up with the Partisans and eventually get back. Then this worry faded as we got further from really dangerous territory, and while I still thought the odds were in favor of us having to leave the ship, I was concerned more with the inconvenience and possible injury if I were forced down into this pretty mountainous territory. At one time, God forgive me, I thought maybe it is better to have to bail out and wander round for a while getting back, or even being taken prisoner, so I wouldn't have to face this danger again.

By this time the Engineer had the leak stopped by transfer, etc., the engine was feathered, and it seemed surer that we would get back all right if we didn't run out of gas. I thought once or twice that maybe our Bombardier-Navigator has screwed up and we are way off our course, but I didn't think much about this. I went back to the flight deck and ate some K rations, then back to the nose while we went over an area where there could possibly be flak or fighters. We got to the coast, and if we didn't have to go down over the water, it was reasonable to assume that we would get back to our territory for sure, even if we did have to bail out there.

Now that the danger was almost passed, the worst definitely was, I began to think more and more about how lucky I was to be alive, and how I might have been in any of those planes that went down, or that I might have been killed by a piece of flak. And I thought how maybe some of those fellows who weren't getting back deserved to more than I did and maybe they had prayed too; prayed better prayers than I did, because I hadn't prayed a very earnest prayer before we hit the target. Since getting back I've thought these same things many times, and I've relived seemingly every moment of the trip from the flak until we landed back here. (I was asleep when we landed for some reason or the other, and I had the \_\_\_ radio turned to recorded music. I had gone to sleep while I listened to it.)

Now I don't think as much about the individual moments of peril as I do about how it seems miraculous that anyone got back really and I've thought, what is it that determines who does and who doesn't in a case like this. Several times this evening I've tried to imagine myself as the fellows who went down at the target and lived, or in the places of the fellows whom we saw bail out a short way behind us, in fairly safe territory. They all got out all right, as far as number of chutes opening goes, and they are probably with the Partisans, or at least, not prisoners.

From a letter to Leonard C. Dickey (736) by Alexander Gorashko (736)

I was a Tail-Gunner in Lt. Warfel's crew in the 736<sup>th</sup> back in July and August of 1944. On August 22<sup>nd</sup>, coming back from a Blechhammer mission, we were attacked and shot down near the west end of Lake Balaton in Hungary,. Only a Waist Gunner and myself survived.

As we flew tail-end Charlie and I was a Tail-Gunner, I never saw what was going on ahead or to

the side of us. I have always wondered what happened for us to get shot down. Because of our plane catching fire in the tail (probably at the tail oxygen station) I had to get out fast. I doing so, I lost interphone contact and do not know if it still worked, if any warning was given to the rest of the crew or if any conversation took place.

I got a copy of the statement that you made as a witness to the downing of our plane and I'm still confused.

1. As a witness, you say that we were attacked from the 1:30 direction. The pattern of yellowish/white explosions that I saw were in line perpendicular to our line of travel and at about the same time the Co-Pilot, Lt. McNeil, yelled "flak". Why didn't he see the fighters coming in at 1:30?

2. Shortly before the ship rolled over and went out of control, I heard explosions. Could this have been the fighter attack?

My question is: Could the ship have caught fire from rockets or something dropped from above? Could we have been attacked by fighters after we were already on fire?

In your statement there was no mention of a FW-190 that came in from 1 o'clock and passed below our formation. This took place perhaps 20 minutes or one half hour before we were shot down. Someone got a good shot at him as I saw tracers bouncing off his belly armor. I got a shot, but he was too far behind me for it to be effective.

I have tried in vain to get the returning crew interrogation records, but no one seems to know if they still exist. The other two officers on our ship were Lt. Alvin Glicksberg, the Navigator, and Lt. Thomas Dubay, the Bombardier.

The Waist Gunner that survived and myself were captured almost immediately along with members of another crew and we were taken to a prison in Budapest and put in solitary for almost a week to get us to talk. We didn't know it at the time, but our war was just half over. The enlisted men were shipped to Stalag-Luft 4 in Northern Germany. There were about 10,000 airmen in that camp. That's a lot of bombers shot down!

The Russian Armies made a drive in the direction of our prison camp and the Germans made us walk out in February. It was very cold and we slept in barns with little food. This went on for several months. The cold, the hunger, and the lice, made our life quite miserable. I was liberated by the Americans and British on May the second of 1945 about 30 miles southeast of Hamburg and it was a glorious day.

After the war, most of my crew members bodies were returned. Five from the front part of the ship were burned very badly and came back in three caskets. They are buried at Zachary Taylor National Cemetery, Louisville, KY. John Klarman, the Ball Gunner, is buried in his home cemetery in Conn. The other Waist Gunner, who was standing next to me when the ship went out of control, is buried in an American Military Cemetery at Lorraine, France.

The Navigator, Lt. Glicksberg, must have gotten out, but too late, he is buried in a family plot in New Jersey. Back about 1950, I was contacted by the staff of a radio show in Chicago called "Welcome Traveler" and they wanted me to meet Lt. Glicksberg's mother on the show. It was broadcast nationwide. Later the show people took all of us out to dinner in a famous hotel and we took a Chicago skyline tour on a boat.

I am happy for those that finished their fifty missions and came back home....

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GROUP MISSION #102, 23 AUGUST 1944  
RAILROAD BRIDGE - FERRARA, ITALY  
A Visit To The Po  
Billy J. Jacobs (737)

Early in the Fall of 1944, the 454<sup>th</sup> BG(H) was delegated to bomb a bridge spanning the Po River

in Northern Italy. The briefing was short and thorough, weather was excellent. Our plan of approach to the target was to fall in line, and each Squadron would make its' own bomb run. The target was a priority one because it was the only land rout Hitler's troops had to return to Germany.

My duty was to lead the 737<sup>th</sup> Squadron. My Bombardier was Lt. Joe Arndt of St. Louis, and my Navigator was Lt. Max Kuniansky of Atlanta, Georgia. Both were very skilled. Lt. Kuniansky was flying in the nose turret to choose the route and avoid flak gun batteries that S-3 warned us about.

The trip to the target was uneventful due to the fact that the enemy fighter action was negligible at this point in the European campaign.

We moved into position, turned on the I.P., and here comes the flak. It was very accurate. All of a sudden we could feel the close burst of flak and the P.D.I. was extremely hared to keep in a central position. I gave it my best shot and finally the bombs were dropped. As we turned off the target and started our descent, Lt. Arndt climbed up to the cockpit, seemingly in shock and partially dazed, with a message. The B-24 had an accumulator that carried 2,000 lbs. of pressure and its' function was to raise and lower the nose wheel, among other things.

Lt. Arndt was presently able to tell me that a piece of flak had fractured the unit and the explosive pressure had thrown him away from the bombsight which separated him from his intercom lines, thus he couldn't tell me that he was unable to use the bombsight on the final run to the target. I remembered that he never said bombs away. Fortunately, he was unhurt and disappointed that he didn't get the job done. The only consolation, our bombs destroyed a synthetic rubber plant near the target area.

On the way home, Lt. Kuniansky reported that his heated suit didn't heat and he had slightly frostbitten toes. I scolded him for not telling me sooner and his rely was "Sir, this mission was more important than my feet", in his slow Atlanta drawl. Fortunately the frostbite wasn't too serious. We arrived at base and used our emergency procedures, lowered the gear and flaps, and landed without brakes.

Intelligence briefed us that 90 flak guns surrounded this bridge. I must say that the gunners knew how to shoot them, as the flak was accurate and intense.

To finalize this trip, we learned that the bridge was still intact and the General at Wing wanted the Pilots and Bombardiers to report to Wing Headquarters for a critique of the mission. I gave my story in due time and General Upthegrove told me before all of us, "that I had the only excuse that he could accept".

"Lest We Forget"

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CAPT. CANTACUZENE  
Edward J. DiNunzio (738)

Col. Gunn was the Deputy Commander of the 454<sup>th</sup> Bombardment Group. He was a fine man- much admired and greatly respected. On the day he flew back to our field, tucked into the radio compartment of an ME-109, I was in the 738<sup>th</sup> Operations office. I recall, as though it was yesterday, hearing a single engine aircraft fly over the building with what sounded like an "in line" engine (as compared to a radial engine) but not the "purr" of the Spitfire or the "hum" of the P-51. I raced outside and caught a glimpse of the 109 as it headed for the runway at about 50 to 100 feet in altitude. Startled, I jumped into the Jeep outside our office and raced toward the end of the runway as the 109 taxied towards me. I was quickly joined by others and the following sequence and dialogue ensued. As the ME-109 came to a stop, the canopy opened and a tall, handsome Pilot stepped out onto the wing and down to the ground. He was in uniform, wearing the Iron Cross, and carried a pistol on his belt. He strode towards me, extended his hand and said: "I am Capt. Cantacuzene from Romania-I have something for you." My response was almost ridiculous, but considering the circumstances that I was



probably dressed in a worn flight suit, not armed and very confused, I replied, "Captain DiNunzio, Italy!" We shook hands and he asked if I had a screw driver. By this time a small crowd had collected and a screw driver was located with which he proceeded to unfasten the approximately 2 ft. x 2 ft. panel towards the tail of the plane. A large American flag was crudely painted on the side of the plane and it ran from the rear of the cockpit to the tail, covering the panel. It appeared to have been hastily painted, perhaps still wet at the takeoff from Romania. As the panel was removed, I could see legs and feet and exclaimed, "Look, G.I. shoes!" We gingerly helped remove the cramped passenger and a roar went up when we recognized our Col. Gunn. Following this, everything went very quickly and the Col. was rapidly whisked away.

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THE TWENTY WEEKS OF PLOIESTI - A ROMANIAN'S PERSPECTIVE  
By George A. Radulescu from "Friends Journal", Vol. 20, No. 3, Fall 1997  
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This story begins fifty years ago in Ploiesti, the black gold city of old Europe, with its big oil refineries. The city with its adjoining oil fields is located in the Carpathian foothills less than 40 miles northwest of Bucharest, the state capital of Romania. The region of Ploiesti has an exceptional situation, underground lie the richest oil fields of Europe and overhead some of the most renowned vineyards, producing tasty grapes and flavorful wines.

Against the natural feelings and interests of our country, we were at war with Russia and the western Allies on the side of Hitler's Germany. Therefore, Ploiesti kept feeding Hitler's war machine with a most vital commodity, the lifeblood of war; petroleum. Long strings of railway tank cars with gasoline and diesel fuel left the refineries daily, running east toward the Russian front and westward to Germany.

The oil refineries, along with the outlying tank farms, pipe lines, pumping stations, and the railway marshaling yards, were heavily protected against air attacks. Ploiesti was like a huge fortress. Its defense relied upon a highly efficient warning system to report inbound attacking planes, and on many hundreds of anti-aircraft flak guns and machine guns. Thousands of smoke generators, arranged in patterns to take advantage of the prevailing winds, raised a smoke blanket in less than half an hour, concealing the city and the area of the refineries. Blast walls, up to three feet thick, were constructed around processing plants, storage tanks, power-houses, and pumping stations.

Thick concrete shelters scattered all over the refinery areas shielded the defenders on duty during air raids. For the night air attacks the Germans had built a fake Ploiesti, ten miles southeast, to confuse the enemy bombers. German units of fire fighters and reconstruction engineers, along with those of the refinery, were ready to return the refineries to production as soon as the bombers had left. The fighter aircraft strength, however, did not match the ground defense force, most of Hitler's planes having to cope with the Allied offensive over Western Europe.

The fifth year of war life in Romania was easy for a number of people. The summer of 1943 had been generous, record crops produced plenty of wheat for the baking of white bread. Meat was also plentiful, even the days when its sale was prohibited. Ration cards were only a formality. Every kind of food was in abundance for those who could pay for it.

We were weary with practice air alerts. During the first ones we ran for the ditches which were located only a few feet from the refinery installation. They were mere ditches covered with boards and dirt. But, later on we yawned when the test sirens blew.

It started in the morning of April 4, 1944, when the air alert was sounded. We thought it was another test by the busy Germans, but we got obediently into the shelters, waiting for the cessation of the alarm. An hour later I heard unusual thuds from the sky and from the ground. It was something weird, which I never heard at any other exercise. After a while the sound became more precise. It began to be real; the war was reaching us.

When the alert was over someone told me that Bucharest had been badly bombed and that Calea Victoriei (the main street of the city) was in flames. I took a train in the afternoon being anxious about my wife who was home in our flat on the same street. Owing to the havoc the bombing did and to the general confusion, the train covered the distance in more than eight hours, and I arrived home at 2:00 pm to see big flames coming out through the windows of our flat. No one answered my sister's telephone when I tried to call (the house was bombed), but at least I found my wife toward 4:00 am at the home of some friends. Since everything we possessed had burnt with our home, I moved my wife to my parents' home in a small town outside of the threatened area. I continued to live in our refinery where I had a room in the bachelor's house.

Afterwards, the round-the-clock bomber offensive went on, with Ploiesti as its main target. Giant swarms of US four-engine "Liberators" and "Flying Fortresses" kept appearing in the sky several times in the week. These uninvited guests, many hundreds in strength, came in the morning from airfields in Italy. They were being spotted by the Germans when they crossed the Adriatic Sea, and an hour before they reached Ploiesti the air raid sirens were set screaming. At first we stayed in the refinery shelters so as not to disturb the production. But after a few air raids we took example of the refineries which were hit, and we ran away at the first sounds of the alert.

The exodus from the refinery was well organized: everyone had a place in a car, bus or truck. During the night raids, when we had to leave in cars, the drivers didn't stop until they put some twenty miles behind them. When the alert was over, they were always reluctant to return. So I found that my bicycle was the best means to leave the refinery grounds when the daytime alarm was sounded. In an hour of time, before the bombers were over Ploiesti, I could be far away and return as soon as the cessation siren of the alarm was heard.

All through April and the first weeks of May, I lived in our refinery. It was an American property which had not been hit, probably owing to its peculiar location a few miles outside Ploiesti. The night air raids, although much less stronger and dangerous than the daytime ones, annoyed me mostly because I was abruptly awakened and had to fumble into clothes and shoes in order to catch the car. But the spectacle was imposing: "over the Ploiesti sky there were firefly winks and delayed reports of flak bursting high in the air, while we dared not speak to each other. The alert lasted for less than two hours, but I couldn't go to bed again before daylight. In the morning I had to go to work, and I found it difficult to carry on.

Late in May I took my wife and moved ten miles east of Ploiesti to join with some acquaintances who lived in a vineyard on a hill. Because the air alerts wasted too much of our time, the working day in the refinery was set between 5:00 am and 1:00 pm. As the alert sounded each time around 9:00 am, we had only a few hours to work.

I felt secure with my bike. As soon as the sirens screamed I looked around and saw that everybody was leaving the building in good order. I was usually the last to leave. I used to study the conduct of people before and during the first minutes of the alert. Long before it started, one employee who came every day with a big attache case was giving signs of nervousness going to and fro. He was on the lookout already when the bombers were over the Adriatic, being warned from the radio set the Germans had in the refinery. Since work was not to be stopped before the alarm was heard, I let him go unobtrusively to the refinery's gate so as other people didn't get panicky. His colleagues like to tell about the experience he had in Constanta, on the Black Sea, back in the summer of 1941 when Romania started war with the Soviet Union. He went to that city to collect the rent from a tenant who had an undertaking shop. Being caught there by an air raid, he took refuge in the basement of the shop. He had to stay there for more than an hour among the coffins and other paraphernalia, the merchandise of his tenant, while deafening flak guns and bombs were bursting.

Laughter being the best medicine, many anecdotes were circulated in connection with the bombing of Ploiesti. One of these related about an old woman in a Bucharest shelter fervently praying during an alarm: "Good Lord, send them away, send them to Ploiesti".

Almost everybody got accustomed with the routine of the daily alerts and bombings. At the

beginning, as the frightened people were leaving the refinery, many dogs ran alongside howling and barking. Now, after several air raids, the dogs became silent, and most of them ran away before the alarm was sounded.

On my bike I needed less than half an hour to reach my wife at the vineyard. The landowner had built a regular shelter between the rows of vines. Although several miles distant from the bombed area, the sound reverberations of the bursting bombs and flak guns made the place unbearable. In addition to the uproar, flak shell splinters were raining in the poultry yard and on the roof of the house nearby. Storks flew out of their nests in the trees, while chickens, the only beings not afraid of the bombing, were running at the falling splinters hoping to find feed grains.

During the next raids I went with my wife higher in the vineyards to join some hospitable people. They offered us sheep cheese, home-baked bread, and the famous white Romanian wine, and we sat down at the table in expectation of a cruel display. As the roar of the engines became louder, the oncoming bombers appeared gleaming in the sky, while they dispensed metalized paper strips to confuse the German radar. The suspense was over when the heavy flak guns bellowed out a wild reception. I saw planes being blasted to bits and others turning to balls of fire. While the aerial show grew in cruelty, we saw many parachutes opening, floating like silvery mushrooms, and small-arms fire was increasing. Huge oil storage tanks were exploding, raising solid columns of fire and debris several hundred feet high. In the inferno which lay at our feet the smashing of the refineries went on. Together, shells and bombs wove an integrated pattern of annihilation. This web of death and destruction seemed like a holocaust presented to some diabolical beholders. I could not have picked a better place to look at the air and ground battle than the vineyard on the hilltop. As the exhibition declined, we drank the last glass of wine waiting for the alert cessation.

Toward noon I returned to the refinery and saw first hand the gruesome spectacle of the roaring burning tanks and bellowing flames from the processing plants. As a German fireman was fighting the fire at one tank, it got white hot and buckled, while the ladder collapsed and the man fell inside the burning gasoline. Usually the fire fighting took several hours, so most of the refinery's employees had nothing to do but gaze.

Home at the vineyard in the late afternoon, the apocalyptic event was forgotten, and dinner was a feast I waited for all day long. After the overwhelming sound of battle died away, the peace that followed, along with the generous wine, gave me a feeling of relief never met before. I slept blissfully and awakened refreshed at dawn.

Once, during the bicycle ride after an air alert, I broke a pedal crossing a small brook which was a few inches deep. I got down into the water and picked it up, continuing the ride with the other pedal. My wife was waiting for me anxiously as I was several minutes late. To our surprise, this time, the planes were already above us, a half an hour ahead of schedule. In the battle sky appeared a strange new type of plane, the twin-engined "Lightning," a fork tailed fighter-bomber that flew at tree-top height. My wife saw a pilot waving at her. We crept into a culvert, while the attackers swept over us, speeding west toward our refinery away from the murderous flak fire. This unusual raid was made up of Lightnings, each carrying two one thousand-pound bombs slung on their bellies. Back in our refinery I saw that these planes came to bomb the last plant of Ploiesti that had not yet been severely hit. One bomb ruined the bachelors' house where I kept my books and some other belongings.

The air offensive now grew in power and intensity, the bomber hordes became stronger and appeared more frequently. The attackers swept over every day, putting us under a test of nerves. Most of the people became terrified under these constant attacks, but I took delight in seeing Hitler's gasoline and diesel oil burning and seeing exploding jerry cans by the thousands. As the days and weeks wore on, the air raids became a great pleasure for me. I enjoyed them further as the greatest thrill of my life.

Early in August, during an alert when I was pedaling toward the gate, I was stopped by the refinery manager who urged me to come with him. Hiding the bike under a fir tree, I got into the car which drove us north of the city. Hardly ten miles away, we saw new U.S. fighter planes overhead at low height. The car stopped and we dashed into the nearby cornfield to safety, but to our surprise the

fighters swooped down and started strafing us. Very soon we understood why: we had chosen to hide only a couple of hundred feet away from a flak battery. None of us got hit but for the first time I was scared to death. Back at the refinery we contemplated the greatest devastation of plants, tanks and buildings. Great sheets of liquid were oozing from a big gasoline tank, and everywhere great fires were roaring. The firemen could no longer fight the blazing heaps of drums and jerry cans ready for dispatch to the approaching Russian front. To my astonishment on the place where I concealed my bike there was now a large bomb crater. From now on I was deprived of my independence, and at the first sounds of the alert I had to climb into a car. Fortunately, we could drive east to the place where my wife was awaiting me at the roadside. High in the hills we went into the vineyard to the usual luncheon with cheese, wine and new ripe tomatoes, gazing thunder-struck at the lethal game in the sky and on the ground.

The situation was now rapidly deteriorating. Many soldiers in charge of the smoke generators deserted their posts at the sound of the alarm. They were shot without judgement. Reconstruction work of damaged plants now took much more time. The engineer units were no longer as busy as in the first weeks of the bomber offensive. At the close of the 20 weeks of bombings, there was almost no plant, storage tank, pumping station, or building that had not been hit by the more than thousand bombs which fell on our refinery. We had no electricity. An artesian well remained luckily untouched and gave us some drinking water.

And then, thanks to the patriotic action of King Michael with the democratic forces of the country, on August 23, 1944, the aerial campaign against Ploiesti came at last to an end.

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GROUP MISSION #117, 13 SEPTEMBER 1944  
SYNTHETIC OIL PLANT - ODERTAL, GERMANY  
"For You Der Var Iss Over"  
Emil A. Petr (739)

It all started the day before at Cerignola, near Bari, Italy, where the 454<sup>th</sup> Bombardment Group of the US 15<sup>th</sup> Air Force was based. I was a Mickey operator, the nickname given to the Radar Navigators. Why? No one seems to know, or if they do, they never informed me. The radar equipped planes were used only for the Leader and Vic-Leader position and had no specific crews other than the Radar Navigator. The Pilot usually was a ranking officer qualified to lead the Group. The rest of the crew were from another plane.

This was in September of 1944. The German anti-aircraft artillery seemed to be concentrating on the lead planes. The resulting high turn-over rate in Mickey operators brought me to the job of Group

Radar Officer, which included scheduling the Mickey operators for each mission.

On September 12, 1944, Captain Unger, who was the Squadron Operations Officer, told me that he was to lead the next days' mission and asked if I wanted to schedule myself, too. Since I still needed a dozen more missions to finish the 50 that gave us the right to go home, I said OK.

The target for the day was an oil refinery at Odertal in Germany on the Oder River near the Polish border. The trip to the target was uneventful. No enemy fighters appeared. The day was clear so there was not much need to use the radar other than to follow on the radar screen as we passed over Yugoslavia, Hungary and Czechoslovakia. Just after we dropped the bombs, the plane shook violently. We had been on a collision course with an enemy anti-aircraft shell that burst when it hit our plane. One propellor was completely shot off, another was free-wheeling wildly, for its governing control had been damaged, and the third motor was dead. This was a B-24 four motor bomber, so we had only one motor working. We were at an altitude of nearly 30,000 feet, so the Pilot had plenty of time to try to control the plane. The rest of the crew threw out everything that they could to lessen the weight.



We had been flying that way for an hour, losing altitude, but headed for home base, when Captain Unger informed us via interphone that the fuel pressure had failed and that the only option was to go downstairs via parachute. He called me and said "Pete, you are first". Realizing that this was hardly the time or place for coyness, I buckled on the parachute and went down to the bomb bay whose doors were open. I looked down at the ground that seemed so far away, but I did not hesitate, for another crew member was right behind me and would have given me a shove if there had been any sign of hesitation. So I jumped, headed for a 9 months forced stay in Germany.

I tumbled through the air for some seconds and then I found myself falling face up. I was not in a hurry to pull the rip cord to avoid getting the parachute entangled in the tail parts of the plane. But after a bit, I thought "better find out if this contraption will work." Just a light touch on the rip cord ring and the white silk unfolded and blossomed out into a beautiful umbrella, with me hanging underneath. This floating in the air was one of the most pleasant experiences of my life. After the noise and confusion aboard the crippled plane, the sudden quietness almost hurt the eardrums. I don't recall what went through my mind during the descent. After all, this was 49 years ago, but I have the impression that these were minutes of relaxed calm. Or was it shock? Or was it a fatalism that was the result of having been shifted about so much by the Air Force? Up to that time, I had been moved 10 times, each time to get used to new conditions and human contacts. Other than the decision to try for the cadets, I had very little to say about where I went. Realizing this, I stopped worrying too much about the future. Since there was not anything I could do about it, worrying was a waste of time.

Everything that goes up must come down (except Brazilian inflation). The descent came to an end. My parachute hung up in a tall tree in a forested area. After unhooking myself from the parachute, I slid down the tree trunk, receiving my first and only "war wound", a scratch on my shin. We had been so busy in that last hour of flight that we hadn't been able to keep track of where we were. From an old newspaper that I found there in the forest, I presumed that I was in some part of Czechoslovakia.

Starting to move about, I had no idea of what direction to go I met a woodcutter, or who I imagined was a woodcutter. I greeted him with "vitam vas" (thereby using up a big part of my Czech vocabulary). Giving one look at the strange creature in the green electric flying suit, the wood cutter decided that discretion was the better part of valor and promptly left the scene.

Following a path there in the forest, I soon met a group of people who proved to be from a nearby village and had come to see the plane that was burning not too far from where we were. It was at this moment that I wished that I had made more effort to learn the Czech language. I did manage to communicate enough to find out that one of them was the Mayor and that there were no Germans in the area. As you will soon see, this proved to be very inaccurate information. Perhaps they did not understand my question or did not know or were afraid. The Mayor invited me to go down to the village to get something to eat. There was a small girl that wanted me to go with her. Maybe if I had gone with her, she might have taken me to where I might have hid out for the duration. Who knows.

Looking back, one can see that I wasn't following what should be the "modus operandi" of one who bails out over enemy occupied territory. I should have tried to hide and then seek friendly help. If I had, I might have been able to now be telling a story of more heroic adventures. I had not been prepared for the sudden transition of sitting there 30,000 feet above the land that appeared on my radar screen, to hanging up in a tree in land occupied by the enemy. In our training, we had received no information on what to do after you bail out. This was perhaps due to most of our instructors having no combat experience. This was in contrast with the British who believed that, even in prison, you should continue fighting. They did this by doing everything possible to irritate their captors, like trying to escape, causing confusion at the daily prisoner count, etc. They did small things that the Germans could not conveniently punish but still things that caused the Germans to lose time. The British were masters at fomenting frustration for their captors.

Enough of this hind-sighting. Back to us walking on that path in the woods. We passed by the place where the plane was burning. In the descent, I must have drifted in the same direction that the plane took in its descent. I never did run into the rest of the crew, but the information I had later was

that all had time to jump. I don't recall where I got the information, but I was told that Captain Unger's parachute collapsed at tree top level and that his back and one or both of his legs were fractured when he hit the ground. According to what I was told, he was taken to hospital in Vienna and was walking by the end of the war. I have never been able to get in contact with him. If I remember correctly, he was from Loveland, Colorado.

Once more back to the forest. As we came to a curve in the path, two German soldiers suddenly appeared, pointing their submachine guns at me. I didn't speak German, but I got the message. We continued along the path, I with the two soldiers behind me. After some time, four more soldiers appeared. There I was, marching through several small towns being escorted by six soldiers. When we got to Bratislava, one of the larger cities in southern Slovakia, the number of soldiers was reduced to two and we went to the railway station to wait for the next day's train to Budapest, Hungary. We slept on a sloping platform about two feet off the ground. All that I remember is that the fleas kept me occupied scratching most of the night. Also, I managed to communicate enough with one of the soldiers who appeared to be about 60 and was from Vienna, Austria and wasn't too enthusiastic about what he was doing.

The next morning, when we were in front of the station waiting for the train, another German soldier came up to me and said "For you, der var iss offer" and then with undisguised sadness, added "I go to the oest front".

As PPP hurries along to become "HISTORY", I will try to continue the telling of my "sad story" of my participation in history, infinitesimal though it was. This will be more like a showing of slides, rather than video. Fifty years and a normal sclerosis have erased many scenes from the memory.

In my previous account, I told about our plane being fatally crippled over the target at Odertal, Germany. We abandoned the plane via parachute over Slovakia. I was captured by two German soldiers and marched to the nearby town of Bratislava, where we waited to take the train to Budapest, Hungary. I stopped my account telling about the German soldier who approached us to tell me "For you der var iss offer, I go oest front" ( For you the war is over, I go to the east front). An interesting footnote - After writing about this, I read about at least 2 former prisoners-of-war who had used this phrase as the title of their books. Apparently the soldier wasn't the only one who felt as he did.

I don't recall anything about the trip on the train, except that, as an experiment in communication I began to hum the song "Lili Marlene". One of the soldiers looked at the other with a sort of "knowing" smile and said something in German which I did not understand except for the words "Lili Marlene". As a word of explanation for the younger generation - Lili Marlene was the name of a German song very popular with the German soldiers. Somehow it crossed the battlefield and was taken up by the Allied troops and then passed on to the rest of the world.

When we reached Budapest, an air raid siren sounded while we were in a street car and all the lights went out. One of my guards grabbed my arm and the other poked a pistol in my ribs and we left the street car and went on, on foot. The guards seemed nervous. It was about this time that I began the attitude that stayed with me for the duration to wit: I had no desire to be a hero, I just wanted to go home. Luckily, we were near our destination, a house where a young German Army officer was in charge. There seemed to be some doubt as to what they should do with me. I was locked in a bathroom to wait for the new day.

I don't recall the trip to the state prison - the next scene is the cell that was my home for 2 weeks. It was about 5 feet by 10 feet with a window at the far end. The walls were about 5 feet thick and the wooden door had a small peek-hole that the guards used to spy on us. A small cot, covered with a very dirty mattress, filled most of the space. I used my jacket, which I still had with me, as a pillow to at least have a clean place for my head. The only other piece of furniture was a 5 gallon slop pail that was the toilet.

Almost every day, we were bombed, the American Air Force in the daytime and the Russians at night. The thick walls would shake dangerously but, luckily, we never suffered a direct hit. It was quite an experience - I had been dropping these bombs, but now I was on the other end.

The only break in the solitude was when the guard would bring the daily ration of a 5 inch round loaf of black bread, more a bun than a loaf, and a bowl of clear soup (?) with a solitary leaf of cabbage floating in it.

Then there was the almost daily visit to the interrogator. The fellow that questioned me had an interesting story to tell. He said his family was in the international shipping business in Hamburg. As part of his training when he was 20, his father gave him money enough to get to New York but when he got there, he had to learn to shift for himself. Having had experience, it was not much of a problem for him to get a job in shipping. When Germany started the war, the Nazis contacted him, offering him the job of Mayor of Albany, New York when they had won the war. This may have been an invention of his to develop a buddy-buddy atmosphere to get me to drop my guard and reveal secrets that actually I did not possess. Then too, it may have been an effort to save his own skin, for this was in September of 1944, before the Battle of the Bulge, when it appeared that Germany was losing the war. This would not be the time for the interrogator to get a bad reputation that might bring an act of settling the score when it was all over.

The Germans had an amazing amount of information. The interrogator showed me a list of the crew and their functions. It had been their policy to send Radar Navigators to another interrogation center. But, in my case, whether because of the threat of defeat or need to fill a shipping quota, I was sent to another room where there were some 30 of us waiting to be shipped to Stalag Luft III at Sagan, near the Polish border.

It was here that I had my first contact with fellow prisoners. Each with their own interesting story to tell. Many of these stories were so amazing that my experiences were like a stroll in the park, in comparison. Perhaps the most amazing of all the stories was that of one of the fellows in this room. When he bailed out, his parachute failed to open but he landed in a haystack with no injuries except a bad shaking up when he literally "hit the hay". I don't recall if he told what went through his mind during the free fall, but his feeling of relief did not last long for he was met by a group of peasants with pitchforks, threatening to kill him. The Germans had told the natives that American airmen were Chicago gangsters and that each one received a thousand dollars for each mission. But our friends' luck continued, for some police or soldiers appeared and took him in custody and saved him from the mob.

I wonder where these men are today. Of all the men with whom I had contact during the combat period, I have located only one, Allen Unger, pilot of the plane on that last mission. He is now a retired Methodist Minister, living in Loveland, CO. And it was only last year that I found where he lives. The Air Force Group to which we belonged now has an association. I read, in the EX-POW magazine, about their reunion, so I wrote to the secretary and he forwarded my letter to Allen who then wrote to me. On my next trip USA, contact with Allen will be a MUST.

Donald H. Rimbey (739)

Captain Allen Unger, operations Officer for the 739<sup>th</sup> Squadron was flying the lead plane for the 454<sup>th</sup> Bomb Group. Norton's plane was positioned on the starboard side and towards the rear of the formation. Immediately after we dropped our 500 pound bombs on the target, the lead plane received a series of flak hits. From my radio operator's position on the flight deck, I could look through our plane's windshield. Unger's airplane seemed to shake for a few moments as the steel shrapnel tore through the wings and fuselage of the bomber. One of the outboard engines received damage and began to smoke. The slight loss of power caused the bomber to vacate the lead position and trail towards the rear of the formation. The Deputy Group Leader moved into the Group Leaders slot in accordance with Standing Orders.

The target we had just bombed was a synthetic oil plant in southeastern Germany near the town of Odertal. The date was 18 September 1944. It was my fourteenth combat mission. Oil refineries were always heavily defended by flak guns and fighter squadrons. Germany had ten or twelve oil refineries processing natural crude oil within striking distance (approximately 1000 miles) of our airbases



in southern Italy. German scientists had mastered the technique of producing synthetic oil. Only four of the synthetic production facilities were within our strike range. In addition to today's target, there were also synthetic oil plants at Blechhammer, Germany; Oswiecim, Poland and Brux, Czechoslovakia.

A few minutes later, Captain Norton ordered me to go to the rear of our airplane. Our Tail Gunner had advised him via intercom that Captain Unger's bomber was trying to keep up with the formation and was currently positioned at four o'clock and slightly below our airplane. Unger's Radio Operator was sending blinker signals using Morse code. I was the only one in our crew with training in receiving and sending blinker messages. In order to go to the rear of our airplane, where I could see Unger's bomber from the starboard waist window, I had to travel aft through the empty double bomb bay compartment. The catwalk through the bomb bay was a narrow aluminum member about ten inches wide. It was supported on both sides by the bomb racks which sloped outwards as they extended towards the ceiling beams. It was always a tight fit going through the bomb bay when the plane was on the ground and a person was wearing a one-piece flight suit. Even then, the movement through the bomb bay was a sideways shuffle.

When dressed for combat, every flight crew member wore extra clothing and equipment. It should be pointed out that the outside air temperature at 21,000 feet was about forty to fifty degrees below zero. The bombers did not have a central heating system. An electrically heated suit was worn over long underwear and underneath our regular wool uniform. The electric suit consisted of four separate pieces. Each piece was electrically connected to the adjacent piece. For example, the electric booties were connected to the pants at the ankle. The top of the pants was connected to the upper body piece at the waist. The electric finger gloves were connected to the sleeves at the wrist. It was necessary to wear silk finger gloves before donning the electric gloves. Our GI shoes were secured to our parachute harness by a steel ring clip so that we would have them with us if we had to bail out.

A heavy cloth (sometimes fleeced sheepskin) two piece flight suit was worn over the above described clothing. Sheepskin flight boots were pulled over the electric booties. Leather finger gloves lined with wool were worn over the electric gloves. Some readers may be wondering why finger gloves were used when mittens would be warmer. Everyone's job required some finger dexterity. Squeezing the triggers on the machine guns, flying the airplane, operating the controls on the Norden bombsight, turning knobs on the radio receivers and transmitters, etc.

At high altitudes, i.e., above 10,000 feet, every crew member wore a leather helmet with built-in earphones. The helmet was designed with special hardware that allowed the wearer to attach an oxygen mask directly to the helmet. A flexible hose ran from the oxygen mask to a plug-in module on a central oxygen supply system. The oxygen hose could also be plugged into a small portable oxygen bottle to allow the crew member mobility. When flying at high altitude, it was routine practice for the Pilot to periodically check with each crew member via the intercom in order to make sure that no one had accidentally become disengaged from the oxygen supply. Oxygen deprivation is a serious matter. In rarefied air, death could occur in a matter of several minutes.

Prior to entering the target area everyone donned a special protective garment called a flak suit. It was a heavy two piece upper body vest that snapped together at the shoulders and allowed the front and rear pieces to cover the upper body. The flak suit was made of segmented pieces of hardened steel that overlapped each other. The chain of mail was covered with heavy canvas and corduroy. In addition, most crew members donned a steel helmet with large hinged earflaps that protruded outward and hung down covering the headsets built into the leather flight helmet. A microphone was built into the oxygen mask and connected to the intercom system.

I responded to Captain Norton's order to go to the rear of our airplane by removing my steel helmet and flak suit. In addition, I unclipped my chest parachute from its harness and placed it near the door leading into the bomb bay. After informing Captain Norton that I was leaving the flight deck, I disconnected my microphone and plugged my oxygen hose into a small portable oxygen bottle. Lastly, I disconnected my electric suit from the central supply system and became completely mobile. Opening the small door leading into the bomb bay, I eased downward until my feet touched the aluminum



catwalk. I started the sideways shuffle carrying the portable oxygen bottle in one hand and dragging my parachute with the other. It was extremely cold in the bomb bay because the roll-up flexible doors did not fit tightly enough to keep out the frigid air as the bomber flew at an air speed of one-hundred seventy miles per hour. The adrenaline rush I felt made my body feel warmer. However, without any external power supply for my electric suit, my body was chilly by the time I reached the door leading into the waist area of the airplane.

The Waist Gunner/Photographer assisted me in getting reconnected to the central oxygen and electrical supply systems. Looking through the Plexiglass waist window, I had to restrain myself from observing the extensive damage to the bomber and concentrate on reading the Morse code blinker message flashing at me from its waist window. For each letter transmitted by the blinker lamp, I spoke the phonetic word (h-how, e-easy, a-able, v-victor, y-yoke, etc.) into the intercom and the Navigator wrote down the message. Meanwhile, the Waist Gunner had connected our blinker signal lamp to an electrical outlet near the waist window. Unger's message read "Heavy damage to aircraft. Cannot maintain airspeed. Some crew members injured. Preparing to bail out." I responded by triggering our signal lamp with standard Morse code letters that meant that I had received and understood the message. I repeated the code letters twice and then flashed the sign-off signal. Captain Unger waved from the cockpit giving us an optimistic thumbs-up signal. His airplane lost speed and quickly faded out of sight. We did not see anyone parachute from the bomber during the short time it was within our view.

We were at a point of deep penetration into Nazi occupied Germany. Probably close to nine hundred miles from our airbase in southern Italy. Even if Unger's crew were successful in bailing out and landing without injury, they would not be able to make their way southward and avoid capture by the Germans. At best, it was their destiny to become prisoners of war.

It was fifty-two years late when Al Unger and I met face to face at his home in Loveland, Colorado. We were vacationing in Denver and visiting with one of my former air crew members, Bill Schuyler and his wife, Edie. Bill said that he knew Unger lived in Loveland. We phoned and made arrangements to visit the following day. Al met us at the door of their home. He introduced his wife, Florence, and said they had grown up in the small town of Loveland in the 1930's. After high school, he enlisted in the Army Air Corps and became one of the first Pilots to learn to fly the B-24 Liberator airplanes. The conversation soon turned to our memories of the war years and our experiences while flying on bomber raids with the 454<sup>th</sup> Bomb Group. I related the story about receiving his message via blinker signals and assured him that we had relayed the information during our debriefing interrogation. Al stated that his plane continued to lose power after they had signaled us. Within several minutes, their plane had fallen far behind and the entire crew bailed out over Germany.

The parachutes, in those days, were not maneuverable. Once the rip cord was pulled and the nylon chute filled with air, the airman was at the mercy of the wind. Unger said that he and another crewman were drifting towards a forest of large trees. The remaining members of the air crew were being blown by the wind currents in a different direction. Both Unger and his air crewman landed in the trees and incurred similar injuries: a broken back and a fractured leg. Of course, both of them sustained multiple bruises over their bodies as they plunged through the branches until the parachute canopy became entangled in the tree tops and stopped their descent. German patrols rounded up the entire crew and sent them to POW camps. The officers were imprisoned in one compound while the enlisted crew members were sent to a separate POW camp. Unger said the medical treatment he received was adequate, considering the wartime conditions, and his broken back healed without complications. However, his leg was not set properly and walking was a tiring experience for him.

Eight months later, the war ended and the POW's returned to the United States. In 1947, the Army Air Corps was separated from the United States Army by an act of Congress. The new branch of service was called the United States Air Force. It was at this time that Unger made the decision to leave the Air Force. He used his GI Bill of Rights to attend college and seminary and was ordained a Methodist minister. He and his family moved back to their home state of Colorado and he eventually was assigned

as Pastor of the Methodist Church in Loveland.

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GROUP MISSION #134, 13 OCTOBER 1944  
SOUTH OIL REFINERY - BLECHHAMMER, GERMANY  
Earl E. Koehler (736)

To begin this report, I should first tell how I was on this crew at this time. I had arrived at San Giovanni base, 736<sup>th</sup> Squadron, 454<sup>th</sup> Bombardment Group, 304<sup>th</sup> Wing in May 1944 on the crew of Capt. John J. Hildebrandt. After a couple months, Capt. Hildebrandt had some medical problems, and the crew flew missions with various crews. The Bombardier was assigned as Squadron Lead Bombardier, the Navigator assigned to the 739<sup>th</sup> Squadron, and since there were not any crews for me to take as Crew Commander, I joined Thomas M. "Hawk" Hunter's crew as his Co-Pilot was hospitalized and they had arrived in August 1944, as best I remember, so we began our association together. Tom and I had graduated from the same Cadet Class 44-A at Columbus Army Air Field, 7 Jan 1944. Tom got his nickname "Hawk" from the "Old Man" of his crew, 31 year old Arthur Husted. The rest of the crew was in their early 20s, I was 21. Tom and I "swapped" left seat duties on missions, since I was checked out by then to fly as First Pilot (Crew Commander) should the need arise. However, on this mission, Tom was Commander, I was in the right seat, the Co-Pilots position. The crew that day consisted of nine (9) crew members: Pilot - Tom "Hawk" Hunter, Co-Pilot - Earl "Porky" Koehler, (I was a bit "chubby"), Bomb/Nav - Robert Gay, Engineer - Thomas Doyle, Nose Gunner - Stephen James, Waist Gunner - John Rimmer, Radio Operator - John Thayden, Ball Gunner - Arthur Husted, and Tail Gunner - Howard Lynch.

Our aircraft was a B-24-H-25, number 42-95288, named "Nacherly", built at the Ford Willow Run plant. She had good flight characteristics, handled well, and also had been flak scarred, but we enjoyed flying her.

The mission started as most did, wake-up around 4:30 am, shave, dress, go to breakfast, roll call 0610, briefing 0615-0730, stations 0745, take off 0810. Target briefing was for Blechhammer, South Oil refinery in Germany. Having visited that target twice before, we knew we could expect fighter intercepts, and heavy flak over the target. The weather enroute and over the target was clear, with good visibility. We were in a formation of eighteen (18) aircraft, each plane carried 12-500 lb. RDX explosive bombs. The takeoff, join-up, and climb to altitude, route to the first turning point was normal. At this point we lost the #1 engine turbo charger, causing us to lose 1/2 power on that engine. We could not hold our position in the formation, so we fell back into what we called "the tail-end Charlie" position, continuing with the rest of the formation. Over the target, #2 engine was hit by flak. We jettisoned our bombs, but we started to lose altitude and the damage prevented my being able to "feather" the prop. (i.e.: stop the propeller in the "straight" blade position.) By using the R.P.M. (Revolutions Per Minute) control and "feather" button, I was able to keep the propeller from "running away" and possible come off the engine and through the plane. After about an hour, the propeller "froze" (stopped) and control of the plane was somewhat easier. Controlling the propeller, calling on the radio for some fighter escort (this proved futile), as they were very busy with combat with German fighters, and other damaged bombers, and helping "Hawk" with flying the plane, we were sorta busy!! We established a course to the friendly airfield on the Isle of Vis off the coast of Yugoslavia. However, we lost power on #4 engine (1/2 power) so, on only 1 and 1/2 engines Hawk prepared us for "bailout". We jettisoned all the extra equipment, i.e.: flak vests, aux power unit, guns, ammo, etc. We continued to lose altitude, so "Hawk" gave the bailout order. We were over Yugoslavia near the coastal towns of Split and Sebenik, and we exited the plane. I landed on a big flat rock (about 30 ft. in area), sprained both ankles. Luckily I was wearing fleece lined heated boots, so my ankles "gave". Had I been wearing my GI boots laced tight, the ankles would have broken. After landing, I placed my chute and Mae West (water flotation vest) under some rocks and put on my GI boots (which I had strapped to my parachute

harness), laced them tight to hold my ankles, and prepared to get out of sight.

At this time, a Partisan about 25-30 years old came over the rise, with a rifle pointed at me. He asked "English??". I said "No-American". He shouted back over his shoulder, "Americanski-Americanski!!", and over the rise came a couple more men and six or seven very large women in Partisan uniform (the uniforms were not all the same, bits and pieces of different material) but a welcome sight anyway!! The inquired as to the parachute and Mae West, (these people used anything they could get for their purpose of fighting the Germans). These Partisans all wore a red star on their caps, identifying them as members of Marshal Tito's forces. The women retrieved my chute and Mae West as they used any materials they could get to good use. This group all shook my hand, some hugged me, told me they had picked up a crew member who was hurt fairly severe and another party was taking him to where we were to go, so we set off for this place. These folks knew their business, as we evaded some German patrols to get to our rendezvous. When we arrived, Sgt. Husted was laying on a pallet of blankets, his head was bandaged as best they could. We learned later that his skull was fractured and also both ankles.

Having been walking a good distance and not having anything to drink for a good bit of time, I indicated that I would like a drink. Since this group spoke very limited English, most communications were by signs. An older lady brought me a small clear glass of liquid which I drank down, and it was like a ball of fire when it hit bottom!! Was their pure 120+ alcohol content whiskey they seemed to have on hand in abundant quantity I learned later! They all had a good laugh at my discomfort, and produced a flask of red wine which cooled the "fire". I might add, however, this potion did have a pain reducing effect on my sprained ankles!!

These folks informed me that the seven others had been located and were on their way to another location, and that we were to go there, as that was where their local Commander was located and he wished us to be brought there. A wagon and horses appeared, where they got one I have no idea, but it was there, and Husted and I were loaded in it and off we went. It was getting dark and so we traveled in silence and very quietly so as to not alert any German patrols.

We arrived at the Commanders' position - he greeted us - he could speak fair English. The rest of the crew was there and we had a good reunion. Some liquid beverages were consumed, as the Commander insisted on several toasts to our help with the Partisan cause and our brave airmen who were bombing the Germans.

We had all kept our "escape kits" which contained maps, some "APC" pills, (like Aspirin or Advil now), Sulfa powder, and other things, also we had kept our First Aid packets from our chute harness, which contained Morphine syrettes which we "pooled" and started giving injections on a scheduled basis to Husted to relieve his pain.

Before continuing with how these Partisans took us through the German patrols and we eventually all arrived back in Italy, I wish to digress on our bailout, etc.

During WWII Combat Crew Training, very little was done as to actual training for egressing aircraft. Time was short for much of our training, as crews were needed, and much was done through lectures and what was in Training Manuals and what each crew member had to study on his own. Each crew had to discuss their crew's actions should the need to leave the plane arose. Three (3) rings on the "bailout-ditching bell" was used to alert the crew along with intercom earning and a long sustained ring plus voice (if possible) command over the intercom to "bailout". Our crew procedures worked well.

As for ditching in the water for the B-24, it was a very risky business, as the plane did not have good ditching characteristics. Bailout, if possible, over land was much preferred over a water landing.

As I left the plane, I gave a five second count and pulled the ripcord, and after what seemed an eternity (a few seconds) that beautiful white canopy blossomed above me! What a wonderful sight! Trying to get turned so as to land with the wind at my back, (landing backwards was to be avoided if possible), I was not completely successful, and landed crosswind. The area was very mountainous, however, I landed on a big flat slab of rock, and did avoid hitting any craggy sharp rocky areas.

Later, talking to the rest of the crew, we all had some scary experiences when we neared our

landing spots!! Thaden landed just over a wall and his chute on the other side, and on top of the wall was broken glass bottles which the local people used to discourage anyone climbing over their property walls!!

Floating down, I observed the plane crash into a mountain top, and explode. Not much fire - almost all of the fuel was gone, and later I learned the Partisans salvaged the tires and some other equipment from the wreckage.

All in all, I was glad my first and only parachute jump was a successful one. I have always said, you should do it once, but I do not believe in "skydiving" as I can see no good reason for leaving an aircraft that is still flying!!

Continuing with the story - the Commander brought the soldier who I had given my .45 to and asked if the man had taken it from me, as he would punish him if he had. I assured the Commander that I had, indeed, presented the fellow with the gun as a present and hoped he could put it to good use. Both were very happy and both shook my hand.

It was getting late, but from the local village came a Doctor who came at great risk, as he had to be very careful as he was watched closely by the Germans in the village. However, these people were very resourceful. He looked at Sgt. Husted's head and cleaned it up and stated that indeed it seemed to be a fracture. He set Husted's ankles and suggested we use the Morphine sparingly so as to last as long as possible, and hoped we got him out and to the British hospital on Vis as soon as we could. The Commander assured him that he had plans in the works to get us out.

Next morning, after a breakfast of brown bread and washing it down with wine, somewhere they produced some eggs and meat for Husted. He ate and seemed better. The Commanders' barber gave us all a shave and a trim, and we spent the day talking as best we could about the war, Hitler, and how they were thinking of getting us out to friendly hands.

Toward dusk, it was decided that Husted and I would be taken in the wagon on one route and the other seven go by another route, since they could walk and they might be slowed down due to having to be very careful traveling by wagon. By the way, I never asked or tried to get names of those helping us as I felt if captured, I could not give any info on who helped us.

We traveled toward our destination, avoiding several German patrols, arriving at the foot of some high hills near the coast. Two donkeys were produced by these folks and Husted and I were mounted on them and we proceeded up the hill and over the crest. There was a small cove where several small speed boats were unloading supplies for the Partisans. These supplies were carried up the hill, mostly by the women who were not small by any means! They looked as though they could handle themselves in any situation. The men were guarding the area very closely.

Husted and I were loaded on a speedboat, the Captain of which was an American. He said he came from the Chicago area and had been a liquor runner on the Great Lakes for the mob during Prohibition.

At first light, we started down the Adriatic Sea toward a rendezvous with a larger ship. When we got to the cove where that ship was anchored, we boarded it, only to find that it had a broken rudder, and we would have to stay on board until another ship could be arranged for. Husted and I were bunked with the Captain and his son. I gave them some cloth maps and a nice compass from my escape kit and they were very appreciative as the maps were in great more detail than some they had. On board were eight British troops from a "Pathfinder" unit (these parachuted into areas and established communications for use by the Partisans and allied units). They had been recalled and were on their way back to Vis. Also on board were several wounded Partisan men, women and children all going to Vis and other areas for medical attention.

Next day the other ship arrived, we got on board and started toward Vis. Some bombers were on their way on a mission and one dropped out of formation with a "feathered" engine, turned back and jettisoned his bomb load. We had a few anxious moments as the bombs came down. They landed about 1 mile from us. Would have been a bad stroke of luck had we been hit by one off the bombs!!

When we arrived at Vis, we were met by medical personnel from the British American Medical



Detachment/Hospital (was a small facility) and they got all the info on Sgt. Husted from me and assured me they would get the necessary information to 15<sup>th</sup> AF Hdqs and our Group and Squadron. (I did not see Art for over forty (40) years. We met at our Groups' 2<sup>nd</sup> Reunion in 1985 at San Antonio. Art has since passed away).

I was taken to the Army Air Corps Detachment and got a shower, a good meal and a good nights rest. Next morning, a breakfast of fresh?? eggs (they were great), some bacon, good coffee, and good conversation with fellow American flyers. I boarded a B-25 which took me to Bari and I was taken to the 15<sup>th</sup> AF Hosp. for exam, delousing, (I had avoided getting any lice, which I could not figure out how I missed them as I was told most did get them while in company with Partisans), got debriefed, a clean uniform, contacted my Squadron, and was informed that Major Skinner (my Sqdn. Commander, Capt. Kilimnik (Operations Officer) Lt. Borkan (the Bombardier on Hildebrandt's crew and my original crew mate), were in the Bari area and I could get with them at the Army/Air Corps Hotel, which I did.

The next day we shopped at the Military Exchange. I purchased one set First Lt. bars (all they had in stock) as Maj. Skinner informed me that Promotion Orders had come down from 15<sup>th</sup> Hdqs. (Later, my fiancée - Hilma Kaiser - she and I got married 31 Jan 1945 upon my return) sent me several pair of silver 1<sup>st</sup> Lt. bars). We left for our base. Upon arrival, I retrieved my personal things from Squadron Supply (these belongings were about to be processed for shipment to my home). I moved back into our crew officers tent where Lts. Donald Trawin (Hunter's Bombardier) and Harold Davis (Hunter's Navigator)(they were flying with other crews on the day we bailed out as there was another mission to Szekesfehervar Rail Marshaling Yard in Hungary on Friday 13th, which they flew on). I had been gone from the Sqdn. seven days. I told Supply that the rest of the crew was being brought out of Yugoslavia and not to ship their belongings home.

Next day, I had my ankles checked by the Flight Surgeon and he said they were done O.K. Took it easy and next day flew a practice mission to see how the ankles did. Were a bit sore but worked O.K. We received word on or about the 22 Oct. '44, that the rest of the crew was at Bari ready to come back. Capt. Skeens, I, and a makeup crew, flew down and picked the seven up. I kidded "Hawk" about me being a 1<sup>st</sup> Lt. He asked if he made it also and, after some time of having him think he didn't, I gave him a copy of the Orders - we were on the same orders.

I had eight sorties to fly to finish my 35 sorties, the rest had thirteen (13). After a ten day rest on the Isle of Capri, we came back and I finished my sorties on 15 Dec. 1944. Returned to the States on 26 Jan 1945. Was released from Active Duty Jun 1945, assigned to the Reserves, Nov 1966-Nov 1967. Retired 1 April 1970, from Scott AFB, IL where I was Chief, Special Actions Division, DCS Personnel, Hdqs. Military Airlift Command, and have enjoyed the 454<sup>th</sup> Bomb Group reunions since we started them in 1984.

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#### THE MEN WHO FELL OUT OF THE SKY

For 55 years, Hans Taubinger wondered about the silver bird he saw crash. Now he knows.  
By Paul Reid, Palm Beach Post Staff Writer

Wednesday, Sept. 13, 1944, was the type of day you want to bottle. From the Adriatic coast of Italy north to Bavaria, friendly breezes scudded cotton clouds above Alpine meadows. Harvests were coming in from Brittany to the Ukraine, and the aroma of scythed hay and sawed cedar and pressed apples announced the advent of fall.

On Sept. 13, 1944, the most terrible war was entering its final, convulsive months. Million-man armies wrapped a necklace of death around Germany from the east, the south and the west. But even a war that kills 70 million doesn't touch everyone.

For Hans Taubinger, a 4-year-old boy who lived with his parents and brother in a Slovakian hamlet near the Danube River, the war was never more than the distant rumble of unseen aircraft. Until

Sept. 13, 1944. And every day thereafter, for almost 55 years.

### **'I saw the silver bird'**

At noon that day on the forested slopes of the Carpathian Mountains of Slovakia, Hans' father, a woodsman named Elemer Taubinger, hunted deer for his table. In Modra, the nearby village where he lived, his wife Elena, cooked soup while Hans played in the garden.

That morning, Hans had heard the Allied bombers heading north, hundreds of them. He and his brother, Karol, 6, had looked skyward when they heard the low hum that announced the coming of the planes. The boys could make out the planes' contrails, 5 miles overhead. Now, at lunchtime, a lone plane drifted low, eight or 10 or 11 puffs spiraling behind.

"I saw the silver bird," says Hans, now 59. "I saw the bright silver bird and the parachutes bright white. I could count. My brother and I argued about how many parachutes, seven or eight or 10. The plane flew low behind a ridge. Then, black smoke.

"Right then at that moment, I wondered who was on that plane. Almost every day for 10 years I'd remember that silver bird and wonder: Who was on the plane? Who was the pilot? The bombardier? The navigator?"

"You see, as I grew older, I learned about B-24 bombers, the engineering, the crew positions, how they flew, to where, the bombs they carried, their targets. I wondered about the gunners, the gunner in the belly of the plane. And the tail gunner. Who was the man in the tail bubble? What happened to them?"

Hans Taubinger is relating his story while sitting across a table from Fred Oswald, a 74-year-old bald, retired appliance salesman from the New York City borough of Queens.

They are in the kitchen at Oswald's sister's house in Delray Beach. Fred Oswald has just met Hans Taubinger. Taubinger has come from Munich, where he lives and works as a software engineer, to meet Oswald. He no longer wonders who the tailgunner was on the silver bird. He's talking to him.

Staff Sgt. Fred Oswald, B-24 tail gunner, 454<sup>th</sup> Air Group, was a kid who had already seen more of life than he had bargained for. His B-24 was shot down at exactly 12:23 p.m., Sept. 13, 1944, over a garden where a 4-year-old looked up into the brilliant sky as Oswald and his 10 crewmates were looking down into what seemed the blackest of forests -

### **'It was my last mission'**

"I was packed and ready to go home," Oswald says. "My regular crew, the one I came over with, had done their 50 missions. They were waiting in Naples for a ship to go home. I had been wounded in April cracked ribs, frozen left hand. I had taken my glove off when my gun jammed, and my hand froze to the gun. You're at 30,000 feet and it's something like 40 below zero, so your hand freezes without a glove. So I lost a few missions and was trying to make them up. This was number 48. And the Major said he'd see to it that it was my last, get me on the ship with my crewmates. He was right. It was my last mission.

Oswald's B-24 Liberator, number 570, with a crew of 11 men, was the lead plane of Sept. 13, the target locator for a formation of more than 160 U.S. bombers. As the pathfinder, it was equipped with radar and carried an extra crewman to man the radar. After a four-hour flight from the base near Bari, in southern Italy, the Pilot handed off the controls to the Bombardier for the final run to the target - the Odertal oil refinery in Germany, just over the Slovakian border.

"Just as we started the bomb run, **WHAM!** Direct hit. Flak. They were trying to get us 'cause we're the lead plane. The plane goes straight up - feels like a thousand feet - then straight down. The number four engine is hit, out. The number three goes. The plane starts shaking. But we made the run, dropped the bombs. Then we turned to go home. The Captain told me get out of the tail, get in the waist. I left, grabbed my parachute. We're throwing stuff out the plane to make it lighter, Browning

50-caliber machine guns, everything. Out. But we're losing altitude. Captain says, "Ozzy, we're going out." I had a .45 with two extra clips. I got an escape pack, I know what's in it. Aspirin, gum, three Fleetwood cigarettes, five small maps, \$50 in cash and a fish hook. I figure what the hell.

"I went out the bomb bay doors. It was a nice ride down. I waited eight seconds to pull the rip cord. I don't know why eight seconds. Nobody taught me how to parachute. A German fighter flew corkscrews around me. The pilot waved. I didn't know where the hell I was or what to do when I got there. I was just a 20-year-old kid parachuting into hell.

And that was the end of Oswald's last mission.

### **Pilot had broken leg**

All 11 crew members made it safely to ground, the Captain with a broken leg, the rest with scratches and bruises from landing hard in trees. They were separated. They were alone in Nazi-occupied Slovakia. And none of them spoke a word of German or Slovak or any language that might help their cause.

About the time little Hans Taubinger saw the plume of black smoke rise in the hills, Fred Oswald, out of breath and hiding in thick undergrowth saw a squad of German soldiers.

"I checked my .45. I had a total of 21 shots, I figure if I'm gonna go, some of them are going with me. They're coming up this path four or five of them. I'm trying not to breathe. Thank God they didn't have a dog. Then I see this movement to my right. I point the gun. There's a guy pointing a pistol at me. It's Charlie Edison, the navigator. He's a Dartmouth guy, an officer. His family owns Buster Brown Shoe in St. Louis. I tell him, 'Get in the bushes fast.'"

"The patrol stops right in front of us. One guy is looking right in the bushes. Nothing happens. They leave. We wait. I ask Charlie, 'Where are we?' He says, 'How do I know?' I say, 'You're the Navigator, supposed to know where we are.' I ask him where we're gonna go. He says we're going back, to our lines. We decide to move by night, sleep by day. Try to move south to our lines somewhere. Maybe move east to meet the Russians. In truth we don't know what the hell we're gonna do."

That night Hans' father returned from his hunt. He had beaten the German soldiers to the bomber crash site. He brought his sons a souvenir.

"It was a contraption," says Hans. "For me it was a toy, a magic box of wires and needles. But my father was smart. He had taken the plane's autopilot. For years I played with it. When I was older, I took it apart and learned how it worked - the cams and gears and four magnetos that controlled altitude, heading, the rudder. The toy became a tool in my education. I am an engineer because of it. And always it connected me to the men on the plane."

Years later, in the early 1980s, Taubinger lived in Delray Beach and worked as an engineer for Siemens, a German conglomerate. He says when he returned to Germany, he never thought he'd come back to Florida under these circumstances. The war and the plane were constant memories but had not become part of his everyday life.

### **Germans searched forest**

During the days after the B-24 crash, Hans played with his new toy, and German troops searched the forests for the airmen. The Germans were also searching for American OSS operatives who had recently parachuted into Slovakia to foment revolt against the Nazis. The German search for the OSS spies would have lifelong consequences for Oswald. In more ways than one, he had parachuted into the wrong place at the wrong time.

Edison and Oswald walked the woods for two days and pretty much chewed all the aspirin and gum in their escape kits. Then, in a clearing, they saw a house, a low-slung, steep-roofed timber dwelling of the sort in illustrated children's books about dark forests and trolls. The fliers are thinking about what to do, maybe knock on the door, because they're hungry and tired. They see a man. The

man sees them. He says: "Do not be afraid. I am a White Russian and you will be safe here. Go to the house."

"Edison and I looked at each other," says Oswald. "We looked at the guy. We figured, 'What the hell.' We went to the house. A woman gave us soup, bread. Then the man of the house returned. He was a forest warden. His name is Michal Mihalik. He saved our lives."

Mihalik took the men into the hills. They reached an old oak tree.

"Mihalik knocked on the tree three times with his rifle," Oswald says. "From the other side of the tree comes a grunt, a head pokes out. An American. There's a secret cave, and five Americans are hiding in it. Mihalik brought food up every day. One of the Americans is a guy named Richie Moulton, shot down in June. He had escaped from a Slovak POW camp in August. So now we have seven Americans alive by the grace of this forest ranger and his wife. If the Germans find us, he's dead."

Mihalik had a friend who was a miller, the miller collected flour from the villagers of Pila, a tiny hill town about 5 miles from Hans' town of Modra. The miller's wife baked cakes and bread for the fliers. The people of Pila contributed fruits and cheese. The Germans never caught on.

### **Germans scoured area**

But by November, the heat was on and the Germans were scouring the area. The Gestapo had been to Mihalik's house. Based on their intelligence reports, they knew they were seven fliers short. They also were still looking for U.S. spies. So Mihalik told the fliers it was time to make a getaway.

"We split up," Oswald says. "The four officers went their way. Dick Moulton, Jerry Howland and I went our way. It was November 11, Armistice Day. We dressed in civilian clothes. I kept my .45 under my jacket. Three days later, a kid heard us talking in a church. He ran out screaming, 'Americans, Americans.' We ran like hell along a river for about 3 miles. Knocked on a door. Man answers and makes gestures that seem to tell us he'll help. But he turned us in. A few days later, I'm in the Gestapo prison in Vienna. That was the last I saw Richie Moulton."

Oswald was kept in a Gestapo prison until New Year's 1945. He's lucky he got out alive. His dog tags had been ripped off when he left the plane. He had no ID. The Gestapo had a good case to shoot him as a spy. He watched firing squads do their work from his cell window. Almost daily, Oswald was hauled to an interrogation room, beaten, revived with ice water, beaten more. He gave them nothing but his name, rank and serial number: 12159221. For that, they beat him more.

The years after the war were tough. He's on total disability. Forty-eight missions didn't get to him. The torture did.

By New Year's 1945, all of Oswald's crewmates had been captured, most within hours of the plane going down. All captured but one, the Bombardier. Menley J Fliger. He had made it back to Italy on Oct. 6, on foot and alone.

### **Patton set them free**

George Patton set Oswald free on April 29, 1945.

"Patton walked into our tent and said we smelled like pigs," Oswald says. "Then the Nazi flag came down and the American flag ran up, and I knew I was going home.

Dick Moulton had been beaten for weeks by his Gestapo captors in Vienna before being sent to a POW camp. After the war, he went home to New England, where he ran a bank in Keene, N. H. In 1973, he and his wife, Virginia, moved to Vero Beach. He had often wondered about the fate of Fred Oswald.

About a year ago, Hans Taubinger happened to see a photo of a B-24.

"It made the memories flood back. It was the silver bird," he says. "I somehow knew it was time to learn who the men on the plane were."



### Search went nowhere

So Hans started his search. And went nowhere.

"I found B-24 Web sites, veterans groups. But I lacked information, I had no tail number, I couldn't remember the exact date of the crash. I called my brother and asked, 'Do you have the autopilot?' It was gone. I had nothing."

A call to the U.S. Air Force Historical Research Agency at Maxwell Air Force Base in Alabama brought a sigh from the staff there. Without a tail number, forget it. But Hans persisted.

"Mickey Russell, a staffer, told me, 'Look, we had dozens of planes go down then, hundreds.' But he went through all the possibilities and came up with one: a B-24, serial number 42-50570 had gone down near Modra at noon, Sept. 13, 1944. He sent me a copy of the original Missing Air Crew Report. And there were the names - Eleven names. But how to find them now, 50 years later?"

Taubinger surfed the Internet. He cross-referenced veterans groups and airmen and POWs. He called directory assistance. He started calling every Oswald and Meyer and Stewart listed anywhere. But Oswald and Meyer and Stewart aren't exactly rare names. He got nowhere.

Then he searched phone books for the name Fliger. It's not a common name. He got one hit. He called the number, asked the lady who answered whether she knew anyone named Menley J. Fliger. "He's sitting right here," she said.

And that call led to the eight surviving crew members, including Oswald, who mentioned his old pal Moulton. So Taubinger tracked down Moulton, too. He even found a photo in the Slovakian police archives of the young pilot who shot down Moulton in June 1944. That pilot was killed when he was shot out of the sky four minutes after he shot down Moulton.

Hans Taubinger wanted to meet the crew, speak to them, touch them. He came to Florida from Munich two weeks ago to tell Fred Oswald he watched his plane go down.

They talk.

Where's Charlie Edison, asks Oswald. Died many years ago, says Taubinger.

And Richie Moulton? Just up the road, Taubinger says.

Oswald drapes his arm over Taubinger's shoulder and says this is a rare man, a tremendous man.

Then the two new friends call Dick Moulton and jump in the car and drive up to Vero Beach where, 54 years after the Gestapo separated them, Fred Oswald and Dick Moulton meet and sit on the beach and talk about the old days and marriage and kids and the strange, sometimes terrible, often beautiful quirks of life.

Hans, Dick and Fred stay up late into the night. It's been a long day. It began under clear skies Sept. 13, 1944.

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#### GROUP MISSION #148, 11 NOVEMBER 1944 MARSHALING YARD - VILLACH, AUSTRIA Frederick A. Pyecroft (737)

Here are the notes from my diary of the mission to Linz, 11 Nov 44.

Duty Officer awakened us at 0230 for an 0430 briefing. Target: Linz, Austria.

We started up the Adriatic Ocean but clouds forced us over Yugoslavia. Flew north over Yugo, cutting back between Sebenik and Zara to pick up original course. Forced to turn back - inverters out - electrical problem. Set course for return to base. Forced to bail out. Pilot Pat Tolson reported that, after he jumped, he saw #4 engine explode and wing crumple.

We were picked up by Partisans - 2 mile walk to Brigade headquarters. We had landed about 2 1/2 miles from Knin, where a major battle was raging. Had to wait 4 days until Partisans captured a truck

from the Germans, this took us to Vodice, then to Sibenik by fishing boat. Then to Split by bus. Returned on converted excursion boat Lyublyona to Bari. Total: 14 days.

An interesting anecdote: After bailing out, I was drifting down and remembered that upon landing I should have the wind behind me. How to determine that? I decided to watch Jay Burkley, who had jumped before me, to see which way his chute blew after he landed. Unfortunately, I landed on a hill top before he hit the ground.

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\* A MYSTERY Within A MYSTERY \*  
Joseph E. Colson (738)

Late in June last year (2000), I received a telephone call from Florian Kulaga (738<sup>th</sup> carpenter). I did not know Florian in Italy and had not met him at any of our reunions; however, he had found my name in a Group Directory. Florian explained that his son Jon had spotted a French Franc on the Internet (e.bay??) And it had the words "454<sup>th</sup> Bomb Gp" written on it. Jon is always on the lookout for WWII memorabilia; always has his father in mind; and, "454<sup>th</sup>" certainly caught his eye. Jon obtained the Franc (actually it is a 100 Franc) and sent it to his father. When Florian spotted my name on the Franc, he called me to ask if I could recall signing it?

My mind was a "total blank" (56 years will do that to some!!)/ I couldn't think of having seen a French Franc anywhere during my WWII tour. Florian graciously sent the Franc to me for personal viewing and to possibly awaken a latent memory.

One glance at the back side of the slightly faded and dog-eared Franc immediately restored about 75% memory of the signing event. I pulled down my file of WWII Military Orders and found 15<sup>th</sup> AIR FORCE OPERATIONS ORDER #252 dated December 4, 1944.

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1. The following officers and enlisted men, 454<sup>th</sup> Bomb Group, will proceed o/a 6 December 1944, via military aircraft B-24 No. 42-52207 from present station to CAIRO, EGYPT and PALESTINE for a period of five (5) days for recreational purposes:

<u>NAME</u>	<u>RANK</u>	<u>DUTY</u>	<u>ASN</u>
CORWIN C. GRIMES	Major	P	Will not list
JOSEPH E. COLSON, JR	Captain		CP "
JAY H. HILLIS	Captain		B "
JAMES F. MEARS	Lt Col	P	"
PETER T. NANOS	1 <sup>st</sup> Lt	B	"
FRANK L, CRANFORD	S/Sgt	AE	"
JAMES L. NOEL	S/Sgt	G	"
ROBERT KERLIN	T/Sgt	E	"
GEORGE H. PRESTON	S/Sgt	G	"
JAMES M. FAUCETT	S/Sgt	RO	"

Officers and enlisted men will return to proper station via military aircraft B-24 No. 42-52207 o/a 11 December 1944. AUTHORITY: Cable MAAF, ----32044, 22 September 1944.

By command of Major General TWINING:  
R. K. TAYLOR  
Colonel, GSC  
Chief of Staff

(Official Signatures and Order distribution list this space)

I believe B-24 No. 42-52207 was "Miss Maggie"

Now back to the Franc to view signatures:

Joseph E. Colson Jr.  
454<sup>th</sup> Bomb Gp

Peter L. Nanos  
454<sup>th</sup>-738<sup>th</sup>

Jay H. Hillis  
454<sup>th</sup> BG

Corwin C. Grimes  
James F. Mears

(And a Name not on  
OP ORDER #252!???)

Civilian name on Franc: Mr and Mrs Bilicki  
Charlie M. Berline  
Dorothy Horton

I do not recall the actual event that led to the signing; however, here are a few memories I still retain of the trip. There were very few US Military personnel in Tel Aviv at that time; however, there were many British Military and a few uniformed Free French in evidence. In addition, there were US, British, and other nationalities to be seen. We were unable to obtain room in any of the Tel Aviv hotels; so, each of us were assigned to homes of people who had opened their homes for military personnel. (I, along with our Unnamed Signer ended up in the home of a Dentist (I think) and his family.) We took breakfast with them and then assembled with the other crew members each day at the main Hotel to arrange our tour schedule for the day. Our US Army Air Corps uniforms drew attention from many of the locals and some would greet us and engage us in conversation. This also resulted in being guests at a meal or two at the expense of those who approached us. Thus, I assume the Bilicki couple who signed the franc may have played host; Dorothy Horton may have been the hotel Dining Hostess; and Charlie Berline?? He's a complete blank in my memory!!

Possibly we "autographed" the Franc for one of the people as a memento of the occasion??? A Fifty-Six Year Mystery! What path had the note followed to arrive in the US and to eventually appear for sale on the Internet?? In mid July, 2000, I received a very warm letter from Jon Kulaga about his obtaining the Franc and his subsequent effort to find if the Auction Site could give any information on their having it. As I understand it, the seller had no record and said it may have come from an Estate Sale; he may have gotten it from a "flea market", or from another auction house.

\*

Although our Orders only mention "recreational purposes" for our "arduous" trip, we were "scoping out" an area for a suitable?? place for future R & R sites for people of the 454<sup>th</sup>. I understand there were some who did make the trip before eventual return State-side.

Now moving on from the mystery of a franc's mysterious travel that covered fifty-six years, we move on to the second Mystery. First, I ask "How many average Military personnel scan their Orders other than to make sure their name is on them??" Possibly Mears and/or Grimes were in on the "know"; however, I certainly never realized we had a passenger on the flight whose name did not appear on official Orders!

We stayed a day or two in Cairo before flying on to Palestine. I have a couple of snapshots in Cairo—one in which an unnamed Captain from the 454<sup>th</sup> Bomb Group and I are mounted on camels before one of the Pyramids. Also in my collection is a couple of snapshots in Tel Aviv of the Captain and as I mentioned, he and I were housed with the same family in Tel Aviv. Of the ten men listed on OP ORDER #252, Grimes, Mears, Hillis, and Nanos have responded to TAPS. Four of the enlisted men are not listed in our Group Directory. Frank Cranford is there and I have chatted with him at some reunions and I certainly will seek him out if he is at Colorado Springs. However, he probably would have no

knowledge of the incident of the signed Franc as the Enlisted men were quartered in a different location while in Tel Aviv.

I will divulge the name of the Unnamed Captain when I am able to clear matters with him. After all, he may still be fearful of a Court Martial for being a Stowaway on a military aircraft and/or being AWOL!! (1) His name was inadvertently left off the Orders; (2) He had an individual Order issued at the last moment; (3) He made the flight unofficially: however, with the knowledge of Mears and Grimes. I'm inclined to go along with #3. (We did visit Bethlehem, Jerusalem, Joppa, and Lydda while in Palestine which was the official title while under British jurisdiction. The Palestinians have never actually governed any part of the land.)

Would you say, "Here was an early day military boondoggle in which ten intrepid warriors of the 454<sup>th</sup> were a part of?"

3/8/2001

j e colson

#### TIME FOR CONFESSION??

9/10/02 - How time flies!! In reviewing notes about the foregoing report, I find I wrote to our 738<sup>th</sup> Flight Surgeon in the Fall of 2000. On 9/18/00, I received a telephone call and an unfamiliar male voice asked when I was going to come in for my Physical Exam!?!? Well, I was due for a scheduled exam with our local doctor on 9/25; however, the voice wasn't his and it certainly wasn't that of his receptionist. I asked "Who is calling, please." The reply was "This is Jim Walker". We had a good chat about generalities, health issues, and the 454<sup>th</sup> Group. He expressed that he considered the 738<sup>th</sup> Squadron as the best in the Group (I agree with that evaluation!) And he mentioned some of the individuals in the Squadron that were some of the best and he flattered me by including my name. I mentioned the fact that his name did not appear on the Travel Orders and asked "Why?". There was a long pause and then he said, "I consider Pat Grimes as a very true friend and he was truly a great individual"! I considered Dr. Walker's answer to be an inference that my surmise was correct...! He had been a "stowaway" and was on the flight with Grimes and Mears "free pass"...or, just maybe Orders were cut too hurriedly to include him??? I think not!

9/10/2002

j e colson

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GROUP MISSION #170, 18 DECEMBER 1944  
SYNTHETIC OIL PLANT - OSWIECIM, POLAND  
Carroll R. Griffin (737)

Transcribed and edited from audio tape by Historian

Joe, I'm not sure how this is going to work out because this is my first attempt at narration into a tape recorder, and I might say at the beginning there will be some skips and blanks and hesitation until I really decide I'm doing the right thing - it may not even be coherent. I got your letter yesterday and it was real interesting to read the debriefing isn't as I remember how it happened.

We, as I remember, never did get to the target. We were flying along over the open country in Hungary and I don't know where the guns came from - we hadn't been briefed - maybe they were on a railroad car and they were moving from some place and they stopped long enough to shoot up our tank. As I remember, all that happened is we lost our fuel - they blew a hole in the wing tank and we lost our fuel and didn't have enough to get back to Italy, back to friendly territory. So we turned East and went behind the Russian lines, we hoped. While I think of it, Bill Daniel was our Co-pilot on that flight. Fryer didn't have a crew of his own, he came over as a replacement, and they moved him finally from the



736th to the 739th. He was the Squadron CO there later - but at the time, on December the 18th, we were a makeup crew - pulled from the crews that weren't flying that day to fill in and make his crew. I've got a list of the crew members and I'll look at it later and try to figure out who was the Mickey man and who was the Navigator on that particular date.

Now, one other thing, you mentioned Young - the name was Yount, Jack Yount. He was a baby-faced kid from Memphis, Tenn. and I'm trying to make contact with him. We went through Memphis a couple years ago, and I stopped and got the Memphis phone book and I could not find any sign of any Yount. He and I buddied after we got shot down and stayed with Hungarians, then Yugoslavs - they split us up on our way from where we got shot down to Belgrade. He and I always stayed with Hungarian peasants or wherever we happened to be roomed together, as it were. He was a real baby-faced kid - looks were deceiving - he was sure a tough, go-getting type. He did a lot of things you wouldn't suspect. He looked like he was about 17 years old.

But anyway, Bill Daniel and one of the other crew members broke their ankles in that bailout and I never did - I can't remember and I haven't talked to anybody at the reunions about which crew Daniel was on. He was from Denton, Texas and, as it turned out, some of my relative were from Teas and he and a cousin, my cousin really, went through grade school and high school together and this boy, a friend of his, got killed early in the war - I don't remember now where it was. I've tried to check on Daniel since the war and nobody that I've talked to has any idea what might have happened to him.

Well, let's see - I always thought that Geyer, Hungary was where we ended up but after talking with Milt at reunions a time or two, he didn't think we ever got that far North. Anyway, as you mentioned in the debriefing, I was out four nights I think, because the first night, before I made contact with any of the other crew members, the Germans - apparently they were retreating at the time and I don't know if it was their ammunition dump they blew up or if they blew up a Russian bomb or ammunition dump - but there was the damndest explosion - and not, I didn't think - too far from where I happened to be. I thought - my god, that stinking Navigator has set us down between the Russian and German lines. That's where I traveled at night and holed up in the daytime. I was trying to get back East to make sure I was behind the Russian lines. However, as it turned out, I finally started out and had to go into a Hungarian farm house and an old man and his son saw me. They apparently had heard about the Americans bailing out and they were too friendly. Over there, they had the kitchen and the stalls for the horses and cows on the bottom floor of the house and the bedrooms and whatever else up on the second floor. I could see they had a couple little cows in the stalls in the house and I wanted a glass of warm milk as bad as I ever wanted anything in my life and I was about starved to death. But anyway, I couldn't make them understand that. They still had some fire in the cook stove and the old man grabbed a little old skillet and filled it up with wine and warmed that wine up and gave me a big glass of it - or a cup - I don't remember, and as empty as I was, I tell you, I was as drunk as a skunk on that wine in just a sort time.

Anyway, after they got me in a little old boat, there was a slew, I don't think it was a running stream, but anyway, there was water there, and they got in this boat and rowed up, oh, a quarter of a mile or so and got out and it wasn't very far until we got to a Russian fighter base. 'Course it was just an open grass field, no runways or anything - just open grass field - and these young Russians, they really made me walk. Of course I was still higher than a kite - so that was great - and they lined up and I shook hands with every one of them and they told me where they were from in Russia and their age. Of course I told them how old I was and I didn't think they had ever heard of Arizona probably, and I had lived in California after I got out of school and before I went into service, so I told them California. They just grinned and shook hands and were great buddies. At the time I would have been glad to have gone with one of them on a fighter plane on a trip up into Germany. They took me then on into this village and the rest of the crew had already been there two or three days while I was out staggering around in the dark.

One thing, first night I walked off - when we bailed out it was a nice afternoon - the temperature was probably in the 50s or 60s. That night a blizzard blew in and the first thing I did was walk off into a

mud hole and get my feet wet. Within an hour or two they were so cold and hurt so bad I finally holed up in a little granary or corn crib type of thing to get out of the wind and pulled my boots off and my socks and my toes were frozen together. From then on, my feet nearly killed me. To this day, cold weather is the worst thing that can happen. I couldn't hardly walk by the time we got back to base two weeks later. Jack Yount and I were traveling together, and when we stayed with one old Hungarian couple, the old man had what we called sandals or clogs on in December, late December. We took our GI shoes with us on the flight and we had all had time to put our shoes on and put our flying boots on over them. Jack felt sorry for this old man so he gave him my flying boots. My feet were just killing me.

I can't remember how much I told you in the letter I wrote so some of this may be repetitious - but at my age and my memory you'll just have to bear with me. We traveled from wherever it was - I always thought Geyer but, according to Milt, we were further South - and one thing - this is kind of hit and miss and as I talk I remember these things. We, my wife and I, and another couple, friends of ours from here in Arizona, went back to Europe 7 or 8 years ago, I don't remember exactly. My main intent in going was that I wanted to go back to Austria and put my two feet where I landed when I bailed out after we were shot down the second time, but that's another story - I'll get to that later on. On that trip we went to Austria and then over into Hungary and I wasn't too sure - and I don't remember and I hadn't talked to Milt at the time - but I thought Geyer was the village and it's not - it's a pretty good sized place, as we found out. Anyway, we went to Hungary and stayed a couple of nights in Budapest. It was real enjoyable. But the main reason for our going was I wanted to go back to Austria and, like I say, I'll get to that later. When we left I wrote you but I probably am -.

Anyway, we had this Russian Captain that took us down to Belgrade from up in Hungary and we traveled about every way we could possibly travel, I think. We walked some and finally got in the back of a truck and rode and we went to -. We got on a train and were on it - I can't remember how long now - but Christmas Day, the train stopped in some pretty good sized town or city, small city probably, and had Christmas diner. Big building, long hall - there must have been maybe 80 people there and, as I remember, just one long table and, oh it was great, and one of the guys - I don't remember which one or how he was elected - stayed on the train and looked after what - I can't imagine what we might have had that was worth looking after - but anyway, I think we took Christmas dinner to him from the table where the rest of us ate. We finally went on that train and came to the Danube and I can't remember whereabouts. When we got to the Danube, we got off the train and got on a freighter, a ship, and went down the Danube from wherever it was we started to Belgrade. I probably told you this in the letter - if the crew had gone together and pooled their escape kit money, which I think was 7 \$5 bills American, we could have bought Yugoslavia. They were so desperate for American money or currency that was worth anything that it was unbelievable. One guy bought a big old table model radio - in the States it would probably have cost 80 or 90 dollars or maybe more - I think it was \$7 he had to pay for it. That is the main thing I remember about the purchases except Jack Yount and I, we spent our money on booze. They had a lot of it. We were there New Years Eve - we were going to celebrate and bring in the New Year in great fashion, so we started out at sundown and we bought us a couple bottles of booze and we started drinking at sundown. What we didn't take into consideration, apparently, was that the sun goes down there at 4:30 in the afternoon on the 30<sup>th</sup> of December - New Years. By ten o'clock we had had it - we were back in the sack. We stayed in the nicest, a real nice, hotel but there was no heat and it was cold. But when we got ready to leave there finally - I think it was Jan. the 2<sup>nd</sup> as I remember - one of the, I don't know what - ATC - flew over from Italy to pick us up and take us back and the Pilot of the DC-3, C-46, or whatever it was, had apparently made that trip on a fairly regular basis, at least he had been there long enough to pick up a girl friend, and he didn't want to fly right back so it turned out there was something wrong with the old airplane, or the weather was bad, or whatever, but we stayed an extra night or two, or day or two, so he got in the plane, got ready to leave, took off, circled - I wondered why we were circling over the airport - but anyway, we were coming back over the runway and I sat looking out the window. All at once I am looking right into this girl's eyes - the Pilot's girl friend. She had come out to the plane with him in a Jeep with a driver and at that level - he wasn't two

feet off the runway - scared me worse than flying on a bombing raid - scared us so bad. Anyway, we got back to Cerignola, to the base and the Group and my feet - they were killing me - but it didn't make any difference. I didn't get a bit of sympathy from the Flight Surgeon. I'd have to look in the Directory - my memory's not good on names any more - he was always a hard-nosed old son of a gun. My feet were - like I said - they still bother me in cold weather.

Anyway, the only good part of being shot down up there, other than having the experience which came in handy later, was the fact that we got to go on rest leave - not all of the crew, but part of them - Yount and I anyway. I can't remember who else, but we went to Cairo and the Holy Land on rest leave, which was great. We got to see things that normally we would never have seen. The day we left we were on three different continents in one day. We left Europe and flew over to Africa and then on to Asia. At that time, a lot of people had never done it. I guess you could say we were irreverent in the Holy Land, so far as the biblical implications didn't mean a whole lot to us, but we did see things that I still remember and am grateful that I got to see.

The War Dept sent my brother, my only surviving relative, a list of the crew members in case he wanted to get in touch with their survivors. By using the reunion directory, I find Martin and Beebe were Navigators and that would leave Dreiman as the Mickey Operator. That was the first time I had ever flown with any of those people. Radar was a big deal at that time - real hush, hush and secret. They had a destruct mechanism that, if something would happen, they could melt it. As they left the plane, they could punch a couple of buttons and it shorted out and melted it all. Dreiman apparently was the Radar man and I can't imagine why - except your letter said we were flying Deputy Lead but, as I remember, we were flying Group Lead. That may not be right. I can't imagine why we would need two Navigators because all they did was to fly us over the flak gun that shot us down.

I tried to get in touch with Sherman. For a long time I thought he and I were the only ones over there who had been shot down twice. It just happened I was flying with my original crew, or part of them when we got shot down the second time and Sherman was filling in for our Bombardier who was Mike Barrone. Mike passed away a couple of years ago. Got to see him at two or three of our reunions. I have sent one or two letters to the address we have in the Directory for Sherman but I haven't received any answer. One of the other crew members lives in PA and I think he's going to try and get in touch with him.

Back to your letter. As I remember it, we never did get to the target, we had to leave the formation on the way up. I know that's right because Milt Fryer says we took a heading for Lake Balaton which is a long way South of Oswiecim. If we had gone over Oswiecim, I'm sure I would have remembered it because it scared the living hell out of us to think of Oswiecim or Munich or Vienna. Of course Linz was our downfall the second time. I know we'd never made it to Oswiecim. I remember making a big right turn after we were hit and I couldn't remember, even though the debriefing said the prop was feathered - hit #4 engine. I just remember that our tanks were punctured and we were losing fuel and couldn't get back to Italy or back over the area of those Ustachi Partisans, German Partisans. We didn't want any part of those suckers - we had heard stories and I didn't have any reason not to believe them. They loved to pick up the American flyers and poke their eyes out and cut their tongues off and all that sort of good stuff. We sure didn't want any part of that and we were tickled to death to think we were getting behind the Russian lines. When we got to Belgrade - I can't imagine why I was the only one to have .45 automatic - the crew decided that I should give my .45 to the Russian Captain who had accompanied us. He deserved it - he was a very nice fellow and did everything he could for us. There was a lot of conflict between the Communists and Resistance, wanting us to stay with each of them.

That bail-out was the hardest thing I ever did in my life! The old airplane was flying straight and level with no problem other than we were going to run out of fuel. One reason I hesitated, I wanted to make sure I was doing everything just right and the hesitation moved me probably five or six or seven or maybe even ten miles from the last guy that bailed out. I don't know, I think there was one guy left after I bailed - Phillips, I believe - and I don't know how long it took him but I know it was the hardest

thing I ever did up to that time.

Herbert E. Eldridge (737)

On December 18<sup>th</sup>, 1944 on a mission to Osweicim, Poland, we were shot up so badly that we were forced to abandon ship over the Hungarian border into Yugoslavia. All were not able to parachute from the ship. Myself and Wolff and two Gunners rode the ship down into the rugged mountainside of the country. I was the only survivor, the others being killed in the crash. I managed to get out of the now burning wreckage through a hole near the bomb bay bulkhead which was probably caused by a bursting oxygen tank on that wall. Just about nightfall, after hiding from German patrols, I was approached by friendly Yugos (Partisans) and placed in an oxcart under straw and was taken along the mountainside paths to one of their village huts where I was attended to for wounds and put up for the night. For the next day or so, I was interrogated by Partisan officers and placed with a family overnight who could speak the English language. This is when I learned of the retrieval of the other crew members and that they were to be brought to the same village for burial. The funeral took place in an old churchyard in weather that was bitterly cold and windy. (Temperatures, I was told, around -30 degrees.)

After this, I was delivered by a wild ride down the mountainside, in a Jeep protected by armed Partisans on each fender, to the town of Sanski Most, on the Drava river. There I was hospitalized in what was left of a hospital for the duration of the time before being repatriated.

After returning to the Squadron, I was assigned to Group Headquarters, as Gunnery Instructor until I joined another crew ( Capt. John J. Dunn) and flew the duration of the war as the Nose Gunner in the ship "Powder Room", which we flew back to the States arriving the end of June 1945.

Milton Fryer (739)

My crew, list enclosed, all managed to be returned to Italy with the help of the Yugoslav Partisans and the Russians. I was returned through Belgrade in 10 days, but my crew was delayed by transport problems for about 5 or 6 weeks.

I was separated from my crew at bail out by a delay in exit from the aircraft. Lt. Martin and I were the last to leave - Lt. Martin's chute had one spring clip broken and needed to be wired with copper safety wire to remain hooked to his harness. When fixed, I told him to jump - I saw him oscillate once and satisfied myself he was OK then I followed. I later learned Lt. Martin broke his ankle upon landing.

When I got on the ground, I walked to a nearby village and was taken for the night by Partisans who turned me over to the Russians the next day - also, learned that my crew had been pulled together in a nearby village and would be returned to Italy.

After 3 days with the Russians, they sent me to Belgrade in a small bi-plane (like a Stearman) where I arrived in time for Christmas. Met other airmen there and we were the first to be returned to 15<sup>th</sup> AF in Bari following the Ploesti episode some 4 or 5 months earlier. The 15<sup>th</sup> sent a C-47 over and picked up 10-11 of us on 27 Dec. 44.

It was an interesting experience and, in retrospect, I view it as a happy one since all of my crew were returned in good health (except for Martin's ankle). Also, all members continued flying and finished their missions before being sent home. I think I managed to fly an additional 11 missions before the war was over.

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GROUP MISSION #172, 25 DECEMBER 1944  
MAIN MARSHALING YARD - WELS, AUSTRIA



Donald H. Rimbey (739)

The Squadron Orderly came to our tent at 0430 to wake us up. We dressed, put on our rain gear, and sloshed through the mud to get to the Mess Hall. After breakfast we went back to our tent to shave and properly dress for the days combat mission. We caught a ride on the Squadron truck and arrived at the old farmhouse (AKA Group Headquarters Building) in time for roll call and briefing at 0600.

The battle map, with colored ribbons to the assigned targets for the day, showed that the Primary Target was the Synthetic Oil Plant at Brux, Czechoslovakia. The 1<sup>st</sup> Alternate Target was the Pilsen Skoda Works, also in Czechoslovakia. The 2<sup>nd</sup> Alternate Target was the Ingolstadt Marshaling Yard in Germany. The 3<sup>rd</sup> Alternate Target was the Wels Main Marshaling Yard in Austria.

Major C. C. "Pat" Grimes was leading the Group on this mission. Captain John Norton was designated as the Squadron Leader of the 739<sup>th</sup>. I was assigned to the Radio Operator's station on the flight deck directly behind the Co-Pilot. By looking to my left, I had a good view through the windshield. As we taxied to the runway for take off, the rain increased in intensity and the ceiling appeared to be about 400 feet. We climbed above the rain clouds and began circling underneath an altocumulus cloud bank that covered the sky and allowed some sunlight to penetrate into our airspace.

We had to spend time circling our airfield waiting for other planes to become airborne and join us in combat formation. During this time, I occupied my mind reflecting on past Christmases and other events. I celebrated my twentieth birthday about two weeks before Christmas Day, so I was no longer flying combat missions as a teenager. However, I was not legally an adult because, at that time in the history of our country, one had to be twenty-one years of age in order to have the right to vote.

Just a year previous, I was at Sioux Falls, SD Army Air Force Technical School. I had completed the six month course as a Radio Operator/Mechanic the day before Christmas. Graduation exercises were schedule for December 26 at 0930. The CO at Sioux Falls gave everyone on the Air Base Christmas Day off. I slept late that morning and got up in time to go to church service prior to the main meal that was served at noontime. The menu for the Christmas Day meal at Sioux Falls was spectacular. I saved a copy of it in my memoirs. The meal featured roast milk-fed turkey stuffed with sage dressing, snowflake potatoes with giblet gravy, creamed corn, cranberry sauce, lettuce with Russian dressing, mince pie with ice cream, chocolate nut cake, assorted fresh fruits, candies and nuts.

During the early morning briefing for today's mission, our Base Commanding Officer announced that a turkey dinner with all the trimmings would be served at 1800 to everyone. The turkeys had ben frozen and shipped by boat to United States airfields in southern Italy. Captain Norton jolted me back to duty by calling crew members on the intercom to inform us that all planes were in formation and we were heading north to our Primary Target.

The weather cleared remarkably as our Group formation traveled northward over the Adriatic Sea. By the time we flew over northern Italy and Austria, the clouds had disappeared and it looked like we could go on to the northwest portion of Czechoslovakia and strike our Primary or 1<sup>st</sup> or 2<sup>nd</sup> Alternate target. However, a severe winter with heavy cloud cover had already arrived in central Europe and our Group Leader made the decision to strike the Wels Main Marshaling Yard in northwest Austria. The weather in the Wels area was clear and we bombed the railroad yard with good accuracy. Our fighter escorts consisted of P-51 Mustangs and P-38 Lightnings. No enemy fighters were seen on this mission. The anti-aircraft fire from the ground batteries was light and inaccurate. As soon as the bombs were released, I flipped the electric motor switch and the trailing wire antenna reeled out from beneath our airplane to a predetermined length in order to establish the proper frequency for the transmission of the coded strike report. This information was needed by Headquarters back in Italy in order to dispatch a photo recon fighter to assess the damage to the target. Captain Norton was executing the evasive maneuver plan and we were rapidly departing the target area.

We maintained altitude until we approached the Adriatic Sea. As we slowly descended in preparation for turning westward to enter the fight path for landing at our airfield near Cerignola, it was apparent that the early morning fog had not dissipated. In fact, it had intensified and completely

covered our airfield to a depth of about three hundred feet. Our Pilot was in radio communication with the control tower operator seeking instructions for safely landing the airplanes. The tower operator told him that fifty-five gallon open steel drums had been positioned on both sides of the steel mat runway. The drums were partially filled with one-hundred octane aviation gasoline. Ground personnel were ready to light off all of the drums. Hopefully, the heat from the burning fuel would cause the dense fog covering our airstrip to rise enough so that the bombers could land, one plane at a time, after peeling off individually from the Group formation circling the airfield above the fog bank.

We were among the first planes to peel off the group formation and descend into the dense white mist. I watched the needle on the altimeter instrument slowly rotate as we lost altitude on the initial approach leg of the landing pattern. When our plane made a ninety degree turn on the final leg, we were approximately lined up with the runway. Faint glimmers of light from some of the burning gasoline drums could be seen ahead.

Suddenly, Captain Norton shoved the control column stick forward and our bomber nosed downward. Simultaneously, I heard a loud roar of engines and, looking straight ahead and upward through the windshield, I saw the undersides of another bomber climbing in the opposite direction we were heading. Captain Norton quickly leveled our plane and increased power in order to reach the beginning of the steel mat runway that was illuminated by the burning gasoline drums

It was a close call! We never learned the identity of the other airplane. It may have been from another Bomb Group and the Pilot became disoriented in the thick fog trying to land at his own airfield. There were several Bomb groups located in the vicinity of the town of Cerignola. Other airplanes from our 454<sup>th</sup> Bomb Group made it safely to the ground. However, the last planes to peel off and attempt a landing, could not do so at our airstrip because the gasoline in the steel drums had burned away and the dense fog closed in, creating zero visibility. Those planes had to land at other airfields in Italy where fog was not a problem. They returned to our base the next day when the weather was clear.

The reward for a successful mission and a lucky, but hazardous landing, was a turkey dinner with all the trimmings. It was late that night when many of us found out that some of the turkey meat that we had eaten was spoiled during the shipment from the US. About three hundred to four hundred men in our Bomb Group suffered through the night with stomach cramps and diarrhea. After the war was over, it was about four years before I could eat turkey again.

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GROUP MISSION #192, 14 FEBRUARY 1944  
FLORISDORF OIL REFINERY - VIENNA, AUSTRIA  
Donald J. Newell (736)

The next day, Valentines Day, was no sweetheart either. Our mission was to bomb the FLORISDORF OIL REFINERY near Vienna, Austria. We had been briefed that Vienna was now the heaviest-defended target in our area, with over 300 flak batteries. Each battery had four to six guns, many operated by radar to fire through clouds. In retreat, the Germans could concentrate more batteries at key targets. We had weather on the way to the target and had to weave around clouds, a maneuver necessary to keep the Group formations intact, and all the rendezvous times were missed. The attack was in disarray, there were B-17s below us and another B-24 Group beside us, all on the same bomb run. There had been a lone B-24 with strange markings flying parallel with us at our IP or Initial Point (the turn onto the bomb run and final commitment to a target), and our P-51 cover had been requested to check it out. We heard later it didn't respond to the code of the day and they shot it down.

Over the target, the ground cloud cover disappeared and every gun, radar and otherwise, obviously was firing. Directly ahead we saw nothing but black smoke and bursting flak - it was a chilling sight. There had been enough prior action over the target that the German gunners had our elevation and course already bracketed. Everyone had their flak helmet and vest on and there wasn't much

conversation, we were going to have to fly right through that maelstrom.

The very first salvo split our Squadron; the plane flying in the second, or Deputy position just ahead of me and slightly higher, took a direct hit into the flight deck. We flew through debris from the hit plane, which took out our windshield and some instruments, and almost knocked Freddy off the flight deck into the open bomb bay. Al was showered with glass and had his sunglasses shattered, received facial cuts and was temporarily blinded. I was hit in the shoulder with what looked like a quart tomato juice can, but felt more like an oil barrel. We were still minutes away from the bomb release point, but stayed in formation and dropped our bomb load with the Group. With bombs away, the Group immediately peeled off, sharper than usual, to get the hell out of there. Joe came out of the nose to help Freddy trying to stuff blankets into the windshield to cut down on the rigid blast, with little success.

We were not home yet. German fighters had been reported in the area and we stayed with the formation until we were out of the target area, but I had to get lower or we would suffer severe frostbite on the flight deck. It was thirty below outside but the wind chill blowing through the flight deck must have been five times that. A lone bomber didn't stand a chance against enemy fighters and I called for a fighter escort. I aborted the formation - we were alone and going down to buzz some Alp peaks on the way home. Mac reported from the tail turret that two fighters were coming in on a pursuit curve, he couldn't tell if friendly or enemy, and I told him to give them a warning burst. Both planes separated and peeled out to each side, they were P-51s. "Hey mistah bummer, we's come to take you home!"- it was our friendly black cover Squadron. The leader pulled up right under my wing, close enough to almost touch, and we waved and smiled at each other. He wanted to know if we had a Navigator on board. When I said "yes", he unstrapped his navigation note pad from his leg and relaxed, he was happy to follow us through the reported coastal flak areas, akin to threading through an aerial mine field. When we were safely over the Adriatic, they peeled off with a waggle of their wings.

For all this I got a Distinguished Flying Cross, when I was just doing what I was trained to do. Al and I got Purple Hearts for our wounds, mine a bruised and lacerated shoulder, which took us off flying status and we missed two missions. There was no frost-bite and everyone else was fine. Losing those two sortie credits was worse than the pain! Goody said now he had a story to tell the boys back home. I'm reminded of the Bill Mauldin cartoon where Dogface Joe says, "I got me one of those Purple Hearts, Doc, all I need is an aspirin".

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GROUP MISSION #203, 28 FEBRUARY 1945  
ISARCO RIVER RAILROAD BRIDGE - ALBES, ITALY  
Conrad R. Leslie (737)

"February 28, 1945. Target, Isarco/Albes Railroad Bridge, Italy, my 28<sup>th</sup> mission. Flight time: 7 hours and 35 minutes. Flak was moderate and accurate. Target was in the Alps, and the Germans gained about 8,000 feet of accuracy by placing their guns up in the mountains. In the formation, we were assigned the No. 4 position just behind and below formation leader of 36 planes, Captain Ted Schindler. On the bomb run, felt our ship receive hits a number of times and heard the shell bursts. Just before "bombs away", experienced loss of engine speed control but was seemingly able to regain it after I transferred to spare electric inverter switches ( which I was told later did not solve the problem).

After "bombs away", on the breakaway turn from the target saw Schindler's plane, which contained my Navigator, Hal Stricker, flying his first mission as Squadron Navigator Leader, get its tail blown off just ahead and above us. Its tail turret with the Tail Gunner in it was blown loose and came tumbling directly at us, but I was able to raise the left wing high enough, without disrupting the formation, to avoid an impact. Then the tail section of the plane came at us. I was able to avoid its smash into our props or wing, but it collided with our vertical tail rudder. Meanwhile, Co-Pilot Wayne Wells was frantically calling via the radio to Stricker and any others who were busy on Schindler's plane

to put on their chutes and bail out because their plane was mortally damaged.

We still had rudder control, but decided to come back along the Yugo coast and then past Falcon Aero (Italy) in case we had to abandon or emergency land. We made our base but had to lower the gear and flaps by the hand- crank system as the hydraulic vacuum line had been cut. The strength of the target's defenders and our B-24 indicated via the evaluation of damage from the Ground Chief. He said that we had 150 holes from flak hits, the right aileron cable was cut as was the aileron hand trim, auto-pilot controls cut, several gas tanks were hit, both electrical invertors were shot out, no gyro navigation or electric pilots' compasses, no radio direction finder, no engine instruments-and the Tail Gunner's window was blown out. The brakes did work. (There was one modest comment of disappointment from a crew member in back when he did not get to pop the hand-prepared chutes, tied to the waist guns, to stop the landing roll if the brakes failed.)

Well, the Good Lord really took card of us once again, and I do mean good care. Of course, in jest, after we were all on the ground and had time to think following the Squadron critique, Co-Pilot Wells reflected it might have been more sensible after "bombs away" to cross on over into Switzerland. But at the time, that thought didn't come forth from any of us.

We all are conscious of the (so far) empty cot in our tent tonight. Really a tough break for our much-liked and talented Navigator Stricker. Hope to hell he got out okay, but it would seem to be doubtful because of his location in the plane. He might have been here tonight if I'd gone up to headquarters and complained about the breaking up of our crew team. He didn't want the responsibility of flying lead, even though he was fully qualified and had brought us back several times when we had to come home alone with damage. He wanted to stay with us, "his crew". I don't know what words to write to his mother and father - and to his girlfriend at home - who sent him a letter every other day.

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GROUP MISSION #207, 8 MARCH 1945  
STEEL WORKS - KAPFENBURG, GERMANY  
John F Thomas (738)

The day of 8 March 1945, started like any other day in Italy during World War II. We had been given our flying assignment the day before, and as usual, the crews were up bright and early (before sunrise) to get breakfast, and attend briefing, and get on with the tasks that lie ahead. As usual, it was a cold, damp day, and we plodded along with our duties. I was the Flight Engineer of Lt. Charles E. Rileys' crew. Other crew members were: Co-Pilot Wilkens, from Illinois, Radio Operator James Cole, from Florida, Robert Remick, Ball Gunner from Wisconsin, Maurice Schwartz, Waist Gunner from Oklahoma, "Red" Davis, Tail Gunner from Texas, John E. Newell, Nose Gunner from Pennsylvania. Our Navigator was from Muncie, Indiana, and at this writing, I cannot recall his last name. Most crews did not have a Bombardier assigned, as most of the bombs were toggled off the lead ship when the Lead Bombardier called "Bombs Away".

There seems to be some confusion concerning our target for that particular day. My records indicated the 207<sup>th</sup> mission of the Bomb Group was the Steel Works at Kapfenburg, Germany, however, that is of no consequence at this time. Our crew had been assigned to Buzz Job. Buzz Job was originally assigned to the 485<sup>th</sup> Bombardment Group, and later transferred to our Squadron. After all the preflights were complete, all crew members of all the aircraft boarded their respective birds, and we were waiting for the green flare. When it came, the engines came alive, and this mass of aluminum became a formidable weapon of war.

After takeoff, we grouped our flight over the Adriatic Sea. Our position in the formation was tail end Charlie, low man in the diamond. We began our primary climb over the Adriatic, as we had done dozens of times. We leveled off to lose some weight until our secondary climb point was reached. This climb point would allow the formation to clear the southern portions of the Alps, reach our cruise



altitude, and settle down to prepare for whatever the Germans would throw at us. We were not overly confident, but we were not asleep either, even though German fighter power was somewhat decimated. However, we still had to be concerned about flak.

We finally reached cruise altitude, leveled off, and were given orders to clear our weapons. I was in the upper turret, facing forward, when I witnessed the right wing man get a direct hit. The Liberator appeared to have hesitated, shuddered a moment in flight, and suddenly it was gone in a puff of smoke, and flame. It seemed to disappear right before my eyes. It happened so rapidly as to almost make it appear that it did not occur at all.

The proper formation procedure that was established, called for a "closing up" of the aircraft in formation so as to offer maximum coverage of fire power from all the .50 caliber machine guns in any given formation. This procedure was required if any aircraft in any given element was missing for whatever reason. Even though this was a good, tried and proven procedure, this policy was responsible for our being hit.

Lt. Riley immediately closed, and occupied the right wing slot as we had been briefed and trained to do, over and over again.

Time, for all practicality, didn't seem to exist in so far as what happened next. It would appear that the anti-aircraft crew had the proper coordinates on the aircraft just destroyed, and were reusing those coordinates on us, for the next thing we knew, we were losing altitude, and Lt. Riley was asking for more power from engines No. 1 and No. 4, the two remaining engines that had not been hit. Other assessments of damage to our aircraft indicated a gas line rupture in the forward bomb bay. The bomb bay doors were immediately "cracked" open to prevent any accumulation of fumes in the bomb bay area. In the meantime, we were falling out of the sky, but in a very "controlled" manner. The formation continued on toward the target, while Lt. Riley struggled for control of the airplane. Reaching lower altitude, and regaining control of the plane, Lt. Riley asked for a position report from the Navigator. In the confusion that followed the hit and gyrations the aircraft was going through had completely disoriented the Navigator he had no idea as to our position. Lt. Riley felt that we were close to Russian held territory, and chose not to salvo the bomb load in the event we might be over "friendly" troops. We continued to drop lower, and lower. When we reached an altitude Lt. Riley was satisfied with, he "dragged" the area, and found we were over an active airdrome. All the while, Sgt. Cole was firing red flares to indicate to anyone observing that we were crippled, and with landing gear extended, looking for a place to set down. In the meanwhile, Lt. Riley received word from the Waist position that there were several YAK-9 fighters off our wings (left and right), and several more YAK-9s on our tail. We were over a Russian airfield, approximately 60 kilometers south east of Budapest. Jimmie Cole kept firing red flares. We continued to drop even lower to approximately 1500 feet, which for most landing fields would be traffic pattern altitude. The YAK-9s kept just out of range of our .50 caliber machine guns, for the Germans had pulled this "Lame Duck" trick in the past, on other occasions involving Russian fighters, and when the Russian fighter pilots came up to investigate and assist if possible, the "disguised" American aircraft, piloted and crewed by German airmen, would open fire on the unsuspecting Russian fighter pilots, shooting them down. The "American" aircraft would tuck up its gear and roar away before opposition fighter pilots were able to take off and avenge the deaths of their comrades. Anti-aircraft crews on the ground had us dead to rights in their sights, to insure destroying our aircraft, had we been foolish enough to do anything stupid. We had descended so low you could see the gun crews actions of turning the cranks that made it possible for the guns to bear on us.

After dragging the field, Lt. Riley decided to land on the sod. The runways showed extensive damage from past bombings, and there was no way to know if the damaged runways had been properly repaired. So, with a full bomb bay of bombs, a leaking fuel line, and two engines out, Lt. Riley feathered Buzz Job down so smoothly it was almost impossible to detect until he applied brakes to slow and stop old Buzz Job at the opposite end of the field.

As was customary, the Flight Engineer was responsible for many things relating to the aircraft. However, Lt. Riley also thought that I was PR man for the United States Army Air Corps. After stopping

the aircraft, he directed me to leave the ship and introduce myself to the overly large Mongolian that was approaching our airplane. I didn't mind that too much except he was coming at me, not at "Port Arms", (that's with his weapon held diagonally across his body). Instead, he approached me with that damn gun pointed right at me, and I had no way of knowing if he had an itchy trigger finger, and/or if his weapon had a hair trigger, The hole in the muzzle got bigger and bigger as the Mongolian got closer.

As was customary with all flight crew members during World War II, each air crew man had a very large silk handkerchief that had several languages printed on it stating that the bearer of that piece of cloth was an American Airman and our government would reimburse the individual who helped this downed airman to find his way back to his organization, or words to that effect. Well, I knew from looking at this piece of cloth in the past, that of all the languages on it, Mongolian was not one of them. However, I was trying to buy myself some time, and motioned to this individual that I had something for him to read, and I pointed to my wool flying jacket. He half way nodded that it was ok for me to "fetch" this item. Then I remembered that right under my left hand, and under my jacket, was my .45 in the shoulder holster we had to wear on each flight. I motioned to him that I was on the up and up. I wanted him to see this gun, and not get caught by surprise, when he might react in a most unwelcome manner. I gingerly took my thumb and index finger of each hand, and very carefully held the flap of my jacket with my left hand, and grasped the zipper with the thumb and index finger of my right hand, and very, very, slowly pulled my zipper down, while at the same time pulling the jacket away from my body to reveal the .45 automatic in my holster.

Thankfully about that time, other personnel arrived by Jeep. One man got out of the Jeep, and I threw up my hands, and in a loud voice said... "Roosevelt, Stalin, and Churchill". These words were to let those accosting me know that I was an ally. I spoke in what I thought was acceptable language for someone not accustomed to the English language, much like one addressing a native of the jungle for instance. The Russian officer that got out of the Jeep, came up to me, and in perfect Queens English, said to me. "It appears that you are experiencing some difficulty". By that time, the other crew members were leaving the aircraft. The Major was the Aircraft Maintenance Officer of their airfield. He looked somewhat like Don Ameche. He was approximately 5'6" and stocky built. His hair was black, and combed straight back. His part of this story will come later.

Lt. Riley informed the Major that we would like to have the Buzz Job repaired, as we wanted to fly her back home. There were other B-24 Liberators that had landed here for the same reasons, having been rendered incapable of flight, and probably unrepairable. The Major was most comparative. After our initial encounter, we unloaded Buzz Job. We turned our bombs over to the Russians, along with our .50 ammo. The Russians were flying the "old" A-20 Havoc Fighter-bomber from this field, along with YAK-9s, and a little two-winged airplane. This biplane was used in the morning to drop 100 pound bombs on the front lines, which were only 60 kilometers away from us. This "shuttle bombing" went on every morning until noon. Then the airplane was used to "train" Russian pilots. Their methods of selecting pilots was rather unique, insofar as they would pick and choose by sight. That is, if you looked like you could fly, they would put you in the biplane with an instructor. He would teach you the fundamentals of flight, such as what made the airplane go up, down, turn right, turn left. After a few hours of this kind of instruction, they would put this "new" pilot into the cockpit of an A-20 Havoc, show him how to start the engines, where the flap and landing gear handles were, slap him on the back, and away he would go.

We were in a rather strange situation here. These people were supposed to be our allies, and yet we were watched like you wouldn't believe. I must digress for just a moment. There were other American crew members that had the misfortune of being shot down. However, there was some sort of agreement between the United States and the Soviets, whereas we would set up a daily shuttle to fly American crew members back from whence they came. With this information, Lt. Riley decided to allow "Red" Davis, and John Newell to return to Cerignola, Italy to make sure our families would not be unduly alarmed if they were informed we were missing in action.

Once we got settled in suitable quarters, the Russian Major started his campaign to defect. At

that time we were not accustomed to the word, however, we did know that any attempts to aid or abet this man in his quest would surely place all of us in jeopardy.

The Major's story, as related to us: the Major's mother and father left Russia when he was a youngster. He grew up in the United States, and his family lived in Ohio. Some years later, his mother and father wanted to return to Russia to visit friends and family, only to be caught up in the war. Since this young man was Russian, by Russian logic he was going to be a Russian soldier. He was drafted, and here he was. He saw his chance to leave, but was disappointed, because we were ordered by Lt. Riley not to discuss the subject of defecting with this officer at any time. It was difficult, as he was in constant contact with us due to the work being accomplished on Buzz Job.

While work was progressing on Buzz Job, Cole, Remick, Schwartz and myself, would venture into the village of Kesmet. All I have to do is close my eyes, and remember the villagers of this small community. My first encounter with one of the villagers occurred at the village well. It seemed that everybody in "town" would come to this well in the village center. I guess there was a lot of gossip, and it appeared to be the only socialization that was carried on between the inhabitants. There was this one lady, approximately 30 years old, pulling water from the well in a very large, heavy bucket. I walked over and asked if I could help her, and she knocked me dead, when she answered in a very clear voice, "I certainly would appreciate your help. You must be one of those Americans we have heard so much about." As soon as anyone heard that the "Americans" were around, there was chaos. Everyone wanted us to do something about the conditions that existed in this community. They could not comprehend that we had all we could do to take care of ourselves.

The lady at the well was supposed to have come back to Hungary with her mother and father. She too was from Ohio. I cannot recall as to whether she was from Lorraine, Ohio or not. However, the same thing happened to her. She and her parents came back to Hungary to visit, and got caught in the chaos that was Europe in 1939. She met and married one of the local men. He was affiliated with the local bank. They had twin daughters, named Marilyne and Magdaline.

The girls were approximately 9 years old, and one of them was wounded rather badly by a German officer who was going to rape her while she baby sat for some friends. As it turned out, instead of getting raped, she was shot in the upper thigh with a small bore pistol. When I first saw the wound it was badly infected and quite ugly looking. I told Lt. Riley about it, and asked if it would be OK to use some of our sulfa powder that was carried in the First Aid Packs on board all combat aircraft. With his permission, I returned, and with the help of her mother and father, we cleansed the wound, poured sulfa powder on it, and rebandaged the area with clean sterile bandages. These people were so grateful, they were ready to give me anything I might want, even share their meager food supply. Of course, I refused.

The day came when the two damaged engines were replaced, and the damaged fuel line repaired. We traded our bomb for fuel, and made preparations to return home. Both engines checked out. Finally, on 21 March 1945, we were actually going to fly back to Bari, Italy. All crew members were aboard Buzz Job, except myself. It was my responsibility to keep the props clear, and stand fire guard as Lt. Riley, and Lt. Wilkens proceeded to crank up. It seemed that every Russian in the European theater was waving us off. The engines were started, and I walked Buzz Job between the YAK-9s that were parked on either side of our bird. It was a tight fit, but we finally got to the end of the field. I got on board at that point, while Lt. Riley and Lt. Wilkens performed Engine Run-up checks. Everything was in the green and away we went. The take off was smooth. We were much lighter than usual since we had nothing on board of any consequence. Lt. Riley gained altitude, swung around to the left, climbed to approximately 2500 feet, and then headed back to the field. As we crossed over, we performed the usual "wiggling of the wings", and headed for the blue and Italy. Several hours out of Kesmet, and at an altitude of approximately 18,000', Lt. Riley said, "Chief, go see what the hell is going on back there". As I made my back to the Waist Gunners positions, I was expecting to see a couple of buddies engaged in fisticuffs. I was not prepared for the scene that I came upon. I find Remick, with a .45 pistol in hand, standing over the Russian Major!!!



I asked Remick how in the world did he find him. Remick told me that he was concerned about the airplane, and he was just making a visual check of the bomb bay area, looking for leaks, or anything else that might be out of the ordinary, when he noticed the tarp. First of all, the tarp should not have been anywhere near the electrical equipment found in the Center Wing Section of a B-24. These items were the servo motors of the Auto-Pilot system. These items can generate some pretty high temperatures which can cause anything touching them for any length of time to burst into flames. At any rate, during his inspection, Remick saw the tarp move, and when he went to investigate, he found the Major, slightly blue, and definitely on the cold side.

With everyone performing the pre-take-off tasks, Major Morrison, as he called himself, just ambled onto the aircraft in full view of his superiors. We learned later he had informed his superiors that it was the custom of the United States Army Air Corps, that any time a major component of an airplane was changed, it was the responsibility of the Base Maintenance Officer to be on board when the aircraft is test-hopped. This was to instill in the minds of the air crews, the integrity of the maintenance performed. Only part of that statement was true. It did not include the Base Maintenance officer, only the Crew Chief of the aircraft in question. Since we did not have a Crew Chief, this requirement was not really necessary under the circumstances.

I returned to the flight deck and informed Lt. Riley what had transpired. He immediately radioed what had happened ahead to 15<sup>th</sup> Air Force Headquarters in Bari, Italy. Unbeknown to us, the Russian Government had already informed the United States State Department, that one of their aircrews had **KIDNAPED** their Base Maintenance Officer. When we reached Bari, Italy, it appeared that every MP in the Italian area was on the ramp waiting for us to land. We were herded off the airplane, one at a time, and each of us escorted by MPs. We showered, were deloused, and issued new uniforms, but at no time were allowed to talk to one another prior to being interrogated. I can faintly recall the scene. We were sitting against a long wall, with Lt. Riley in the first chair, and an MP between each of us. The alignment was in order of our position on the aircraft with Pilot, Co-Pilot, Navigator, Engineer, Radio Operator, and so on down the line. We were told that we were not to talk to one another at any time until this investigation was completed. Each of us were led into the interrogation room, questioned, and led out of the interrogation room by another door.

Then it was my turn...I was really frightened by the whole thing, and my fears were not subdued when Major General Twining himself told me that I could be shot for this!!! I looked around the room to see who he was talking to, and there was no one else in that room but the General, and some officer from Intelligence. I was only 23 years old, and never had anything this serious, or of this magnitude, ever happen to me. I will tell you this, I was scared silly. This was just too much. I related my story to General Twining and the Intelligence Officer, as it is stated here. At the time, General Twining was holding me responsible, as I was on the outside of the aircraft, and he thought that I should have been more observant. It was difficult for me to make it clear to the General that there were just too many people around the aircraft for me to stand fire guard, and keep the props clear. It never entered any of our minds that this man was as desperate as he was to get away from the situation he found himself to be in. We were ordered to never speak of this incident as long as we were in uniform. As far as I know, this is the second or third time I have related this story since my retirement from the United States Air Force on 31 May 1962. Several years ago, perhaps two years ago, I attempted to find out whatever became of the Major, I am informed by the personnel that maintain the archives at Maxwell Air Force Base, that they have no record of that incident. I have not seen or heard from any of my fellow crew members after our return to the United States. Just recently, I learned of the whereabouts of our nose Gunner, John E. Newell. We met for the first time almost two years ago, were fortunate enough to attend a 454<sup>th</sup> reunion in the San Francisco area only to lose John the following January. As far as I know, I am the only remaining member of the crew that was shot down 8 March 1945. I find this hard to believe, but efforts to locate any of the others has turned up nothing.

So now, October 17, 1989, 45 years and a few months past the date of 8 March 1945, I relate this episode for the purpose of enhancing the Historical Archives of the 454<sup>th</sup> Bombardment Group (H). I



can honestly state that at no time did any crew member, during this entire episode, ever bring discredit on the United States, or the United States Army Air Corps.

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GROUP MISSION #219, 23 MARCH 1945  
TANK WORKS - ST VALENTIN, AUSTRIA  
James W. "Bill" Bond (736)

It was the morning of March 23, 1945 when I first met Second Lieutenant Faxon and his crew. I was going to fly Engineer with my best buddy, Sgt. Charles A. Mitchell, who would be flying Tail Gunner. Charles, or "Chick" or "Mitch" as our original crew called him, had met Lt. Faxon in Cerignola a couple of days earlier and we had lost our Pilot due to a case of nerves, and he had not flown for several days. I met Lt. Faxon and he agreed to take me and my Assistant Engineer Wein, and Mitch as his Tail Gunner.

I had heard of Lt. Faxon, who was flying his second tour, but I wasn't prepared for what was to happen that morning. He wasn't too popular and had drawn a B-24 that had too many hours on it to be flying at all. The #3 engine would not start and the Ground Crew Chief and I changed the carburetor so it would run. By that time, our Squadron was long gone but we were going to cut around the Adriatic Sea and catch them. We did get in sight of a flight of planes crossing our path and got necessary permission to join them. We later learned they were going to Saint Valentines Tank Works and it was pretty well protected.

We took a direct hit in the bomb bay and our #3 engine was blown off the wing. Lt. Faxon was a brave man and wanted to make it to Switzerland. I finally persuaded him the plane was on fire and that as soon as we got into oxygen at a lower altitude we would be a fire ball. After some discussion, he told the Co-Pilot to bail out, along with the Navigator and Nose Gunner. I told the gunners to get out and they did. I went back to the flight deck and gave Lt. Faxon his shoes and then made sure I had helped them all get out, then I went through the forward bomb bay. I was soaked. I looked up as soon as my chute opened and saw the plane go into a tight turn and burst into flames. Lt. Faxon never got out, of course.

I landed in a snowbank that was so steep that all I could do was make a toboggan out of my parachute canopy and slide until I could walk. This was several miles and I would stop at intervals to be sure I wasn't going over a cliff. When I got to a valley, I wrapped my parachute around my arm and a civilian and his wife down the hill saw me and came up and dug me out of the snowbank where I had fallen through and was trapped. They took me to their home. They were Austria and had no love for the Germans, however; the next door neighbor was a Nazi Party member and he could do nothing but turn me over to them. They had a radio and called to a mountain Ski Troop Headquarters somewhere nearby. They sent two men on skies to pick me up. While I was waiting, the Germans found two clips of .45 ammo and no gun. I had thrown the .45 gun into a snowbank after being told that they would make me eat it if I went into the house with it. I later wished I had! When they found the ammo and no gun I was worked over pretty good with rifle butts and shoved around until they were satisfied I had no gun. The people who picked me up couldn't help me and then the enemy marched me down a trail and up another peak where they put me in a guard house. This is where I liked to have froze to death. I stayed there until my Navigator, Co-Pilot, and Nose Gunner were brought in. Then I learned that Mitch had landed upside down in a tree and was killed by the civilians who found him. He was my closest buddy and the whole crew loved him. In later years, his mother told me that Chick was 18 years old. His dad, Carl Mitchell, spent three or four years flying to Austria trying to find their sons' body but never was successful in doing so.

While I was being interrogated and beaten, I learned that the Germans had already climbed the mountain I landed on and had the book which I had hidden in the snow with my crew members names in it and also their serial numbers. The interrogator told me, "I could give this information about my

crew members!" I didn't know enough to tell them but the Germans didn't believe me, therefore, more beating went on.

So my friend and buddy, my favorite enlisted man, Chick, never was found. I sometimes wonder what difference it would have made since I have a son of my own.

That was the way we were in World War II. Oh well!! I still miss Mitch.

Vaughn E. Weir (736)

My trip that day was as Waist Gunner in place of Mel Lamond. We hit our target at Linz. As we flew away, they zeroed in on us. We got a direct hit. We were told engine #3 was on fire and the Pilot, Faxon, told us it was time to get out, so we had to jump. I landed in pine trees in the Alps. I was found by 2 kind German soldiers and, along with Carroll Griffin and Clifford Darnell, we were taken to the Mayors house in Heathlau, Austria and was there for several days. A kind woman took our clothes and laundered them for us.

Donald H. Sparks (738)

St. Valentin Tank Works, East of Linz, Austria - 7 hrs. Flew 562. 4-1000# bombs, light load because of new #1 engine. I can't express my feelings and thoughts on this mission.

For the first time in my life, I was really scared. I have never been on a mission so rough and hope I never have to go on another like it. We started out in #3 position, #3 came into formation over the Alps. We took over #6 in Able Blue box. On the bomb run, #3 - flying about 100 ft. in front of us, took a direct hit in #3 engine starting a fire on the wing and in the bomb bay. Fell off to the left & 4 chutes were observed. We were hit again and again but somehow the ship remained intact and all 4 engines continued as they should. One piece entered below the Bombardier's feet and exploded beneath ours, making a huge cloud of dust and smoke in the cockpit, another burst hit the nose turret, shattering the glass, another tore the head set from the Radio Operator's head, another tore the camera from the Cameraman's hands. We estimated between 95 and 130 holes were taken by the ship without serious damage to it or any injury to the crew. All I can say is "Thank You!"

We started the bomb run with 6 ships in our box & ended with 4. Altogether the Group lost 4 ships not counting damage to others.

I didn't see how any ship could get through that flak without going down. 17 planes did go down.

From a letter to Charles F. Crookshanks (739) by Edwin C. Range (737)

....I remember the mission to St. Valentin Tank Works very well, even after forty-two years, and I can still feel the concussion of the Flak, and hear it rattle against the belly of our ship. I could not believe we would live through that barrage, as I cowered in the waist. However, we all got back, in one piece.

We lost one man over there. Our Bombardier made Lead-Dropper, and in February, or March of '45, he flew with T.K. Schindler over the Italian Alps, and they were shot down by a direct hit in the waist, killing all. I still remember T.K., a fine young man, about twenty-two years old. It must have destroyed his folks to lose such a heroic son.

My Bombardier was an only son, an Iowa farm-boy, and I still write to one of his sisters, the other having followed the parents up to that Great-Big-Hanger in the Sky.

For me, the War will never end until I end. My father wore a kilt in a Canadian-Scottish regiment in War I, and he never forgot, either.

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GROUP MISSION #226, 2 APRIL 1945  
MARSHALING YARDS - KREMS, AUSTRIA  
Howard C. Horton (738)

Crew: Pilot - Lt. Gould A. Ryder; Copilot - F/O Howard C. Horton, Bombardier - F/O Stephen Gracik, (No Navigator assigned), Flt. Engineer/Top Turret Gunner - R.J. Schmid, Nose Gunner - Sgt. R.A. Manahan, Radio Operator/Gunner - Sgt. L.V. Restighini, Ball Turret Gunner - Sgt. W.H. Schmid, Waist Gunner - Sgt. P.L. Owen, Tail Gunner - Sgt. S.L. Caffey. 9 members. The Schmid's were not related.

At briefing, we discovered we were assigned to be a "Standby Crew", aircraft #009 (66) nose name "Ginny", which was located on the hard stand next to the main road that led to the 455<sup>th</sup> B.G. This was the first time we met F/O Gracik. Lt. Boyce Smith, our crew Navigator, was away at "Mickey School".

At the hard stand, we were all outside watching the take offs, not expecting to go anywhere. Sgt. Restighini was inside monitoring the radio. He called out that we were alerted to go, as there had been an abort. The rush began to join the take off line. We took a position in the formation and all went well into the mission, guns tested, 500 lb. RDX pins removed, etc. At some point in the long climb over the Adriatic sea, there was a small explosion in the left forward section of the bomb bay with flames coming into the flight deck at and around the liquidometers. I immediately left my seat to fight the fire and was soon joined by Sgt. Schmid, from the Top Turret. I had the scare of my life when I thought the gasoline was boiling and was going to explode from the flames around the liquidometers. Then I remembered, that in flight, the liquidometers always had bubbles in them!

We had the fire mostly put out, or out, when Ryder called me back to my seat. I didn't know we were in trouble, as I had been busy with the fire in my time away, and never heard any communication. Ryder had already alerted Air Sea Rescue, as only he knew that the aircraft was in serious trouble. He told me he had been trying to feather engines 1 & 2, but the props wouldn't feather. I pushed the buttons several times - no action. The engines were in a run away configuration with severe drag on the aircraft. I noticed we were in a spiral to the right and descending rapidly. He told me to give it a try to level the aircraft, as he couldn't. As I took the controls, I hadn't realized he had full aileron and rudder applied against the 2 engine runaways and we almost flipped over before I could get the same flight configuration, spiraling down to the right. I couldn't stop the spiraling and gave the controls back to Ryder. The crew was alerted by Ryder to assume ditching position. At about a thousand feet above the water, F/O Gracik came forward to ask about jettisoning the bombs. Ryder pulled the salvo handle and the bombs fell away.

Sgt. Schmid must have remembered we didn't have our life vests on and got them. He draped a Mae West over his, Ryders' & my neck just before we crashed into the sea. We had not put them on prior to flight as we had been watching the takeoffs and not expecting to go. During the scramble to get in the take off line, they were forgotten. He took a seating position between us, his back to the pedestal. Sgt. Manahan was seated on the floor behind Ryder with F/O Gracik between his legs. 5 of us on the flight deck, 4 crew in the rear in ditching positions.

I took off my sunglasses and put them down on the floor to be recovered before heading for the right life raft - standard ditching procedure. I don't recall being afraid of ditching at sea. There was no time for that. The explosion had made the pitot static system inoperative so I can only estimate the speed of ditching at about 175 or more in our spiral. We hit the water right wing/nose low. All I saw was some sea spray on my windshield and then felt like there was a giant hand pushing me up & toward the windshield. No pain-nothing, I just went out like a light

My next memory recollection, I was in a blissful dream-like coma. I was standing on a porch, not unlike the old farmers porch, and I saw the mail man coming through the wooden fence gate, bag on his shoulder, coming up the walkway. I saw he had a letter in his hand that was all bordered in black! (The old time notice of a death, I must have read about sometime).

Then I realized that I had a burning in my chest like I was on fire and I was under the sea. No

air. I had to breathe, so I had to inhale salt water, maybe more than once. I coughed, choked, kicked and somehow found the surface. I had difficulty staying above the sea, I kept sinking and coughing. Miraculously, my Mae West was still hanging around my neck. I kept sinking under the sea. Then I realized that my backpack parachute was dragging me under, I got it off as well as one sheep-lined boot that was also dragging me down. I got the Mae West waist strap connected but the other strap I couldn't press hard enough to connect it, no strength. After inflation and holding on I could just barely keep my head above water. I then threw my .45 away.

I heard a voice in the distance. I had come to the surface about 100 feet to the left and rear of the remains of the aircraft. It was pitched up in the rear, left wing up, right wing broken off and the whole nose gone. I saw the Ball Turret Gunner, Sgt. W. Schmid standing up where the tail had broken off at about the Ball Turret platform. He was in a panic, calling for help. The waves kept knocking me under, the next time I surfaced the aircraft was gone. I believe Sgt Schmid must have been entangled in the control cables.

I never saw or heard anyone else or any other aircraft - only the splashing of waves over me and going up and down in the wave troughs. There was high thin broken overcast sky and a cool April day. The sea was cold. No matter how I got oriented, waves would slap me in the face and run up my nose, down my throat. I got very bloated and angry at the sea. After about an hour or more, I was about gone from the cold water exposure. I never heard the PBYS. I became aware of a large object beside me and a rope that landed over my left shoulder, but I couldn't raise my arms, so the aircraft drifted away and I was alone again up & down between the wave troughs.

Sometime later, the PBY came back and the Pilot taxied right into me. The left wheel hit me in the chest, knocked me under and when I came up, I felt a hand grab me. One of the PBY's crew was standing on the wheel. I had uncontrolled shaking and I must have passed out. I don't know how they got me into the waist bubble window. My next awareness was someone cutting up my pants leg to remove my clothes, out again, I awoke later under 13 blankets. I was told they all were moving! I only remember the takeoff and I don't know how the aircraft stayed together, what a beating we took bounding from one wave to another. I don't remember the flight back, I suppose I was given something to ease all my injuries. On the way back they bandaged my head with only my left eye showing enough into get into the ambulance. I recall seeing people taking pictures. I was 15 days in the hospital and grounded for two months to recover, I was told in the hospital my head was swollen twice it's normal size and I was going to have the blackest of eyes! X-rays showed no skull fracture. My legs and thighs took a real beating by going up under the dah and control column.

When we hit the water, no doubt we cartwheeled and the plane broke apart, everyone on the flight deck and rear, save Sgt. Schmid, were thrown into the sea. I visited Sgt. Manahan, in upstate N.Y., after the war, and he related all that went on during and after the crash, as he didn't lose consciousness. He managed to catch one of the oxygen containers floating by and held on for dear life.

What did happen to us. - I had heard the stories where small aneroid explosives were placed in the upper forward bomb bay to knock out the circuitry to Nos. 1 & 2 engines once the aircraft had climbed to a certain altitude. With 2 engines in a runaway configuration, no aircraft could stay airborne. The aircraft was parked in a vulnerable spot next to the main road. The subject of this type of sabotage was broached, as it was known to have happened in the theater. With a war on, no time was expended by anyone that I know of to follow up and account for our loss of the aircraft & crew. Everyone was just too busy afterwards with the bombing missions. The Sqdn. made up a letter, the next day or so, and brought it to the hospital for me to sign. I had no idea what it said as I was still heavily bandaged. I managed to sign it. I read it when I was at the archives in Wash., D.C. and it was not correct at all. However, at the time, it filled their need to notify higher Hqtrs. to account for the loss of the aircraft and those missing in action.

The flight deck: Lt. Ryder and Sgt. R. Schmid, after being thrown into the sea, ended up being close to one another. Sgt. Schmid had lost his Mae West and was treading water near him. I gather Lt. Ryder must have been injured enough not to be able to connect the clips of his Mae West. According to



Sgt. Schmid, he passed out and slipped out of it and sank into the sea. - Sgt. Schmid's statement to me and others. Sgt. Schmid was able to recover the Mae West of Lt. Ryder and was able to save his life. Sgt. Schmid was the least injured and returned to flying. F/O Gracik survived the crash but apparently died from exposure or injuries, in his Mae West. His was the only body recovered late by boat. Sgt. Manahan was the most seriously injured. With F/O Gracik sitting between his legs, the crash put all his weight on to Sgt. Manahan and crushed his hip. He was evacuated to the States for rehabilitation. It was a lifetime crippling injury with many operations. We corresponded for years. He is now deceased.

Actions and events that saved our lives - The only way Air Sea Rescue found us was from the sea disturbance pattern made when the bombs exploded. They were able to home in right to the crash spot. The sea state was such no one would have been seen without the ocean being stirred up from the exploding bombs. The crew of the PBY visited us in the hospital in Foggia and told me about how lucky we were to have had the bombs explode or they would have never found us in time.

Sgt. Schmid remembering the life vests and mine somehow staying over my neck after the crash despite my being thrown some distance out of the aircraft and under water. I have been eternally grateful to Sgt. Schmid.

The Flight Surgeon, on board, stated later that I was within a few minutes of dying from exposure to cold water. The Good Lord spared my life that day. I have been keenly aware of some of the reasons he did so through events and happenings that have occurred over my lifetime and later during the air phase of the Vietnam War.

I have enclosed some of the correspondence from my search to find the air crew who saved our lives that day and a copy of the report from their mission history of the 1<sup>st</sup> Emergency Rescue Sqdn.

I had several replies from my inquiry posted in the Air Force Magazine, including from their Commander, Ops Officer, Sqdn Navigator, who had taken pictures of our arrival back at Foggia Air Base, and the Pilot of the PBY, Capt. Walter Milburn.

We did not have a bomb on fire, as stated in their report, nor did anyone see any other B-24 aircraft overhead.

After the war, I did visit with the Ryders, Caffey's, Gracik's, Schmid's and Manahan families when I was in their part of the country.

#### James O. Talbot (737)

There was a time when it was said a boy came of age at twenty-one. Until that date, he was - well - a boy. As a teenager in rural Illinois in the 1930's, I heard the older boys talk of that magical moment of being twenty-one. Calling for a celebration. You would be free to do as you pleased, you didn't need permission to do anything. Indeed, you were expected to stand on your own feet - be a man.

Until you came of age, your conduct was centered around the family. After finishing high school, if not employed on a family farm, you lived at home and worked elsewhere. Helping with family expenses and more or less felt obligated to the needs and wishes of the family. Twenty-one was several years away for me but it sounded like something to look forward to.

By the end of the 1930's, events around the world were beginning to be felt even in small towns. Men were leaving town to work in factories making war materials. Some were joining the military services as they were expanding. By 1940, the situation overseas became worse. Rumors of a military draft became fact when, on September 17, the Selective Training and Service Act was signed into law. Men ages 21 through 35 were required to register. A lottery was conducted on October 29 and the first men were inducted into service November 18 to serve one year. Being twenty-one took on a new meaning. The Act was extended in August 1941.

After the attack on Pearl Harbor, December 7, 1941, military service was certain. The only question was which branch of the military. I needed to finish high school. Flying kites and building model airplanes had been hobbies. Following the exploits of the Eagle Squadron, Americans flying for

England, and the Flying Tigers, Americans flying for China, were an inspiration. There was only one place for me and, by November 1942, I was in the Army Air Force Pilot Training Program.

Finished Pre-Flight School, and half way through my Primary Flight Training, the Army had other ideas and I was what was called "washed out". It was pretty hard to take, not to be able to play my chosen part in the war effort. Next, it was Airplane Armorer School, followed by Air Force Flexible Gunnery School. The next assignment I hoped I would be assigned to an aircrew with another chance to be in an airplane. I was assigned as the Armorer and Ball Turret Gunner on a B-24 crew, the unglamorous heavy bomber of the Air Force used all over the world. There were ten men in the crew. Four Officers, all 2<sup>nd</sup> Lieutenants. The Pilot and Aircraft Commander, Kenneth J. Woods, Co-Pilot, Navigator, and Bombardier. Six Enlisted Men: Nose Turret Gunner, Engineer and Top Turret Gunner, Radio and Left Waist Gunner, Armorer and Ball Turret Gunner, Right Waist Gunner, and Tail Turret Gunner.

Now it was Combat Air Crew Training in Casper, Wyoming to put into practice the training of the last few months. Working together as a team and as part of a Squadron of planes.

With our combat training completed, we were ready and eager to find out where we would be assigned. Some crews flew their plane to their assignment, we went by boat, landing at Bari, Italy October 26, 1944. Then by truck to the 737<sup>th</sup> Bomb Squadron, one of the four of the 454<sup>th</sup> Bomb Group of the 15<sup>th</sup> Air Force, located at San Giovanni Air Base near Cerignola. We lived in tents, Officers in one tent, Enlisted Men in another.

Our first mission as a crew was November 17. Little anti-aircraft fire, no fighter planes. On our way to the target, and before we climbed above 10,000 feet and went on oxygen, as the Armorer of the crew, it was my job to pull the pins from the bomb fuses in the nose of the bombs. The bomb fuses in the nose of bombs have a propeller type device that spins off after the bombs are dropped, at that point the bomb is armed. The propeller is held in place by a cotter pin and a wire that is attached to the bomb racks. After the pins are pulled, the propeller is held in place by the wire that is long enough to allow the bomb to clear the bomb bay when it is dropped, before the propeller is free to spin off. The next mission was uneventful, too.

Before each mission, we were taken to Group Headquarters, where we were briefed on the mission. The target, reason for the mission, what to expect, the route and safe areas in case we bailed out or had to make a forced landing. When the crews were all seated, a curtain that covered most of one wall, is drawn back, exposing a map that showed all the targets within our range. On our third mission, when the curtain was drawn back, there was a loud groan from the crew members. A red ribbon outlined the route from our base to the target. The ribbon ended at Vienna, Austria, the most heavily defended target within range. There are aircraft factories, air fields, oil refineries, military storage areas and the hub of the railroad system that served southern Europe.

No matter how it was attacked, you had to go over almost 400 anti-aircraft guns. They fired an 88 millimeter shell that explodes, making a black puff of smoke and sending various sized pieces of metal, called flak, in all directions. From the ground, you were only a tiny invisible speck in the sky 25,000 feet away. From your position, looking down, you felt like a huge target and all bulls eye. That night, back in the tent, we began to realize what the groans were all about at the briefing. Going through flak gave you a helpless feeling. There is nothing you could do, you felt vulnerable.

There was a surprise for me when we got back from a mission on November 22. My brother Wayne met the plane at the hard stand, or parking place. I had written him when I arrived in Italy, he had no trouble finding me. I hadn't seen him in three years. In the Air Force too, stationed at an Air Base near Foggia, about thirty miles from our base. He was with the 324<sup>th</sup> Service Group, 368<sup>th</sup> Service Squadron. We agreed to get together at Christmas, if all went well. No problem developed, we spent Christmas eve and Christmas day together at our Base.

After seeing several planes go down from flak or other problems, you begin to think in terms of increasing your chances to survive. Survival is more than luck. We started taking additional flak jackets to place on the floor near our positions. I started taking a pair of GI boots tied together and attached to

my parachute harness when in the target area. Flight boots were not made for walking. Also keeping the two escape packets with items you might need, in inside pockets of the flight suit so they will not get lost in a hasty exit from the plane.

The Enlisted Men of the crew, along with other members of the Squadron, were taken to the Rest Camp on the Isle of Capri for a week of R&R. Then it was back to our routine, After supper, we went over to Squadron Operations Office to see if Woods crew was scheduled for a mission the next day. On mission day, we were awakened about 5 AM. Breakfast, then taken to Group Headquarters for briefing. Next, it was to Squadron Supply for flight gear before being taken to the plane. We did not have a plane assigned to us - we flew in what was ready for flight. We gathered at the plane for group prayer before taking our positions in the plane. After the engines were given one last re-up, it was time to wait for the signal to move out and get in line for take-off.

I had a new magic number to think about. Thirty-five. Thirty-five combat missions got you a ticket home and some time off before being reassigned. It seems that after thirty-five missions time off was needed. Though, at times you were scared to death, there was never any thought of asking to be reassigned. We were a crew, trusting and depending on one another to do their jobs. To reach that magic number as a crew would have been ideal. One problem. The Pilot had gone on three missions with another crew before he took his own crew on a combat mission. At the time, I didn't think too much about it other than it was part of the Pilots' training to familiarize him with combat conditions before he took his own crew. The Pilots' three missions took an added meaning. I was half way to the magic number by the middle of February. Part of an Armorers' training is to operate the bomb strike camera. I went to the Photo shop and asked to go on three missions as a Camera Operator and got the assignment.

I didn't know it at the time, but no crew liked to see the camera man ride with them. It was considered bad luck. There was usually one plane in each Squadron that took bomb strike photos. Sure enough, on my first mission as camera operator, we took a lot of flak. I was busy with the camera and couldn't pay much attention. We started to smell gas, even through our oxygen mask, but we stayed with the Squadron. When we got to friendly territory, the Pilot landed at a fighter base in northern Italy. After an inspection of the damage, he decided to continue to our base. We counted over one hundred holes of various sizes. Gas must have come from a tank that was now empty. It was considered bad luck to talk about the number of missions you had been on. However, everyone had a way to mark them off and counting how many more to reach that magic number.

We were on the last mission that attacked Vienna, March 30, 1945. After that mission, Vienna was taken off the target list. The target was the main rail yard in support of the Russian Army that was at the Austrian border. It was the fifth time we were over Vienna.

Finally, we are in line for take off. This is really some plane. Lot of improvements. Never flew in one like this before - great way to finish my tour. I must not have thoughts like that. Must think this is just another mission like all the others and nothing else. I take my usual position between the ball turret housing wall and the rear wall of the bomb bay. There is a window there that I like to look out of. I have one foot on the top of the ball turret housing wall and the other about two feet down to the step that leads to the bomb bay. The four Squadrons line up for take off, waiting for the signal to go. One last rev-up of the engines before we move to the runway. We start to roll down the runway. With mixed emotions, it is hard to keep my thoughts off number 35. It is stimulating to roll down the runway and I may not have that feeling again for some time, if ever.

Gathering speed, we must get up to 120 mph to become airborne. Boy, it is taking a long time, must be near the end of the runway. We are losing speed! Then I hear a metal scraping sound. Part of the plane is scraping the metal mesh of the runway. More noise, plane bounces around. Bombs are breaking loose from the bomb racks and banging up against the rear bomb bay wall. For some reason, I raise my right leg just as the bomb bay wall smashes up against the ball turret housing wall. Finally, the plane comes to a stop.

The crew in our part of the plane headed for the back hatch that was now about six feet off the

ground. I was pretty sure the bombs wouldn't go off. There was a chance of fire though ad we ran from the plane. Everyone made it out except the gunner Yelton who was penned in. His take off position was in the cabin area just ahead of the wing. The cabin area from the wing forward was almost twisted off. The rescue crew went to work to free Yelton, the rest of the crew was taken to the Dispensary for a checkup. Everyone was OK. I had thought that, after an accident like that, you were taken for a ride in a plane before you had a chance to think about the experience and became too scared to fly again. We were not, and I wondered if that meant anything.

Back in the tent, some of the enlisted men weren't sure they wanted to fly again. We watched the schedule for Woods crew. Three days later, Woods crew was scheduled. I agreed to go. It would be number 35 for five of us.

The briefing didn't sound too bad. Of course, there is always a chance of an accident, something that we never used to think about. Mission to northern Italy, Alessandria rail yard, part of the German supply line.

We made it. No flak, no mishaps, good mission, what is called a "milk run". I completed my tour. It was like a heavy weight lifted off my back, a feeling of freedom. It was truly a magical moment because, on April 5, 1945, I had "come of age"- I was twenty-one!

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ARMY AIR CORPS  
Robert M. Martin (739)

After chow I wandered over to Operations. A tight group was watching a Corporal chalk names on a lined blackboard. Moving closer, I saw my Pilot, Oscar Helton, listed as a Co-Pilot and, further down my own name. For this mission we were both assigned to a crew flying their last sortie; we were up for our first. (The record of green crews was poor, so a decision had been made to mix newcomers with experienced crews to promote transition to combat.) Briefing was at 0400, so that meant hitting the sack early.

Ted (Flight Engineer), Marv (Nose Gunner), Freddie (Tail Gunner) and I shared the same tent. We had rigged oxygen piping from an elevated fifty gallon drum outside the tent to a cut up drum inside. With an on/off spigot, we regulated drops of 100 octane gas that fell on a flat round stone. This stove provided strong, clean heat with no ashes. At night it purred complaisantly and gave off a friendly light. On the flight line during the night aircraft engines were constantly run up and service vehicles could be heard moving about. At first I was conscious of these sounds but eventually they lulled me to sleep.

At 0300 I got up and dressed in the dark, doing my best not to wake anyone. Using a flashlight, I found socks, boots, pants, shirt, warm underwear, and my jacket. Despite efforts to rummage quietly, even simple acts such as zipping and buckling reverberated. I could sense my tent-mates half awake, patiently waiting for me to be finished and off to breakfast. Since they were not flying, they were anxious to resume sleep. I stepped out into the cold air and closed the tent flap; memories of camping trips and trout season occupied my thoughts as I walked among the scattered tents under a mantle of stars.

The mess tent, brightly lit, warm, and rife with conflicting odors welcomed us with powdered eggs, Italian bread, thick slices of ham composite, and mugs of black coffee. Every bomber had a nickname so conversation revolved around who was flying what ship and what problems had occurred on previous missions with particular turrets, bomb doors, oxygen lines, gun malfunctions and landing gears. Everyone lingered until it was obviously time to go.

Briefing was conducted in a spacious wine cellar. Rows of upended metal bomb-fin cases served as stools. Talking stopped and everybody stood at attention when the Group Commander arrived. He responded with "seats", and we settled back down. All eyes focused on a large screen at the center of a raised stage. It was covered with a long black shade and, while it was raised, ever so slowly, a



continuous whistle was maintained. A map of Europe gradually emerged with strips of red tape representing route to target and black tape the path home. A clear overlay with numerous dots depicted known anti-aircraft batteries protecting the target. The Commander named the target and discussed the general purpose of the mission. Individual briefing officers then took over.

The Intelligence Officer confirmed the mission would be rough because the target, Vienna's marshaling yards, had many new flak guns withdrawn from territory overrun by Russian troops. A low hubbub of groans greeted this news. Paint patterns and particular markings of friend and foe aircraft were illustrated. (Our Group periodically changed tail letters and symbols to distinguish us from captured B-24's the Germans occasionally used to infiltrate formations to radio our altitude and heading to flak batteries and fighter planes.) Cigarettes glowed in the semi-darkness as a succession of enemy aircraft were flashed on the screen at a hundredth of a second. Recognition drill over, lights came up and the officer concluded with information on escort fighters scheduled to appear for penetration cover, cover over target, and return cover.

The Meteorologist was next. He was always thin, always wore horn rimmed glasses, always graduated from M.I.T., Cal-Tech, or Rice, and was always wrong. (Later, I learned that early stages of the flight would be predicted fairly well but, instead of expected and desired heavy cloud cover over target, we would usually get clearing skies perfect for flak batteries.)

Col. Bill Large would lead the Group. Call signs, each plane's place in the formation, rendezvous altitude, alternate targets, length of the bomb run, and direction for rally were disclosed. After some operational housekeeping items, takeoff was announced for 0630. Then Father O'Brien appeared and slowly raised his right hand. Believers and non-believers alike took no chances and all heads bowed to receive his blessing. In a deep, resonate vice flush with feeling, he rendered a prayer which ended by beseeching the Almighty to hold us, keep us, and return us safely to base. Pilots, Navigators, and Bombardier peeled off to specialized briefings. The rest of us filed up the stairs murmuring like a theater intermission crowd. Six by six trucks with lowered tailgates stood ready to ferry crews to the flight line.

Inside a low hut hung rows of green satin apparel consisting of fishermen style, high suited pants with suspenders and long sleeved vests to match. Vests were snap attached to pants which in turn were attached to wool footgear. Wires ran throughout these heated suits. A cord and plug dangled from one side. Once fitted up, I was given an escape kit containing U.S. check vouchers to pay partisans, and American flag arm band, a previously prepared card with a photograph of me in civilian clothes, medicine, forty-eight U. S. Dollars - one for each state, a map, and a short printed statement in eight languages declaring my identity as an American airman. Finally, I received a leather shoulder holster with a .45 Caliber automatic.

In order to slip my six-one frame into a Ball Turret, I trimmed my wardrobe by wearing British flying boots, long underwear under a heated suit, green twill pants and shirt, a red basketball pullover (six inch raised letters on the front spelt OHIO), a six foot white scarf, silk gloves inside heated leather gauntlet gloves, radio headset, and a helmet with oxygen mask attached. Dressing this way, I could wear my Mae West and parachute harness inside the turret but had to leave my chute in the plane's waist because a bulky computing sight took up valuable space.

After perfunctory introductions, several veterans got on my case and painstakingly supervised my pre-flight procedure. I checked the Sperry sight, stack and ammo feed, Ball Turret positioning, hydraulics, and connections for oxygen and heat. I received no friendly words or smiles. These guys were serious; the tension was palpable. They were forced to accept me and were making damn sure that I knew my job. No novice was going to thwart their imminent return to the good old U.S. of A. I understood and kept quiet.

San Giovanni airfield had no paved tarmac. Instead, it had steel grated handstand, dirt aprons, and parallel dirt runways. B-24 Liberator bombers took off from these short runways with three thousand gallons of gas in wing tanks, four tons of bombs, four rotating turrets, thousands of fifty caliber bullets for ten machine guns, ten crew members outfitted with flak jackets and steel helmets, and other equipment for bombing, navigation, and ditching. Taxiing on rugged ground caused tail empennages to

jounce up and down, at times touching the ground. Because tail skids could puncture a plane's aluminum skin, these items were removed as soon as new aircraft arrived.

Meandering lines of airmen stood outside makeshift latrines. (Pilot relief tubes were available in the air but, at forty below zero, using them was no easy matter.) Better get as empty as possible beforehand. Anxiety and spasmodic butterflies helped things along.

Dawn's pale grey light penciled the horizon as puffs of smoke began belching from engines as, one after another, they coughed to life. We waddled from ramp to taxiway to join planes forming up. The Pilot's alternate use of throttle and brakes maintained a safe distance from planes front and rear as we gradually moved toward our take-off slot.

Once in position, Pilot and Co-Pilot stood on the brakes. Propellers raced and whined, engines thundered, and the entire aircraft shivered and shook with wingtips flapping to and fro like gooney birds struggling to get airborne. Then the brakes let go and we were rolling.. To preserve center of gravity, the entire crew moved forward. I stood on the bomb bay's catwalk. The doors were cracked a notch so I could see the dirt swirling beneath my feet as we picked up speed. Near the end of the runway we lifted off and began a shallow climb. Still over base but now at sixteen thousand feet we linked up with other squadrons and proceeded north over the Adriatic. Flying formation, number three in Charlie Box, we continued to gain altitude.

Precipitate prompting by my crew mates caused me to enter the Ball Turret early. I lowered it into the slip stream, pulled up the hatch, put my feet on the cold metal seat and slid down. Once seated, I pulled a woven belt across the back of my neck and secured the latch. Then I closed the hatch and tightened two Navy-type screw locks to prevent any untimely opening when two hundred and fifty mile winds buffeted the door. Using two upright handles, I slowly rotated down and around in a full circle. Ahead I saw bombers stretched across the sky. Vapor trails streamed from each plane and reflected light danced upon metal wings like bayonets flashing in the sun.

I inserted air speed, ground speed, altitude, and thirty-three foot wing span (ME 109's) into my computing sight and continued to survey the surrounding area. I plugged in heated suit and goggles, made doubly sure rounds were chambered, and switched channels to intercom. Shortly afterwards, the Pilot initiated oxygen check; all positions answered affirmatively. This safety procedure would be repeated every twenty minutes until we let down to lower altitudes near home base. Several times enemy fighters feinted attacks at a distance but, when our escort, a gaggle of P-38's circling above, gave chase, all planes disappeared.

While going through training, I had volunteered to be a test subject and go up without oxygen mask in the altitude chamber. At eighteen thousand feet, I unlaced and then laced my shoe according to directions. Like a drunk, I thought I did extremely well. (Later, I spent ten minutes untangling a knotted mess.) At twenty-three thousand, I felt great but could hardly hear or understand requests to write down my serial number. (Later, I found out the speaker system was at full blast.) I wrote down the first seven digits and then kept on writing 06, 06, 06, 06, across the page, never reaching the last digit. Again, I thought my performance was excellent. Finally, after I was totally unable to push a mask to my face that was inches away, I received a rush of pure oxygen that sent me floating into space. I had a headache for two days but the lesson was worth it. Oxygen hoses are push/pull and can be separated by any wrenching body motion. No one can detect lack of oxygen. By the time something seems amiss, one is unable to do anything about it. Common sense says otherwise but common sense in this instance is wrong. Thereafter, at altitude, I tested my hose connections frequently.

A bomb's propeller has a wire to prevent premature arming. As the bombs fall, propellers rotate, thus arming the bombs. As we neared target, I, being the armorer, climbed out of my turret, switched to a walk-around oxygen bottle, and, balancing on the catwalk, leaned over and removed each wire.

Flying at twenty-four thousand feet, we approached the I.P. (Initial Point) marking the beginning of the bomb run. I switched to command to hear instructions from lead ship. Radio silence had to be maintained except for overwhelming emergencies. I noted that the sky was clear of clouds but then irregular ink blotches began to stain the blue background with increased rapidity.

Our bomb doors were rolled up and I could see the bombs poised for release. An odd spattering noise like shotgun pellets spraying a garbage can commenced. I knew flak was intense and accurate. Twisted metal and a gaping hole appeared on the right wing, at the rear of number three engine. Despite the barrage, all aircraft maintained position and plowed steadily ahead into a scraggy curtain scarred with black drooping smoke. Occasionally, the plane shook when hunks of jagged steel whomped us.

Despite the cold, I felt warm. My heart was beating at a good pace and I kept hoping that our bombs would drop. Eventually, lead ship gave the order: "Salvo bombs." Although the time since I.P. was only about five minutes, you could have fooled me that it was a lot longer.

I followed the bombs as they plunged down and away. For a short space, they disappeared and then, as in a silent film, I saw bunches of percussive flashes carpet the ground in swift succession; the only sounds were straining engines as we escaped flak altitude by descending in a steep diving turn.

During rally, our bomber group scrambled to reassemble formation and were vulnerable to attack. This time however,, a relieving squadron of P-51's showed up and no fighters were sighted. To the northeast, I observed a flight of bombers threading their way through a gauntlet of black flak and could fully appreciate our survival. Floating aimlessly in great profusion were thousands of tinsel-like silver, named "window" or "chaff" which had been pitched from slots on the fuselage of all planes. This defensive measure was designed to confuse Jerry's Wurzburg radar sets.

A half hour from Vienna our escort, low on fuel, departed. Squadrons tightened up their formations and all eyes searched the sky for Axis planes. Although engine oil streaks were a common occurrence, when a flow appeared on our wing behind number three engine, the Pilot shut it down and feathered the prop. We were unable to keep up and gradually lagged behind the formation. Loyal Fascist pilots, based in Northern Italy, were always eager to jump unprotected stragglers. Consequently, our crew became even more vigilant and I rotated my turret to all compass points in regular sweeps.

The Tail Gunner saw the planes first at six o'clock high; two spots in the distance drawing closer. I rested my thumbs on nubby buttons atop my control handles, peered through the sight, and waited to begin firing. With great relief, we recognized the planes as Spitfires and heard a crisp British voice say: "All right Yanks, all right, we're here, we're here." For positive identification, they lowered wheels and flaps to approximate our sluggish speed, flew alongside, and waved. We waved back and our Pilot welcomed their presence. The Spitfires had sufficient fuel to cover us for twenty-five minutes which would take us just beyond the Adriatic coast. Both planes retracted their gear, swooped p, and continued to hover about until we passed Trieste.

As we descended over water near the spur of Italy, the crew's attitude toward me changed drastically. Up to this point, I was Jonah, but now I was a talisman, a good luck charm. After helping me out of my turret, I was passed a smoke and invited to feast on K-ration crackers dripping with melted cheese which they had unceremoniously cooked on the waist gun heaters. Their unconstrained euphoria and high spirits were contagious and I found myself joining the back slapping and arm punching signaling their combat tour's end.

Number three engine was restarted as we approached the ribbed Brunellschi Dome of Cerignola's Catholic Church. (This prominent landmark was one I would see many times with gratifying reassurance upon returning from other missions.) Within minutes we entered the pattern downwind, wheels came down and locked, and emerging Fowler flaps revealed two ugly holes; one in the wing and its twin in the flap. Turning from base leg to final, the Flight Engineer stood behind the Pilot and called off airspeed at short intervals. Only one other plane was circling to land as we touched down.

Once the plane parked, we tumbled out to count the holes fore and aft. By the time we lugged our equipment to a waiting truck, the ground service crew was busy patching holes by bucking rivets through sheets of aluminum.

At the personal-equipment shack, our heated suits were hung up and other items were put in assigned bins. The Flight Surgeon stood behind a table with glasses and bottles of rye whiskey, doling our generous shots to each crew member whose name appeared on the mission list. This practice

allowed the Flight Surgeon to know everyone and to observe changes in behavior as the missions climbed in numbers.

The last stop was Group Headquarters where all ranks stood in line for coffee and doughnuts served by an attractive Red Cross girl. We then carried our cups inside for interrogation where the crew was questioned about two downed bombers from our Group, observance of parachutes, intensity and accuracy of flak, time over target, escort, enemy fighters, weather, bomb results, equipment failures, and happenings of any significance.

Angled rays of a late afternoon sun dappled the earth as I trudged through a grove of olive trees. The transposition from flying velocity to walking made each step dreamlike slow. Hours on oxygen and adrenalin rushes began taking their toll for, rather suddenly, I felt drained of sensation and bogged down with fatigue. The tent was empty. I pulled off boots and leather jacket, fell on my cot, and was soon deep in sleep.

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AN UNFORGETTABLE MISSION  
From a letter to the Historian  
Wayne E. Bigrigg (739)

When you spoke of unforgettable missions, two of ours came to mind. One occurred when 500 pound bombs were not available and Ordinance decided to piggy-back 250 pound ones. When our Bombardier released over the target, only one bomb dropped, he and I spent the next hour in the bomb bay, gingerly untangling the mess until the remaining ones fell free. I've often wondered if the people on the ground that day were beginning to question our strategy.

The second incident occurred on our way home from Bucharest. Enemy fighter planes had traveled along with us for several miles when one pilot decided to test the ability of his cannon fire. Watching from the nose blister, I could see tracer fire headed our way and he managed to hit the "T Bird" with five shots. Fortunately, the crew was uninjured except for a flesh wound on Bill Glavin's seat. The shelling had made a huge hole in the left rudder. Our Pilot, B.L. Green, promptly dropped under the Group formation for protection and we returned home without further incident. Realizing that our braking system was worthless, the Pilot had us all assemble in the rear of the plane when he was ready to land. Since the Italian mud was still plentiful, he landed on the grass surface and used our weight as a braking element. This worked quite well and three weeks later, the "T Bird" returned to the air war.

My impression of our first mission on 8 February was that we had caught a "milk run". In fact when I remembered it later, I felt that the target was selected to give us a gentle initiation to combat. The next six months proved that they weren't all going to be as simple as the ride to Orvieto had been.

Dear Joe:

When you requested details regarding missions that I had mentioned in the newsletter, I realized that a diary would be most convenient. After nearly half a century, I find some details are very vivid and some a bit blurred. Since I made ten trips over Rumania during my tour in Italy, I'm not certain which target was involved in the piggy-back bomb incident. I do remember that when the Bombardier, Gill Glavin, called "bombs away", B.L. Green informed him that only one had dropped. You can imagine our reaction when we entered the bomb bay and viewed the tangle of bombs. Since the temperature was -40 degrees, and open bomb bays are a bit windy, you can appreciate that we worked very carefully. After strapping ourselves to metal uprights by using our parachute harness, we surveyed the task at hand. Spinners had spun off several bombs and we moved these very gingerly, not knowing how much handling they might endure. Fortunately, they proved to be very durable and at the end of a long hour, the last stray bomb dropped clear. We were very happy to be able to close the bomb bay doors and return to our normal stations.



PLOESTI REVISITED  
Edward W. Rodgers (737)

A beautiful clear day over southern Europe. Up before dawn, then just like dozens of times before. Dress, gear together, then to the Mess, but one thing is different today. There's a change in the crew. We are getting in replacements for those we've lost. To orient them quickly, the Pilots and Co-Pilots are assigned to fly Co-Pilot to an experienced Pilot on an experienced crew. I have a Pilot for his first combat mission today, and Carl Renz, my Co-Pilot sits this one out. He stood with Runway Control that day, and watched us leave ground right at the 15 seconds (exactly) like we always did, even though it was an instrument take-off in the dust of the PSP runway. It was his day to sweat us out.

It had been an unusual briefing; going back to the "big P" was not expected, and I got to fly a position that was new to me: in the slot in back and just below the Group Leader, the middle of the second "V". Not too tough, but you look up all the time. So off we go. I did the take-off, climb out and assembly, and off to the east. I turned control over to the new guy several times (for the life of me, I can't remember his name). He was having trouble holding position, over-controlling, and getting too far under the lead ship. That's one thing you don't want to do, especially on the bomb run. I remember early on one of our freshman missions, I was flying the airplane on the bomb run when, out of the corner of my eye, I saw this huge explosion; a ball of fire and black smoke. I'd never seen such a thing before, and thought it was some new kind of flack. Wow!! But, fortunately or unfortunately, I later realized the left rear wing-man had slid forward under the plane in front and taken an armed bomb in the wingroot.

All the way over, several hours, I gave him the controls, until I convinced myself he could not fly formation. By then, the flack was coming up, I could feel and hear some hits on us, and in between the flack attacks came the fighters. I could see dog fights and Luffberrys going on all around and I could feel the vibration of our own guns, and hear the chatter of the gunners talking back and forth. And all around us huge columns of black smoke from the ground to well above, attesting to the success of the Groups in front. Then it was our turn and we're on the IP and the bomb run. I'm not getting to see the fun, as I'm doing all the flying now. Then "bombs away", and we stop working for the Army Air Corps and start working for the wife and kids: home, or at least back to base home! It was a damn long day and I didn't give the guy a good grade.

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"B-24 SABOTAGE IN ITALY"

R.W. Koch  
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Phillipe Coudert  
Bombardier, 737<sup>th</sup> Sqdn  
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Sir: Reference your article "Briefing" issue #54 titled "B-24 Sabotage in Italy". You assigned the 10 planes to the wrong Group - it was the 455<sup>th</sup> not the 454<sup>th</sup>. This mistake was easy to make because we shared a double-runway airfield at Cerignola.

Let's start from the beginning: both these units started flying about mid-Jan. '49 (44!-Hist). By mid-Feb., both groups had some combat losses, but the 455<sup>th</sup> was also having losses on take-off - in a 3-4 week period, 5 planes going down 1-2 miles from the end of runway some minutes after take-off. Hundreds of Italians were recruited going up and down both mile-long dirt runways removing rocks and debris that might cause tire damage.

In 1995, I went to visit Major Fred Vickers who, at that time, was a Capt. and Chief of Intelligence 454<sup>th</sup> B.G. He said that, in Feb., security was doubled around both Groups and that he was

tasked to try and penetrate base defenses at night in order to locate any weak points. He also told me that, in March, specialists started checking all monies sent home - gambling monies were accountable, anything else questionable. In this way, special agents began internal surveillance of various individuals and finally caught a 455<sup>th</sup> Bomb Group T/Sgt Line Chief, with access to all the aircraft in each Squadron. He was in the process of affixing a device in the wheel wells of a B-24 already uploaded with bombs for the morning mission. Major Vickers surmised that this was a small device because all it had to do was penetrate the self-sealing material of the fuel cells and set fire to the 2,700 gals. of high-octane fuel concentrated in the wings. It was probably attached to the electrical circuit which activated the wheels-up indicator in the cockpit. This would more or less account for the varied distances of the wreckage from the base. As you stated in the original article, "Swift Justice" took place when the T/Sgt was tried, convicted and executed by firing squad in under 45 mins. Not swift enough for the physical and mental havoc he caused to the 455<sup>th</sup> B.G. in killing more than 100 aircrew members at a cost to the Germans of a mere \$10,000.

I would like to add that, though morale was at its lowest ebb during this period, the 455<sup>th</sup> was later involved in one of the epic air battles of WWII. On 26 June 1944, the target was the oil refinery at Moosbierbaum - 36 aircraft participated. While 26 twin-engine enemy a/c took on their escorts, 60 twin-engine enemy a/c hit at the I.P. and 60 additional single-engine fighters hit during the bomb run. The Group lost 10 aircraft, almost 1/3 of its complement, claimed 34 enemy aircraft destroyed and a number of probables, and set numerous fires in the target area. Especially significant was the fact that, after being set afire by enemy a/c projectiles, two of the 10 aircraft continued in formation over the target, dropped their bombs, and then exploded in mid-air. At least all those 10 had a "shot" at the enemy. The 10 B-24s sabotaged by the T/Sgt never had a chance to fire a shot or drop a bomb.

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#### WHEN THEY BEGAN THE RAVINE (AND CHEATED CERTAIN DEATH)

Don L. Jandernoa (736)

Was it February or March 1945? The 454<sup>th</sup> Bombardment Group runway had an olive orchard with a gradual upward incline at the south end. At the north end there was a ravine. Was it 300 feet wide, 100 feet deep and perhaps a half mile long running near straight? Whatever the size it was just right for an exceptionally skilled pilot, copilot and engineer.

The way I remember, Pilot John Trapani was designated as Airdrome Officer. His job was to wave the planes down the runway in the morning and welcome them home in the afternoon when they returned from a mission.

On this particular day, John convinced me that I could handle the task. All I needed was a Jeep, a Very Pistol, a stopwatch, and a position near the south end of our runway.

It was "Take-Off Time". Twenty-eight fully loaded B-24s were lined up with engines idling. Mission minute arrived. I shot the Very Pistol and waved the lead plane down the runway. Everything was in order. The engines roared and the plane rolled down the runway with increasing speed.

Were the intervals between planes 60 seconds? The lead plane had cleared the runway and I was about to wave the second plane off when all hell broke loose on the lead plane. The bombs were jettisoned and went crashing down the runway end over end. The bomb bay doors were swinging in the breeze. The #3 engine prop was feathered. Someone pushed the throttles and the mixture controls to the wall. AND THE PLANE DISAPPEARED INTO THE RAVINE.

What now? Why weren't there fire, smoke and a loud explosion as the lead plane crashed in the ravine?---- NOTHING FURTHER HAPPENED THAT I COULD SEE. I waited an extra 60 seconds or more. I kept asking myself what was my duty? Finally I concluded that the "war must go on" and I began waving planes down the runway every 60 seconds.

After three of four planes had taken off, I noticed a B-24 a half-mile west about 200 feet above

the ground limping back to base. It was the lead plane! Somehow that crew had done all the right things - jettisoned the bomb load through the closed bomb bay doors, feathered the #3 prop and nursed that badly wounded B-24 to remain airborne.

As the lumbering lead plane approached the field, we cleared the runway and they made a perfect landing. They taxied off to their revetment, deplaned, kissed the ground and thanked God they had lived to fly another day.

ANOTHER DAY WAS THEN!-----THE PILOT INSISTED THEY FLY THAT DAY! SO THEY BOARDED A SPARE PANE, JOINED THE FLIGHT AND LED THE MISSION THAT SAME DAY.

WOW! TALK ABOUT COURAGE!

Who were the guys on that flight? Did all of them live to complete their missions? How many are alive today? At our 454<sup>th</sup> reunion a year or two ago, I met one of the crew. As I recall, he was a substitute Bombardier that day. He had a story that I am sure all of us would like to hear.

Training, good equipment, skills, and the Grace of GOD brought them home.

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#### MISSION?

From a letter by Billy J. Jacobs (737)

My memory tells me that we started this mission with 16 planes and seven returned to our base. Some landed at alternate bases. Some didn't make it. My hat's off to all for a gallant effort and a hell of a battle. At Interrogation, we accounted for seven 109's shot down and nine probables. Our crew did an outstanding job and we had very few missions completed at the time and our Group had only been operational two months. Prior to this mission, I give extreme credit to our crew: Capt. Carithers; Capt. Ford, Bombardier; Capt. Brothers, Navigator; Sgt. Jimmy Rowland, Engineer and top turret gunner, with an apology for the rest of the crew members which I am unable to recall. All in all, it was a "rock-um, sock-um" day that will live with us as long as we are on this planet.

Back at our base, I learned from Maj. Joe Bloomer of 304<sup>th</sup> Wing Operations that I had been put on orders to go to Cairo, Egypt and be one of the Pilots that would fly Avriill Harriman (the Ambassador to Russia) between Cairo and Moscow. Later, it was decided to send Captain Carithers instead, because of his condition after the confrontation with the spent shell case. He did Pilot duty for Mr. Harriman till WWII conclusion.

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#### A PERSONAL RECOLLECTION OF THE BARI HARBOR EXPLOSION

William P. Taube (738)

The news article to the right (1) is a clipping from the Italian edition of Stars and stripes. It is of significance to me and our crew (AP Commander Gene Barter), because we were in Bari on April 9, 1945 to bury our Bombardier, John (Jack) O'Connor, in the Military Cemetery just outside of the city. Jack was on his 31<sup>st</sup> mission and died of anoxia caused by a frozen oxygen mask.

Transport to Bari was by a base ambulance for the EM, and a staff car for the officers. About noon time, after the funeral, we stopped at the Military Hospital for dinner before the return trip to home base. The hospital was located on a bluff just outside of Bari. Just as we were exiting the ambulance, all hell broke loose. We saw this gigantic column of smoke from the harbor area, and several seconds later, heard the concussions.

We piled back into the ambulance and headed for downtown Bari. He carnage we witnessed was indescribable. There were totally and partially wrecked buildings everywhere, including the Red Cross Canteen with its 15 foot doors blown off its hinges. Broken glass littered all the streets, and black

gooey oil was splattered everywhere from a burning tanker in the harbor. What is still etched clearly in my mind was the frenzied paroxysm of the people. What I was witnessing was a mindless people stampede. Thousands of people were of only one mind; to escape from the city at all costs. They believed the German bombers had returned without warning as happened 16 months earlier.

The narrow streets of Bari could not accommodate the crush of this uncontrollable mob, and many of the unfortunate ones that lost their footing were instantly trampled. We saw several go down in this manner. I believe that most of the deaths reported in the news article were caused by this stampede rather than by the explosion itself.

We were ordered by the MP's to leave the area immediately, so we high tailed it back to the hospital. When we arrived, the wounded were coming in on any conveyance that could carry them. Two of our crew, Joe Talbott and Marshall Bryan, were dispatched back to Bari in the ambulance to pick up casualties, and Willard Hubsch, Russ Chamberlain and myself remained at the hospital to assist in carrying in the casualties. The hospital quickly filled to overflow and canvas cots were set up in the hallways.

The condition of the incoming wounded was appalling. The British stevedores working in the dock areas were in the worst condition. All were saturated with black oil, many were severely burnt, some had arms and legs missing, some were blinded, and all were bloody. The doctors and nurses had to first clean off the oil before they could attend to the injuries.

I remembered thinking that war in the rear echelons could be just as dangerous as in the front lines or flying missions over Germany. After most of the military personnel were cared for, an endless stream of Italian civilians received help for their injuries. The hospital staff was superb in coping with the conditions of this sudden disaster, and I understand that no one was turned away.

We also learned that our officers, Gene Barter, John Pallas, and John Cody, were in the downtown area at the time of the explosion, and that John Pallas, our Co-Pilot, sustained a minor head injury from flying debris.

By now, the hospital staff had received additional reinforcements and we were relieved of our tasks. We had our dinner and then drove the 50 odd miles back to Cerignola and the Air Base. I was surprised when the news of the explosion appeared in the Stars and Stripes because the war was still in progress, and the policy was usually to never disclose any disasters that could give comfort to the enemy. But for me being there was quite different than just reading about it in the paper.

(1)

Friday, April 13, 1945

#### **Hundreds Killed In Bari Blast**

Over 1,000 Injured As Bomb-Carrying Ship Blows Up

AFHQ, April 12 - Hundreds of Italian civilians and unannounced numbers of U.S. and British servicemen were killed and more than 1,000 injured when an American Liberty ship loaded with ammunition exploded in the Bari harbor April 9 in what Associated Press called "one of the major disasters of the war in the Mediterranean Theater."

A brief announcement issued late today by the first official disclosure of the explosion, said that the merchant ship blew up, causing service and civilian casualties, damaging a number of harbor installations and civilian buildings and setting three other merchant ships on fire, one of which was towed out of the harbor and beached. The cause of the explosion has not yet been determined.

A spokesman for the Italian Government was quoted by AP as placing the number of civilians killed at 267 and injured at 1,600.

The ship, carrying aerial bombs, blew up in a huge ball of fire at a little before noon. Hundreds of panic-stricken Italians were injured by flying glass and even by doors, desks and chairs as the blast rocked the town, said the AP dispatch. The roof of the thousand-year-old cathedral collapsed, killing workmen in the church. Scores of other persons were killed and injured as the explosion hurled them



through the air. Some Italians ran screaming through downtown streets carrying dead and wounded. Lt. Col. Robert H. Harper, Washington, D.C., who was reportedly only 200 yards from the merchant ship when it exploded, described the scene to an AP correspondent as one of "indescribable horror."

He said that trucks were blown against buildings, and that huge blocks of cement were hurled through the air.

"Everywhere were wounded, dying and screaming. The explosion was accompanied by a tidal wave which swept dockhands into the water."

Capt. Anthony Menkel, Ogdensburg, N.Y., reported that he was walking along the waterfront when he saw a ball of fire at least 300 feet high and 200 feet wide belch up in the harbor. "I hit the dirt as a tremendous explosion shook the town," he said.

The explosion was so terrific that it reportedly blew one Navy officer through the wall of his office, situated not far from the scene.

This was the second major disaster to hit Bari, according to the AP. In two years, more than 1,000 persons, mostly American and British seamen, were killed Dec. 12, 1943, during a German air raid.

The official announcement from AFHQ said that the port was continuing to work at full capacity and that next of kin of all service and merchant service casualties are being notified.

#### Update

Several months ago, I obtained a copy of "Command Magazine" that was dated Nov/Dec 1992. What was of great interest to me was the short article on the first explosion in Bari Harbor in Nov. 1943. We, as a crew, were witnesses to the second explosion in April 1945 as I described in my original article. I have included the entire Command article (2), to capture the full horror of that Nov. 1943 ship explosion.

I was totally unaware up to this time, that Mustard Gas was in any cargo ship, in any port, in any theater of operations. How this was kept a secret for so long is bewildering to me. But this information answers a question that has intrigued me all of these 55+ years later. I had written about the "mindless people stampede" that I had witnessed as they tried to flee the city of Bari on April 9<sup>th</sup>, 1945. I had assumed falsely that the Italian civilians feared another air raid by the Germans. I realize now that their greatest fear was another gas attack. So the stampede to flee the city is now understandable to me. This update information is not directly relevant to the 454<sup>th</sup> B.G., (again excepting our crew members). However, many combat crews from the States crossed over and landed by Liberty ship in Bari Harbor. Many of these crews ended up as replacements to the 454<sup>th</sup> BG., including ours. I remember those sunken ships in the harbor, with smoke stacks and ship booms sticking up out of the water. Knowing now the complete story brings my recollections a little closer to reality.

(2)

#### **"A Calculated Risk"**

In November 1943, the 10,000-ton Liberty Ship SS *John Harvey* was loaded at Baltimore with 2,000 M47-A1 100-lb. Bombs. Each bomb, just over four feet long and eight feet in diameter, held 65 lbs. of mustard gas. Six members of the Army's Chemical Warfare Service were also on board.

The *Harvey* and her cargo were part of what had become standard practice for both the Allies and Axis. Convinced chemical warfare might break out at any time, both the Allied and German high commands faced the dilemma of how to prepare for it while not looking as if they were planning to initiate it.

Throughout the war, both sides kept supplies of chemical weapons near the various battle areas. All such dumps were shrouded under the greatest possible secrecy. The (again, mutual) fear was that if the other side found out about the existence of such stock-piles, they might use that as a pretext for launching chemical attacks of their own.

The *Harvey* was only one of a number of transport ships used to make sure U.S. forces in Italy had a sufficient stock of chemical armaments on hand in case the Germans or Fascist Italians attempted to use similar weapons to slow Allied progress.

As the ship made its way toward Bari, on Italy's southern coast, the Chemical Service men on board had plenty to occupy their time and thoughts. Fashioned using the cheap and speedy "Levinstein H Process," American mustard gas was notoriously unstable. That process also contaminated the mustard gas inside the bombs with up to 30 percent impurities. Those other gases could build up inside the casings and cause explosions. Consequently, the bombs had to be vented regularly, and the casing constantly inspected for any signs of erosion.

On 28 November, the *Harvey* arrived at Bari, where the harbor was already choked with other, more conventional Allied shipping. Forbidden by orders to reveal its cargo to port authorities, the supposedly "standard" supply ship was directed to tie up at a pier, there to await its normal turn for off-loading.

Four days later, on 2 December, Air Marshal Sir Arthur Coningham held a press conference at which he announced the Allies had achieved total air supremacy in the skies over southern Italy. At 7:30 p.m., 100 Ju88 bombers, their pilots flagrantly ignoring Coningham's announcement, roared in over Bari and inflicted on the Allies their worst seaport disaster since Pearl Harbor.

In 20 minutes the *Luftwaffe* bombers sent 17 ships, carrying some 90,000 tons of supplies, to the harbor floor. Shortly after 8 p.m. a fuel ship anchored next to the *Harvey* exploded with enough force to shatter windows in buildings seven miles away. A few moments later, an explosion tore through the *Harvey*, which began to list and sink.

Some of the mustard went straight to the bottom, but other cylinders began to burn. Then the deadly cargo began to leak out of the ruptured hold and spread through the debris-filled harbor. There it mixed with the hundreds of tons of oil that had leaked onto the surface during the attack. A strong odor of garlic soon hung over the water. Slowly a dense cloud of black smoke mixed with the gas and rolled over the nearby town.

The worst was suffered by the men actually in the water, sitting in puddles of oil in life rafts, or hanging on to pieces of floating debris. Their entire bodies were immersed in a solution of mustard and oil.

The rescue teams in the harbor and at the hospital in Bari had no idea mustard gas was aboard the *Harvey*; everyone on board her had died in the explosion. The hospital was soon overwhelmed with 800 wounded (1,000 others had already died). Assuming most of the men were suffering from simple exposure, the harried staff made no attempt to decontaminate them. Still wet and covered in crude oil and mustard, most were simply wrapped in blankets and given warm tea. They sat or slept quietly that way for the remainder of the night.

Those men, of course, had unknowingly been dipped in a solution of mustard-in-oil. The blanket-wrapping did nothing more than allow them a prolonged period of absorption. Inadvertently, precisely the wrong things had been done for them.

By morning, the first of about 630 mustard gas victims began to complain they were blind—their eyelids had swollen to several times their normal size. As the day progressed, appalling burns developed. Surface skin layers came loose in strips, as large blisters, themselves filled with mustard agent, burst. Some men lost 90 percent of their skin in the days that followed. Seventy of them died.

Out at sea, the destroyer *USS Bisteria*, which had picked up 30 survivors before dashing out of the harbor, was also having serious difficulties. The vapors from the mustard agent clinging to the men, as well as that which had gotten on the ship's decks, was having an effect. Her officers and crew were almost all totally blind and severely burned. It was 18 hours before the crippled crew was able to guide the ship into Taranto harbor.

In Bari itself there were similar scenes of misery. More than 1,000 civilians were killed in the attack and its aftermath. At least 25 percent of them died as a result of the great mustard cloud which had billowed over their town. Others were coated with the agent after being swamped with the oil-

mustard waves that soon covered the seafront. Thousands more fled the town, spreading stories of war gasses throughout the countryside as they went.

After first attempting to clamp a lid of secrecy on the fiasco, the Allied high command finally admitted a chemical weapons incident had occurred. Gen. Eisenhower, in his press release of 2 January 1944, explained that "Allied policy is not (repeat not) to use gas unless or until the enemy does so first, but we are fully prepared to retaliate and do not deny the incident, which was a calculated risk."

In May, Allied commanders were directed to inform their medical officers when and what stores of gas weapons were in their localities. In the meantime, sufficient chemical agents had been placed within easy reach of the 5<sup>th</sup> Army to allow it to conduct full-scale chemical warfare, if the need arose, for 45 days (and even more was enroute to England to support Operation Overlord). The "calculated risk" was continued by both sides for the rest of the war. - David Tschanz

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