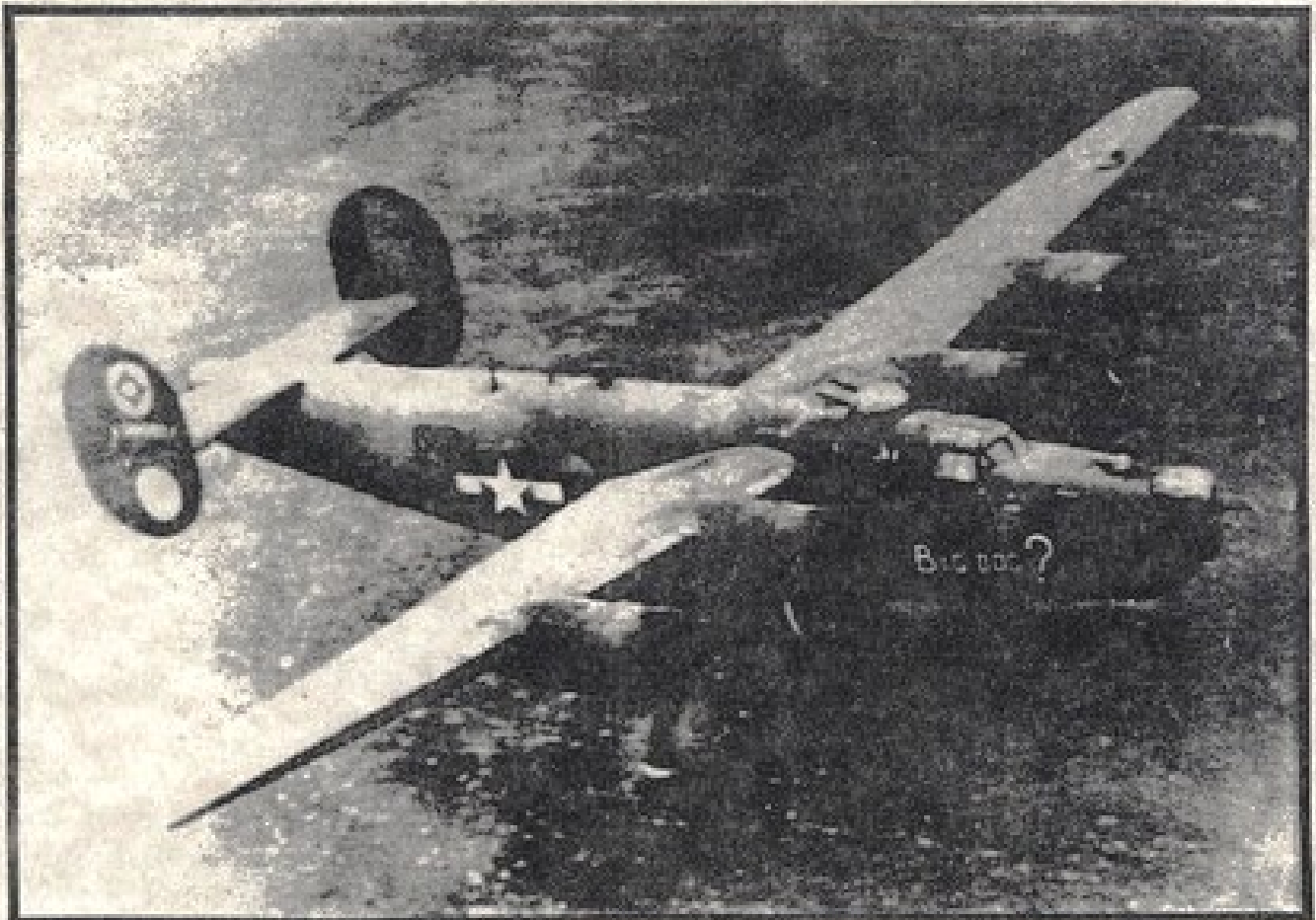


BIG DOG'S

NINE OLD MEN



by
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INTRODUCTION



I wish to dedicate this little book to the hundreds of Airmen who perished while in the 454th Bombardment Group in the struggle for Allied Victory over Nazi Germany, along with a special remembrance of our radio operator Sergeant Paul T. Cline and our Tail Gunner Sergeant Rohelio Vargas, who have since passed away, along with many men that had once been a part of the 454th Bombardment Group.

My memory has dimmed, but I wanted to leave our children and grandchildren with a little history of World War Two as we had known it. A type of Aerial War fare that will be nothing more than a legend.

I'm grateful for the assistance of James R. Robinette and William J. Borecki and most grateful to Dwight and Esther Smith who typed the story from my crude writings.

My deepest gratitude to my daughter and her husband, Cheryl and Dennis Gravo who edited and printed my war story.

CHAPTER
I

It was a warm autumn day on September 9, 1922 when I came into the world, son of Robert W. Taylor and Minnie Myrtle (Pastorius) Taylor, the last of five children, three boys and two girls. One little boy James, three year old, felt forsaken with this new bundle of joy and he sat on the steps outside the house and sulked.

This was in McMechen, West Virginia. We lived by the side of the road with the street car tracks beyond, then two sets of tracks of the main line B. and O. and beyond that the Ohio River, more than enough to give a Mother gray hairs with five children.

When I was nine, there was no work for Dad in the Carpenter trade, so he found a little farm out in Ohio near Deersville, Ohio and that's where he took us leaving some furniture, lots of friends and all our relatives behind. Needless to say it was rough that first winter.

Our closest neighbors were the Wilbur Poulson family who helped us survive. The men cut Coal Mine props, hunted and trapped game. The little one room school house, called Buckeye, was two miles away through the woods. Jim and I went along with two Poulson girls, Mary and Margaret. The school had about thirty children and one teacher, but she handled the job real well and everybody learned. It's surprising what city kids can learn going to the country.

We later moved to another farm called the Clark Place. More nice memories. Then we moved into Deersville on Rock Street.

In the spring after my junior year at Scio High School, I went to Canton, Ohio and took a job at a glass company. Later I got hired at Hercules Motors Corporation. On this job I was a tappet setter and engine tester.

By now, England was reeling from the bombing she was taking from Germany and on December 7, 1941, Japan bombed Pearl Harbor practically wiping out our Navy. The United States went on a war footing and our engine plant went on three shifts seven days a week.

By this time, Dad was working around Washington D.C. on government jobs and Mom had bought a five acre farm on the edge of Deersville. I worked at Hercules seven days a week until October 1942. At that time I took a temporary leave to enlist in the Army Air Corp. Since my address was Deersville, Ohio and I was in the Wheeling, W. Virginia District, my Mom, brother Russ and I went to Wheeling. There were large posters telling that you could choose your own field of endeavor. I was told that I could sign up for Aircraft Mechanics and never have to fly. I bought their story

and enlisted October 7, 1942. I had two weeks to get things together before reporting back to Wheeling and needless to say that time went fast.

On the way to Wheeling, Russ and I stopped at my sister Milly's. She and her husband, George Walter "Fuzzy" Sivard had three children, Carol Lee was 12, Bob was 10 and June was 4 years old. I took each of them a stuffed toy animal, knowing I wouldn't be seeing them for some time.

Reporting to the Officer at the recruiting center, I was put with other volunteers and loaded on a bus headed for Parkersburg, W. Virginia. Arriving in Parkersburg that evening, they fed us and put us in a hotel. At eight a.m. the next morning we began our medical examination and it was thorough, checking us from one end to the other. Near the end we were required to give a urine sample and it seemed the more I tried, the more flustered I became and after fifty some men had went around me I finally filled that little bottle. When all the men were through with their physicals, we were given lunch and then assembled in front of the Major. He separated the men who had failed and sent them back home. He gave us a lecture about the service and swore us in.

By mid afternoon they marched us in a group to the railroad station and loaded us on a train, they said for just a short ride. It was to Fort Hayes, Columbus, Ohio. All of us were relaxing trying to rest from the busy day, then about 8:00 p.m. the train jerked and screeched to a halt. It seemed this little guy from Kentucky named James Holcomb was wandering around in one of the cars and some how pulled the red emergency cord, that little cord puts all the air on to every car. There were railroad men all over the place trying to find out what happened. The train pulled into the siding at Fort Hayes at 10:00 p.m. They formed us into ranks and marched us to supply. There we were issued two blankets and a folding cot. These blankets I had were crawling with bugs, I never slept a wink that night.

We were aroused out at 5:00 a.m., given breakfast and another lecture. Around 9:00 a.m. we were given the first of many short arm inspections, lined up out side in front of everybody. This is very embarrassing, but a way of life in the Army. Then we were lined up for shots. They gave you a shot in each arm at the same time. On the third or fourth shot this one stung bad, I walked out the door into the open air and then fainted. Two medics ran out picked me up and revived me. Then they told us blood tests were next. I was afraid of blood tests since I had fainted back in Cadiz, Ohio at Dr. Petty's Office. I had gone to Dr. Petty's office and explained I needed a minor physical to enlist. We sailed through the examination, then when he was to draw blood, he layed me down, tied this rubber hose around my arm, then put the needle into the vein, the rubber hose got loose, the Doctor tried to tighten the hose, the needle flopped around and I passed out on him. He revived me with smelling salts.

The Army medics don't mess around with 100 men lined up. They grab your arm, hold it tight, jab the needle in and draw your blood. I was fine this time. Then a few hours later, they called my name for another blood test, some guy had dropped and broke several vials and mine had been one of them.

After the shots and blood tests there were movies and lectures on V.D. (Venereal Disease), lectures on Army procedures. They gave us a Soldiers manual, that had everything in it a soldier needs to know. Then we were marched to supply for our clothing issue. Since it's coming winter, everything was Wool O.D. They asked your waist and inseam then they throw stuff at you. Two pair O.D. wool pants, two wool shirts, one O.D. blouse, one long wool over coat, one cotton field jacket, two tan shirts with tie, shoes that don't fit, one wool hat that is supposed to fit on one side of your head, the fatigue clothes that you were supposed to work in. They gave you a barracks bag to carry it all in plus a canvas rain coat. Nothing fit like you thought it should but it was T.S. The guys in supply could tell you, they would say the Chaplain would punch your T.S. card.

After two days at Fort Hayes the train ride took us to Fairborn, Ohio, that is near Wright Field. It was a large Army Base with two story wooden barracks. You were put into groups according to your last name. Each floor of each barracks had lots of double decker bunks. The guy next to me said his name was Louis E. Schwartz from Marion, Ohio, we shook hands and have been friends ever since.

We were given aptitude tests and placed in training squadrons. I attended a carburetor and magneto class part of the day in one of the big hangars at Wright Field, the rest of the days were took up with basic training. We ran, we drilled, paraded. ran the obstacle course, and sat through training lectures.

One morning in November after a four inch snow fall, we were marched out to the rifle range, instructed to the use of the M-1 rifle and taught how to bore sight and then fire the piece. The targets were set at 100 yards and then 300 yards. After laying around in the snow all day, we were marched back to the barracks.

After supper, I chilled, just couldn't get warm. My one blanket wasn't enough. A guy a few bunks away had some booze, he mixed me a drink, lemon, hot water, and whiskey and I went to sleep then. Around 4:00 a.m. I became delirious, I came to in the base hospital and the doctor said it was Pneumonia. They kept me two weeks.

Patterson Field was a good base, lots of things to do. There was a large theatre and Post Exchange and a nice library. Nice mess halls with good food, of course K.P. "Kitchen Police" duty came around pretty often. Every Sunday after roll call they ran

us completely around Wright-Patterson Air Base, a good five miles, then excused us for the day. chicken was served every Sunday with the trimmings.

The Saturday night after Thanksgiving, they held a dance in the big hangar. There was Bob Hope, Jerry Colona, Francis Langford and their big band. The show they put on for us was great, then they played dance music. I was a wall flower until I met this girl from Iowa, her name was Charlotte Kinn, her job was secretary to one of the Generals on the base, but she was a country girl and quiet like myself. After that night, I had a couple of dates with Charlotte in Dayton where she had an apartment. I was still in basic training so couldn't get a pass, but I managed to slip into Dayton, getting back in was sometimes a problem with the six foot fence, besides bed check was 11:00 p.m. and they usually counted heads.

This one Friday in early December, this rumor was going around about no bed checks and no roll calls for the weekend. Four of us guys started talking about it in the barracks and did some planning, Boy! were we gullible. By this time we could get an eight hour pass off base. Saturday morning four of us guys from Wheeling area got our passes, went to the east side of Fairborn on the Highway and started thumbing. A Major came along and hauled us into Springfield. He quizzed us as to where we were going, I don't remember if we revealed our plans or not, but he remembered us later. Out of Springfield we caught a bus into Wheeling, but coming back from Wheeling it had to be by train, so we four agreed to meet at the Wheeling Station at 10:00 p.m. Sunday night for the trip back to Patterson Field.

It was nice seeing Mom and Dad and Sis, a girl I had dated before enlisting. Russ was very helpful getting me around, at this time there was several inches of snow on the ground, besides I had sold my 1934 Ford Coupe to a friend for \$80.00 before enlisting, why I didn't do as Carl had done and store that car in a barn somewhere is beyond me. Russ took me back to Wheeling Sunday night where I met the guys and we caught the train. We slept and it was just before dawn when we got back to the base.

The Company Commander insisted on a formation of all personnel on the parade ground every day at 4:00 p.m. for roll call and any information to pass out to the men in the command. This Monday afternoon at formation he got right to the point by saying some men had missed bed check and several roll calls, then he called out our names and told the Sergeant to take them away. We were marched to the orderly room for a Company Court Martial. There were six officers on the board, one of them of course was our helpful Major who had given us a lift into Springfield. The trial was short, we had missed two bed checks and three roll calls, the sentence was thirty days in the Guard House. I felt sick because that meant no more trips to Dayton, Good-Bye Charlotte.

There were others who had went over the hill that weekend due to that rumor, enough others to fill half a barracks. The Guard House wasn't big enough. They kept us very busy. The ground was too hard to dig holes in the ground but any dirty jobs we got them. Many hours on K.P., lots of snow shoveling, besides G. Iing the barracks every night. We were allowed no phone calls or other privileges.

On December 21, 1942, we were told to pack all our stuff and assemble in the street, then we were marched to the train siding and loaded on pullman cars for somewhere far away. After traveling two days we knew we were traveling south from the rise in the temperature. This warm night the train had pulled on a siding waiting for another train to pass, Lou Schwartz and I had stepped off to stretch our legs and have a cigarette. After talking to Lou, I realized that others were homesick besides myself. Lou had a wife back in Marion, Ohio that he didn't know when he would get to see again.

Our train pulled in the siding at Keesler Field, Biloxi, Miss. on the 25th of December, Christmas morning. At 9:00 in the morning it was 90 degrees. The supply room issued us summer clothing and then we were marched down to tent city. There were several hundred tents set up so six of us found one empty and got settled. We would march up and eat at one of the fine large mess halls. Turkey with all the trimmings was served at noon because of Christmas and then we were issued passes to go into Biloxi, Mississippi.

Biloxi was a beautiful old southern town with large two story homes, spacious lawns, huge live oaks with hanging moss, all kinds of beautiful flowers everywhere. A quiet town with white shell roads or plain white sand. Biloxi was only a ten minute walk from the main gate of Keesler Field. There were a few bars downtown. Jax was the local beer made in Jacksonville at \$.15 a bottle. It also had a five and ten cent store, a few other stores and a couple of hotels. The main road ran close to the beach on the Gulf. There were bars along the beach built up on pilings over the water. Narrow wooden walks ran from the beach out to the bars. These bars were rough, the women were rough also. Navy men or boys on leave or pass came here to drink. There were lots of scraps between the Navy and Air Corp. guys, usually over nothing. All the bars had juke boxes, some had slot machines that were illegal, but lots of women hung around the water front bars.

After I was at the base for a time, I enjoyed going to the Breakers Hotel as it was close to the beach but had a pleasant atmosphere. The lounge was large enough for dancing, someone was always playing the organ and we sang and had a good time. "As Time Goes By!" was my favorite back then. To add a little spice to our dull life, hundreds of Army nurses were stationed at Keesler Field and they enjoyed the lounge, and we could all stagger home together after closing the place.

During our stay in tent city, we were given more basic training, lots of close order drill, Hand to Hand combat training with knives, guns and bayonets. The obstacle course took in rope climbing, over high fences, crawling through round pipe with speed, the main factor in running the obstacle course. We trained with the Army Rifle and the 45 Automatic and shot for scores. They even wanted us to know some Jujitsu or some self defense for it. Several days were spent out in swamps for our training. Each man had a one man pup tent we slept in. I crawled in my tent one night after dark, I was just stretching out to go to sleep and layed my hand on a snake, now I upset several tents getting away from that snake. We were still in the swamp when a Corporal in a jeep came out and took me back for by belongings. I was to start Aircraft Mechanics school on Monday.

CHAPTER
II

In March of 1943 after completing basic training, we were promoted to Private First Class, moved into the two story barracks and put into Squadron T-411 TSS - SP which was our address until we were through school.

I was assigned a class in the Mechanics school that was specifically for the B-24 Liberator H Bomber. Classes ran around the clock here, there were 4 six hour classes. My class started at 6:00 a.m. so we were up at 4:00 a.m. to shower, march to eat, march back, make our bed, mop under the bed and be ready to march to class. Classes covered all phases of the Airplane, Hydraulics, Electrical, Engines, Fuel Systems, Flight Control, propellers, Wheels and Brakes, plus assigning you two hours of study at your bunk or in the library every day. You were given a test at the end of each phase.

During the busy time here at Keesler there were 60,000 people on the base. They had a graduating class every week. The mess halls "five" were operated around the clock. Every where you went while on duty you were marched in a formation with a man calling cadence. They would gig you if they had had a bad night. Another thing you had to sing as you marched, loud songs that soldiers sang the world over, like "She Wore a Yellow Ribbon", "I've Been Working on the Railroad", "The Limey Song - Pack Up Your Troubles in your Old Kit Bag."

My normal day sort of ran like this, called up at 4:00 a.m., Roll Call, got showered, shaved, marched to breakfast at 4:45, marched back, make up bunk, mop all around bunk, police up, March to class at 5:45, classes 6:00 to 12:00, study until 2:00, check mail, Calisthenics 2:00 to 4:00 or run obstacle course on your own time unless you have extra duty. Our supper was at 5:00 and we were marched going and coming.

Our little group, or barracks, was the sole charge of Sergeant Gay. He was a cocky little permanent party jerk, liked by no one. How good you marched and how good you sang or rather sounded, had its privileges. The best marching and singing squadrons were endowed with a blue banner. If your squadron had the banner that meant privileges.

Ladies in the town with daughters of dating age would hold these dances, supply the music and punch and a lot of chaperoning. There were Army buses to take any of us guys that were off duty. Occasionally some guy would have a bottle stashed outside some place and maybe get too much. One night at Bay St. Louis the dance was held in this small school house. Don Holcomb was in our bunch and had made a few trips to his hidden bottle and when he danced he hung on to the girl, so the ladies asked him to leave.

There was a long flight of stairs coming out of the place, Don fell down all the steps and landed on his head, but you can't hurt a drunk. One Saturday night at one of the dances, a lady invited four of us guys to her house for a weekend. We slept in good beds, had a good breakfast, "I learned about Grits" and then spent Sunday at the beach.

I buddied some with a fellow named Nick Serrani from Cleveland, Ohio. He was the best gold bricker I ever saw. Nick spent half his time figuring how to get out of his duties. In a formation at 2:00 p.m., we would answer roll call, then sneak off from the formation. We were caught a time or two. Another buddy in our circle was Jack Terbrack. We would go to town together, have a beer and he would tell me about his job on the Times Pickaune Newspaper.

Being in the Army did a lot for personal neatness. Seven days a week the officers made a personal inspection of the barracks, checking for dust, "they wore white gloves," how well your bunk was made up, how your clothes were hung, how neat your foot locker was, if your socks were rolled right and everything in its place. One officer always carried a clipboard and pencil to gig or mark you up. If you were gigged, you got extra duty or forfeited a pass. They also had class A inspections, that meant everyone dress in Class A uniform, tie, shoes shined and lined up outside at attention, so the inspecting officers could go down one row of men and back another. Some Saturday mornings they held a review, especially when visiting generals were on the field. This was held on the huge parade ground along side the landing field. There maybe would be 60,000 men, Wacs and nurses marching past the reviewing stand of the Dignitaries giving eyes right at the proper time. When you were waiting for them to line up all the Squadrons for the review it could get awful hot. The temperature might be 100 degrees and you are standing out in the sun with a heavy O.D. blouse on. Some guys couldn't take this heat and just keeled over from it.

It was at one such review when we were being dismissed that everyone heard an awful roar and here came five P-51's flying about fifty feet over our heads. It was my first look at a P-51 fighter plane. Once a month if you were not gigged you could get a 48 hour pass limited to 100 miles from Keesler Field. So, Nick Serrani, Moose, Valpatic and I left after our last formation on Friday with a 48 hour pass for New Orleans, LA. We rented a room on Bourbon Street and for two days looked the town over, ate different French foods, saw shows, heard lots of blues music and looked at the girls. We had a great time.

The four months we went to school passed quickly. I couldn't wait to get to class. There were Mock Ups of the Hydraulic Systems that actuated the landing gears, the braking system and fowler flap system. A complete cut-away showed every moving part of the fourteen cylinder radial engine and its accessories and its super chargers for each engine in order to boost up the inches of

mercury or ram air at the carburetor. These four engines had to supply the power to lift 60,000 pounds of airplane four miles high.

One day while I was working on a mock up in class, I turned and was surprised to see General George C. Marshall and Commander Sir Arthur Harris of British Bomber Command looking on. Marshall layed his hand on my shoulder, then moved on. Also we had to have a knowledge of the fuel system, electrical system "24 volt" and be able to start the engines and give a preflight to them.

Finally it was our week to graduate. We men lined up on the parade grounds in our class A's. The Company Commander was on this high platform. He praised us and said we were one of the best, that we had been selected to go on to Gunnery School and later fly combat. Those words from the C.O. upset many of us. I just assumed I would be a ground mechanic. My friend Nick Serrani said he was getting out of flying, I know he went to Medical, but I never knew what happened to him. All I know is he didn't go to Gunnery School.

Since I was little, I had no fear of flying. I loved to build models. I recall a few years before we even had a real airplane, at the Clark Place, Jim and I would fool around with a small single place parasol wing job with no engine, Russ had secured it somehow from a flying club in Wheeling, W. VA and hauled it out to the farm on top of a car. Jim and I would hook the wings to it, hook the controls up and he would pull me out over the field with the old Dodge car. It was fabric covered and painted red. It disappeared from the farm after we left. Now I didn't know what I would think about flying in a big Bomber, it just looked like my destiny.

Harlingen, Texas is way down, forty miles from the Mexican border, ideally suited for Aerial Gunnery with nothing but sage brush and back water from the Gulf of Mexico. The town of Harlingen was about the size of Cadiz, Ohio. A river running through the town separating the Mexicans from the Angelos, but the Mexicans far out numbered the Americans having lived there longer and seemed to have larger families.

After departing the train, we checked into barracks, met the officers of the post and were given passes to go into town. Lou Schwartz and I had bunks close and were pals. So many of the bunch from Keesler Field that we knew had gone other places to schools. There were a half dozen Gunnery Schools over the country.

I was to start classes on Monday at 7:00 a.m. Instructors in class would explain things like flight path of a bullet, what lead was, deflection, bullet drop, they had movies showing the path of a bullet. Inside one room you shot at toy airplanes going around a track using a swivel gun using B-B's. Then they had a quarter mile track, you rode around this track in the back of a truck and

shot at skeet or the clay pigeons that sailed out of little wooden boxes all around the track. You used a 12 gauge pump shotgun and every hundred feet a clay pigeon sailed out at a different angle. They kept track of the amount you broke. I bruised my left shoulder bad that first day holding the gun tight. I learned to hold the gun away from my shoulder and still break the clay pigeons.

After three weeks of class room then we were ready to start shooting at targets from an airplane and we shot at a long canvas target pulled by another airplane. An A-T6 airplane was used for this. The pilot sat in the front cock-pit, the gunner in the back cock-pit, these were open cock-pits, the rear one had a track around it and a gun carriage, you would anchor your thirty caliber machine gun in. You had to wear a helmet and goggles doing this and were right in the slip stream.

You were issued your own colored or painted bullets. Mexican girls were kept busy painting the bullets. Four gunners with four different colored bullets could shoot at the same canvas target and have a score tallied. The pilot took you up to 5000 feet then told you to get ready then another plane with a 300 ft. rope and a 20 ft. canvas sleeve moved up to the right with the sleeve out about 300 yards, you then swung the machine gun out and lined up on the sleeve. Every fifth bullet was a tracer that showed you where your bullets were going. You had to lead the target and account for elevation because of bullet drop. When you shot your 200 rounds the pilot would bring you back to the field. Once on the ground you carried your machine gun over your shoulder back to this long rack where they stored them and you made sure the gun was cleared of bullets.

My second time out and back I had just placed my gun on the rack and made sure it was clear, at that instant a machine gun on another rack fired once. The gunner standing next to me said I think I've been hit and he crumpled to the ground. This round went right thru him so fast there was no pain at first. I heard a few days later he had survived.

Schwartz had a funny thing happen to him. This one day Lou felt sure he had scored good in this sleeve, but later in the day he had to go shoot again, some gunner firing after Lou had shot the rope that pulled the sleeve and the target was never recovered. Your scores had to add to a certain number before you passed on to something else.

Every gun you used, you were taught to field strip it. The fifty Caliber Air Cooled Machine Gun we had to field strip over and over until we could do it blind-folded. They impressed on us getting a jam out of this fifty caliber fast might save our life.

After a number of trips in the A-T-6 they moved you to a larger airplane, this was an A T-11, a twin engine closed cabin

plane with a top gun turret, you fired at a sleeve the same way and they tallied your hits.

At this time in Harlingen, I had no knowledge of having a first cousin flying these airplanes. I was taking gunnery in and he may have been my pilot. All this I learned years later discussing Bob Weishaupt with cousin Harold. Bob had learned flying before the war or before going into service which became his primary job at Harlingen. He never went over seas but trained gunners and then instructed new pilots flying. Bob continued flying after the war and was chief pilot for an oil company. He had married a Texas girl and after the war lived in Austin, Texas. Bob had flew some of the oil men to Alcapalco for a meeting, having the rest of the day off, he was climbing on the cliffs where the divers dive 200 feet for coins. The ledge he was on broke off and he fell to his death. Mexico would not release the body until President Johnson applied a good bit of pressure.

While we were in Harlingen they had a bus trip this Saturday to Matamoros, Mexico. I went along. We went down through Brownsville and over the border. It was a dirty, smelly little place. It looked like everyone used the streets and alleys for a bathroom. There were a few souvenir shops, stores and bars. All they had was Mexican beer and tequila. There were cribs where the Mexican women had their business set up, all of them calling you to come in.

The bus brought us back late in the afternoon, all of us tired and hungry.

At this school you had Saturday and Sunday off and I took advantage going to town as often as possible. One dance I went to I became acquainted with a little blonde girl. We had a good time dancing, then she waited with me until I caught the bus back to the field.

Two nights later I was in town watching this Salvation Army Band playing on the band stand, I looked closer and there was the blonde girl playing an instrument, dressed in her black uniform, but she would not have any more to do with me for some reason.

I wrote home often during all this time and received letters from my sister Daisy, she lived with Mom and Dad and kept me informed. Milly wrote every week besides some cousins I corresponded with. If you wanted to receive mail you had to write. I never told Mom in a letter that I was flying or would have to fly combat missions in a bomber. I didn't have to; it came out in the Cadiz Republican paper along with a picture showing me with a 30 caliber machine gun over my shoulder and stating in the story I was trained and ready to bring them down. That article upset Mom bad and she went up to Cadiz to the newspaper and told them they were lying people. I think she called them skunks. Mom didn't know it was the Army not the newspaper making me fly.

When we completed our gunnery course, they pinned a set of wings on us and gave us three stripes to sew on, and we said farewell to Harlingen, Texas.

There were not enough graduated Aerial Gunners out of Harlingen, Texas to make up a troop train. Our orders read we would travel by train to Randolph Field in San Antonio where the train would be loaded up then move on up to Fort Douglas Military Reservation near Salt Lake City, Utah. The orders read there would be a two day delay in San Antonio before proceeding north. That made us happy to be getting a little break, and it couldn't be at a better place than San Antonio.

After we arrived at Randolph, the word spread of the approaching landing of the Memphis Belle that was making a War Bond tour of the United States after completing twenty five missions over Germany. The "Memphis Belle" was a well decorated B-17 Flying Fortress that had come into the public's eye over in England flying in the Eighth Air Force. We were eager to meet the crew of the "Belle" and find out first hand what combat was like.

The plane made a long approach and a soft landing, rolling up to where we were standing on the flight line. All nine of the crew got out, all wearing their decorated A-2 flight jackets. One of their jobs was to talk to men like us who were still in training and had not yet seen any combat. The men talked of the targets they had been over, with special emphasis on names like Swinefurt and Regensburg, Germany. They talked about the aggressiveness of the Germany pilots that flew the M. E. 109's and German F. W. 190's. The men seemed to believe by the time we began combat, we would have American fighter planes to give cover for us over most targets. They also mentioned that one of their crew members was still recovering from injuries received on their last mission over Germany. When our visit with the Memphis Belle was over, we walked away feeling very uncertain about our future.

In San Antonio we tried to assist some pretty girls sell more war bonds. The town looked very prosperous. Many halls and hotels had dances for the service man, especially on weekends, also Texas sure seemed to have an abundance of good looking women.

When our short holiday was over, we reported to the base railroad siding and got our assigned seats on the troop train from a captain who was in charge of the loading.

CHAPTER
III

The troop train wound up through Texas by Amarillo, we turned west by north through New Mexico then on into Southern Colorado. The Mountains were getting higher when the train stopped in this deep Gorge and everyone was allowed off to look. The Arkansas river was a torrent of water rolling through the Gorge by the railroad. The train waited one half hour while everyone looked up 5000 feet over our heads to the bridge spanning the "Royal Gorge" and those that had cameras took pictures. A train ride through the Rocky Mountains was a memorable occasion. The scenery was breath-taking.

Two engines working hard to pull the train up long steep passes out through the mountains. There were some tunnels near the crest and going through them you couldn't see a foot in front of you, then going down the other side of the mountain they didn't just let her rip, it was slow going. You could look ahead and see the caboose rounding a turn, you might look down eight thousand feet to a little town below. This train took several days to get to our destination and the cars were pullman, that is on one side they made into an upper and lower bed. There was a dining car but the food was below average and they sold lots of candy bars. The guys played cards, read and watched the scenery through the days. There were little bathrooms where you could clean up and shave, but a bath had to wait until you arrived at your destination. We came down off the last mountain into Grand Junction and then the desert lay out in front of us.

Fort Douglas Military Reservation on the east side of Salt Lake City was our destination. They put us up in wooden barracks in a very tidy Army Camp. After a nice shower we went to check out the Mess Hall. The food looked good, they served it on large metal trays, you could take all you wanted, but you had to eat every bite. A sergeant stood by the exit and that tray had to be empty.

At this base we were instructed more what our duties were to be with pictures and films on joining a flight crew. I met the five enlisted men I was to live with and fly with from here on out.

Paul T. Cline was our radio operator, married, age 27, from Apalachicola, Florida.

Harry Barton, Engineer, Single, Age 26, from Bridgeville, Pennsylvania.

Robert G. Verkamp, Armor Gunner, Single, age 23, from Cincinnati, Ohio, our nose gunner.

Manatho H. Smith, married, age 31, from Anderson, Indiana, Our Ball Turret Gunner.

Rohelio Vargas, Divorced, age 37, from Key West, Florida, Our Tail Gunner.

My classification was 748 Assistant Engineer. I was 21 years old.

We were only in Salt Lake City one week, but I still got to town to look it over and to a dance at the Coconut Grove. A huge dance floor with stars in the ceiling. One of the three ball rooms in the United States. Nothing but big name bands played here. Salt Lake city was crawling with Service men because of the many bases all around it and it was the cleanest town I was ever in.

Soon we were on a train headed south for Clovis, New Mexico. Clovis is in the desert and the wind blows constantly. We were here to meet the officers of our crew. All of us were called to a meeting in this large Rec Hall and after answering roll call an officer gathered us six enlisted men together and started introducing the officers we were to fly with,

2nd Lt. James R. Robinette, Pilot, age 27

2nd Lt. John P. Gaylord Johnson, Co-Pilot, age 24

2nd Lt. William J. Borecki, Navigator, age 24

2nd Lt. Louis Steinberg, Bombardier, age 25

Robinette hailed from Port Arthur, Texas, he was a big guy, pleasant most of the time but he could look as mean as a bull dog and be as mean as a junk yard dog when provoked but he also had the muscle to wrestle a b-24 for eight hours.

Johnny Gaylord Johnson was a medium built fellow, a devout Mormon and rather quiet, from Salt Lake City, Utah.

Bill Borecki was from Wilmington, Delaware, very outgoing, always quick with a joke and Polish.

Lou Steinberg was medium build, Jewish and lots of fun.

We six enlisted men would share the same quarters and get to know each other pretty well. Many other crews were brought together at Clovis, at the end of two weeks there were enough new crews to fill a troop train.

During our two weeks stay at Clovis Army Air Base, the time was taken up with lectures on many things, one was all types of air craft recognition that included planes of Europe and Japanese. We had no clue yet where we were to be sent, but we had to be able to recognize an enemy fighter at 800 yards from all angles.

There were lectures on the equipment we would wear flying, the "Mae West" life preservers, how to inflate it with the CO2 bottles by pulling a little ring and to inflate by mouth and information on using the two secured life rafts in the event you ditched in the sea. They were in compartments outside overhead of the flight decks. It was also a time to get acquainted with

men on other crews.

During our short stay at Clovis, the wind blew constantly and the sand was everywhere half the time you were spitting sand and rubbing your eyes.

Before leaving Clovis, the men of our crew had been told, we were to be in the 739 squadron of the 454th heavy bomb group on arriving in Charleston, South Carolina. Our Group Commander's name was Colonel Horace D. Aynesworth.

Colonel Aynesworth and a few crews had begun flying some practice missions in the summer of 1943 down in Florida, then went up to McCook Field, Nebraska where more crews were added and more practice missions were flown. Now all personnel were to join up in Charleston, S.C. for our Advanced Training before proceeding to our overseas attachment.

Our destination was a well kept secret, would it be far East, or England. We now had to start our third phase of training at our next base. Our troop train pulled out from Clovis, New Mexico September 22nd headed for Charleston. It was a relaxing trip, just set back and look at the scenery, play cards, and visit.

Coming East through Tennessee it just happened the train had to take on water in Chattanooga, this was right in town, directly across several tracks and a wide street stood a liquor store. They told us we could stretch our legs but the train would leave in a half hour. About a third of the guys on the train checked out the liquor store and made a purchase. When the train whistle blew, a lot of the guys were running with a bottle under their shirt.

Later I am passing through the cars when I came upon this crap game, guys down on the floor rolling dice, I'd never shot craps before, they invited me to play. When I got the dice I played two dollars, made four straight passes then crapped out, then had to go to the bathroom. I looked and saw I had made thirty dollars in five minutes. I was afraid that could be habit forming so I didn't go back to the craps game.

On back in our car, I played some poker, then a guy opened a bottle and we started drinking, singing and really having a good time. Much later I woke up and I was curled up on some barrack bags in the baggage car half freezing with nothing on but my shorts and T-shirt. I don't know what I was doing back there.

For three days and nights you could look out and see the country side of America sliding by, as the train moved east at thirty miles an hour. Some guys griped about the dust and poor food and nothing cold to drink but overall it was an enjoyable trip.

Finally we arrived at this siding marked Ten Mile Station. The siding that took us in to Charleston Army Air Base. When the train was empty and all the men lined up standing beside it, the officer in charge of the troop train commented how dry the trip was. That got a roar from all of the guys.

Charleston Army Air Base was ten miles southwest of the city of Charleston, South Carolina. All crews were billeted in small six man wooden huts. Each had a tiny coal stove to take the chill off. Our officers were over two streets in a similar hut. There were three parts to Charleston Air Base, The Squadron area, where the orderly rooms and other sleeping quarters were, the line where the big hangars were and the planes were kept, maintained and flown from, the base area where you found the Post Exchange, which included a soda fountain and restaurant, also a beer garden, Post theatre, Base Headquarters, a nice service club stocked with magazines and where weekly dances were held. There was everything to make you feel at home. The mess hall served good food and was open 24 hours a day, since crews were arriving back at the field at all hours of the day or night from practice missions.

We flew simulated or practice night missions on cities like Norfolk, Virginia and Atlanta, Georgia. Some practice missions were six and seven hours long and when we would arrive back we would head for the Chow-Hall. It didn't matter what time, the mess Sergeant would come up with something to eat for us. The Post Exchange was always busy serving egg, cheese or hamburger sandwiches and milkshakes. They also had a nice display of souvenirs for the folks back home. I remember Mom received a lot of Air Force emblem pillows over the time I was away. The theatre showed good movies, the only thing, the waiting line might reach a thousand feet. They had two shows a night.

We were here to train for combat and a lot of the strict military rules were not observed. You were expected to salute your superior officers when encountered but most important, group wanted a team work spirit among the men.

One time I had to go as engineer for a pilot and co-pilot that were taking a B-24 out to Oklahoma and pick up a part. I sure enjoyed that trip. We were gone the whole day. Some of our flights we practiced emergencies like shutting down an engine and even two engines trying to maintain altitude. We cranked the landing gear down by hand. Robinette gave each of us engineers a turn at trying to fly a plane, but with no previous instruction we both ever controlled and did a sloppy job of flying. I was impressed by one thing after that and could see why a pilot of a B-24 was beat after a long flight even if the thing did have an automatic pilot. It took a lot of muscle to fly a B-24 airplane.

Group just had so many planes and all crews had to get so many practice missions in. Mission flights and crews were posted on a large bulletin board inside and outside group headquarters. We attended many briefings about types of targets, types of bombs,

different enemy air craft and escape procedures if we were shot down or bailed out over enemy territory.

Any or all health problems were to be taken care of here at Charleston. I had some teeth filled and a cyst removed from my left jaw, it was a fibrous cyst and even with anesthetic it really hurt. Several of us started growing a mustache, I kept mine until I returned home.

It wasn't all work at Charleston, we could get passes when off duty. The bus left every twenty minutes for Charleston and the last one returning was at 11:00 p.m. Many of the places in Charleston were better class and frequented by Officers. A few were gamlins, The Wagon Wheel and the Elite. Some had gambling tables, large craps tables where you could lose a months pay with a roll of the dice. Some of the bars downtown had a wire bird cage with a pretty girl in the cage that ran a little gambling device.

One night I was by myself, I had heard of the Wagon Wheel, so I went in. It was packed with officers from our group. I just wanted to watch the gambling. I watched different ones shooting craps and how they played the odds. Our own Squadron Commander was there and pretty loaded. He would get the dice and make a bet, then throw the dice and yell here's for the 739th. Rarely did I mingle with our officers, not that they weren't friendly, it's just that enlisted associated with enlisted men.

Charleston was a beautiful old southern town, with the large old homes, sat back on spacious lawns, great live oak trees hanging with moss, it was one of the splendors of the southern cities. Port Sumter sat in the harbor.

One evening Harry Barton and I decided we wanted some fish, so we went into town to a restaurant and had our fish and beer. Then we had some more drinks and wound up missing the last bus back to the base. So we found a taxi to take us out. When we arrived at our hut, I had my half ready to pay and the driver wanted his five dollars. Barton told him to wait so I waited at the cab with the driver. Barton came out of our hut with his 45 automatic held behind him. Barton then stuck the 45 against the driver's temple and jacked several shells through the gun. The driver about passed out. He said to Barton you don't owe me anything and pulled away. We had just gotten to sleep when the M.P. hit our door and turned the lights on. I don't know how, but Barton talked his way out of that mess.

Early in November my Mom and Sister Daisy came down by train to visit me for two days. They got to meet the officers of my plane. Just as I was introducing them, this little hat Dizz had on blew off and went sailing across the street, Bill Borecki retrieved it for her. Big Dog told Mom I would be safe flying, that she had nothing to worry about. The weather changed when they went home and Mom and Dizz about froze on the train, besides

the hard Coach seats made a long 500 mile trip for them.

The middle of November we went on Bivouac. They loaded most of the group into 6 X 6's, they are heavy 2-1/2 ton trucks that ride like a covered wagon would, and drove us forty miles out into the Carolina Pines for a six day camping trip. We set up our pup tents and ate K-rations. Our camping area was three miles out of Walterboro, South Carolina. Group flew ten B-24's to Walterboro airport for our continued flight training. Here we trained with the hand gun, our parachute, how to survive a parachute landing on land or water. Out on the target range with our 45's, Big Dog showed the rest of us up. I got so I wasn't too bad when I held the piece with both hands.

We made two night missions flying out of Walterboro and it was very tricky to land. They were three hour missions with simulated bomb runs. The evenings were pleasant with the many camp fires, the guys sitting around singing and teasing one another. Schwartz and I would reminisce about the times back home. Some guys had cameras and there were some funny snapshots taken. After the first day an open air mess kitchen was set up with good food.

The camping week passed quickly, time was drawing near when we would be going over seas. No one was getting a furlough. The only exception was if there was a death in the family.

During our advanced training at Charleston one of the requirements of flight crews was for each man to be checked out in the pressure chamber. The chamber could simulate any altitude, but we were subjected to 30,000 feet for fifteen minutes, then another fifteen minutes to depressurize the chamber. Some men would get the bends or bubbles in the blood causing severe pain. If this problem persisted, you were taken off flying status, but this rarely happened.

One of the problems the Army had was Venereal Disease in the ranks. World War Two was no different than other wars. What the percentage of men that contacted the disease was, I never heard. But the Army went to great lengths to protect the servicemen from any venereal disease. Short arm inspections were held periodically. Lectures and films were shown. All large service towns had pre-stations the G.I.'s could use after having been exposed. Most Army posts passed out Pro-Kits when a service man received a pass to go to town or had a short furlough.

Overseas air bases had the same policy. I have seen some non-com's insist on your taking a pro-kit with your pass, alot of times we thought all this was silly but it was just for our own protection.

CHAPTER
IV

Our staging area was Mitchell Field New York out on Long Island. This is where all crews would pick up their new B-24 H bomber. Our group was scheduled to leave Mitchell Field December 15th, 1943 destination unknown at this time.

We left Charleston, South Carolina on a troop train December 1, 1943. During this time our Pilot, Lt. Robinette was suffering with an ear infection. At Mitchell Field there were B-24's sitting everywhere. All had to have the group identification markings painted on the tails.

After finding our quarters and reporting into the orderly room, we were issued 24 hour passes to New York City. Four of us enlisted men spruced up and walked out beyond the main gate to the train station. An overhead subway train ran into New York City, 25 miles away. I couldn't get over the size of the city and the tall buildings.

The Stage Door Canteen was the place every lonesome service man went to first. You were served sandwiches, donuts, coffee, soft drinks, offered tickets to theatres, stage shows and a chance to talk and dance with a beautiful girl all free. We saw the Rockettes, then Oklahoma was on stage at the theatre. The Stage Door Canteen in an evening was packed with service men. All movie stars working in New York spent so much time each month at the Canteen as hostess'. The dance floor was good size but not enough women to go around. All you could do was get a ticket and wait your turn to dance, maybe with a star.

You could go anywhere in New York on a subway for a nickel or a dime by getting a transfer ticket, but you had to know which ones to catch and where to catch them. Most of the stops were down in a subway underground. We saw many shows by getting tickets at the canteen.

Paul Cline and I met two student nurses one day on 5th avenue. We got acquainted and then paired off. Of course the girl I got was about 5'9". They said we could take them out to dinner. Before we picked them up, Paul put a bandaid around his wedding band. They showed us a good time. Every day we could get a pass into New York and it wasn't too hard on the pocket book.

When the 15th of December rolled around Robinette was still grounded with his ear infection, so group gave our B-24 to another crew. "This broke our hearts." The 454th formed over the field and headed south, their destination still unknown to us. At this time I was homesick for Deersville and the folks, but there was no chance for a furlough. I had heard in a letter Mom, Dad and Dix

were going into Milly and Fuzzy's for Christmas. I wanted to see someone, so I wrote to Russ that in less than two weeks I was leaving for overseas and God knows where. A couple of days later I received a telegram from Russ saying he was coming to New York the 20th of December on the B and O Railroad arriving at 2:00 p.m. I was happy to hear that, then I found out the Baltimore and Ohio ran trains into both the Pennsylvania and Grand Central Stations, anyhow, after two taxi trips to each station off walked Russ just as my cab pulled up to the Pennsylvania. I took Russ to Jack Dempsey's bar the longest in New York for a cold beer. Then we went to Mitchell Field for some Army Chow. Russ stayed with me in the barracks, met the crew and we had a good visit but they wouldn't let Russ near the B-24 at least on board. He caught the train back to Columbus the next day where he worked on the Curtiss Hell Divers for the Navy at Curtiss Wright.

Four days before Christmas, I haunted operations trying to get a Military flight into Pittsburgh, PA. since I could have a 48 hour pass over Christmas, but no flight came up. I called Milly on Christmas day and talked to everyone in the family. Mom assured me she had sent a package. Bless her heart, Mom didn't know that package would follow me to Puerto Rico, South America, Africa, Tunisia on to Cerignola, Italy.

One night around a week before Christmas, Bob Verkamp, Paul Cline and I decided to take in Greenwich Village. We had heard it was a fascinating place. We rode the subway as usual and went to this bar called Don Mulio's. It was a large crowded restaurant. We found a table and right off the bat the manager sent us out a bottle of champagne on the house. Most everyone in New York were kind to service men going off to do battle for them. Sitting next to us were three women and two men, this one good looking was giving me the come-on, so I got up and asked her to dance, besides her escort looked too old to get up. After that dance she sent him on his way. The women were three Italian sisters so everything worked out at least for me. Cline started talking to one of them and she told him her husband was in the Navy. Poor Verkamp got stuck with the one called Angie, a girl that preferred girls. The woman I was with was called Toni, she told me she was divorced with two children. They took us to other bars and it was a great evening.

Toni lived down in the bowery and it was the poorest section of New York. She invited me for dinner the next evening for spaghetti and to meet her children, a little girl 8 and a boy 10. Toni was good enough to invite Paul and I to her place for Christmas dinner along with Anna that had shined up to Paul. The weather got warm in the afternoon and we took pictures up on the roof of the tenement house. Toni had some little gifts for me and insisted I call home from her place.

While all this was going on our Tail Gunner Vargas and the Ball gunner Smitty were off somewhere and none of us knew where. Vargas had found the Spanish side of New York and had a good time

over Christmas. No one knew anything about Smith other than he was A.W.O.L. Three days after Christmas our Pilot Lt. Robinette received a call from the Port of Embarkation on Ellis Island, they had a man in custody that had been drunk and rolled and stripped of his uniform and all identification and claimed his name was Smith. The authorities didn't believe him, so they sent him to Ellis Island to deport him.

Big Dog had been layed up for three weeks with a bealed ear, and had his airplane taken away because of this ear and after hearing his story said to hell with it, let them deport him, meaning Smith. Borecki thought they should check the story out, Robinette finally gave in and let Borecki take a uniform and go out to Ellis Island. Smith came back with Borecki looking like he had been hit with a truck. Smith's story was he had got too much to drink and had finally come to in a wash room all beat up with nothing on but his shorts. It was a week or two before we all forgot about the episode. We told Smith he sure missed his chance to escape combat, on the other hand he could have been deported to Russia or some where worse.

One night in New York, Verkamp and I were on this city bus when two civilians in the seat in back of us started hitting us in the back of the head and bad mouthing the Air Corp. We were peaceful but you can only take so much, they provoked a fight and all four of us were rolling in the isle swinging away. Women were screaming their heads off. Finally the bus driver stopped the bus and got us separated, he was throwing some punches too, he sided with us and threw the civilians off the bus. They ran along side that bus yelling and cursing us. They apparently hated uniforms.

It was sad leaving New York after a month on the town but on the morning of December 31, 1943 we lifted off in our new B-24 H Liberator and headed south. Lt. Robinette had finally been released from the doctor with his ear infection. I had said good-bye to Toni the night before. She was crying as she pushed this package into my hands. It was an electric coffee percolator 110 V, but on the airplane everything was 24 V, so we never did use it.

After lifting off at 10:00 hours and we gained altitude the sealed orders were opened and said our destination was Cerignola, Italy by way of Brazil, Africa and Tunisia. We flew at 8000 ft. due south finally arriving over Morrison Field Florida. We called the tower and got permission to land. On locating our sleeping quarters and some chow and a shower, we six did our New Years Eve celebrating in the enlisted men's lounge.

January 2, 1944 after gasing the airplane and a good preflight inspection, we took off for Puerto Rico. After six hours we arrived at San Juan. There we were taken to a nice hotel with a pool. The temperature was 90 degrees so Verkamp and I took advantage of the pool. I don't know now where we found swim suits, but we enjoyed the girls and had two days of it.

Our next hop was down the South American Coast to British Guiana. This base and landing strip was hacked out of the jungle. The barracks or huts were built on posts eight feet high. That was for protection from snakes and wild boars, but there were monkeys everywhere and pretty friendly. By now the temperature was over 100 degrees and everyone just wore Khakis, and short sleeve shirts. All you could buy was peanut beer.

After two days we were on our way again landing at Belem, Brazil. This country is hot and dry has miles of cattle range and millions of mosquitoes. Everyone bought themselves a pair of mosquito boots to protect their ankles from the pests. My pair lasted me until I was back home in Deersville, Ohio.

Harry Barton was flight engineer and I was assistant engineer and it was our job to inspect and service the airplane before every flight. The Cunos on the engines had to be drained for signs of water and the super chargers inspected for cracks, also other parts of the plane had to be inspected. Even with new airplanes, things can go wrong or break. We kept a daily log of all maintenance and flight time and were expected to use a slide rule on airplane weight when loading fuel. Borecki and Robinette discussed with Barton and I about the long flight we would have over water and wanted us to be sure the fuel transfer pumps and valves were working properly.

On the seventh of January we left Belem, Brazil and flew to Natal, the closest airport on the east coast of South America and the closest to the country of Africa. Arriving at Natal we stayed one night then prepared the plane for the long flight, topping off the tanks with 2700 gallon of 100 Octane gas. This was to be a night flight, so at 1900 hours we took off from Natal and headed east across the South Atlantic. Most of the crew sacked out after dark. Four of us in the waist slept, Barton came back and woke me at 0300 hours and I let him get some sleep. I went up to the flight deck. Borecki was up in the astrodome shooting a fix. Robinette wanted to know if the E.T.A. was the same, Borecki told him it would be if the wind remained the same. Barton had transferred gas from the Tokyo tanks into the main tanks, now Robinette wanted me to measure gas supply in the stand-pipes from the main tanks by turning two valves on the stand-pipe, that lets gas flow from the main tanks up into the stand-pipe and it was marked in gallons to show how much you had. If none came up in the stand-pipe you had about 50 gallons in the main tanks. Also there was a red light or warning light in front of the pilot on the instrument panel warning him of the low gas supply.

There are controls on the throttle column named automatic lean and automatic rich that the pilot or co-pilot moves in conjunction with the throttle controls forward or backward, this control opens or closes the gate on the super charger. When these levers are moved clear forward, it is giving the maximum amount of gas and ram air to the carburetor to produce maximum R.P.M. or

horse power. Also the propellers are adjusted to bite the most air. To cut down on gas consumption, the pilot can adjust these controls to deliver less gas and more air to the cylinders. This combination can cause the cylinder heads to heat up. There are four cylinder head temperature gages in plain view on the co-pilots side of the instrument panel, each has a red line marked on the gage indicating danger to operate above red line for an extended period of time. Robinette was leaning out the engines but keeping them under the red line on the cylinder head gages. We had been flying eleven hours. The sun was brilliant coming up in front of us.

Barton came forward and we checked gas in the stand-pipes again. This time the gas just rose a little in the stand-pipes telling us we were getting low. Then the coast of Africa showed up through the haze, Borecki started naming landmarks. We had to find this small landing field at Rufisque outside of Dakar some thirty miles. When we located it, Robinette called the tower for permission to land and we set down after being airborne for eleven hours and forty nine minutes. Operations picked us up in a 6 x 6 and took us to quarters which was fenced in with high wire. There were black people everywhere, some were used for kitchen help, but all the others were after the garbage cans. These people would fight over the scraps of food that we threw away. Our bunks were set up with mosquito netting all around them. They passed out Atabrine tablets for us to take all the time we were on the base to guard against Malaria.

From the time we left Morrison Field Florida, Robinette had insisted on one of us guarding the airplane 24 hours a day, so we did it in shifts. In Africa we felt better when two of us were standing guard.

Dakar was known as a transient base and refuel stop for all army and civilian aircraft arriving from the United States via South America. The day after we arrived here, Barton was with a mechanic working on an engine of our airplane and not needing me for anything said go enjoy yourself. Well, Bob Verkamp always wanted to explore strange places. Now there were notices several places on the base stating that Dakar was off limits to U.S. transients. Verkamp said, "They will never know," so we went down over the hill and hitched a ride into Dakar. As soon as you hit the city limits you could smell Dakar. Smelled like an outhouse, something you had to get used to in Africa. Dakar was in French territory so that was the principal language spoken here, but sign language said a lot too. We saw quite a few American and British service men here, all stationed here as permanent party with a soft job way back from the fighting. Verkamp asked directions to a restaurant and was directed to one that specialized in sea food. The menu was in french but the waiter helped us out. They had fish, squid, large chocolate ants, snails, clams and shrimp. I ordered fish and Verkamp ordered snails in the shell, he had to pull them out and I about gagged. I enjoyed the fish and wine.

After our meal we wanted to look the town over. It was obvious that the Alhambra Bar was the most popular in town and the biggest. It had a very long bar, also a large area for tables. There was a second floor with a balcony on the inside extending clear around it into many rooms on the second floor. These rooms were occupied by the French Harlots. In some rooms there were some very nasty shows. Verkamp and I were having a beer at the bar when the bartender announced the next show, we went upstairs to this room where two french women and a sailor performed. Believe me they shocked this country boy. After the show we were down in the bar when this service man ran in and announced they were checking passes all over town. When the M.P.'s came in the front, Verkamp and I went out through the kitchen into this alley, but there were so many M.P.'s you couldn't get out of sight of them for long. They chased us on foot, we would lose them, then they would find us and chase us some more. We hid in this alley until they had checked all the guys passes that were getting on this truck convoy heading back for the air base. When the last truck was passing we ran and jumped on the tail-gate and crawled into the truck. Soon after that a jeep with some officers caught up to the trucks when the convoy passed through the town of Rufisque, Verkamp and I jumped off. Then a spotlight on the jeep picked us up and we ran down more alleys. The jeep finally gave up the chase and we were standing to get our breath. I went to turn my foot, came down on a cat's tail, this cat screamed and I about fainted. Verkamp about laughed his head off. We had to hike a mile over the hill, crawl under the wire fence, slip past several guards, then try to find our bed in the dark.

It seemed we had just layed down when Robinette was shaking us awake. Neither one of us felt like an early flight this morning. It's a good thing there was relief bucket on board, it was used several times back in the waist. Our flight out of Dakar was to take us east then north over the Atlas Mountains then on to Marrakesh approximately eight hours flying time. Borecki had layed out the course the night before, there were two passes through the mountains, one much higher than the other. Lt. Borecki had plotted our course using the lower pass which was 12,500 ft. and we wouldn't have to go on oxygen. When we got to this pass in the mountain it came up so suddenly, with us flying at 12,500 ft., this mountain loomed way above us. I was on the flight deck at the time, Robinette grabbed the throttles and gave maximum power and full boost to the engines. The plane went into a steep climb, it looked like we wouldn't clear the mountain for a minute, but finally did with little to spare. Lots of yelling back and forth after that for a little bit between pilot and navigator. Once over the mountains, the desert stretched out in front of us. Around 1500 hours we saw our first glimpse of Marrakesh, all the town and walls looked pink. Marrakesh was surrounded by a high wall and was many hundreds of years old.

This being another transient base we were housed in huts right on the field and would take our turn at guard duty for the next 48 hours. Marrakesh has a huge market place and many Arab tribes of the desert come here to barter and trade. Arabs are very dark skinned, shiny black hair and snappy black eyes. They travel back and forth across the desert on their camels. The market place was alive with the noise of all kinds of animals besides the chatter of the Arabs. They love to barter or haggle over the price of something. Here you could buy oranges, fresh dates, pastry, hard candy, many kinds of wine, leather goods, things made from brass and even leather shoes.

Many places in town there were signs saying "Off Limits" meant for us, but we didn't always heed them. One thing we didn't do is drink the local water. Also you saw writings many places that we traveled since leaving the United States saying "Kilroy was here" I don't know who he was but he got a round.

There was a U.S.O. club in Marrakesh where a service man could get a bite to eat, they had soft drinks, coffee, magazines, and writing material. French girls worked here and were very pleasant. We looked the U. S. O. over and then went back to the market place. In the market there were sheep, goats, ducks, chickens, birds of all kinds, tarantula spiders, snakes of many kinds, and lots of little Arab women, some looked to be 10 or 12 years old. I assumed they were for sale too. The married women had a blue tattoo in the center of their forehead and were veiled when on the street.

On the building we were staying in, there were notices stating plainly that Medinas and Arab bars were off limits to United States service men. Word was passed to us of some curious United States Air Crew going into these walled cities and never seen again. All this intrigue seemed to excite Smitty and Verkamp and they talked about what a walled city was like on the inside. It was early afternoon when Verkamp talked to this Arab that had a two wheel cart and a very skinny broken down horse into taking us out to a Medina five miles away. We thought we were on a lark, three unarmed soldiers out for fun. This city appeared to cover a square mile of desert. The walls were twenty feet high, eight feet thick at the base, the top was three feet wide and filled with broken glass layed in cement, so you had to use the gate to enter or leave this place. The huge gate was twenty five feet high and made of solid wood. When we got to the gate it swung open and we dashed through. The street continued on through the city to a market place. It was hard to imagine but many of the people in here had never been outside these walls. These walls were their protection from other tribes.

We were driven on through the city into an open area where the driver stopped the cart and told us some single women lived here. We got out of the cart and was soon surrounded by several women, all looking very young. All had on white wrap around smocks and all talked at once. There was a wind-up phonograph and the women were playing Arab records, they served us wine and fresh figs. Then we coaxed them into dancing for us. Later on Smitty and Verkamp slipped away somewhere with their friends. This one

with me was real forward, wanting to kiss and fondle, really get to the point.

These rooms didn't have ceilings and the light was fading, soon it was pretty dark. Then I heard a loud jabbering of men's voices like it was out in the area we had come from. Just then one of the other women ran in the room very excited. She told the woman I was with in Arabic something, I finally got the message. The Arab men were looking for American Soldiers. The girl I was with led me out through this maze of rooms into the court yard and disappeared. All I could see were shadows of men moving around and hear the clash of metal from their swords. There was a large crowd of them and I could not see any horse or cart. Fright came over me. I could see myself being hacked to pieces and "Missing In Action." All I could think of was to look as small as possible. I got down on my hands and knees and started crawling to find our transportation out of here. I actually crawled around some of these dancing Arabs, all jabbering at once. These blades looked to be thirty inches long and they were shishing and clanging together. In the dark it seemed hours before I found the cart, Smitty and Verkamp were already aboard. I clattered in and the driver whipped the old horse into action. It was trying to gallop as we went down through the center of the city. Up ahead we could see the tall gate, all wondering if it would open. When we were very close the gate swung toward us and we charged out into the desert.

While we were out seeing the country, Sgt. Barton though he would look the town over. The story we heard was he had a couple of drinks, then went into an Officers Club, then after a drink there, an argument developed. There was a fight and an officer was knocked through a window. They offered him ten days in the base guard house. Our pilot went to bat for him and he kept his stripes but was detained for ten days and caught up with us later in Oudna, Tunisia.

The principal taxi of Marrakesh was a two wheeled cart that would hold two people pulled by a tandem bicycle. Two men peddling could pull a cart fairly fast. Verkamp and I used the taxi several times.

Going through the market place one morning I saw these cute green leather shoes, so I selected a size to fit sister Dizz and mailed them from Marrakesh, but she never received them.

Our last night at Marrakesh, Verkamp and I hired us a taxi and were pulled around town. Then Verkamp said the Arabic word for women and we started out this road. On the edge of town we were passing this high wall on our left, came to an opening in the wall and the guys turned in. Once through the opening in this court yard, Verkamp and I were pulled from our seats by some Arab women. None could speak English so they would try to get their message across other ways. They were hanging on us smooching and hugging. This is something that is hard not to enjoy. I noticed Bob wasn't wanting to slight any women. This went on for a few minutes and the girls were starting to look better and better. Just then I heard a familiar sound of metal on metal. I looked over against a far wall and there stood seven Arabs, five with their sabers across their chest and two swinging their blades back and forth. I pulled this woman off me and went over to Verkamp and said let's get out of here before we lose our heads.

Our taxi had been waiting at the road for us, but it wasn't easy getting Verkamp to leave the women. I felt we had been set up. Coming back into Marrakesh the boys were pedaling hard and we were making time. By now it was dark and the lights of Marrakesh were coming on. We came to this intersection and the next thing we knew we were flying through the air and landed in the road. Our taxi had collided with another taxi. There stood four Arabs yelling at one another in the midst of their twisted bicycles. Verkamp and I laughed and started walking toward the lights of town. We had walked a couple of blocks and all at once we heard some loud voices and they were talking English. Now we thought we had better investigate this. The voices were coming from the basement of this building by the street. We pushed the door open and it was a bar room. On looking further, we saw lots of khaki uniform with black faces. They spied us and welcomed us with open arms. These guys were P-51 fighter pilots of the 99th fighter group on their way to Italy. They would later fly escort missions for the heavy bombers. They seemed very happy to have us to drink and talk with. I have never felt so at ease with anyone as I did with those black officers.

The sun was well up when we lifted off and headed northeast for Oudna, Tunisia, but we were minus one flight engineer and Lt. Robinette was growling like a bull dog over his slap happy crew. I assumed the engineer duties on the flight deck where earlier, I had drained the cunos on each engine and did a thorough preflight check along with Robinette. The flight was routine, Borecki pointed out places of interest along the route and it took a little over six hours when we landed.

All the 454th was still at Oudna, so we had a few tales to tell and guard duty of our airplane was taken over by ground personnel. They used Turks to guard the plane and they were big black mean looking guys and they wore nothing but shorts and a red turban. A two foot long knife was their weapon. It was tough for even one of us to get near that airplane after dark.

The second day we were in Oudna, I took a long walk back over the hills. I guess I just wanted to be by myself for a time. I walked a long distance, came over the crest and there down before me was a flock of sheep with one herder looking after them. I went down to him and tried to converse. He was young, maybe 12 to 14 years old, had a long smock on that tied in front with a rope and he carried a long stick with a hook on the end. I could see the graze wasn't plentiful for the sheep. When I started my walk I had stuck a candy bar in my pocket and I gave it to the boy, then he pulled out a piece of hard black bread and offered me a piece of it, then he offered me a drink from this round leather bag, it turned out to be wine. He told me he didn't go to school, just watched sheep. Then we traded coins. I gave him a new fifty cent piece and he gave me an Arabic coin with a date of 1320. We visited half an hour or more, said good-bye and I came back to our area.

Back in August 1943, the head lines in American papers read, "54 United States Liberator Bombers lost on low level, raid on Ploesti Oil Fields, out of 178 Liberian based Bombers." I heard this news while in Salt Lake City to meet my crew.

When I read these large headlines back in August, it didn't impress me too much. I did realize that 54 bombers carried 540 crew members which was a great loss in itself. Then I hadn't heard of the Fifteenth Air Force and didn't know where Ploesti was. As our training progressed, Ploesti was forgotten. But now to be a part of the 454th heavy bomb group of the 304th wing of the Fifteenth Air Force. The name Ploesti crossed my mind and hung in the back of it. We were briefed that General James H. Doolittle was in command of the Fifteenth in Southern Italy, and the Fifteenth was to destroy Germany's war machine. It wasn't too hard to figure that our next move would put us in Italy and according to the Stars and Stripes closer to the action.

While in Oudna, our group did some close formation flying on the 19th, 20th, 22nd, and 24th of January. These were two to three hour flights. Primarily for the pilots, they did need an engineer. By this time our engineer Harry Barton had caught up with us and received his chewing out.

One evening at dusk, Robinette asked me to check our airplane to see if the gas tanks had been filled that day. I started out with my flashlight to the area where the planes were parked about a mile away. Before I found the planes, it was getting dark. I came over the rise and just then someone yelled close to me something in French or German, then I heard the rifle bolt go back and forward, he was yelling more, I gathered it was French. He couldn't see me and I couldn't see him. I didn't know one word of French so I stood still and started yelling Americano and I shined the flashlight on my face and uniform. He finally moved forward and identified himself as French. We saluted each other then, and went our separate ways. This man was standing night guard on his French Company and I am glad he didn't get trigger happy.

We had some passes into Tunis during our stay in North Africa. The smelly town was crowded with French and British troops. There had been many battles in this area before the Germans had finally surrendered North Africa. The main street of Tunis was very wide with trees and grass separating the two streets. During all this time in Oudna, we met more crews of the 454th and got better acquainted.

On the 25th of January, the 454th formed up over Oudna and headed east for southern Italy. We had loaded the ammunition belts into our 50 caliber machine guns the day before, but we didn't need them. It was no more than a scenic flight lasting five hours and forty five minutes. All the planes landed safely at San Giovanni Air Field. Axis Sally of the German or G.B.C. knew of our movement and told us about it on the radio before we landed. Sally was on a German radio several hours every day, seemed to know all the troop movements, where all the bomb groups were located and their targets. We listened because she played all the songs we were used to.

CHAPTER
V

The 739th Squadron area was located in an Olive tree grove. There were six man tents set up in rows and we used the next few days trying to make it more comfortable. Every one stayed in tents other than group officers. They used this old stable for quarters and group operations. We came up with a 55 gallon drum we put outside our tent with a valve and copper tubing running inside the tent. Inside the tent we had a half drum with the good side up and with a door cut into the half drum. Inside the half drum there was a quart can with rocks inside it with the copper line coming into the little can. One man turned the valve on and one man lit the gasoline in the little can. This stove ran on 100 octane gas and was pretty efficient. Out of the top of the half drum there was a smoke stack that went out the top of the tent. This stack would get pretty hot and you would have to shut the gas down. This stove made a lot of heat but if you didn't watch, the smoke stack would set the canvas tent on fire. This usually happened after everyone was asleep.

There were mornings when it would snow an inch. February was a damp cold month for southern Italy. The mess quarters were out in the open and it rained a lot and you had a real mess. Usually we took our mess kit and cup, got our food and came back to the tent but by then it was cold and all sloshed together. Mostly it was C-Rations, maybe a slice of spam and a slice of peaches or pears slapped on top. In the mornings you could expect powdered eggs bread and jelly.

Our toilet was a deep trench in back of the tent. Sometimes when you were hunkered down over the slit trench in the mornings you would hear a loud roar, then you would see this spitfire fifty feet off the ground heading right at you. You didn't know whether to jump into the slit trench or what. Those Britishers would pull up in a half roll and look down laughing their heads off. The British had a squadron of Spitfires and Hurricanes one mile from our area. They gave cover for the Lancasters that were based near our field.

On the 15th of February 1944, Lt. Robinette told us we were scheduled to fly the next morning. He wanted us rested and our equipment checked. Also we spent a few hours at our airplane taking the guns down and oiling them, making sure everything was operating. The Armour's had loaded 10 - 500 lb. general purpose bombs in the bomb-bays. The auxiliary power was on and gunners were checking their turrets. Lt. Steinberg was supervising us in our work. Naturally we were all speculating where our first mission was and if it would be a rough one. We went to bed earlier than usual but sleep didn't come easy with so many things on our minds.

My sister Milly had sent me a little pocket size Bible with a metal shield on the front cover. This I was trying to read by the lantern light along with some ribbing from the other five guys in our tent. From that night on I did read a few pages before going to sleep.

It seemed we had just closed our eyes when some non-com was shaking us awake, it was 04:30 hours. After going to chow and a trip to the slit trench, we donned our heavy underwear, our summer khakis, our 45 in its holster, our fleece lined leather flying suits, boots and the parachute harness, then we went to briefing in the old stable. The briefing room was crowded with everyone else in flight gear. We all took seats on the metal racks. These metal racks were used to protect the metal Finns on bombs, but they made a strong seat. After sitting down we noticed one wall with a large pull curtain on it. Just then two officers came into the front of the room, one of the officers pulled the curtain back revealing a large map of Southern Europe and the Balkan Countries. On the map was a red yarn reaching from our base here at Cerignola up across Italy to the initial point "I.P." then to the target, the yarn reached back to our field, but on the way back, the yarn ran more in a straight line.

One officer said our target today was a railroad bridge, but very important to the Germans, it being the main route by rail for ammunitions, troops and supplies in and around Anzio and Rome. He went on to say the bridge was ringed with German 88 millimeter flak guns and that we were in range of German fighters. Also we were to watch for troop movement from truck convoys and report anything unusual on the ground. Another officer talked some about the weather we may run into, type of clouds and etc. Then went on to tell us to check our equipment, flight gear, about how to tighten our parachute harness in case we had to bail out.

After briefing our next stop was supply where we picked up our parachute and Mae West. First thing you were supposed to do was check the little co-2 bottles in the Mae West. They were full of compressed air that inflated the Mae West when you pulled a lever on each side of it puncturing the end of the little bottle. The parachute was the chest type with a heavy snap ring on each side of the chute. Our parachute harness had two heavy D-rings, one on each side of our chest to take the snaps on the chute. In emergency you could pick the parachute up and hook the snaps to the D-ring very quickly. I could still hear the officers words at briefing saying, always carry your two dog tags around your neck and never carry any material on you, the enemy could use to their advantage, letters, orders, etc. At the end of everyone's briefings, everyone was called to attention, given at-ease, then Chaplain Thomas Hepner asked God to guide us in our days work and deliver us safely back to our home base.

Our Co-Pilot Lt. Johnson was responsible for securing the little escape packets from group then collecting them and turning them back in after a mission. This kit we were told contained several articles we would find very necessary in the event we ever bailed out in enemy territory. There was a large scarf that had a map of all the territory we flew over, a little compass and a wallet with 48 United States one dollar bills. The money was to help us evade capture and work our way back through enemy lines. This packet was sealed and supposed to be water tight. The briefing officer then told us to be very careful shooting at fighters, they wanted the enemy shot down, but some trigger happy gunners had chewed up some of our P-51 fighter planes mistaking them for M. E. 109 German planes. That's why the P-51 pilots coming near the bombers would give a half roll to show us their wings and big air scoop. At the

end of a mission Lt. Johnson collected the escape kits and turned them back in to Group.

We were issued a round plastic flat box that would go into our pocket containing fishing line, sulfa powder, large bandage, bandaids, needles, thread, atabrine tablets, and morphine capsules. This pack we carried with us every mission and kept with us. The flak suits and metal helmets we wore in combat were always left in the airplane, the flak suits weighted 38 pounds.

A 6 x 6 truck took us out to the airplane. There was a little auxiliary power unit in the front of the bomb-bay that supplied electric power when the planes engines were not running. Our crew chief and mechanic had been at the airplane hours before preflighting the engines checking instruments and control systems. Maggaic informed us everything looked okay.

The B-24 Bomber was called a lot of things like, packing crate for a B-17, flying box car, flying coffin, but one thing was definitely true, it was very awkward to board with all your flying gear on. You had to squat down, bend over and slide under the open Bomb-Bay doors, stand upright, lift a leg onto the catwalk, then pull yourself up onto the catwalk and crawl up onto the flight deck. The catwalk was only 10 inches wide, with the bomb racks on each side, so it was a tight squeeze to go from the waist of the plane to the flight deck.

The weight had to be distributed in a 24. Barton and the four officers and I shared the flight deck and four men shared the waist on take-off. This being our first mission to fly, we were all nervous. It was basically what they call a milk-run, but all of us knew this was the start of our Aerial Combat, the first of fifty missions.

A man in a jeep with a flag came by where our plane sat waiting with the four engines idling. Robinette moved the plane off the hard stand as the man waved the flag vigorously. We moved onto the outer perimeter road that circled the long runways and got behind a string of 24's. The runways ran east to west, some 24's already were airborne. When our turn came Robinette swung "Big Dogs nine old men" around facing the runway, held the brakes for a few seconds, pushed the four throttles and mixture controls full forward, the plane vibrated and started to move down the runway. Barton called off the air speed, we were bouncing at 120, at 130 when Robinette pulled back on the wheel and called gear up. The ground fell away fast. Robinette then asked for 1/3rd flaps and pulled the booster control back 1/3. We circled the field while gaining altitude then moved toward the rendezvous point. This is where the planes moved into position in the nine plane boxes that make up the four boxes of the Group. Our position was number four of the low box on the left side.

At 8000 feet, all planes spread out, Robinette announced for all gunners to test fire their guns. Two of the turret guns would not fire indicating a problem. The formation closed in, then Robinette asked me to go pull the bomb pins. These are cotter pins in the front and rear of the bombs that keeps a little metal propeller from turning. When the pins are pulled the little propellers will wind off their shafts and that arms the

bombs. The little propellers have to turn eighty revolutions to drop off. When ever a mission is aborted the cotter pins have to go back in to disarm the bombs. It was the bombardiers job to pull the bomb pins, but Steinberg was more chunky than I was and he conned me into doing it, with Robinettes okay. He was afraid he might get stuck out there on the catwalk.

At 12,000 feet the crew went on oxygen. Our position in the box or Squadron was number four in a nine plane box, that meant planes front and back and on each side, that also meant hard flying for Robinette, constantly increasing or reducing throttles to hold distance and watching both wing men. There was one consolation, it was a safer place in an enemy fighter attack.

Lt. Borecki and Robinette were discussing our flight path, Borecki told Robinette not to worry we have a good lead navigator and he will lead us to the target. The success of the mission is up to the group navigator. Then each navigator on each plane follows his map, makes the necessary log entries of time, temperature, compass heading, keeping track of where the group is at all times, and watches for enemy fighters. When the group arrives at the I.P. "Initial Point," a place on the map, navigators easily recognize usually around 18 miles from the target, he tells the pilot what the new compass heading is, he then makes sure the bombardier knows where the target is, from there on its up to the bombardier. With us flying number four position all the time in the nine plane box, our bombardier toggled off the lead plane in our box, plus watching for fighters. Lt. Borecki was prompt about giving landmarks or any information necessary to assist Lt. Robinette on the flight.

The higher we went the colder it became. None of us had electrically heated suits, but had been promised them. Borecki said it was -40 degrees, I was plenty cold standing by this large open window. Paul Cline looked around at me, he was shaking. Borecki told Robinette, should be approaching the I.P. this is 18,000 feet, then Verkamp wanted to know what that white burst was. Someone said we're getting flak. The Bomb-Bay doors opened and a blast of cold air hit Cline and I. Our plane made a sharp right turn along with the group. Barton from the top turret called "fighters at 6:00 high. I looked up and saw P-47 T-bolts (6) six of them, they turned wings up for identification about 3000 feet over us. Now we started getting more flak, some bursts heavy, also we were getting prop wash from the plane in front. Then Steinberg called bombs away. I had my head out trying to see the bomb bursts and if we had blasted the bridge, there were some clouds under us, but I could see bombs exploding very near the bridge. When the bombs dropped, the plane bounced up a few feet, we made a sweeping left turn, following our position in the box everyone closing Bomb-Bay doors, then you could see the town of Cecina below us.

We hadn't lost any Bombers on this first mission. Soon we were down to 10,000 feet and could get the oxygen off. All wanted to talk about our first mission, but Robinette shouted for quiet and asked the two engineers to transfer some gas and check generators. No one had seen any German Fighters on this, our first mission, but everyone had seen flak. Well, we have had our milk-run, now things will get a lot tougher. I always enjoyed the landscape from 10,000 feet. Soon San Giovanni came into view.

We circled wide and then took our turn landing, moving on around to our revetment or hard stand.

A few minutes after we were out of our plane a jeep came around with two officers who grabbed a bottle of Old Overholt and some glasses off the back seat, each of us received a small water glass half full of whiskey. It was very soothing after we had been fired up and on oxygen for several hours. One officer of our crew abstained and never took a drop to my knowledge. Lt. Johnny Johnson was a very faithful Mormon. Of course these shots of booze followed every mission and always an argument over who was to get Lt. Johnsons.

After waiting a few more minutes a 6 x 6 swung by our plane and we loaded our equipment and hopped on for the short ride to Group. Before we went in for debriefing, just outside the stable two red cross girls had a stand set up and served us coffee and donuts. The S-2 officers that interviewed us after the mission asked us about the target, if we destroyed it, how the flak was, if enemy fighters were seen, if any troop movement was seen around the target or anything unusual was seen. When he excused us we turned in the equipment to supply and went to our tent for some sack time.

The weather continued to be wet and cold for the next couple of days, not fit for flying. Then on the 22nd of February, there was an early wake-up for us, the target being a harbor in Yugoslavia called Sibenik not a long mission and pretty routine, bombing harbor installations and German ships in the harbor. Our leaders at group were not happy with our sloppy bomb patterns and the loose formations the group was flying.

The next ten days saw many practice formation missions. It was imperative to have a tight formation, it gave the German fighter pilots second thoughts about jumping a tight formation with much more concentrated fire power from the fifties in the bombers.

Passes could be obtained for Cerignola when you were off duty. You could get laundry done, you could get a few drinks of vino in the bars scattered around and visit the Red Cross for coffee and donuts. Meals were expensive but they could be had for a price.

The next three missions we flew were to bomb roads, towns, all in support of the coming invasion of Anzio, Italy. At least one night for three weeks in a row our sleep was interrupted by lots of yelling and banging after all lights were out. When your tent is burning up around you anyone would get excited. The smoke stack going up through the roof of the tent would gradually get the canvas hot enough to ignite, usually after the fellows had gone to sleep. The unfortunate guys would have to salvage what they could of their stuff and just find an empty tent and move into it. Some mornings the grounds would be covered with snow, then it would quickly disappear. Many days it rained continually with mud everywhere. During the early days of March, Mount Vesuvius was erupting and throwing black ash, then the wind would carry it. It was not good for our airplane engines. This volcano several miles south of us hadn't erupted very recently.

The days we stayed down and it was cold, we stayed in our tents, wrote letters, played cards and kidded everyone, especially Verkamp about his sloppy clothes arrangement. Bob had one big pile of stuff and when he wanted something he just dug for it.

One day we gunners had cleaned and oiled the machine guns. Then I hung around the plane after the others had went back to the squadron area. The line chief was there with Maggaio and his assistant talking about engines on the plane. There was an endless amount of work just to keep a four engine airplane off the red line. These mechanics spent most of their time right at the plane. A plane on red line wasn't supposed to fly.

Oil leaks are one of the problems dealing with radial engines. Usually an oil leak indicates a part of the engine working loose. The old line chief was telling Maggaio one way to check for oil leaks was after running up the engines, take off the top and side pieces of cowling, making sure all switches are off, then pour a bucket of gas down over the hot engine. All the grease and oil smudges dissolves and disappears. That makes an engine inspection much easier, and the engines cleaner to work on.

At the end of every mission when the pilots shut down the engines and before leaving the cock-pit, they were required to list all problems they had with the airplane all during the mission. The crew chief would then take care of the problem and sign off the form.

Of an evening when we were letter writing, everyone used the little V-Mail sheets supplied by the squadron. I mailed out several letters each week. The letters I sent to Mom and Dad I never mentioned flying missions. I wrote about everything but missions, hoping Mom would be fooled that I was on the ground. My Dad and my two sisters knew pretty much what was going on. They paid close attention to the evening news on the radio. On any particular day when a lot of bombers went down, sometimes the number was broadcast and they would discuss it among themselves. Dad would not miss hearing Kaltenborn on the evening news. All the letters were censored by the officers, before leaving the Group, our officer's taking their turn at it. All V-Mail letters we mailed home, we wrote (free) where the stamp should be.

CHAPTER
VI

On March 26th the air war heated up. The target for the 304th wing showed the yarn stretching north over the Italian Alps to a place called Steyr, Austria. It was the Daimler Puch Aircraft Factory turning out many fighter planes for Germany.

The briefings was more involved this time telling us of the number of German fighters that could reach us and about Herman Goerings yellow Nosed M.E. 109's that had very experienced pilots, also about the many flak guns the Germans used to protect an important target like Steyr. Around a hundred radar operated heavy flak guns were estimated. These guns could fire a 20 pound shell 26,300 feet at a rate of 20 a minute.

Our take off time was .0730. We climbed and found our number 4 position in the left lead box of 9 planes, then our group joined with the 455th, 456th and 459th groups that make up the 304th wing and rendezvoused over Giulia at 4000 feet. Then we headed out over the Adriatic, test fired our guns and headed north. I counted four planes that had aborted and headed south for various mechanical problems. Lt. Borecki kept talking to Robinette about the kind of clouds we were running into. He was concerned they were becoming more dense. We had turned up the Udine Valley and were flying at 18,000 feet when all of a sudden the clouds were so dense the Group started breaking up. It was difficult for me to see the plane off our left wing, then our plane was lurching as Robinette fought to hold it steady and see the number one plane in our box. Fright came over me then as it did all the rest when it was eminent that there may be a collision in the air. Robinette was having an awful time of it and began swearing about visibility and prop-wash. Just then it came over Command Radio for Group to abort mission. Wing had started a large right turn to head south. There were bombers going under and over head, some had lost their positions in the boxes. We stayed on the tail of the lead plane and after several minutes some of the bombers took up their positions. There was some talk about the alternate target, now the word came on that the alternate target was also heavy undercast with clouds. Then orders were given to salvo our bombs in the Adriatic. By the time we were down to 12,000 feet Robinette told me to put the pins back in the bombs, so I went out on the catwalk and put the 20 cotter pins back in to unarm the fuses. Our Group along with the others dropped down to 8,000 feet, salvoed our bombs in the Adriatic and probably killed a few fish. Three days later we bombed a marshalling yard in Milan, Italy.

On April 2nd, we had another early wake-up. On arriving at briefing we saw the yarn reaching up to Steyr, Austria. We got the same briefing about all the fighters to expect and were assured the weather was better. None of us had really been battle tested and were apprehensive about this second trip to Steyr. Sergeant Barton had talked me into flying top turret position and being first engineer. Today we were loaded with general purpose 500 pound bombs as before. It was another Wing effort and Colonel James Gunn was leading our Group. From the top turret you had a

splendid view front and rear, as we spread out to test fire guns. The fifty caliber guns on each side of your head was deafening in your ears, but the turret was neat to operate. With a twist of the grip handles you could travel around left and right and also elevate the two guns. This morning the sun light was very bright, in the top turret the green lenses of your goggles was necessary.

The turret sight had an electric ring sight and cross hairs to align up on the fighters. I layed my parachute at my feet, stood up in the turret, then pulled the little seat up under me, that way you were suspended up in the turret. Once again we were over the Udine at around 20,000 feet headed north. I was facing forward or 12:00 at this precise time. Just then the plane on our left wing exploded into a million pieces. I saw a huge fireball and our plane bounced around. I saw lots of pieces falling then, bombs, gas, everything had exploded along with killing ten of our men. Robinette said on the intercom that a bomb had dropped from a B-17 group, three thousand feet above us and that was what took the bomber down. It must have been a freak accident. A few minutes later it came on Command of Groups being hit by enemy fighters. Just then these yellow nosed M.E. 109's started coming through our formation in a head on attack lined up about eight abreast. Bombers started falling out, one exploding just under us, it was hard to line up your sight on these fast moving fighters, one fifty feet from me, I could see the pilot plainly. We stared at each other momentarily, then he was through the formation. One German pilot hit the silk right over us. I could have stitched him easily in the brown parachute. Our bomber was shaking with all ten guns firing, everyone trying to line up a kill. I poured a burst into this one fighter, he went down low at 8:00, a little smoke came out. I swung the turret around looking for more fighters to shoot at. Smitty in the ball turret called they were attacking from under us. These German fighters had plenty of fire power with the six machine guns in the wings. Some had 20 millimeter cannon in the nose that fired through the prop, a direct hit on a bomber could take it down. More bombers from our Group were going down, some on fire, some with props feathered and there was not time to count chutes.

The battle broke off for us, as several P38's charged in, they had dropped their wing tanks and were attacking the German fighters around us. Then they were mixing it up with them. Brave men too, since in a dog fight the P-38 was not an even match for the very maneuverable 109 in a turn or climb.

This morning at briefing the waist gunners were introduced to "Window" or chaff as the British liked to call it. It was nothing more than Christmas tree tinsel made up into packets one inch thick, four inches wide and one foot long packed in cardboard cartons. Many strands of this tinfoil if scattered slowly was meant to jam or confuse the German radar operated flak guns. The radar was supposed to reflect off the window the same as off the bomber wing to give a confused reading. The gunners were instructed to scatter it slowly out the waist windows a few minutes before arriving at the I.P. As our wing approached the I.P., Robinette called the two waist gunners to begin throwing out the window. The flak had started as we turned at the I.P. for the bomb run. Then I saw this German fighter hanging out there at about 1200 yards just at our

altitude. I fired but could see my tracers falling away short of him. He was no doubt calling down our altitude. The flak got more intense. Another bomber started dropping from our Group, he took a flak burst and dropped into a flat spin. Cline came on and said he counted four chutes way below, the bomber still spinning. The centrifugal force would build up and the remaining crew would be unable to walk or crawl to the open hatches and would die in the crash. Steinberg toggled the bombs off the lead bombardier and we made a sweeping right turn to get out of the flak range. Lt. Borecki came on and said he smelled gas, Robinette told me to leave the turret and go check the waist and Bomb-Bay. I grabbed a portable oxygen bottle and started through the Bomb-Bay. The smell of gas was strong, there was a small puddle of gas left of the catwalk, laying in the Bomb-Bay door. I could see a good leak in the inboard fuel tank overhead draining down, it was draining from the puddle overboard. I went back and told Robinette and he gave the order for no smoking. We were still in enemy territory so I returned to the top turret. When we cleared the coast and started down the Adriatic we were down to 12,000 feet, I made another check of the gas leak, it was no worse, but then I saw something else, a piece of flak had indented the ten gallon hydraulic tank so deep I had to pry it off the side of the tank, it was a 1/2 inch square and two inches long. The same piece had ruptured the self sealing gas tank overhead from the same blast of flak. I showed this piece of flak to the guys but wouldn't part with it.

While we were standing down for our plane to be repaired and the holes to be patched in the metal skin, Lt. Clarence Potters crew of our own 739th squadron was hit bad on a raid to Vienna, Austria with our squadron taking the blunt of the attack. I was really upset watching the medics remove the wounded from Lt. Potters plane. It was called Bama Baby and the tail end had took a 20 millimeter exploding shell, tearing up Sgt. Littles lower extremity wounding him severely. My good friend Lou Schwartz had minor wounds besides the right waist gunner John Morally was also wounded and had to be transported to the Bari Hospital along with Sgt. Little. our 739th squadron had suffered, losing five of our bombers.

Later that same night, Lou Schwartz and I sat in their tent and Lou told me reluctantly about that battle. Lou told me they were flying in the high box when this side of the group was hit with German fighters. He explained how Schwartz and Morally both were firing their waist guns at the aggressive fighters. Schwartz heard the exploding 20 millimeter shell that tore up Sgt. Littles tail turret along with his back side and Schwartz said Morally was all over that waist trying to hit fighters and nearly knocked Lou out a window. When Little was hit he fell backward out of the turret and tried to crawl forward. Schwartz looked and Little looked gray. Schwartz saw he was off oxygen and got him hooked up to a waist outlet. The fighters kept coming and Schwartz went back to his waist gun. The condition got serious, the pilot was talking that they all may have to bail out. Schwartz looked at Little and could see no way could he drop out of the camera hitch and open both chutes as Little looked to be unconscious. By this time the German fighters had broken off and they were getting to lower altitude. Schwartz checked Little and his color was better.

Lt. Potter by this time decided with the wounded he had on the plane to attempt a landing at our field. Their radio had been shot out and on approaching the field, Potter shot a red flare signalling an emergency. Once on the ground the ambulance met them and removed the wounded. I watched them drop Little through the camera hatch onto the stretcher, they took him and Morally to Bari field Hospital. Lou had a minor arm wound. They didn't expect Sgt. Little to pull through.

That night Lou and I kept talking about the missions we had to fly. I confessed to him I was afraid I would be killed on a mission and not see home again. Lou was a good Catholic and a strong believer and he talked to me of the faith I must have in God to see me through all this, he made me see I could survive if I had enough faith. He just made it a little easier to go on.

The month of March 1944, we had lost eleven bombers out of our Group. We know April would cost us more in men and planes. The day crews or men were reported missing in action, S-2 took charge of each mans personal effects, tagged the foot locker or B-4 bag with a M.I. A. tag and a letter of sympathy was sent along with his personal effects home to his wife or family.

The days we were not flying and off duty, we could get 12 hour passes. The town Cerignola was five miles from our air base of San Giovanni, a little far to walk, but numerous trucks going to town would always give us a lift. The fields along the way were covered with poppies, numerous green olive trees and a shack here and there. Some fields were planted with wheat that was turning green.

Once in town you soon realized what their people had suffered from German occupation and poverty. The water and sewer lines were not all back in operation. The toilets were on the street with a metal enclosure. Most of the families cooked on a brazier with charcoal.

There was a Red Cross station ran by two pretty Italian girls that served coffee and donuts to the G. I.'s near the square, there were numerous small bars serving wine and some had grapefruit juice with brandy or cognac, none served beer or whiskey. It was a place to meet and talk with British air crews. They made it plain right off that we were over paid and received four times what they were paid each month. They flew two and four engine bombers, the four engine Lancasters. We were more familiar with the Lancasters that were stationed a mile from our field. Theirs were always night missions, British intelligence was highly opposed to daylight bombing. It was strictly forbidden for us to talk to anyone in town or otherwise about missions, targets, our Group, or anything the enemy could use for their benefit.

Evenings when I would hear the British warming up their engines, I would sometimes walk over and watch them taking off on a mission usually around 1900 hours. They would take off at 30 second intervals and hold a half mile interval all during the mission. They carried the 500 pound G.P. bomb or incendiary and sometimes the 1000 pound blockbuster. The incendiaries would cause the fires the following bombers could locate the target by. Each British bomber had a pilot, radio operator, navigator and

gunner. They had to find the target with the compass and figuring the time from point to point and with no cloud cover they could pick up land marks. They bombed from 10,000 to 12,000 feet and didn't have a Norton bombsight like our planes were equipped with. Their mission usually consisted of 12 to 20 bombers. The Germans had good radar and search lights to track them, also night fighter planes with hot pilots to locate and shoot them down. There were many German aces in the night fighter squadrons. The German radar network covered all of Southern and Western Europe, operated from control bases deep underground.

The morning of April 4th was an early wake-up with the usual hassle of six guys trying to find his own battle dress in the dark and get out to chow. When the curtain was pulled back at the briefing we saw the yarn stretched east over Yugoslavia to the Capital city of Romania. The marshalling yards of Bucharest was the target for the 304th wing.

The briefing room was jammed with flight crews. It was very smoky and noisy, everyone with a gripe or something to say about the target that was several hundred miles away and so close to Ploesti. The briefing officer said we could expect enemy fighters and approximately 200 heavy flak guns. Pilots were briefed to conserve fuel as much as possible on this long mission. Chaplain Thomas Hepner said a lengthy prayer for our safe return.

Our position was No. 4 in the high box, I was flying waist position, we headed on a northeast course across the Adriatic after forming into position. Flying over the mountains of Yugoslavia, I enjoyed the mountain scenery, lots of tiny villages on the mountain sides, small roads winding up the mountains.

Five bombers aborted the mission as we went along. We were on oxygen and getting colder the higher we climbed. Out over the plains of Romania, we watched for fighters, we were well within their range now. Verkamp came on the intercom and said, "fighter at 12:00 high." Those words always brought you out of any daydreams you might be having. M.E. 109's were hitting the 455th Group leading our wing. Barten in the top turret called out, more fighters, then someone else said, they are ours. P-47's were taking on the 109's and got a real battle going off to our right. Borecki came on and said 10 minutes to I.P. Robinette called Cline and I to get the chaff ready to throw out. Far to the northeast there was lots of black smoke rising up thousands of feet, Lt. Borecki said, that's Ploesti and they are either getting bombed or they have the smoke pots going. Cline and I were throwing out chaff, then we turned left at the I.P. for the bomb run. Flak was finding our altitude and was getting intense. Now we were flying through the black bursts. You wonder and hope the flak suit you are wearing will do its job, we were trying also to toss the window at intervals, but you also have the strong urge to toss the whole carton out at once and crawl under your flak suit. The bomb doors come open and you have a five minute silent prayer until you are out the flak. Steinberg called, "bombs away." I was looking out now to see the target and the bomb pattern. In the Marshalling yard, train loads of cars were moving, trying to dodge the bombs. Some bombs were falling way wide, others exploding and throwing cars around and also exploding. Lots of fires with black smoke. The results looked good to me, but the P-38

camera plane would bring back the results.

After our wide turn right, Lt. Borecki called Robinette and said they're on the wrong heading, we're going to far south, Robinette called back and said, we'll see. We flew on and Borecki said, "it's still the wrong heading, we're going to far south." A little later he called Robinette and said, there's Sophia, Bulgaria, we're not authorized to be here, Robinette swore and said, the brass will hear about this. Someone had lead the group to far south off the target coming out of the turn and away from the rest of the three bomb groups.

After a while we were down to 14,000 feet, Robinette called for a fuel check. Barton and I measured the gas in the stand pipes. In order for us to get home, Robinette and Johnson would have to lean out the engines. We had cut power early enough, but some of the planes had used more gas and would have to find an emergency landing field. For some reason after landing there was no shot of Old Overholt and there was some shouting back and forth at the briefing.

Robinette and Borecki told the S-2 officer we were off target and way off course on return. They said the photos would show a lot of bombs had missed. I told the officer what I saw over the target.

The next day we stood down, so Verkamp, Smitty and I decided we would go into town for some decent food. All of us agreed we were tired of C-Rations. On asking around for a home cooked meal we were directed to this Italian family on Via Roma. They were friendly people, the lady said she would cook us spaghetti and bake a cake if we would supply money for the ingredients. The father and son showed us their cabinet shop where the principal item they turned out was coffins. There was no time for other wood products and no orders, but coffins, they couldn't make them fast enough, so many people were dying of disease and malnutrition in town.

This family had two little girls with long names, age about 10 and 12 years old. Also they had a daughter aged 15, her name was Rosa. Rosa was a flirt but not real pretty. She wore a black dress, no shoes or socks, had stringy hair, could not speak a word of English, but had a great smile.

All of us used our little Italian English speaking dictionary to converse with the Italians. I will say the meal was different, the spaghetti was brown, made with dark wheat flour and the bread was dark brown and coarse, no butter, but plenty of burgundy wine served to wash everything down. The spaghetti sauce tasted good but had some kind of chunks of meat in it. Bob Verkamp spoke up and said we're probably eating dog or cat meat. We just about all lost it then. The cake was plain vanilla, but tasty. The lady also served us anisette after the cake and was pleased with the Molta Lira she received from us.

April 7th our group went to Northern Italy, our target was the Stazione Nupis Marshalling Yard at Bologna. Bologna was the supply center for much of the German war material needed in Northern Italy and Southern France. They told us we were in range of German fighters and the yard was ringed with flak guns.

Our airplane was a fine flying machine but the designers hadn't considered the crew comfort. They had left out one important item, and that was the toilet where a crew member would relieve himself. None of us were exempt from a touch of diarrhea on occasion. There were always stories going through the squadron of this problem and the solutions. One story that got a laugh was this one crew member had diarrhea bad and used a brown paper bag, then after using it had let it fly out the waist window. Of course it had hit the windshield of the plane following, making it difficult for that pilot to see and hold his position. I know of nothing that will upset a pilot more than that to happen to him.

All crewmen have had to at times endure the pain of no available bathroom. Besides with all the flying equipment on and the temperature around minus fifty degrees, you had to put it off. Then the urge either went away or it was too late. Our airplane did boast a relief tube located in the back of the Bomb-Bay where a man could empty his bladder, but at altitude it immediately froze up and there you stood with a hand full of pee. I was one that could stretch it nine hours without going to the bathroom.

This day Bologna was partly undercast, some of the yards visible. Flak was light and we saw no fighter planes. Aerial photos showed we had not destroyed all the Marshalling Yard. We enlisted men all agreed we could stand more missions like this one.

April 9th, 1944 was Easter Sunday. Everyone not flying cleaned up and attended Easter Service at our open air church. It was a large tent with sides rolled up, the seats were metal bomb fin covers that had come from the dump. Chaplain Thomas Hepner preached a good Sermon to all faiths. They had a portable organ and we sang two Hymns. The Communion was served to any who desired it. We even received a Sunday bulletin of the Easter Service. Sunday evening Lt. Robinette came to our tent and told us we were to fall out in Class A uniforms for a review at .0900 Monday. It was funny all of us trying to find ties, shoe polish, clean uniforms and to look as presentable as possible.

Our crew an many other crews of the 454th bomb group received the Air Metal, presented or pinned on by our Wing Commander Brigadier General Fay R. Upthegrove. The Air Metal was presented to all crew members who had flown five or more combat missions.

CHAPTER
VII

On April 12th the target for the 454th B.G. was Bad Voslau, Austria. The aircraft factories at Bad Voslau turned out the Messerschmidt 109 and the 210, both used as fighters. At this time the M. E. 109 was Germany's fastest fighter besides having lots of fire power, and an equal for any fighter the Allies had in the air. The M.E. 210 was fast for a twin engine and could pack 20 millimeter cannon, rockets and even bombs that were dropped on allied bombers from overhead.

This mission was to be a wing effort and the briefing officer stated we would have very heavy opposition on this one. Paul Cline and I decided we may need extra ammunition, so we took two extra cans each of 500 rounds for each waist gun. Our group formed into four boxes with a tight formation after test firing guns and going on oxygen. The sun was bright going up the Adriatic, all the bombers began making vapor trails on hitting higher altitude.

Starting over the Italian Alps there was some German chatter on the U.H.F. radio. They were getting their reception ready for us. Lt. Borecki just mentioned a half hour to the I.P. and Smitty yelled out, fighters at 6:00! Just then there was all kinds of yelling from bombers up ahead of us, all about German fighters. Then we saw them in the head on attack 10 abreast charging through our formation, they would go out a thousand yards then come diving in from any point on the clock. All the fifties on our plane were firing. Their fighters were trying desperately to break up the bomber formation. I saw this one at 9:00 swing into half circle, line up on us and come in. I could see the flashes on his wings then the brighter flashes that looked like 20 millimeters coming at us. I held on him maybe eight seconds before he dropped his nose and rolled over, smoke was coming from the back of the engine cowling. Lt. Borecki yelled I had got him, right then another was closing fast at 8:00, I held on him pouring lead into his fuselage. He dropped away fast out of my line of vision. Right then my machine gun jammed, I raised the top plate and checked the belt, the jam was down in the chamber. The only way was to pull my gloves and dig the empty casing out. The temperature was -50 degrees, my fingers were numb immediately. The casing finally came out with help of a flat screw driver. I fed the belt back in the track and got the gun going again. I looked over at Cline, he pointed that he was starting on the extra ammunition. I couldn't get my fingers to move. All the gunners were yelling, Barton had a gun jammed, Smitty yelled, he had scored, no one could understand Vargas, when he was excited, he always broke into Spanish. Verkamp came on and said something broke his plexiglas and his turret was jammed. I beat my fingers till they would move. Robinette was screaming at Vargas to talk English. We started our turn at the I.P. and Robinette called for Cline and I to start throwing the chaff out as more enemy fighters were diving past us. Cline and I were trying to shoot and still throw out some chaff. When the flak got heavy, the fighters broke off their attack.

All this time Cline and I had been fighting without flak suits on, I mentioned it to Paul and we helped each other get them on. Flak was intense, there was a constant thump causing the plane to shake and vibrate. One plane was hit in the box to our left. Flak had got both starboard engines, it started turning over on its back going down. All I could see was three chutes. When the bombs dropped the group made a right turn to the south.

Robinette called for battle damage and report, Barton couldn't get his gun unjammed, Verkamp couldn't move his turret around so he could get out of it, I reported frozen fingers. Nobody had been hit but you could see a lot of daylight out through our airplane.

About five minutes after bombs away, the fighters hit us again. Verkamp yelled he was getting hit with empty shell casings and couldn't track the fighters. Robinette told him T.S. the shell casings were coming from the plane in front and above. Cline and I kept shooting when a fighter got in our range. Vargas yelled again about fighters at 6:00. They were after the stragglers of our formation. Robinette told Johnson, Group better cut down their air speed for the stragglers. For fifty miles south of the target fighters were making passes at the formation trying to knock the stragglers down or cripple them so they would have to drop out of formation. It was our close formation and concentrated fire power that saved us this day.

My fingers throbbed constantly all the way back to base. Verkamp had to stay put in the nose turret until after landing, then they sprung him. As easy as Verkamp took all this, you would have thought he landed every day in the nose turret. Lt. Borecki insisted at briefing that I had shot down two fighters but for some reason I wouldn't fill out the form to claim them. Any gunner shooting down five enemy aircraft was officially claimed an ace. When we got out of the plane at our hard stand, our crew chief Maggalo couldn't believe the flak holes we had collected. The plane looked like a sieve and he would have extra work to patch the many holes. At least Maggalo had a plane to work on, some of the crew chiefs were standing by their empty hard stands still looking up at the sky wondering about the fate of their planes.

On the Bad Voslau mission our Group had lost two bombers and had 18 damaged ours being one of the damaged. The bomb strike photos showed extensive damage to the factories and 30 enemy aircraft destroyed on the ground. One strike photo was endorsed by Major General Nathan Twining, Commanding General of the 15th Air Force, for this mission. Our Group received the Distinguished Unit Citation.

This day the Germans had thrown over seventy of Herman Goering's superior pilots at us and we had overcome them to knock out a prize target.

As far as claiming enemy kills, it was something very personal with me and God. I would always try to shoot a plane down that was forcing an attack. I also knew the average life of a pilot or gunner was short, I wanted to survive the war. How could I accept God's gift of life on one hand and claim the death of a German Pilot on the other.

All of us were tired from the previous days mission, but on April 13th the flashlight hit us in the face for another early wake up. At briefing the yarn stretched north up the Adriatic and east to the Capital City of Hungary, which was Budapest on the Danube river. The target for some Groups was the Budapest Duna Aircraft factories, our wing was to bomb the Budapest Rokol Air Drome. Our plane was loaded with 100 pound incendiaries that were in clusters, these clusters separated on the way down. Some bombers were carrying the 500 pound general purpose bombs to blast the machine sheds and runways.

We were briefed that flak would be moderate to heavy and of the amount of German fighters in the area. Cline and I loaded the extra ammunition and boxes of window on arriving at the plane. He also had checked out a K-20 camera from supply when we had picked up our parachutes and Mae Wests.

We moved around the outer perimeter and lined up on the runway to take off. As we sat there waiting our turn to go down the runway, the plane in front of us had cleared about fifty feet in the air when it exploded into a million pieces. Lt. Robinette got the green light from the tower and pushed the four throttles and booster handles clear forward. The air speed was 130 when we lifted off and made our circle over the wreckage. Paul was snapping pictures with the K-20 of the wreckage, then he switched to the plane behind us that had just cleared the runway. It was no more than 50 feet in the air when it blew apart. All of us were stunned and sick to see twenty men die like that. We found out later after the mission, Paul had not checked the camera and there was no film in it. We moved away from the field and up to where our group was formed into the boxes. Rendezvousing several groups took planning. Every plane of each group had to be in the correct spot at a certain time, there would be no waiting for late arrivals.

I pulled the many pins in the small bombs, we test tired our guns, then we went on oxygen. There was no chatter on the intercom today. All of us a little sick over what we had witnessed on take-off.

I would always call out any planes aborting, some would have feathered props on an engine. If the pilot didn't feather a prop when the engine was dead, the propeller would windmill and keep turning, it could eventually shake the plane apart. When the propeller was feathered, a hydraulic pump in the hub turned the prop blades edgewise to the slip stream and that way there was little resistance.

We were to bomb at 21,500 feet and attain it before reaching I.P. Ten minutes before reaching I.P. a squadron of P-47 Thunderbolts moved across us from above, turned up their wings for our identification. We always got some relief seeing our little friends. The P-47 had lots of speed but also burned fuel fast and had a limited range. We turned at the I.P. and started down the bomb run. The Danube was a small ribbon below, I could make out several bridges that spanned the river at Budapest. We also watched a dogfight off in the distance. The flak was now finding our altitude, it was shaking us with the close bursts. We were passing over the city to the south where the large Airdrome was located, bomb doors

came open and we could see the target, it was spread out, rows of planes, some trying to get off even while bombs were exploding around them. Steinberg toggled off the lead plane in our box, I tried to watch them hit, then the rows of planes on the ground were exploding, many burning, then I could see a large building on the edge of the field blowing up. One bomber in our box exploded from a direct hit, no one got out. The red flak started bursting signaling the German fighters to attack. Verkamp called out "another bomber going down in the lead box." Sgt. Vargas in the tail turret yelled "fighters," he would never give the position or number. Three fighters came in from each side of our Group, firing cannon and machine guns, they met a lot of return fire and peeled off and left. No casualties from this pass. Aerial photos showed one heavily damaged aircraft factory from the group bombing. We destroyed many planes and buildings.

We were beginning to see more P-51 Mustangs as escorts. With their drop tanks, they had a much longer range than the T-Bolts and could turn in a tighter circle staying with the German fighters in a dogfight.

A couple of days later, we were laying around in our tent taking it easy, Group was standing down because of heavy weather. Occasionally some little Italian kids would ride their bicycle out to the base and try to sell us oranges, pecans or a bottle of wine. We usually bought the oranges since they were good and sweet and we tried to keep a supply on hand. The kids were grubby little urchins in long coats and caps. Smitty began kidding me about this one being a girl and he said she made eyes at me. No way did she or he look like a girl but Smitty kept kidding me, so I was trying to pull the kid into our tent to find out the gender. Just then our Company Commander drove by in a jeep and saw me pulling this kid, he made a circle with his jeep and right back to our tent. He ignored my explanation and told me to be in his office in ten minutes, which I was. He read me out about harboring Italians on the base, then he went on to talk about the Bombers exploding and the strong suspicion of sabotage. He brought out a lot of things I hadn't realized and said the base was closed to Italians.

The next day our crew didn't fly, but our Group did and we heard the two explosions from our tent of two more bombers blowing up on the take-off. A little while later two officers from our group came by with rubber bags asking us to volunteer to pick up parts of bodies that had been blown all over the end of the take-off area by the explosions. I refused and took a long walk alone over the Italian hills. All I thought about was that our plane could be next to blow up.

The next morning on not flying, I went into town to get some laundry and a bath at the public showers. Italian women did the laundry, pressed the uniforms and did any mending needed for just a few lira. Later in the day when I got back, I was told Group had discovered the two men responsible for the blowing up of the airplanes. They were maintenance men who had access to the flight line. These men were being paid \$10,000 dollars each to place little pencil sized bombs on the underside of the wing in the wheel well, so when the wheels were raised up on take-off the tire set the little bomb off exploding gas tanks, bombs and ammunition, blowing the plane and men to bits. The Germans had managed to bribe these

men somehow. This little devise being so small was hard to detect in the normal visual inspection. I understand the two men had their trial and their execution the same day. Every man that flew in our group gave thanks that it was over.

April 20th, our group bombed a supply depot at Malfoncone in Northern Italy where Germans were building up their supplies for the Anzio invasion, a milk run.

April 23rd, was another early wake-up for us. Mess was serving fried spam and powdered eggs, we six enlisted men ate together. At briefing we all gathered waiting until the big curtain was pulled to show our target for today. When the briefing officer finally pulled it, the yarn stretched up to Bad Voslau for the second time. He didn't have to say a word, we knew what awaited us up there. He said aerial photos showed some factories still producing and many new planes lined up to be flown out to German airfields. We were supposed to finish the job this mission. We made the trip to supply for parachutes and Mae Wests, then when the pilots came out of briefing, Lt. Johnson passed the little escape kits to each of us.

At the airplane, Barton and I along with Maggalo the crew chief made a good visual inspection of the plane, Maggalo pointing out recent repairs and defects. The engines were throwing some oil, but they all four checked out good for Mag, drop and R.P.M. The recent sabotage had alerted all of us not to overlook a thing.

Lt. Colonel James Gunn was to lead the group of 44 bombers, we would fly No. 4 position in the lead box. When Group was forming together and starting up the Adriatic, it was something to look down at the scores of little sail boats and ships out for pleasure and fun off the Bari Coast. It made you wonder if they knew there was a war on. After all planes test fired guns and went on oxygen the bombers moved into a tight formation. The better bunched up we were the more fire power we had on enemy fighters. When German pilots saw groups bunched in tight formation, they thought twice about attacking that particular group.

There were times on the way to a target when you had some time to think of your life, the folks back home, what they were doing, how long you were going to live, lots of things went through your mind. I could usually picture Mom and Dad back home in Deersville on a farm, keeping busy. They were having their problems with shortages of stuff, gas rationing. Dad trying to work at carpenter jobs where ever he could get work, mom cooking Sunday dinner and tending to her animals. I also thought about the rest of the family and what they were doing. I knew Jim was in the far East some place in the Infantry. I wrote to my brother-in-law Carl Poulson in Italy, we were trying to plan a visit but he kept moving north in his tank battalion with the fifth army. Brother Russ had not yet been called to service and was helping turn out Curtiss Hell Divers for the Navy at Curtiss Wright in Columbus, Ohio.

A squadron of P-51's moved over us still carrying their drop tanks, these two wing tanks gave them 500 gallon more gas. They were to give us fighter cover in the target area. They would have a limited time at the

target before getting low on fuel and having to head for home.

Robinette was growling about this flak suit he always hung on his left side on some of the planes fittings next to his seat to protect his lower body when the flak was bursting around the plane. It kept falling down, wouldn't stay where he wanted it to. Lt. Johnson had never felt he needed to hang a flak suit on his right side for protection. Lt. Johnson was a man who had tremendous faith in God and felt he was to be spared. But on this mission, an inner voice was prompting him to do something and after the third prompting, Lt. Johnson reached down picked up a spare flak suit lying on the floor and hung it on some hydraulic lines on his right side. This act could have saved his life because over the target a chunk of flak ripped through the plane tearing up hydraulic lines by his seat and came to rest in the hung flak suit. Johnson never knew this until after we landed and Borecki showed him the hole it made and the piece of flak layed at his feet.

When the bombs let go, I tried to watch, they disappear from view then a few seconds later you see the flashes on the airfield. Planes right in a row are exploding where they are parked. Barton yelled that flak had knocked a hole in his plexiglas turret dome, then he yelled fighters at 3:00. The fighters turned into us with cannon flashes, all gunners are shooting. One fighter explodes, the others went under the group and gave up the attack. The group rallies South in the big turn. Barton comes on yelling he's getting a lot of cold air with the hole in his turret. Robinette advises Barton to bear with the cold until we were out of the fighter area.

Aerial photos showed that this time we destroyed one Messersmitt factory and many new planes on the ground. Our losses were two of our bombers destroyed and ten damaged.

For the next few days we weren't scheduled to fly, so we layed around, wrote letters, all of us arguing with Bob Verkamp to write a letter to his mother, but we could not get him to write. Then one of the guys said he had laundry to pick up, so all of us went into town, took our Musette bags with us and stopped by the public showers where lots of the fly boys including our officers enjoyed a hot shower. This shower cost a few Lira, but that helped pay for the new water heater and maintenance of the building.

At this time we started receiving our allotment of beer from squadron orderly room. We received two bottles of beer a week, also two packs of Marvel Cigarettes and two candy bars, the beer was warm but better than none.

On April 28th the target for our group was the Port of San Steffano in Northern Italy. A major supply Port for the Germans. We carried ten 500 pound bombs. We had some flak over the target but no fighters. The German ships near the Harbor tried to evade the bombs dropping from our group. We were after the Munition, tanks and heavy guns stacked on the decks soon to be moved to the front. I could see the bomb bursts from my waist window at 18,000 feet, but wasn't sure of the extent of damage to the dock. On the way home we listened to the allied broadcast. The

flight time was five hours and 20 minutes.

On April 30th, the Milan Marshalling yard was our target. It was an early wake-up and briefing. The city of Milan, Italy was near the Swiss border and within range of German fighters. It was ringed with some forty flak guns. We were to bomb at 19,500 feet. Lt. Bill Hughs was flying group lead this morning. The sky was overcast this morning but at briefing they predicted the target to be clear.

We flew up the Adriatic within sight of the Italian coast, then turned west up the Po Valley. This part of Mountainous Italy was beautiful but occupied by the Germans. There wasn't much talk on interphone, all the guys admiring the scenery and watching for fighters. Ten minutes before reaching the I.P. six of our own P-51's moved up beside the Group formation, did a wing over for identification, then moved to a higher altitude to give us protective cover. It was 20 miles from the I.P. to the target and Robinette began growling about the rough air over these mountains and valleys. Cline and I tossed out the window, a package every few seconds, the bomb doors came open. Flak was light to moderate on the bomb run. Steinberg toggled off the lead ship and I tried to watch for results. The Milan Marshalling yard was big. There was some bombs exploding in close, one train working to get out of the yard seemed to fall off the track.

Right off the target, Steinberg called Robinette about one light still being on, indicating there was a bomb that hadn't dropped. Robinette called me to take a look. I went into the bomb-bay and saw one hanging, then went back to the waist, hooked up to a portable oxygen bottle and went back on to the cat-walk. I looked around and could see lots of Italian Countryside three miles below, also I remembered my parachute thirty feet away back in the waist. I stood on the cat-walk, one hand holding the portable oxygen bottle, a screw driver in the other trying to spring the latches. Steinberg was trying to tell me in sign language from the flight deck what to push or pry on. When I found the right trigger on the latch the bomb fell away. Normally these latches worked electrically, to release the bombs. I crawled back to my station in the waist. The little oxygen bottle had run dry, Cline saw my situation, grabbed my mask hose, plugged me in and turned it on full oxygen. The rest of the flight was uneventful. Down on the ground the guys kidded me about aiming at a prime target with that bomb we released. The strike photos showed we had did considerable damage to the Milan Freight Yards.

On May 2nd, our target was a railroad bridge at Faenze, Italy north of San Marino, considered by most of us as a Milk-Run. No loses or casualties, besides destroying the bridge.

CHAPTER
VIII

Living in a pyramidal tent with five other guys wasn't too bad, but it could get a little crowded. We slept on canvas fold up cots, now we had a mattress cover with no mattress. Someone had spotted a straw stack and one night we took advantage and filled our mattress covers with the straw then we had two blankets and a comforter to help us stay warm.

The half drum stove in the middle of the tent took up some space, but it was necessary. There were two cots to each side and room for our B-4 bag at the foot of our cot. Our barrack bags and extras, we stored underneath our cot. If we used our stove in the evening, then at bed time we shut the gas off on the outside, checked the smoke pipe going out through the top of the tent that it wasn't too hot before going to bed.

The problems with some of the tent occupants along tent row was they would forget to shut the gas off or they would allow the smoke pipe to get to hot. This would ignite any canvas touching it. There was one time we weren't scheduled to fly, all the other guys were off somewhere so I being alone decided to heat some water for a mini bath and shave. I filled my metal helmet out of the gerry can of water we kept by the door to heat on the stove. I made my paper lighter on the long wire, went outside and turned the gas on a little bit, came back in. lit my igniter, stuck it back in the stove where the gas was seeping into the can of rocks. The fire and smoke belched back through the opening of the stove clear out through the tent door. I was lucky I hadn't lost an arm on a trick that stupid. To light this stove was definitely a two man job.

During the cold weather we wore long johns under our flight overalls. If we went into town we wore a class A uniform. When the weather turned warm, our dress was khaki pants and shirts.

Living so close the way we were, someone was usually picked on about something. Verkamp was always kidded about his wardrobe, socks, underwear, flight clothing, class A's all in a big pile at the foot of his bed. When he was kidded about it, he would grin, wiggle his mustache and laugh. All the time in Italy to my knowledge, he never wrote a letter home. Our officers would even get on him about it. Vargas took a little kidding too. He could talk a mile a minute in Spanish especially if he got mad or excited.

Smitty was an easy going person, never complained, always ready to pull his weight. Paul our radio man was a thinker, and once we began

flying missions, he sort of secluded himself, went into a shell but at times when he felt like talking you could tell Paul was more educated or experienced on a lot of things than the rest of us. He could discuss advertising, public relations, things I knew nothing about. You might say he was the brain of us six.

A few times when the old line chief or a couple of crew chiefs would drop in, we had a good poker game. I was usually cleaned out in a hurry. Paul was a decent poker player too. Harry Barton was a good sport. Sometimes he could get rowdy. To my knowledge, he was a mill worker near Pittsburgh Pennsylvania. There were lots of laughs over the months we were together.

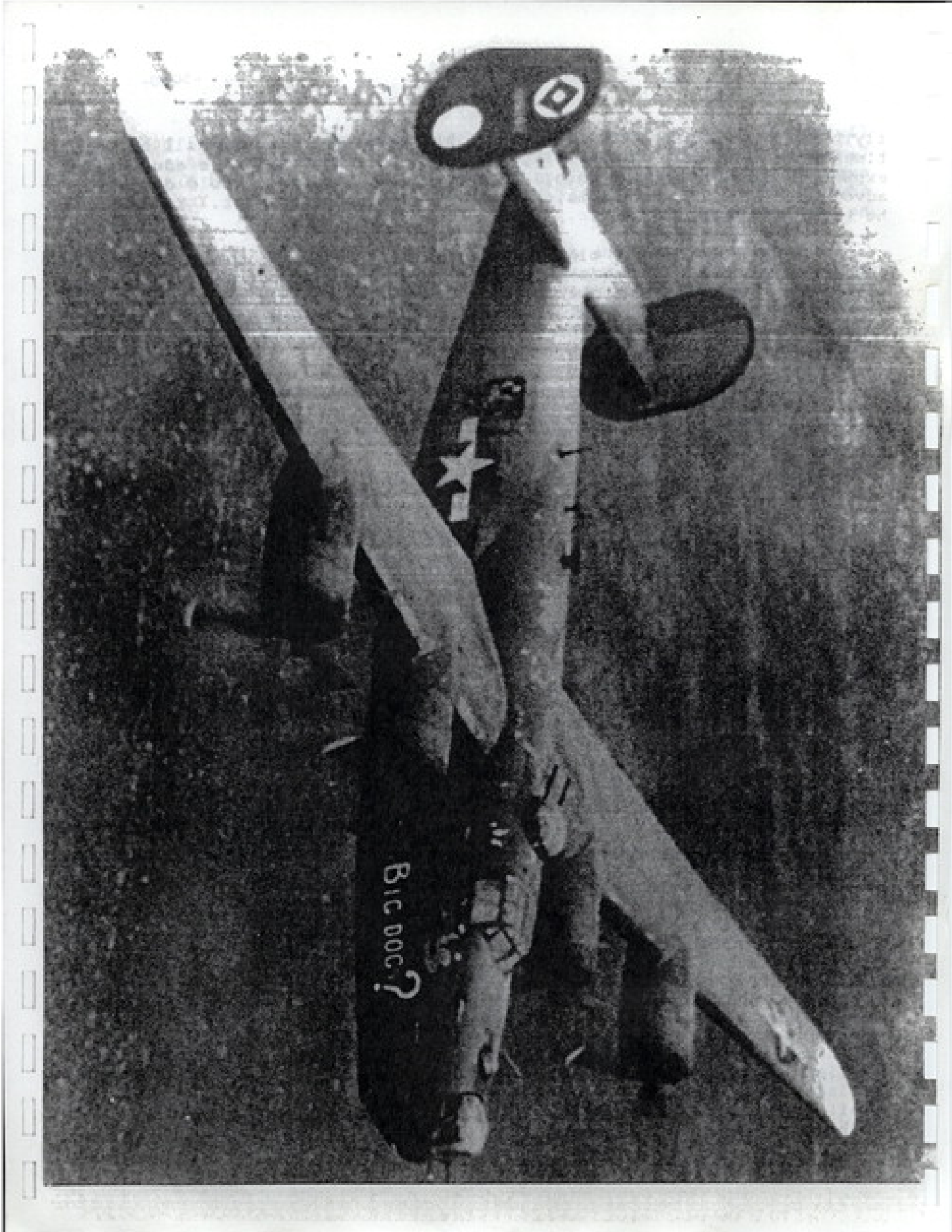
As the missions continued, it wasn't a game anymore. We were losing crews with men we buddied with, ate with, knew well, then the next day they were gone, M.I.A.. their tent would be cleaned out like they hadn't existed.

Fear was beginning to get inside all of us. Some could bear it and not let it show and some tried to cover the fear with other emotions.

During the months of March and April, our Group along with many other groups of the Fifteenth Air Force had been given targets like primary roads, bridges, loading docks, and Marshalling yards where the Germans moved and stored their war material. Also several Aircraft factories that produced their fighter planes, engines, assembly plants, bearing factories and Air Dromes where the fighters were tested then dispersed to where they were needed. The greatest priority now was the oil and gasoline producing refineries over many of the Balcan countries, the oil storage facilities and Marshalling yards that stored this oil and gasoline then loaded it into trains that would transport it to all the German fronts. Ploesti in Romania with its many refineries had massive tonnage and was to be a primary target for the Fifteenth for weeks to come.

On May 5th after an early wake-up and outdoor breakfast, it was still dark but we could hear Pratt and Whitneys being tested and run up all over the flight line. This told us there was a maximum effort in store for us.

At briefing the one officer jumped up on the stage in front of us and said in a loud voice, your target for today is, and he pulled the curtain back to reveal the yarn reaching up the Adriatic and East over Yugoslavia to Ploesti, Romania. It was to be a maximum effort, not only our wings of four groups, but four other wings making up 21 bomb groups to assault Ploesti and surrounding targets. The 49 wing and 51 were to bomb Marshalling yards. The S-2 officer described the lay-out of the nineteen square miles of Refineries and described the 600 to 700 flak guns ringing the complex and brought to our attention the possible 150 to 175 German fighters we could expect. He also mentioned the smoke pots ringing the huge complex. Then he went into detail about, if we were shot down, or had to bail out, that the Partisan Organizations we might connect up with, especially working our way back through Yugoslavia. He said Titos Partisans had gotten many flyers back to allied territory. After the long briefing, Chaplain Thomas Hepner offered a long prayer for men of all faiths, asking for the will of God to guide us in our work today and bring



us safely home.

Back at the Bomber we loaded the cartons of window and extra ammunition. Our group was putting up thirty six bombers, all loaded with 500 pound general purpose bombs. While waiting for the checkered flag that moved us off the hard stand, Sgt. Barton talked me into flying his position with his flight deck duties. I wasn't overjoyed to switch but did. Robinette lined us up just outside the plane and asked us if we had all our equipment and if it was okay. Once in the air and in our Group formation it seemed everywhere you looked you could see B-24's.

Our group took its position with the 304th wing and headed north. We held our usual position No. 4 spot in the high box. Off our right wing I could see McAllister's plane, there was Sgt. Johnny Nordstrom checking out his top turret. I waved to Sgt. Marshall Good in the left waist window. All planes moved away from one another until each gunner shot a short burst, then the Group formed a tight formation and climbed for altitude. I worked the top turret around, satisfied it was functioning normal.

There were times I wondered why I had enlisted in the Air Corp. I thought some branches of Service wouldn't have been as hazardous as this, then I would think of my brother Jim, he was fighting in the hot jungle against the Japanese, with no time limit to remain in combat or in the front lines. Comparing other branches of Service, maybe this wasn't any more dangerous than some, but with our job it was down in black and white, we had to fly fifty missions. After our fifty they had to rotate us home. There was nothing that said we couldn't be assigned another battle zone later, but this was the closest thing to a contract you could get in the service.

Our Group bombing altitude was 21,500 feet. We were going east now over the Mountains of Yugoslavia. I had a splendid view in the top turret, looking front or rear, for 10 miles in either direction I could see bombers and vapor trails. We started hitting an undercast and Lt. Borecki sounded concerned if we would have a clear target. There were Bombers still aborting the mission, some unknown mechanical problem. Robinette cursed and said they are crazy, too many enemy fighters between here and Italy.

We hadn't seen any of our fighter escort, but we were to have a Group of P-51's and some P-38's. Just then I saw planes high over us, possibly a dozen, too far away to identify. I reported them and then they dove down on the lead Group of our wing, they were M.E. 109's. We were too far back to see the damage. Wing had ordered radio silence on this mission. Finally Lt. Borecki called and told Robinette we are five minutes from I.P. Out of twelve large Refineries, our Group was aiming for the Astra, Romania Oil Refinery. We made the turn at the I.P. and the flak was right here. It was thumping our plane and we were flying through the large bursts. I could see all the open Bomb-Bay doors around us. Looking way up ahead, black smoke was boiling up, it looked to be 15,000 feet, someone's bombs had been on target. Our plane was bouncing from close bursts. My palms were damp from gripping the gun handles. Smitty came on and said we lost a plane further back in our box, chutes coming out, they were opening their chutes too soon. Up ahead in the lead box, two more

bombers were dropping out of formation, one had feathered No. 4 engine, but was still going down, no chutes so far. The left wing dropped on the other plane. It started a slow spiral to the left, no signs of chutes from it either. We felt the plane surge up when the bombs let go, then we went into a wide right turn that would get us out of the flak. The one plane that had lost number 4 engine had leveled out, Cline said he counted eight chutes, then it disappeared. We were getting more flak now moving through huge heavy black bursts. As we rallied right, I had a good view of Ploesti. There was smoke and flames shooting way up, black smoke from some Refineries was up to our level, it looked like a caldron of hell down there.

I could also see more crippled B-24's, some with parts of a wing shot away, feathered props still trying to stay with the main formation. Now came the red flak, calling the German fighters to attack. Four minutes from the target Verkamp yelled "fighters at 11:00" and started firing, I was lined up on him and gave some short bursts, but he was a little out of range. He was shooting 20 millimeter shells at us and was not aiming good.

About this time Vargas started yelling his guns were yammed. Lt. Johnson came on the interphone and told Vargas to clear up those guns and get them operating. There had been times on other missions when we were being attacked that Vargas had yelled about his guns being yammed, he was trying to say jammed. What Vargas was doing was leaving too much oil on the sliding bolts on the guns when we cleaned them on the ground, then when he tried to fire them when it was 40 or 50 below zero, the bolts would freeze up and not move backward or forward.

Many of these pilots were Romanian and not as aggressive as the Germans. Barton and Cline, now were calling out 109's that started hitting our group. A bomber to the right of us exploded from a direct hit of 20 millimeter shells, just a ball of fire, no chutes. One fighter out from us at 3:00 turned and headed for us. I lined up on him and gave some long bursts, he came in to 200 yards then dropped under the formation. Cline said he thought he was hit. The rest of the German fighters broke off the attack.

On the long flight home, bomber formations were strung out more, many damaged, engines out, some with only two and three engines operating. Three P-51's came by, slowed down, looked the shot up bombers over, then they waved, moved out and left us. They had to be short on gas themselves. Lt. Robinette called me to check the supply of gas. I did, and told him what we had. He and Lt. Johnson began fine tuning the purring engines, more idle, lean here, decrease pitch, finally on arriving at our field we circled several times to allow planes with wounded and other emergencies to land first. A bomber approaching the field and shooting a red flare had first priority on landing. One plane with no brakes crashed at the end of the one runway, but didn't block it.

This time briefing took longer, everyone had to describe things they had seen at the target, fighter attack, bomb hits and etc. This mission had taken eight hours. All of us were beat. Lots of men wouldn't be with us tonight. They were dead or in a prisoner of war camp. Maybe a few had

escaped capture after bailing out and would be lucky enough to meet up with friendly Partisans. Ten bombers from our Group had went in from flak and fighters today and we knew that Ploesti was rough.

May 7, 1944 our wake-up was at 0500, and after the usual scramble for our flight gear and breakfast we headed for briefing. This morning our target was the Marshalling Yards at Bucharest, Romania, the main assembly point for the train loads of oil pumped out of Ploesti and moved all over Germany. The Marshalling Yards were ringed with flak guns. The Germans used a lot of the 88 millimeter radar operated flak guns, and they also had larger flak guns that could reach 30,000 feet. The officer at briefing described the different guns and their ranges. Some of the larger guns were mounted on railroad flat cars and were mobile. Flak is pieces of steel from the exploding anti aircraft shell and the shell is machined to break into pieces the size of your finger. These pieces have a great force at close range, but our flak suits can protect us from much of the flak that has lost some of its force. The flak suits are little protection and won't save you from bullets from a fighter plane.

The briefing was similar to Ploesti as far as what to expect. The 454th and 455th group had the same target. After the Chaplain asked the blessing we headed out to the airplane. Our Crew Chief, Maggalo, was inspecting the super charger blades on the blowers of our engines. Lots of times these blades cracked from too much heat and had to be changed. He told us the engines were developing full power. We stood around a few minutes as there had been some debate about whether the mission would be scrubbed. If the mission was scrubbed, Group shot a red flare from the tower, something about cloud cover over Romania. Just then the man in the jeep came by, said the mission was on and we climbed aboard.

The rally point was Manfredonia. Going up the Adriatic there were the little sailing ships as usual just like there was no war on. After we went on oxygen and turned east to cross the Dinaric Alps over Yugoslavia, the mountains below us were 2000 to 3000 feet under. If you looked close you could see groups of men moving up or down the mountain trails. I assumed they were Partisans, men dedicated to fighting the Germans who had taken their homeland. Their targets were railroads, bridges, tunnels, electrical substations, and radar bunkers. These men and women were dedicated and brave and was a blessing to many downed fliers. These men and women lived in the mountains.

Then on approaching Romania, the land was more flat, we were flying through some high cloud banks at 20,000 feet. Ten minutes from the I.P. a large aerial dog fight developed north of us. German and American fighter planes swarmed like bees. The American pilots fighting to keep the Nazi fighters from hitting the Bombers. From the I.P. to bomb Bucharest you had a good view of Ploesti. There was a big raid on it today with the huge barrage of flak the bombers were flying through. We got our flak suits on and began tossing out the window every few seconds. The bomb run seemed to last a long time with the intense flak we were flying through. It was constantly thumping the plane. There was a partial undercast,

making it difficult to see the ground. One of the unpainted aluminum bombers in the low box on our left took a flak hit that knocked off part of the tail section making them lose control. The men started jumping out, I counted three out of the camera hatch, then I could see three drop from the bomb-bay. A second later one man jumped out the waist window, chutes started opening, maybe three thousand feet below our formation. The silver Bomber was going down at a steep angle now, then into some clouds. Our plane lifted as the bombs fell away and we rallied right to get away from the flak. Lt. Robinette came on the intercom swearing about his numb fingers. He said, "Take over Johnny." Some of the switches he had to operate were small and very difficult to move with the heavy gloves on, but in no time your hands could freeze at -50 degrees. Robinette had this happen often with the numb fingers.

We were just out of sight of the target when four German Folke Wolfe 190's circled our Group then dived in level at 9:00. Smitty in the ball turret yelled and we both gave them long bursts, and they went under the formation. Just then three P-51's with checkered tails came diving down from above and tangled with the 190's. The fight didn't last long, one German fighter exploded, the others headed for the ground with the P-51's on their tails. The P-51 Mustang was a beautiful machine. It could with its drop wing tanks reach any target on the heavy Bombers list. It was equipped with three machine guns in each wing and I feel the most admired fighter plane by all air crew members. It was a match against any German fighter.

When we saw their red checkered tails, we knew they were the 99 pursuit Squadron that was based just north of us out of Foggia, an all black fighter pilot group highly rated for flying skill and guts to take on the enemy.

We scored well on the Marshalling Yards of Bucharest today, however, the Germans with their forced labor would go all out to put the Yard back in operation very quickly. As we flew more missions, our respect for the German fighter pilots grew. They were so aggressive over all of their cities and targets, besides always developing new weapons to combat our bombers. At briefing we were told of parachute bombs they would drop a few thousand feet over the bomber formation, or one hundred pound bombs they might release from fighters just over us. Also they had rockets mounted under some of the fighter's wings that could take a bomber down from a thousand yards out. You never knew what to expect when they came on the scene.

CHAPTER
IX

May 8th and 9th - Pass to Bari, Italy.

The next few days our crew was to stand down for repairs and engine changes to our airplane. Four of us enlisted men secured 48 hour passes and set out for Bari. We had our Musette bag slung over our shoulder and we bummed a ride on a truck going to Barletta, then we walked clear through the town. The road was high and large trees shaded it. At spots along through the town you could look way out to sea and see ships going north and south on the Adriatic. Another truck took us down the coast to Bari. Verkamp, Smitty, Barton and I were surprised at such a large seaport. All of our supplies for our airbase came from the port of Bari, bombs, gasoline and food. It was the base hospital for all Allied personnel wounded in Italy. The home of the Fifteenth Air Force Headquarters and had the largest Allied Cemetery in Italy.

We found the army barracks where we could stay for free, leave our bags, then we started out to look the town over. First we located the hospital and looked up wounded friends from the 454th. Sergeant Little of Lt. Potter's crew was recovering slowly and would leave for home in a few weeks. Others of our 739th squadron we knew personally, few would be coming back to finish their missions. It was appalling how some men had suffered, losing arms, legs, some with horrible burns on their faces and body. Many had lost hands and fingers from frost bite. It made all of us realize just how lucky so far we have been to escape death or injuries.

It had been a while since we had been in a town of this size, with so much going on. There were shows for the G.I.'s, Opera was one of which we went to, all spoken and sung in Italian, and everywhere we went there were prostitutes. They would hail you on the street. They were in bars, some even had a place on the edge of town in an Olive Orchard. They had half a dozen of these buggies, scattered around through the Olive Orchard and a little Italian girl in every buggy. Looking around you could see some of the buggies shaking like they were about to lift off the ground. All of us thought this was wild. The buggies had side curtains all around it, very similar to the Amish Buggies.

After leaving the Olive Orchard, the four of us went into a bar for a drink. They had quite a variety of wines, so we had our choice. Italy was known as a wine country, but back at Cherignola a lot of the wine they served the military was a poor grade.

Smitty and Barton took some kidding about wanting something stronger than wine. I wanted beer but they had none. Harry was also razzed a little about his walk. He walked reared back and would throw both feet out. Then someone hung this name "Duck Foot" on him, he would just laugh

about it. Someone suggested getting a picture made, so we hunted up a studio and all of us had a picture made to send home. Then someone thought of food and we found a restaurant, you can't go to far wrong ordering spaghetti in Italy. They served good wine, brown bread and very good spaghetti. You always wonder what meat they used in the sauce though. There were vendors on the streets selling a soft ice cream.

We even looked the docks over where so many Allied ships brought supplies in. High overhead large balloons swung back and forth on cables, protection from the dive bombers. Also out in the Harbor sat a large ocean liner with large white crosses on its sides. This ship would take the wounded back to the United States. Hundreds of English service men from all branches of service were strolling the streets of Bari. British Air crews received their R. & R. in Bari at certain hotels I enjoyed talking to them. Many had been in the service five years, some had never gotten a furlough and two that I talked to had been on Dunkirk and barely escaped with their lives. These men could hardly believe we would be sent home after flying fifty missions, they would not be sent home until Hitler surrendered.

In a bar where we were drinking, I struck up a conversation of sorts with a dark eyed, dark haired woman sitting next to me. She could speak English and sounded educated. I didn't recognize her uniform and she told me she was with the Chetniks. I didn't understand and she explained it was a resistance group in Yugoslavia led by Draza Mihailovich. She said this resistance group lived in the mountains, they had radio communications with their leaders and many of their targets were railroad trassels, switches, where they could disrupt German rail travel. She said they had to destroy a target then get away fast to avoid capture. It was very dangerous work and many times some of them paid the price with their lives. She then went on to tell how they would help allied crewmen to survive in the mountains and get worked back through different resistance groups, maybe taking three months before that crewman arrived back in Italy. Bari was one town that resistance men and women of Yugoslavia received their R & R and there were many walking the streets. Some wore uniforms, some didn't. All of us had heard of Tito and his partisans who were fighting the Germans in their own way. Tito later was elected Premier after the war was over.

Much of this she was telling me we had already been briefed at the start of our missions. I asked her to dance and we danced to the German song, Marie Marlene. I felt strange dancing with a woman with a side arm on her hip, but she was nice.

It turned into quite a job for Bob and I to locate Smitty and Barton and convince them that our 48 hour pass was about over. All of us welcomed the diversion.

When we arrived back at San Giovanni, Lt. Robinette came to our tent with an announcement. It seems Group had transferred the remaining crews of the 739th to the 736th Squadron. The 739th was now going to be a Mickey Squadron equipped with special radar bombsights in the planes that supposedly could see the target through the clouds and zero in on it. We six enlisted men went over to the 736th squadron and found us an empty

tent complete with stove and tank, then went back, gathered all our stuff up and moved to the new tent. We gained on the deal since the 736th squadron had a new tufa block mess hall and we could eat in the dry. As hot as it was getting now, the stove could only be used for heating water to shave and clean up.

Some of the days we didn't fly, our pilot and co-pilot and engineer or myself would test-fly planes that had been repaired with new engines or parts of wing or any major change. They didn't scrap airplanes that could in any way be kept flying. I went on one or two of these test rides. A pilot had to be a dare devil to take a B-24 through these valleys at 100 feet like we did. Robinette would laugh when the cows in the pastures would run from the sight and sound of our B-24. All the replacement crews we were getting came in with new B-24J models unpainted. The unpainted planes were supposed to fly ten miles an hour faster. As our missions progressed, more unpainted planes made up the formations.

During this spring and summer, my brother-in-law, Carl Poulson and I wrote back and forth. Carl was with the Fifth Army on farther north in Italy. I would write giving him a date I was coming, then before I could go, I would receive a letter from him saying they were moving closer to the Monte Cassino Valley with their Tank Battalion. He or I didn't know then that a major battle with the German Infantry would be fought there.

The Germans had all the allied Armies stalled where the old Monastery sat looking over the valley. The Germans had heavy guns around the Monastery and for four months held the Allies in check. Later Carl and I talked about this back home in Deersville, Ohio that he and his Tank Battalion stood on the hill across from Monte Cassino and watched our bombers unloading on the Monastery. It was located eighty miles south of Rome, 1500 feet high on a mountain top overlooking two valleys in a V. One valley with the Rapido River rose to the right then formed the Albuzzi Mountains. Along the valley to the left was the Liri with the Liri River. Through this valley was route six that led from Naples to Rome. The town of Cassino was in this V at the foot of the Mountain where Monte Cassino set. The Monastery by now was huge, four stores high, with hundreds of stained glass windows and covered seven acres.

Our 454th Group on March 15, 1944 had bombed the town of Cassino. It was bombed into rubble, but on the 15th of February 1944 American B-17 Bombers from Foggia bombed the Monastery of Monte Cassino doing severe damage.

One quiet night in May, all of us were awakened by distant shell fire. All of tent row fell out to look and listen. The sky way north of us was lit up from the exploding shells. It just lasted a few minutes, but we realized we were watching an air raid. The next day we were told of the Germans air raid on air fields new Foggia and minor damage.

The morning of May 12th was an early wake-up. The target for today was the La Spezia Harbor Installations on the Ligurian sea near Genoa, Italy. It was a large supply port for Germans. The briefing Officer said there could be 30 to 40 flak guns and we would be in range of at least one staffel of German fighters. Our group was to rally over Cerignola, fly

west, then turn north missing Naples and fly north up the coast. The I.P. was just past Carrara, this was mission number 25, the half way point for us. There had been many double missions, like Ploesti, Bad Voslau, Bucharest, this one would count as a single mission. When the American Eighth Air Force in England began bombing German targets and targets in France and Belgium, they were required to fly 25 missions before rotating home. Many of these missions such as Schweinfurt, Regensburg were pretty deadly. The American Eighth Air Force having no American fighter planes that could fly that distance and give cover for the bombers over the target. The Germans protected Schweinfurt with more fighters than most any target because of the ball bearing and roller bearing factories.

The American planners may have thought the Fifteenth Air Force would have all Milk-runs. I doubt who ever decided the mission count had ever been over Ploesti or Stier, Austria. We had to fly fifty missions in order to rotate home.

We came to I.P. from the land side and headed west to the target. We started throwing the window out, right at the I.P. and continued until the bombs had dropped. Bombing at 18,000 feet we could see the ships trying to clear the Harbor and avoid being hit. Flak was moderate to heavy, Steinberg toggled off the lead ship in our box.

In all the moving around, throwing chaff out and looking for fighters, plus looking where the bombs were exploding, I managed to kink my oxygen hose enough that I had Onaxia, which means no oxygen, I had slid down on my butt and was going to sleep. Cline finally looked over, saw my problem, straightened my hose out and turned it on full oxygen. I came to myself and stood up.

We met no enemy fighters on this mission and lost no planes to flak. The picture taking P-38 brought back photos of the target showing much of the German Munitions still intact. Group along with Air Force was disappointed in today's bombing. After briefing, Lt. Robinette showed us a bulletin that Air Force had come out with on the procedure of braking a B-24 with parachutes hooked to the waist guns in the event the plane had lost its brakes. As soon as the plane was on the runway, the waist gunners were to open the chutes at the same time. The chutes would billow out each waist window acting as a brake.

It was 0500 on May 18th when the man with the flashlight woke us up and we fell out for breakfast. The briefing was at 0600 and crowded with men, all with their flight gear hanging on them. The 1830's were screaming down on the flight line, that always signaled a maximum effort. The yarn reached over to Ploesti again. They had pictures of the Redeventa Oil Refinery we were to bomb. It was on the west side of Ploesti and was the target for the whole 304th wing. He went on to tell of the other wings and their targets.

The 454th was to lead the wing with Captain Corwin Grimes flying lead plane of our group. All of our planes were loaded with 500 G.P. bombs, time of take-off was 07:45. We would rendezvous over Manfredonia at 08:35 at 4000 feet. We were putting up 39 aircrafts. I was flying engineer position. I was up in the top hatch watching for the man with the flag,

while Robinette and Johnson were running engines and checking the instruments. Finally it was our turn to go. I closed the top hatch and took my position between Robinette and Johnson. As we gathered speed down the runway, I called off the air speed to Robinette. At 120 she was bouncing trying to fly, at 130 we lifted off. Johnson hit the gear up and we banked to the left, then he brought the flaps up to 30 degrees and Robinette reduced the booster controls back to three quarters or 38 inches of mercury. After leaving Manfredonia, I wiggled up in the turret to check the turret and the guns. We flew up the Adriatic climbing as we went, then turned east just south of Split, Yugoslavia, still climbing to clear the mountains. Robinette was growling, he couldn't get No. 2 engine to smooth out. He had to keep fighting the controls because with our No. 4 position, planes were boxed in around us. The vibration got worse with No. 2. Robinette said to Johnson, we're going to have to shut it down. They closed the throttle and feathered the prop, which put a constant drag on the plane. Now we were south of Belgrade and Robinette said too far to turn back. Robinette called for Steinberg to salvo bombs and for me to transfer some gas to the inboard tanks. With the one engine out, we dropped back to the rear of the box. I returned to my turret, Robinette came on and warned all of us to watch close for fighters since we were becoming a sitting duck, trailing the group.

The pilots had to crank up the other three engines some to carry the load and that meant watching they didn't heat up. Just as Borecki said, there's Pitesti down there below, No. 4 engine began running hot, it was up past the red line. Robinette said we couldn't stay with the group over the target. Just then he decided he had to shut down No. 4. That meant we had two fans out, out of four, over the hottest target on the face of the earth. It was difficult staying with the group now.

We made the turn at the I.P. trailing the group. It was a long 18 miles. Flak was intense at our altitude but no fighters had appeared so far. When we were five miles out from target, Robinette swung our plane out to the left. There were flames and smoke coming up 15,000 feet from those Refineries. It gave us a good view of all the bombing from the planes hitting Ploesti. It was just like we were hung out there on a string at 18,000 feet and very helpless. Just then Vargas and Smitty both yelled at the same time, "Fighter at 3:00." This single H.E. 109 moved up straight out from us around 500 yards, he looked us over good and saw our predicament. Borecki called me to watch him, he flew out there watching us trying to make his mind up for maybe thirty seconds, then he did a wing over and left. I will never forget that half minute. Over the target our bombers were catching hell, the sky was black with smoke and red with the flashes of exploding shells. Bombers were exploding, it was too far for us to count chutes, but we could see some chutes and in the midst of the smoke and flames we could see some chutes burning.

When the groups of the 304th wing cleared the target to rally west, we moved under them. Robinette said we would have to unload some of the weight off the airplane. The guys in the waist threw out extra ammunition and flak suits. The 454th had cut their speed down to 150 after seeing our problem. We were trailing them a quarter a mile back with our two good engines working their hearts out. Finally in desperation, Robinette fired up No. 4 engine. We picked up a little but No. 4 began heating up.

Cline yelled fighters, they closed in on us, did a wing up and we recognized them for P-51's, six of them that had covered our wing over target. They dropped back, but just to wave, then left us.

The pilots nursed the engines along, both of them well over the red line. Finally we could see the Adriatic, what a welcome sight. The bombers with the dead and wounded and shot up landed first. When we came over the field, Robinette brought her straight in, all of us felt like kissing that Italian dirt. We had flew around 1300 miles on two engines, that said a lot for our pilots.

The briefing officer could not get over our surviving out from the target and then getting our plane back home. It took real guts for Robinette to stay with the formation and not to turn back. We may not have made it with so many German fighters around.

Everyone in our squadron knew and liked "Handle Bar" Winkler, he was our supply man in the parachute loft. He had an outstanding mustache, the ends curling up and he kept them waxed. Winkler would answer any questions we had about parachutes and show us exactly how they were packed. Winkler always told me, you pick the chute and I'll jump with it. That made me pretty confident when I grabbed a chute off his bench and took it on a mission. The men that packed these chutes had to make periodic jumps with them.

We didn't expect to fly so soon but our mechanics had worked on the engines all night and had them tuned perfectly. But on the next day after the Floesti mission, we went back to La Spezia to finish the job on the German Harbor. I flew the waist this mission the 19th of May. It was pretty much a repeat of the other La Spezia mission with the 455th Group going along.

Again flak was moderate with some close bursts. The bombs appeared to be closer on the target this time. The mission lasted a little over six hours. When we landed and I picked up my chute, there was a large hole where a hot piece of flak had layed. It may not have saved me if I would have had to use it.

CHAPTER
X

Our Bomber was getting two new engines installed plus other maintenance, so Paul Cline, Smitty and I decided to go to town. We collected passes at the orderly room and caught a ride on a bomb transporter into Cerignola.

Cerignola had a bomb storage dump for all the Groups. They were trucked there, then uncrated, then the bomb transporters carried them to the different groups to be loaded on the airplanes. The bombs came with a metal rack, covering the tail fins. This rack made a good seat and was used everywhere for that purpose. We had them as seats in the theatre, briefing rooms and Chapel. Some bombs came crated in wood crates. Wood was at a premium and didn't last long.

We three stopped at the Red Cross for coffee and donuts, then went to the public showers. Then we checked out the Teatro Mercantile, sometimes it was called Red Cross Music Hall by the G.I.'s. Sometimes the shows were good and other times not so good. This day after a few drinks we picked up our laundry and caught a ride back to our field.

In the early afternoon Paul and I were sitting outside our tent in shorts getting some sun and playing cards. The planes from a mission were returning, flying over the field in the usual pattern. One bomber was higher, around 3000 feet and we began counting chutes coming from it, which wasn't too unusual, often times a pilot will have the crew jump before he attempts a landing with a crippled airplane. Our minds had just gone back to the card game. I looked across at Paul, when I saw the blur, then we heard this loud plop hit the tent next to us about 20 feet away. We ran to the tent and looked inside, here lay an officer dead, with a large hole in the back of his head. Then we heard this crash down at the end of the runway. I ran over to a passing jeep with two officers in it and told them about the dead man. His rip cord had not been pulled. We decided he had jumped from the bomb-bay and had hit the ball turret guns. For nights afterward, I could see that man falling. The crippled Bomber had plowed into the ground at the end of the runway killing the pilot.

The original crews of the 454th B.G. were being thinned out, more by flak than enemy fighters. The more missions each man flew, the more inward he became, keeping to himself. Cline hardly talked now, Barton was shaky, Verkamp and Smitty remained the same. Vargas was serious about a 15 year old Italian girl in Cerignola. He claimed he would marry her. I knew I was more withdrawn. Things in the group were improving, the weather was about perfect, 90 degrees every day, mail was regular and there were movies in the evening.

On the 24th of May, we fell out at 0500 for an early mission, went to briefing at 0600, more new faces all around us. The target was Graz in Southern Austria. There were engine factories and a final assembly plant there, where the Folke Wolfe 190's received their engine and testing. It was a wing operation with the 456 B.G. leading. Take off was at 0750. I was flying left waist position. S-2 had said we could expect 30 to 40

heavy flak guns. All groups rendezvoused over Giulia at 4000 feet, then headed north up the Adriatic. More bright aluminum airplanes made up the boxes now than the olive drab ones. We left the Adriatic at Istria climbing to clear the mountains. I slipped out into the bomb-bay, pulled the holding pins out of the fuses of the fragmentation bombs, went on up to the flight deck, things looked normal, so I went back to my left waist position, checked my equipment and my gun, got on oxygen. Smitty in the ball was rotating slowly, looking. Cline turned around, nodded to me. Now we watched for enemy aircraft. I saw these single vapor trails come into view very high over us. It looked like 24 dots up there heading north. We hoped they were friendly. Lt. Borecki came on and gave us a land mark and said it's -50 degrees. Now we started hitting an undercast 5000 feet below us. Barton in the top turret was getting very excited, calling for all of us to look. When I could finally see, there was the largest tangle of fighters I had witnessed so far, just like swarming bees. I'm sure there were over fifty fighters in this tangle. Every little bit there was one smoking and going down, then one exploding into pieces, and then you would see parachutes, some brown and some white. They were opening their parachutes too soon and the light air would let them pass out. Group had always told us to count to ten slowly before opening the chute at high altitude. Just then high over us, there was a string of bright flashes from the sunlight hitting the aluminum wings of these diving airplanes aiming for our group of bombers. They leveled out at our altitude, then you could see rockets coming into formation. They were packing these rockets under their wings. They were the M. E. 210's. Eight of them plowing right through our formation, one bomber to the right of us exploded, no chutes, apparently taking a direct hit. After coming through our group the M. E. 210's headed away then climbed for altitude no doubt to aim and dive down on another group.

Finally Borecki called 10 minutes to I.P. Cline and I hustled into our flak suits and snapped on our steel helmets, then started opening the cartons of window and began pitching it out slowly separating the little flat packages as we went. We could see more of the ground now, bomb-bay doors came open, less than eight minutes to bomb drop. The flak bursts were heavy and accurate. The explosions tossed the wings up and was thumping the plane. We kept tossing the window out at 5 second intervals. Steinberg was yelling to Robinette that the plane wasn't holding steady. Robinette yelled back at Steinberg and asked him if he wanted to fly this god damn thing. As the lead Bombardier of our Group toggled, Steinberg hit the buttons and called bombs away. One bomber in the lower box took a direct hit flying into pieces, no chutes and no chance to recognize whose plane it was. As we made a sweeping left turn off the target, I was looking out to see what damage there was. The bombs looked to be close in, lots of fire, black smoke, explosions in a row from planes blowing up. There were planes taking off on the end of the field where the bombs hadn't reached.

Five minutes after the bombing, our group was attacked head on. They were F.W. 190's, eight abreast jamming through the formation. Verkamp started firing first. Barton was yelling and firing, then the plane was shaking with all the guns going off at once. Very difficult to line up on them, too much speed, they are here and gone. All I could get were a few short bursts. Their object was to scatter the Bombers and once they were

separated, it made easy picking for the fighters.

One bomber in the low box was hit on the first pass. It looked to have a fire in the bomb-bay. The guys were bailing out. They were jumping through the flames, one man's chute was on fire. Two more dropped out of the camera hatch. I counted eight chutes that blossomed below us. The plane dropped its nose and went in.

The 190's broke off their attack and headed west with several P-51's right after them. Robinette came on then and asked for battle damage report. We had no injuries, only more holes in the airplane. The formation was strung out with the planes with feathered props tagging along. When we hit the Adriatic, some P-51's were passing and waving, all short on fuel. Some of our fighter pilots had bought the farm on today's mission.

May 26th, after one days rest wake up was at 0430 hours. The 454th and 455th B.G. were chosen to bomb the Marshalling Yards at Chambery in Southern France. It lays south of Geneva, Switzerland. Our flight plan took us west over Italy just south of Rome, then up the Tyrrhenian Sea with Corsica on our left. We hit the coast west of Genoa, Italy at 20,000 feet.

Our ground crew had topped off our tanks after preflight because of the long mission. We were told to expect our fighter cover somewhere around Turin going in.

The Germans had fighter bases at Turin and La Tour-Du-Pin in southern France. Just west of Turin we saw the dots approaching with their single vapor trails, then they were close enough we recognized them. It was an escort of fourteen P-51's still with their drop tanks. It's always a welcome sight when they come on the scene.

At the I.P. the flak was reaching up to our altitude. There was the usual discussion about visibility over the target area. No problems today. Steinberg said things were looking good just then Steinberg yelled, his window had exploded from a piece of flak where he had been looking a second before. Between Borecki and Steinberg, they managed to fill the large hole with a flak suit. Steinberg could still toggle his bombs off the lead plane. We had come very close to losing our bombardier from the looks of that plexiglas lower dome. Cline and I hustled into our flak suits and started pitching out the window. There was no undercast today to conceal the target. Flak got more intense nearer the target and one Bomber in our box took a hit and feathered an engine and started dropping back. I watched the bombs falling, long strings of them, they were soon out of sight. The yard was jammed with trains, some moving out trying to escape the bombs. The bombs were exploding in rows right through the yard. The target was soon out of sight, only the smoke was visible. No enemy fighters appeared.

Looking down you could tell how beautiful this country was as we were leaving the hill country and approaching the water.

When we were down to 11,000 feet the oxygen masks came off. Robinette switched the interphone to B.B.C. (British Broadcasting System) they were playing some American music. Someone in the front yelled "Planes" we all looked, there were two groups, one the B-25 two engine Mitchell, the other the B-26 Marauders 1500 feet below us heading for their field on Corsica.

Our crew had a stand down for two days. Then May 29th an early wake-up. The flight today was a short one, but we were to bomb the target, come back, load up bombs and gas and go back for a second bomb drop, apparently a hot target.

Our fifth Army had been stalled for several months by the German held Abby at Monte Cassino high on this mountain top. We were to bomb this Monastery. Our altitude was 13,500 feet. They said the flak would be light and probably no German fighters. All of us on our crew had second thoughts about bombing one of the oldest Monasteries in the world, but top brass said it had to be done. I watched the bombs raining down from our Group onto the huge pile of rubble, so much dust and smoke you couldn't see anything. The second bomb drop was to be around noon. As we were approaching the I.P. the second time, word came from the fifteenth Air Force headquarters for us to abort the second bomb drop. Being far down on the totem pole, I never heard the reason for the cancel. All I cared about was it counted for another mission, making 32.

John McGinley was a waist gunner on McAllisters crew. He and I buddied around some. He claimed to be Irish and wouldn't let you forget it. He was great to come charging into our tent when we enlisted men were enjoying a little quiet moment and start spouting off some bad news of the Squadron or group. Then there were times he would waltz in pretending to be Ted Louis, wondering why everyone wasn't real happy. John and I enjoyed going into town together, talking about our home towns and places we had been. This one day we went into town, stopped at the Red Cross Lounge for coffee and cake, kidded the pretty Italian girl working there. Then we went on to the Mercantile Teatro to see a show. This particular day it was an Italian picture and pretty boring. John and I sat a while, then decided we had had enough. For some unknown reason before walking out, I told John to say loud to the audience, "bese my culu." Well John said it very loud, the audience gasped at these uncouth Americans. Later outside I told John he had told the audience to kiss his butt. John didn't know anything in Italian.

You had to feel sorry for these poor people in town, all of them under nourished, some half starving. All the kids panhandled for cigarettes or anything they could beg, borrow or steal. You never went into Cerignola without a gang following you, maybe 8 to 12 years old, all yelling for "Caramello Joe" and "Cigarettea Joe." They all had a sister "Bella" They were pimping for 14 years old.

Every time you went to Cerignola you saw a funeral procession. This was an elaborate long hearse pulled by four black horses with fancy polished harness and long red tassels on the horses heads and a large crowd of mourners walking behind the hearse. This old hearse was getting daily use. These Italians didn't understand the war. First they were

invaded by the Germans and suffered severely, then the British and Americans were telling them what to do, besides that Mussilini had been a dictator years before with no feeling for the poor people.

The little Stars and Stripes newspaper is printed every week and we read it thoroughly. Bill Mauldin wrote a comic strip that always got a laugh about Willie and Joe. They were forever in a mess in their fox holes on the front line of battle in Italy. The little paper brought you up to date what was happening back home and gave you news about all the wars. Ernie Pyle was a newsman somewhere in Italy and always wrote good articles.

On the sixth of June 1944, there was a wing effort to knock out the Marshalling yards and Railroad shops at Brasov, Romania with a possible 80 to 100 heavy flak guns. Brasov lay several miles north of Ploesti just north of the Transylvania Alps. The 454th Group was to muster up thirty eight Bombers.

There was something new added to each group of all The Wings, each received what everyone called a Mickey ship which was very sophisticated in that it would seek out the target regardless of the heavy undercast. It was new but had proved quite successful. All our bombardiers would toggle off the lead ship in each box.

We took an eastern heading at Split to cross the Yugoslavia Mountains Captain James Unger was leading our Group. Our plane had no. 4 position in the high box. From the top turret I could see in a 360 degree circle. I looked at the other bombers off our wings, all their turrets slowly moving. The men scanning the sky. The ball turrets were slowly rotating around watching below. Everyone looking for specks that could become fighters. After a couple of hours the cold starts getting to you. Some of the flight crews had the electrical heated suits you plug into the 24 volt outlets on the plane. I had been shocked and burned good with an electric suit, so I depended on the long johns and leather fleece lined coat, pants and boots, but I could never keep my hands warm.

Robinette was growling about the extra drag. One of our main landing gear struts was not locking up in the wing, letting the tire ride down in the slip stream. However, all four engines droned on as we climbed to our bombing altitude. Lt. Borecki came on and said, "We are crossing the Danube." We were hitting scattered clouds underneath us. Then started hitting cloud banks. Borecki came on and said, "That's the Transylvanian Alps", their's our I.P. up ahead. We made the 45 degree turn and ran right into the flak. I had a good view of the flak barrage. It looked like the whole Group was going through it. We had 18 miles to sweat. You could forget fighters, they wouldn't come into this stuff. The bursts were big and black and we were sliding through them. The bursts made a thump on the sides of the plane. The plane on our right wing took a bad hit. I could see the jagged metal in the wing close to the deck, No. 2 engine stops, they feathered it, then the nose dips and men start coming out of the camera hatch. Two men drop out of the bomb-bay. The B-24 rolls over slowly and starts down, Cline came on and said five chutes had opened. Watching all of this, men dying, falling out of the sky, it doesn't seem real. You wonder if it is really happening. Your hands and forehead are

wet with sweat and it's 50 below zero, you have to accept the fact, that you could be dead in the next couple of seconds. With the bombs away a little of the apprehension lifts, but barely. The formation banks to the left and the flak lets up, we're on our way home.

We watch for fighters, but none show. The Groups are strung out, some with battle damage. At 14,000 feet I get down out of the turret and transfer some gas from outboard to inboard tanks. Robinette is complaining about No. 1 engine heating up, he and Johnson discuss shutting it down. Barton back in the waist came on and says, "lots of oil coming out, some trailing back over the wing." They decide to shut it down. We were trying to stay in No. 4 spot in the box, without the bombs it's still touch and go on three engines. Vargas yelled fighters were coming up from the rear. I get back up in the turret and hook up. Then we see some P-38's move by heading west, then more fighters, P-51's this time, eight of them do a wing up out from us, then moved in closer to look the bombers over then wave and leave. Some of the other bomber wings had Ploesti for a target today. When we didn't encounter German fighters that told us our escort was doing its job.

Once over the water I got down from the turret, Robinette is sweating trying to hold our position with one engine feathered and the right main strut down out of position. He calls Barton and asks him to watch close when the main gear comes down that it locks. When Lt. Johnson lowered the gear before landing, there is a latch an inch long that is in view from the waist telling you the gear is locked down. Barton said he could see the latches and we made a good landing on three engines. That's 34 missions in.

Soon as we get back to our tent, our tail gunner Vargas is cleaning up to go into town. All of us got on him about robbing the cradle, she's around 15 and Vargas is 38 years old, but he's serious and tells us all where we can go. Vargas was very serious about marrying this girl and as I understand with her parents permission. He tried to get the necessary papers signed by our Group Commander but that didn't happen. He even went so far as to volunteer to fly more missions so he could remain in Italy near his Signorita. He had the bug bad. Vargas wasn't the only American airman that had tried to marry in Italy. To my knowledge, Air Force was not sanctioning any Italian American marriages.

Vargas had told us many weeks before how he became acquainted with this young girl. One evening at dusk he was walking along this city street in Cerignola when he heard a commotion in a dark alley. There was crying and moaning, someone was in real pain. Vargas investigated, and saw this Italian on top of this young girl attempting to molest her. Without hesitation, Vargas pulled the man off the girl and beat him thoroughly with his fists, attracting quite a crowd of Italians. The girls' parents came and to show their gratitude invited Vargas to their home. From then on Vargas took up his suite with Gina the young girl of fifteen. Her parents thought he was wonderful, even though he was going with their baby girl being twice her age.

CHAPTER
XI

Lt. Robinette came to our tent the evening of the seventh of June with some good news. He said Group was sending all crews with over twenty five missions to the Isle of Capri for a week, for rest and relaxation. He said we could take our B-4 bag and Musette shoulder bag.

So Monday morning at 0700 we loaded into 6 x 6 trucks and headed out the road to Naples. At noon we drove through Naples down to the docks and were loaded onto a little beat up Ferry Boat.

Capri lay 17 miles southwest of Naples. It was a pleasant boat ride. We saw the large seaport of Naples fade away. Then we could see smoking Mount Vesuvius on down the coast, then this large rock came into view, finally the little town at the base of the cliffs where we could see the long docks. At the dock where we were headed, there was a U.S. submarine and a Coast Guard Cutter tied up. Once on the dock we could see a little town of sorts, it was called Marina Grande. There were some stores, a restaurant, boating and fishing supplies. We were met by several American jeeps. These jeeps rode us up the narrow switch back road until we arrived at the main town of Capri.

The officers were quartered just off the big square or Piazzetta. Our officers stayed in the Quisisana Hotel. We enlisted men were jeeped on up above Capri to the little town of Ana Capri. It sat on top of the rock and gave us a super view of the ocean. It was 1700 feet high and on a clear day you could see Naples. The little streets were narrow, maybe six feet wide, some too narrow for a jeep.

Each of us had his own tiny room and most important was the cleanliness and white sheets. The only thing lacking was lots of shower water or drinking water. They explained they had to transport all drinking water, but they attempted to catch rain water for other uses.

All the meals were served with wine and fruit juices and the bars sold American beer. The atmosphere on Capri was so relaxed and they pampered us with good nourishing food. All the Italian people who lived on Capri gathered every afternoon in the Piazzetta to gossip, drink wine and enjoy the sunshine. The Italian men stood around playing this game called Matto.

Little narrow streets led off from the main square and this was where the shops were. Verkamp and I did a little shopping through the stores.

They had souvenirs and hand made articles. I picked out a little mother of pear brooch for Mom and mailed it to her along with a letter telling them all about the Isle of Capri. In one store we found shorts and sandals (thongs), through the day you could wear anything, but evenings we always put on a uniform.

The second day there we wanted to see the Blue Grotto. So after a delicious breakfast of grapefruit, rolls, eggs, juice and coffee, we headed for Marina Grande. The Italians had a good business taking the American G.I.'s around the island in their row boats. This opening to the Blue Grotto was small, about 6 ft. wide and 4 feet high. You had to duck when the row boat went through the opening. Inside the large cave was a lake or still water from the ocean, but the lake gave off a blue florescence, I guess something on the bottom caused it. Our guide told us we could swim in it, but none of us did. He rowed us all the way around the island, which was several miles, pointing out different Villas where famous people lived. Some Villas were centuries old, but still occupied. Of course he told us our President, Franklin Roosevelt had stayed on Capri and had seen the Blue Grotto. People waved to us from many of the Villas as we were rowed around.

Lunch at the Hotel was on the light side, fruit, juices and sandwiches. Dinner was served in the hotel dining room. There were tables that seated six people. They served lots of fish, canned meats, fresh salads, canned vegetables and wine with every meal plus coffee or tea, besides lots of fresh fruit like oranges and bananas.

We were limited to two showers a week, which didn't bother us too much. Showers were scarce back at San Giovanni, but they didn't know about the mini baths we took. Lights went out all over Capri at 2200 hours and if you were in a bar sometimes it took a while to find where you lived.

Our days were spent at the beaches and there weren't many unattached women at the beach for company, but we played ball, layed in the sun and relaxed. They had Kayaks you could rent. They were seaworthy, you put your legs in first, sat down, then a leather harness fitted around you sealing you in and that kept most of the water out of the Kayak. You were in a fix if you turned over, but I never did. You propelled it with a two bladed paddle. The tide would take you far out sometimes and there were times when dorsal finns cruised around. I didn't realize how risky that was, I could have been sharks dinner. Quite a ways out, about a half mile, there was a large rock that stuck high out of the water. This rock had a hole in it worn from the waves rushing through it. The guys called it threading a needle, that was to come charging through that hole at high speed in your kayak, it gave you a thrill.

Close to where we stayed in Ana Capri, the former Villa of Rudolph Valantino was operated for the lonely service man. It was a plush villa with marble and glass bathrooms, marble and beautiful paneling on all the walls. The outside was beautiful too, with vineyards, olive and orange trees, a large outside pool and tennis courts. There was an inside game room with several pool tables and table tennis or ping pong. One night after a few games of pool there, Smitty, Verkamp, and I were coming down

this narrow street headed for our hotel rooms, someone above whistled. We looked up and on this balcony were two girls, they were motioning for us to come up. The balcony looked to be ten feet high off the street. With Smitty on Verkamp's shoulders I got on Smitty's shoulders, I was on eye level with them, but there was a set of electrical wires between us running along the building. I could reach their hands that were waving madly for us to come up, but I couldn't get on the balcony. I asked them where their Mama and Papa was and they said sleeping inside. With the noise we made I doubted that. After giving up the balcony approach, Verkamp was all for sneaking through the front door, but we finally gave it all up and waved goodbye to the Signorinas.

The little bars on Capri and Ana Capri were operated to make the G.I.'s relax and forget what we had been through flying. You could buy American beer, Conyac and Brandy. Also they served mixed drinks called Liberator, P-38, these were made from Vodka and Grapefruit juice with a little color added, but at 2200 hours when the blackout hit, you had to try to find your hotel room and there were lots of G.I.'s bumping into each other in the dark.

In the daytime we ran like kids in our shorts and sandals, several times we rode the funicular, which was a cable car that went at a 45 degree angle down the cliff from the town of Capri down to Marina Grande at the beach. It was a thrill and gave us a great view.

Verkamp and I, one day thought we were doing great, we had met these two girls, they could speak a little English, so we walked around. They showed us different landmarks, the Monastery of San Michele, the old castle of Tiberius, King of the Roman Empire, it had practically fallen down. After spending half the day with us, the girls said we must go home. Of course we trailed along. We came to this large stone building with very large doors, the girls went in with us trailing them. Just then this Mother Superior stopped us from going any further. She explained to us all about the girls being novices and with a big smile said Bona Sada.

One night I stopped in Luigis American Bar, it was large and jammed packed with officers. There was dancing, singing, lots of merry making. Most of the Officers were well poked up. There was a good supply of women, all having a good time. When the evening was about over, the girls not taken would get on a table and verbal bids were made, and the bids got pretty high. All the officers had a pocket full of Lira and no place to spend it. The girls would spin around on the table and the bidding would go higher. When the lights went out I moved out into the street with everyone else. I was just standing still waiting for my eyes to adjust to the dark night when a hand took mine and was trying to pull me to the edge of the crowd. I waited until we were alone, then I flipped by Zippe and took a look. She was young and not too bad to look at. I guess she had her eye on me at some place. We took lots of time getting to Ana Capri and my hotel. She knew she wasn't allowed up in my room, but by this time I was persuasive. Hand in hand we started up the long flight of stairs that led from the street to the second floor. We were taking the steps easy hoping that none would squeak, just when we reached the top steps the hotel manager let out a yell from the bottom and that little girl went down those steps three at a time and flew out the door. Then I got a

sermon from the manager about the reputation of the hotel, it was one time I was ready to fight.

It was a little sad leaving Capri, but our seven days were up and we gathered on the dock to board the ferry back to Naples. All of us laughing and joking about our near conquests. We were allowed four hours of sight seeing in Naples. They had the street cars running and things were getting back to normal, after so much bombings from first the Americans and then the Germans. The Signorinas strolled the streets with a welcome eye to the G.I.'s.

Right after we returned from Capri an order came down from Wing Headquarters in Bari, wanting three of the original crews from the 454th B.G. to report back to the states. This was to spread good will among men in training for combat missions and promote War Bond sales, but with the Air Force having the option to send us back to combat later in another theatre of operations, possibly the far east.

Lt. Potter, Lt. Robinette and another pilot got the offer. All three crews were elated to be going home. Robinette turned it down stating we were more than half way through our missions and it might mean coming back into combat. Needless to say he wasn't too popular around the crew the next few days.

I was happy for Lt. Potters crew, Lou Schwartz would be seeing his wife after many months. The ironic thing was, the three crews that went home on this promotion never had to go back to combat and were moved into training squadrons in the states. Schwartz and I discussed this many years later when we visited in Bradenton, Florida..

After our R. & R. at Capri we weren't scheduled for a mission day after day. It was just like they had forgotten nine old men. All of us were getting anxious to get them finished. Finally Lt. Robinette went to Group and complained. On the 24th of June we were back flying, the target was the Craiova Railroad shops in Romania. Our Group and the 455th B.G. were scheduled for this particular mission, not expecting to be too hazardous. We would be within range of German fighters, but flak was supposed to be moderate. I was flying left waist position.

While we were enjoying ourselves in Capri, Rome had fell to the fifth army. The Germans were falling back now as the fifth army drove northward. Also the southern France invasion had taken place on the sixth of June making Germany fight on four fronts. This was a pretty routine mission, there was no undercast over target area, our 500 lb. bombs caused lots of fire and smoke at the target, flak was moderate and no planes were lost over the target.

Barton in the top turret kept seeing fighters that didn't materialize, he seemed very jumpy. Borecki read off land marks as we headed home. Lt. Robinette called the waist and wanted to know if we had saw target damage. Cline and I both told him it looked like the bombs were close in and of the fire and smoke.

Group was sending boxes of K-rations and tomato juice in half gallon

cans on the missions now for the crews. We enjoyed it. I served the tomato juice to the guys, the K-rations came in about the size of a Kracker Jack box and had little cans of cheese with bacon, sacks of crackers and a bar of sweet chocolate. I can still see Cline and Vargas and Smitty laying on their flak suits eating those chocolate bars.

Once on the ground and back at our hardstand, the jeep would come around with the Old Overholt. The officers would ask us how it went and give us each a drink, then on to briefing. After today's briefing, Sergeant Barton went to see Dr. John Minchler our flight surgeon. I don't know the details but Lt. Robinette came to see me that night, asking me to take over as head engineer and fly the top turret. He said I would be advanced in rank to Tech Sergeant.

I thought about it all night. I could see myself trapped on the flight deck of a burning air plane going in, like I have seen so many do, unable to get out because of the centrifugal force that builds up when a plane starts to spin or is out of control. Then weighing that with where I normally fly by the open waist window, having the window or the camera hatch to jump from, I rejected the stripe even though I knew I would still have to fly some missions in the top turret, when we couldn't borrow an engineer from another crew. Robinette said he understood and let me keep the waist position. I never knew what happened to Harry Barton, other than to hear he had been moved out of the Group.

We enlisted men knew for some time that Harry was having stomach problems, he never complained much but it got to be pretty regular that he would throw up his meal. It might be after breakfast but usually after a large evening meal and usually before we had arrived back at our tent. I know this worked on his nerves. He wanted to hang in there and finish his missions. Now that I think back, he mentioned that ulcers had been a problem in the past. But to my knowledge Barton had not gone to Medical before with it. I will say he was missed by the rest of us.

CHAPTER
XII

The 25th of June was an early wake-up for us. Apparently Robinette had gotten the message across to Group that we wanted to complete our missions, so the second day in a row we were at briefing looking at the huge map on the wall with yarn reaching over to southern France to the town of Avignon. There was a large Marshalling yard where the inland seaport supplied war material to southern France. Again we were briefed to watch for fighters, but flak was to be moderate. I flew as head engineer and we had a fill in waist gunner. Our Group joined the 459 B.G. to assault the target.

Our course took us west of Rome then north. As we were passing Corsica, two groups of B-25's went below us also heading north for a target.

North of Corsica we turned west, our target lay a few miles north of Marseille. Our bombing altitude was 19,000 feet. At the I.P. we turned north coming down the bomb run. From out of the sun five F.W. 190's attacked. Our Group put up a lot of fire power and they backed off. Just then we saw the fastest airplanes in the world. These were twin engine fighters with no propellers. They flew around our group giving us a real show in speed and maneuverability. It was the new German M.E. 262 jet fighter, it looked to be flying over 600 miles an hour. I swung the top turret around and around trying to line up my sights, but I didn't have a chance. These German pilots wanted us to see and remember what the future held for other missions, our fastest fighter would have no chance with the Jet.

I read later where Hitler's Generals were all very impressed with the M.E. 262 performance and suggested Germany beef up production on it since it had no match in the world. Hitler thought it would make a better attack bomber, even at this late date in the war. Hitler with his twisted mind thought Germany needed an Attack Bomber. This twist of fate was in our favor. A few hundred of these Jets could have destroyed a lot of Bombers.

Cline reported from the waist, some bombs way off target as we made the sweeping turn to the south. The M.E. 262 had affected pilots, Bombardiers and all crew members. Flak was moderate over the target, just a few short bursts. Cline came on and reported some good bomb hits in the yards, said he could see some train cars flying apart. Once out over the sea and down to 12,000 feet, I left the turret, transferred some gas and

passed out the K-Rations to the guys, everyone still excited about the Jet Fighters we had seen. This was No. 36 mission today and had taken 7 hours and 45 minutes.

On June 28th, our target was the Karlova Air Drome in Bulgaria. We had a new flight engineer today, a man borrowed from another crew. Air Force had sent Group photos of the Air Drome heavily loaded with fighter aircraft. For that reason all planes of the 454th B.G. were loaded with clusters of fragmentation bombs. These bombs were made to tear up an airplane if one exploded near one. S-2 said, flak should be moderate, but fighter opposition could be heavy. We were to have a Group of P-51's to fly cover for us.

The 455th B.G. was leading us on a straight east heading. Over Yugoslavia, two bombers fell back, then turned and headed home. Germany was feeling the pinch now, losing so much oil production from the constant pounding of allied bombs on her Refineries and the many bombings of their Marshalling Yards where the trainloads of oil and gasoline were assembled, then moved to the four fronts they were forced to fight on. For this reason we were seeing less German fighters in the air.

Just two hours into the mission, Borecki reported vapor trails overhead. We looked and there were lots of specks headed the same way we were. It had to be our little friends.

When we turned at the I.P., Robinette warned us to look for fighters. We dispensed the window keeping a constant look out. The flak puffs started, then they were shooting up a barrage, the flak slightly over us. After the bombs dropped and we went into our turn, the Air Drome lay below us. Cline and I could see rows of planes on the ground exploding, lots of black smoke from gasoline and oil fires and some planes taking off at the undamaged end of the field. Two different dog fights going on out from us, P-51's and 109's in a tangle, then some large buildings exploding near the parked aircraft. Vargas said from the tail, black oily smoke coming up, like from an oil storage dump. Just then I looked over on my left, the bomber on our left wing had lost an engine. They feathered number three, still staying in position. I reported to Robinette, he said he knew about it. A little later they started dropping back losing altitude.

When we were down to 12,000 feet, the oxygen mask came off, Smitty came up from the ball turret and went into the bomb-bay to use the relief tube, then came and lied down in the waist, he was a happy guy most of the time. The P-51's were passing us, waving as they went.

After briefing we guys went to Squadron orderly room to check on mail. I received letters pretty regular, Milly wrote often, Dizz kept me informed what Mom and Dad was up to, besides I wrote to some cousins, Cora Belle Balgo and Dorothy Reed. This day I had a beat up box that said Merry Christmas on it. It had an awful odor to it and the guys in the mail room were real glad to see me get it out of there. I took it back to our tent, cut the string and it just fell apart. The cake was a pile of moldy crumbs, the chicken rotten, but the carton of cigarettes was the only thing that survived. This was the package Mom had mailed me before Christmas back in 1943.

On June 30th we had to go back to Austria, our target was a synthetic refinery called the Ordertal Refinery at Moosbierbaum, Austria. This was a wing effort for the 304th. Our squadron commander of 736 Major Jamison, was leading the 454 B.G. second over the target with a Mickey bombsight. No other country in the world had this formula for making 100 octane gasoline out of coal like the Germans were doing and they had many such refineries. The labor was cheap, they used slave labor in the coal mines and throughout the refineries.

The Fifteenth Air Force after weeks of pounding Ploesti, had now turned to the synthetic refineries scattered over Austria and Germany. We had P-51 escort after leaving the Udine Valley, Borecki called ten minutes to I.P. Cline and I got into our flak suits and opened the carton of window. At 21,000 feet we had a 5/10 undercast. As group turned we tossed the tinsel, Verkamp reported lots of flak up ahead. All four boxes of bombers toggled off the Mickey ship. There were bursts of flak all around the planes, but no casualties. When we headed south, we were unable to see the damage to the refinery.

We were to have new escort on the way home. Robinette called each man for his condition, everyone was fine. He reminded us to watch close for German fighters. Our plane flew on and sounded good, but if you looked you could see the right strut hanging out a little.

Along with the wheel that wasn't locking up in the wing, our left aileron was hanging out about twenty degrees. Robinette was using trim to allow for it. I guess about this time the plane on our left wing developed a fire in the number two engine. The flames began reaching back over the wing. I could see the co-pilot reaching over head to the feathering button then the white puff of smoke from the fire extinguisher ring around the engine. The fire died, the prop blades stopped windmilling and turned edge ways and stopped in feathering position. As we went along, the plane with the dead engine started dropping back. It dropped to the rear of the formation then appeared to hold our airspeed. Vargas kept us informed of the crippled bomber's position and it was still with us coming into the landing pattern.

The Stars and Stripes had a piece in it about a German fighter attacking this B-17 over Austria, the B-17 was down to 5000 feet with engine trouble. The fighter made this pass and somehow didn't pull out of his dive, cutting the whole tail piece off the B-17 with the gunner in his tail turret floating slowly down, slowly enough that the gunner survived and was liberated.

July 2, 1944 --

Oil refineries were top priority now. The 304th wing was to bomb the Shell Oil Refinery in Budapest, Hungary. This was another early briefing and we had been to Budapest and knew what to expect.

The flak was now listed as intense, accurate and heavy, apparently they had a lot more flak guns brought in. P-38's were to give cover on the way in, then a group of P-51's over target. The Wing flew up the

Adriatic, then turned east on a heading to pass south of Zagreb. We in the 454th were to be third over target, that should give the German flak gunners plenty of time to find our range. After everyone test fires his guns we go for altitude, the drone of the engines change, the plane on a right wing bouncing around, Robinette has his thumb on the interphone button and is cussing new pilots. A few planes abort the mission heading in the opposite direction. Now the Vapor Trails are pouring out of each engine reaching way back. After a while Borecki announces ten minutes to I.P. I look and Cline is already hooking his flak suit in the front and his steel helmet on. I get ready, the weight of the flak suit bears down We made the turn at the I.P. at 20,500 feet, we hear bomb doors go up and feel the cold draft racing through the waist. Flak is working up to our altitude, then it's hammering us with large black bursts. You look over and see Bombers sliding through these big bursts, surviving the blast. There's thumping on our plane, shaking it, you can hear the pieces hit. We keep on dispensing the chaff. We know this is a waste of time the way the flak is. I pray, God get us through this. It seems forever, but then there's the words "Bombs Away." Group rallies to the left in a wide sweep, the plane in front of us lagged. Robinette on using evasive action, layed the left wing over at a steep angle. I lost my balance and was falling out of the plane window, unconsciously I grabbed the top window rail, I swung for a couple of seconds in space hanging out the window, then the plane slowly rolled back to an upright position and I swung back inside. No one saw this trick I just did, so I didn't say anything about it. I would have had a four mile fall and no parachute, with a flak suit hanging on me acting like a sinker.

Out of the flak zone Robinette called for battle damage or injury. told him he almost lost a gunner with the slow roll to the left. Someone had reported a plane going in over the target and had counted four chutes. When a plane is falling out of control or drops into a flat spin or into a steep dive, G's take over and increase the weight of your body, maybe several times the normal weight and you can't move, even to get out of your seat. This caused the deaths of many crew men. It was said when you have a fire in a B-24, nobody has much time to get out. It was said 10 to 20 seconds or the time it takes to grab your parachute, snap it on and go out a window. Some crew members have gotten frightened by too much flak or enemy fighters and just up and jumped out forgetting their parachutes. Looking back from our altitude at the city of Budapest, you can see it's very large on both sides of the Danube, several bridges cross there and a good deal of barge traffic on the river. The black oil smoke is rising from the refinery our wing has smashed. Still no German fighters show themselves. Our group looks intact other than a feathered prop here and there. Seeing all those barges down on the Danube, I imagine some bombardier would like a chance to unload on them.

CHAPTER
XIII

July 3, 1944 --

There were many German occupied countries within our range of bombing. Most of Germany's oil came from the occupied countries. This included many synthetic oil plants we could reach and would be top priority from now on. We were going for more oil today.

At 0500 hours we were awoken and could hear the crew chiefs checking Mag drop and Preflighting bombers on the flight line. We stumbled around our tent in the dark trying to dress, no one mentioned Barton, but all of us missed our engineer.

Breakfast was getting better, canned sausage or spam, powdered eggs, grapefruit and cereal. On to briefing at 0600 to look at the yarn going north, then reaching over the city of Bucharest, Romania. Some Wings were going to Ploesti, our 304th Wing was to bomb the ammunition and oil storage depot on the north side of Bucharest. It was a two counter and a long mission.

Going east toward Bucharest it's a sight to see, one could never forget the hundreds of bombers in formation, planes strung out for miles ahead and as far back as you can see, then the vapor trails start flowing out as we climb higher. I surveyed our Group, three out of four were new silver unpainted planes. We cling to the No. 4 position with McAllister of Miss America leading the high box we were in. There's no chatter on intercom, we all have jobs to do and that is to watch for fighters and Borecki reports landmarks to Robinette.

Time passes and finally Borecki says there's our I.P. down there. We make a 35 degree turn. Cline and I get into our flak suits and began tossing out window. The target is cloud covered now and our Group releases our bombs off the Mickey ship in the lead. There is already oil smoke at our altitude from the lead Group bombs and flak was intense right over target. On the way home we flew by some shot up bombers limping along on three engines. Some of these Bombers that were shot up had been over Ploesti today.

July 4, 1944 was a day off for all men in the Group. The day was hot and dry. About noon Group opened the kegs of beer and had a show with lots of pretty U.S.O. girls that danced and sang on stage built for that

purpose. We layed on the ground and enjoyed it. Later in the afternoon there was a donkey baseball game with lots of the Group boys taking part.

July 6, 1944 --

At 0810 hours we lifted off and joined with the 459th B.G. and took a northern heading up the Adriatic. Our mission today was the Refinery and oil storage complex at Trieste, Italy on the northern tip of the Adriatic. Flak was to be light and little possibility of enemy fighters. S-2 gave the weather as a possible 5/10 undercast over target. The lead plane in each Group had a Mickey ship to locate the target.

We saw so many little sailing boats all along the coast. I know it made Paul Cline more sick than me, Paul lived on the top of the Gulf at Apalachicola, Florida.

After the duties of test firing guns, pulling bomb pins, we went on oxygen. Land was just in view when we turned right at the I.P. for our bomb run. Our Group was first over the target through the scattered clouds. There were a few flak bursts, but they didn't have our range. We toggled off the lead ship and watched the results. The bomb strikes looked to be close in lots of flame and smoke on the target, after we rallied right the black smoke was rising behind us. Robinette called the waist and asked what the target looked like and I told him.

This was mission No. 43.

July 8, 1944 --

After a one day rest and an easy mission, there was a Wing effort on the wall map. The 55th Wing was going to Vienna, Austria to bomb the Refinery and oil storage plant, while the 304th Wing had as their target the Munchendorf Air Drome and final assembly plants of the Polke Walke 190 fighter planes at Vienna.

Flak was listed 80-100 guns, intense to heavy, but with an abundance of air opposition. After briefing we were trucked to our revetment and loaded two cartons of window into Nine Old Men.

We were aboard ready to start engines when our radio man Paul Cline called the pilot and said he had forgotten his oxygen mask. Robinette said, "go get it." We all knew he would never return back in time to make this mission.

I was in left waist position, Paul had the right waist position, when he was with us. When we got the checkered flag, we lined up with the rest of the 24's, came to the runway and took off. Everything went well until about twenty minutes before I.P. The top turret gunner yelled "Fighters 12:00 high." Eight F.W. 190's attacked our Group. Two came in at 9:00 high, I was firing at them, then Smitty was yelling. They had dived under the Group then turned to come right back very aggressive. Smitty and I shooting at these two, Vargas started yelling about a fighter, but in Spanish. Robinette yelled to Vargas to talk English. I looked out the right waist window and could see rockets coming into the Group. Johnson

came on and said Lt. Winters just lost an engine. I charged the right waist gun and fired a long burst at the 190, he rolled and dropped down out of range. Lt. Robinette called me and asked how things were going back there. I guess I sounded shook up, he said just do the best you can. By this time we had some P-51's to help us out. The Germans broke away. Borecki called out, one minute to I.P. I started opening up the cartons of window and getting rid of it. There were small dog fights all around us right and left sides, flak was all around us and heavy. Down the bomb run I very slowly tossed out the window, trying to watch both waist windows for an enemy fighter. The dog fights out from us continued. Planes were going down, fighters too far away to identify.

The flak got worse, shaking our airplane, some bursts looked only twenty feet away. Steinberg was talking, now ready to toggle, then he called bombs away, then the wide turn to the right to escape the flak. There lay the Air Drome under us and bombs exploding through the rows of parked planes. I had a clear view and it was unbelievable the rows of planes stacked on that field. Then I could see explosions starting in a row, one plane after another. The target was soon out of sight and Robinette came on and asked if we had any casualties, everyone reported okay and he said watch close for enemy fighters, we're not home yet. Verkamp had reported one of our bombers going in over target and had counted eight chutes. I looked around our formation and our box looked intact, every plane holding its position. Waist gunners would wave when they saw you.

Now some P-51's slid by always staying out a few hundred yards and showing us that big air scoop on the bottom and doing a wing up. They were short on fuel and some were shot up from the tangle with German fighters.

Robinette and Johnson are trying to tune number four engine. The cylinder head temperature just doesn't want to drop. Johnson said the pitch change of the prop doesn't seem to be normal. Robinette says on interphone, "we'll just have to live with it, make sure those cowl flaps on number four are written up. Borecki comes on and tells Robinette that Group better give Klagenfurt a wider berth. They are known for their hot flak gunners. Then Group swings a little west to miss the town. Our fill-in engineer had made a fuel check and reports to Robinette what we have. Now our ears are popping we're letting down to lower altitude. Verkamp comes on now saying there's water ahead. Yes there's the Adriatic Borecki says.

July 15, 1944 --

Before dawn Robinette was shaking me awake. He asked me if I would fly waist position with another crew. I asked how new the crew was and Robinette said this will make their third mission. I said well that's a pretty new crew, but that I would fly.

At briefing I got the shock of my life when I saw the yarn going over to Ploesti. I asked myself how crazy am I to be going with a new green crew to Ploesti, and I asked myself that question many times during the

day. This was a maximum effort of 21 Bomb Groups to hit Ploesti and surrounding targets. The flak guns hadn't decreased in number or size, in fact we were to fly a higher altitude over target because of the heavier flak guns. Our bombing altitude was 24,000 feet, other Groups had been given a higher altitude. Each lead ship of each Group would have a Pathfinder or Mickey ship to locate the target through any cloud cover. S-2 assured us of two Groups for fighter cover.

Before take off I was introduced to the crew I was to fly with. We were flying a B-24 H model and I was familiar with it. We rendezvoused with the rest of the 304th Wing over Viesto at 0850 and headed north. It was a bright sunny morning. The pilot had me pull the bomb pins and at the proper time all guns were test fired. Over Vis the long formation turned right to head for Romania. A few bombers began aborting the Mission now, various mechanical problems.

The engines began working hard now, gaining altitude. I watched the terrain below starting to appear smaller. The Pilot and Co-Pilot began discussing this higher bombing altitude on intercom. The higher we climbed the more manifold pressure the hungry engines needed. The Navigator called out 10 minutes to I.P. The nose gunner came on and said there are planes up ahead dropping one and two bombs. The other waist gunner and myself began throwing out chaff. Now the tail gunner reported more planes were dropping one and two bombs. Our pilots began discussing the higher cylinder head temperature on all the engines and was considering unloading a couple of bombs.

We began flying through a barrage of flak, it was very intense, bombers were getting hit. This bomb run seemed to run on and on. The flak was shaking our plane, the tail gunner called out that a bomber in our box was going down in flames, no chutes. After the bombs dropped, we were still in a huge barrage of flak, then we turned and it was letting up. The target area was completely covered with black oily smoke rising to our altitude. The ball gunner came on and said his turret wasn't functioning right. The pilot asked everyone else their condition, everyone was okay. The pilot then asked me to keep my eye on the turret.

The gunner was moving his turret around in the azimuth position, one way and then another. All at once the heavy electrical cable blazed up, flames were going to the roof of the plane. I got my oxygen off and grabbed a fire extinguisher hanging on the wall and put the fire out. The wires were completely burned up. I shut the electrical power off at the outside of the turret and called the Pilot about it. When the wires were burned up this eliminated the means to raise the turret up into the stowed position. The gunner was able to crank the guns around in a horizontal position and rotate the Sperry Ball with the latch to the top so he could get out of it.

We had no fighter opposition on the way home. When we were down to 12,000 feet, the Pilot called me to come up to the flight deck. There were several hazards to landing a B-24 with an extended ball turret, normally it would wipe out the ball, maybe causing a crash. If you shifted the weight forward it put much more of a strain on the nose gear.

I went up to the flight deck and talked to the pilot. We figured if the weight was to the front, the ball may not hit if he flew it in making a three point touch down and braking very gentle.

We circled the field until all the other planes had landed, then came in. Eight men were on the flight deck and two in the waist. The Pilot brought her in, the ball rapped the runway once with just minor damage. Then we settled down on the three tires and rolled using all the runway. I really thanked God that Mission was over.

That evening at chow two guys were the center of attention. They were explaining all the adventures they had with the partisans that had worked them back through axis lines coming west through Romania then Yugoslavia after they had bailed out over Bucharest on the seventh of May mission. They were undernourished but happy to be back with the 454th.

My missions were winding down. I had 47 official, but I walked around with the fear of the remaining three to fly.

The day after the Ploesti Mission, there was another review on the parade grounds. The new crews were receiving their air Metals. Many men received the Purple Heart, Soldiers Medal. We received the Oak Leaf Cluster to our Air Medal.

July 20, 1944 --

Our Wing along with the 55th Wing were scheduled to bomb the Manzell Aircraft factory at Friedrichshafen, Germany. This target sat on the north side of Lake Constance. On the south side of the lake sat the Little Neutral Country of Switzerland. Friedrichshafen was known world wide for the home of the Graf Zeppelin built in the late twenties and later for the Hindenburg a larger Air Ship of 808 feet long, that could carry 72 passengers in luxury from Germany to Lakehurst, New Jersey in roughly sixty hours. These two ships made many trips to America and South America during the 1930's. On May 7th, 1937, the Hindenburg exploded over Lakehurst, New Jersey killing many of the passengers and flight crew. The Goodyear Aircraft Company in Akron, Ohio was also a producer of Air ships in the 1930's and was known world wide for the Shenandoah, the Akron and the Macon. But all these huge airships met tragic ends. Three cities in the world had dirigible hangers large enough to accommodate airships this large. They were Akron, Ohio, Lakehurst, New Jersey, and Friedrichshafen, Germany.

At briefing we were told that flak should not be too severe and we were to have P-51's over the target. Our position was No. 2 in the lead box of nine planes. I was flying top turret and we had a fill in waist gunner. The 456th Group leading our Wing was equipped with a pathfinder and we were to bomb at 20,500 feet. As we climbed for altitude, there were some high cloud banks around. Crossing the Alps of Italy, I could see occasional specks high over us, it was hard to say if they were friend or foe.

We had heard off and on little rumors of German atrocities as early as April 1944, but an unbelievable story was circulating in July of

thousands of slave labor used at all Germany's refineries and coal mines, and rumors of the mass murder of Jews taking place in Germany and Poland. We didn't realize on this Mission we were flying over Dachau, one of the camps Hitler was using in his final solution to exterminate the Jews of Europe.

We were to toggle bombs off the lead planes over the target. We could see fighters high over us using a zig zag course to stay with the Bombers. At the I.P. we made our turn, burst of flak just here and there, nothing serious. Patches of ground was showing through the undercast.

One half minute before bombs away, our lead plane feathered number one engine, the Bomber slowed, dropping out of formation, then the left Wing dipped and he headed down at a steep angle. Robinette in the number two spot immediately moved up and took the lead position. Steinberg then toggled our bombs off the Group in front of us. Borecki came on then and said I better plot us a course home. The ride back was routine other than for Borecki who had to make sure we flew around the major flak zones.

At briefing, the lead crew was reported M.I.A. Two months later back in the States in Lincoln, Nebraska, I was in the Post Exchange, and recognized an officer from our Group. He said he had been lead Navigator of that Mission and went on to tell me of the crews escape out of Switzerland through France and Italy by the Partisans and their flight home after arriving back in Cerignola.

July 21, 1944 --

With no rest from yesterday's mission an early wake-up got us moving at 0500 hours.

At briefing they described the extra long mission and Robinette had an extra set of battle orders describing all the Groups makeup which he gave to me after we were heading to the flight line. The target was the Synthetic oil plant at Brux, Germany in the very heart of Nazi Germany. The amount of flak guns around Brux was anybody's guess. S-2 told us 40 to 60 heavy flak guns.

This would finish the missions for our crew. We loaded aboard our equipment and cartons of window. All of us get aboard, all of us apprehensive about the last mission and the target being so close to Berlin. We have a fill in flight engineer from another crew. The man waves his flag from the jeep and we roll off the hard stand. Maggaio was standing off to the side with the big fire extinguisher in one hand and his fingers crossed on the other. We take a position in the long line of B-24's waiting to head down the runway. As we start north up the Adriatic I look around, the little sail boats off the coast fading in the distance. The sight of so many Bombers in formation as far as I could see north and south, several hundred bombers all with ten men aboard, all with the same purpose, hit the target, and knock out another oil plant of Hitler's. If I survive today, I'll not see anymore of what I'm seeing right now and I have to say "Thank God."

Looking around at the boxes of planes there was so very few of the

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HEADQUARTERS 454TH BOMBARDMENT GROUP (B), AAF

Operations Order No. 193

Battle Order

21 July 1944

1. Main Briefing:
 - a. Roll Call, 0555
 - b. Time of Briefing, 0600
 - c. Time of Transportation, 0655
 - d. Time of Stations, 0725
 - e. Time of Take-Off, 0755
 - f. Time of Rendezvous, 0840
 - g. Target Time, 1220
 - h. Time of Return, 1819
 2. Leader and Deputy Leader: Major Grimsby - Lt. Phillips.
 3. Order of Flight, 455th, 456th, 454th, 459th.
 4. Bomb Load, M-17 Incendiaries, clustered.
 5. Intervalometer Setting, 100'.
 6. Targets:
 - a. Primary, BRUX Synchro, Off Point, NW, 760'.
 - b. Secondary, Primary target by Pathfinder.
 - c. Last Resort, PLEIN/SKODA Works by visual or PFF if necessary. Elev. 1115'.
 7. Cruising Formation, 9 ship front, 9 ship boxes.
 8. Bomber Rendezvous, GIULIA, 0840, 4000'.
 9. Route Out, Base to KP - SANSEGO (44°31'N, 14°18'E) to TP (45°07'N, 14°17'E) to TP - LAKE MILLSTATTER (46°48'N, 13°35'E) to TP - SEEWALCHER (47°58'N, 13°35'E) to TP - DROGENDORF (48°51'N, 12°58'E) to TP - BOZALICE (49°27'N, 12°57'E) to IP to target. KP time 1002 at 17,000'.
 10. Point of Climb, Base.
 11. Initial Point, P/T, SCHLACKENWERTH (50°19'N, 12°57'E). S/T, same. L/R, MANETIN.
 12. Axis of Attack, P/T and S/T, 64°N. L/R, 166°N.
 13. Bombing Formation, 9 ship front of 9 ship boxes for all groups.
 14. Base Altitude, 21,600'.
 15. Bombing Altitudes, A-22,100; B-22,200; C-22,000; D-21600.
 16. Indicated Bombing Speed, 180.
 17. Rally, Right to 120° until out of fl/k. L/R, slight left. Speed, 170.
 18. Route Back, Rally to RALPT - PRIEM (49°42'N, 14°01'E) to TP - SEEWALCHER, then reciprocal to Base.
 19. Radio Procedure:
 - a. Frequencies, Command on Op. frequency. VHF Channel in accordance with SP 28-1. Leaders will call BUTTO on channel "B".
 - b. Call signs,

736-R/T, MIDDLE	737-R/T, DARTBOMB	738-R/T, WHITESAIL	739-R/T, 6FLASERS
W/T, ZKO	W/T, FDM	W/T, VAN	W/T, GAX
 - c. Collective call signs for Bombers, 455th-PIXIE THREE ONE, 456th-PIXIE THREE TWO, 454th-PIXIE THREE THREE, 459th-PIXIE THREE FOUR.
 - d. Collective Call Signs for Fighters, KIDDIES with numbered suffixes in order of contact with bomber formation.
 - e. Recall signal, PLANTER.
 20. Air-Sea Rescue, VHF Channel "A". Radio Operators 4535 KC.
 21. Signals for period,

Time	Cartridge	Letter	Color	Challenge
0600-1200	Y-Y	X (X-Ray)	White	P (Peter)
1200-1800	R-Y	L (Lovo)	White	Q (Queen)
- Miscellaneous Information: IFF off at 43°N and on again at 44°N....Gas tanks will be topped off after preflight. Every effort will be made to conserve fuel and oxygen supply....AF formation will be a column of Wings with 5th Wing leading, 49th Wing second, 30th Wing third and 47th Wing last....Maximum Pathfinder will lead all Gps....Each A/C of A, B, and C boxes will lead three c-tons of window. Dispensing will begin 2 minutes before IP at the rate of 6 units every 20 seconds and will continue until clear of fl/k area....Box

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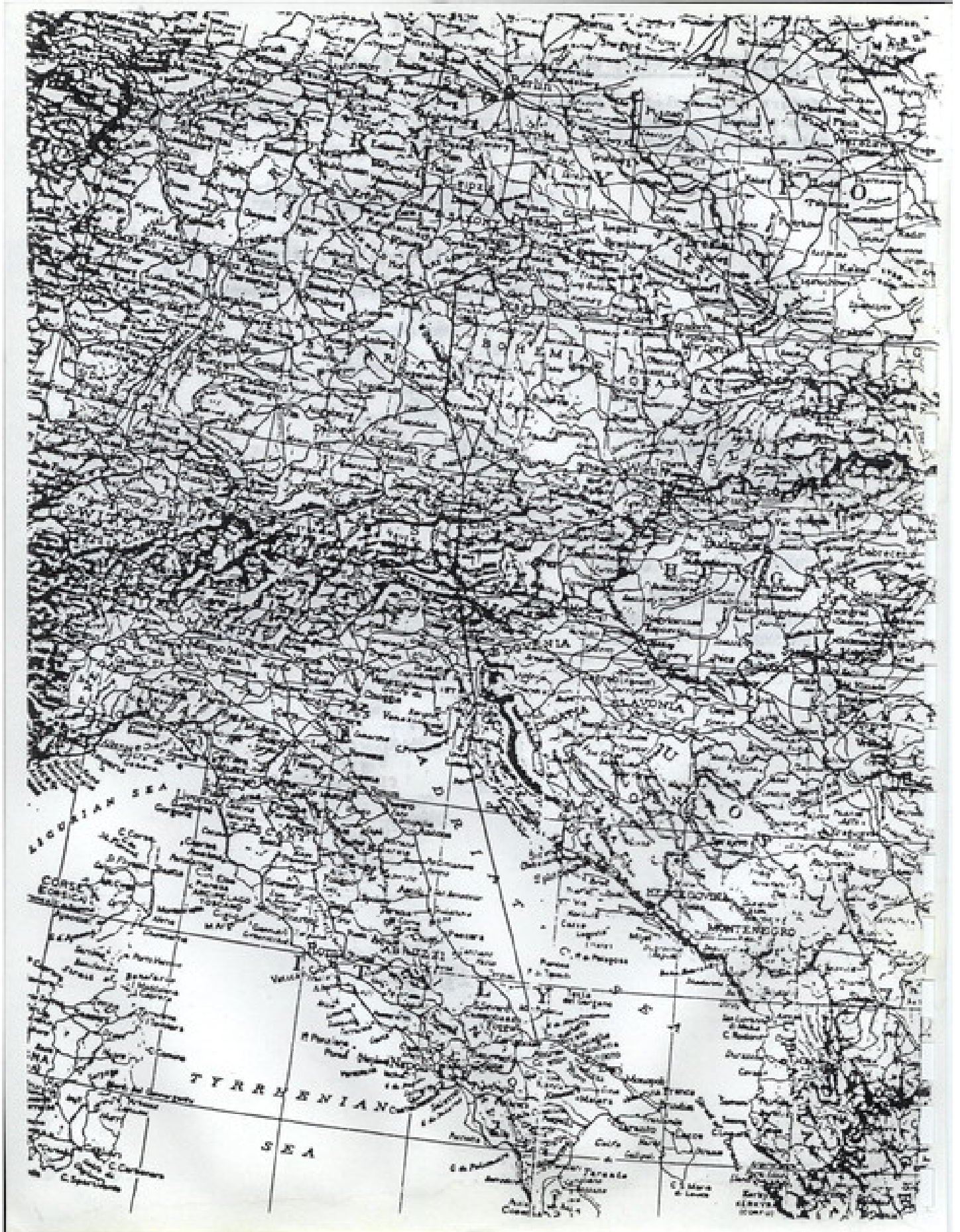
Operations Order #195, Battle Order, 21 July 1944, Cont'd.

leaders will fly close formation on "A" box on the bomb run to insure a close bomb pattern....Targets may be expected to be smoke covered and Gps will be prepared to employ synchronous bombing method.

FORMATION SET-UP FOR 21 JULY 1944

		790	B	M	F
		8182	GRIMES-Hillis, Scroff, Thompson		
		YEOMANS	PHILLIPS-P. Thompson, Holman		
		377	BRADBURY		
		8362	KUHLMAN	0246	HUBERT
		278	MASON		
	8489	881	JENSEN	210	278
	ROBINETTE		BUTTS		ANDERSON
204				458	387
HILDEBRANDT	8914			HAYNIE	DOERING
	BROOKS				466
8509					WARDLAN
MILLHOLLANT				193	337
0315	288			CRANLEY	CONTELL
THOMPSON	CLARK				
132					
SCHUESSLER					RUUGE
8432	0324			581	312
POLTYSKY	EGAN			REEVES	KENNEDY
		8461			
		KILLONIX			
	8423	2311			
	BAKER	HUGHES			
	2307				
	KIRTLAND				
304	316				
MOGIER	CLOWNINGER				
	080				
	JENYEN				
	205				
	HALL				

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olive drab ones now, just about all bright aluminum. I had heard an officer remark about there being nine of the original crews left in the 454th.

Borecki and Robinette were conversing about the cloud cover under us as we started over the Mountains. This is where you hit the down drafts, where the floor tends to drop out from under you in the rough air. With our plane leading the low box, Borecki is plotting the route. He has to know precisely where we are, in the event we have to assume the lead for the Group.

Johnson and Robinette discuss number four engine, the cowl flaps are not wanting to function normally. The engine is running a little hot. All I can hear is the steady drone of the four engines. Smitty is constantly rotating the ball, watching. Now Borecki gives Robinette a new heading, Verkamp calls he's seeing some flak off to our right. I keep looking out the left waist for specks and notice how cold it is getting. I rub and slap my hands together and keep the circulation going.

Time passes, then Borecki calls ten minutes to I.P. That's our signal to get the cartons ready, then in five minutes I start dispensing the window letting it roll out of my glove and separate in the slip stream. The bomb doors roll up. I look forward and down into lots of white clouds, then the clouds turn black with the flak explosions. The black explosions surround us. I keep tossing the window out and watching the flak bursts. Would the flak be a lot worse if there was no window thrown out at all, I wonder? Flak remains intense until bombs are dropped, then we start the wide turn to the right and the flak begins to disappear. Off to our left black smoke is at our altitude. Robinette calls for any battle damage, everyone reports okay. Robinette turns the intercom to Command to hear if other Groups are being attacked. There are damaged planes and stragglers right off the target and the speed is reduced. They had to try and move into Groups heading south for protection. Now we're getting reports of Groups getting hit with German Fighters. A few miles south there's an impressive dog fight off to our left. We're all straining our eyes looking for specks that could become an enemy fighter. We're down to 18,000 feet, but have to maintain that until we hit the coast and hope our gas supply lasts. After about an hour we're letting down. Someone calls there's the Adriatic up ahead. Steinberg is hungry and calls for tomato juice and a K-ration. At 12,000 feet I get off oxygen and start serving the guys a glass. Our engineer is checking the gas supply. All at once Vargas starts singing in Spanish over the intercom. Robinette tells him to shut up, then other guys wanted to talk, this being our last mission. Now Smitty cranks the ball around and gets out smiling all over. I give him some juice and a K-ration and he curls up on a pile of flak suits.

Before we get to the field, Robinette says, this is your landing Johnny. Once in the landing pattern, Robinette reads off the landing check list to him, Johnny lines up 8489 to the runway and we glide in, bounce easy, then roll on down the runway for the last time. Once on the ground at our hard stand the first thing Smitty and Verkamp do is get down and kiss mother earth. Just then the jeep comes by with two Officers and they break out the pain killer. Now all of us stand around and relax

joking with each other. It's a great feeling to have fifty missions in. Our crew chief, Maggaio extends his congratulations to all of us on completing our missions and was happy we brought his prize airplane home one last time. All of us figured "NINE OLD MEN" had seen its last mission.

Briefing is just standard procedure, then we head for the mail room. We sat around a few days, then we're notified to pack all our things, we're shipping out the next day. Six by six's take us over to Naples, south of town to the large race track where many tents will house us until a convoy of ships are assembled to take us back to the United States.

As soon as we were assigned a tent for our living quarters, we were ordered to bring our belongings over to a large open area, then empty our B-4 bag and barracks bags onto blankets spread out on the ground. The Non-Coms looked through everything and took most everything we possessed. I had a new chest type parachute, my forty five automatic, trench knife, all my flying gear and much of my clothing, all repossessed by these guys. They would no doubt open their own Army Surplus store back in the States after the war was over. They told us we didn't need much going home on the boat.

The first night of our stay in Naples, one lone German attack bomber came over and made a run on the harbor installations and we witnessed a fantastic display of fireworks. The tracers and different colored exploding shells were something to see.

For the next several days we relaxed. There were ball games going on if you wanted to play, and movies in the evenings. They refused to give up passes to Naples. The chow wasn't the best, more C-Rations but we were given plenty of fruit which we needed. There were card games and bull sessions.

When our turn came to board the ships, we were trucked to the port of embarkation and marched up the gang planks. There were many decks to this ship, it was a large converted ocean liner. I had a top bunk on the second deck down and it took all day to load the ship.

During the night our ship moved out from its berth into open water. The next morning there were ships all around us as the convoy formed, fifteen ships, plus a small aircraft carrier with a dozen fighters on deck, it was on our port side. Then there were several destroyer escort vessels that could move very fast and their job was to seek out and attack any submarines that attack the convoy.

The top deck of our ship was for people with rank. There were also maybe sixty Wacs and Nurses that had become pregnant and had their ticket home. They paraded the top deck and we watched from below. You could see some officers too that had become wounded and were going home. The food was better than we were used to, but you ate standing up and you were rushed through because of the large amount of men. A few guys had musical instruments and we were entertained that way, but there were many poker and crap games going on too. I'm sure some guys would get off the boat with a bundle.

The weather was beautiful going through the Med. The hot sun and the sea breeze was making all of us well tanned and with being in southern Italy all summer I looked like an Italian more than anything else.

The Rock of Gibraltar came into view long before we got to it. It was huge with towns built high up on the rock. It took several hours to pass it and then we came into the open ocean. We weren't in the open Atlantic too long until a storm struck and it stayed with us two days. There was lots of seasickness with the ships rolling from side to side. The first day of the storm no one was allowed on deck. I went out just for a look, the aircraft carrier on our port side was riding it out, but the waves were sweeping the deck, going over the planes that were stacked on one end. I heard some sailors talking about the zig zag course we were on to make it more difficult for German subs to track us. The small destroyer escorts were dashing here and there always busy.

The second day the storm had slowed down some. You could go on deck, but there were ropes here and there to hold on to. The third morning we came on deck to bright sunshine, the storm had moved away.

Rumors were thick of German subs being sighted, but only rumors. One day one of our submarines surfaced a little ways off, it hooked up to the flag ship in front of us and with the long lines transferred parcels to the flag ship, then moved away and dived.

The only way to get exercise was to walk on the deck. Church service was held on our deck at the rear of the ship on Sunday. Any major news was either posted on bulletin boards or public announcements over the radio.

Every day we could see the smoke of ships off in the distance crossing one way or the other. I liked to stand by the rail and watch the flying fish going from wave to wave. Before land was in sight, the gulls showed up and stayed with the ships, all the time coming back on the ship, the big question in my mind was where I would be sent after my furlough. Then I told myself, take each day as it comes.

The greatest view any American will ever have is when the Statue of Liberty on Bedlow Island, New York comes into view. It had taken our convoy of ships fourteen days to sail from Naples, Italy to New York City, New York.

When the ships docked, there were bands playing and thousands of people crowding around, some waving little American flags. The people of rank and all wounded personnel were taken off the ship first, then we were taken by train to Camp Kilmer, New Jersey. The first thing I did was send Mom and Dad a telegram telling them I would be home very soon. Then I sent my sister Milly a telegram saying I would see them soon and I expected a party. The date was September 2, 1944.

The headlines carried the story of a very familiar man to all of us Our Lieut. Col. James Gunn III. Some of the newspaper stories varied, this story was in the New York Times paper.

1,126 ALLIED FLIERS GO FROM RUMANIA

Fleets of Flying Fortresses on Trips to Bucharest to Get Imprisoned Men

UNITED STATES FIFTEENTH AIR FORCE HEADQUARTERS, Italy, Sept. 1 (AP)—Fleets of Flying Fortresses have made a spectacular mass evacuation to Italy of 1,126 American and British airmen who had been shot down and interned in Rumania during the last year.

Of the first American airmen to land, 470 were in excellent condition, fifty were wounded, seventeen were on crutches and ten were stretcher cases. They were flown from a field three miles outside Bucharest.

Among the fliers were Second Lieut. Theodore Hastings of Wallington, N. J.; Staff Sgt. James A. Shaughnessy of Watertown, N. Y.; Tech. Sgt. Paul V. Messana of Watertown, N. Y.; Staff Sgt. Edward Flaherty of 299 Coney Island Avenue, Brooklyn; Staff Sgt. Charles L. Snyder of Rochester; Second Lieut. John Noel of Pittsford, N. J.; Staff Sgt. Joseph Cutrone of 1704 Jerome Avenue, Bronx; Flight Officer Sidney Fisher of Albany; Second Lieut. Charles M. Paglieri of Little Falls, N. J., and Lieut. Marvin Lorber of Buffalo.

[A Columbia Broadcasting System broadcast from Rome, listed Lieut. Howard Anderson of 1243 Fugate Street, New York, and Lieut. William Macintosh of Niagara Falls.]

As the big bombers rumbled to a halt on the runways at the base, gaunt figures poured out and suddenly were swept by delirium—shouting, cheering and falling into each others' arms.

Behind their station lay a grim story of one of the great and decisive battles of the war—the air battle to knock out Hitler's oilAchilles at Ploesti. During this battle for Ploesti more than 2,000 Allied airmen were shot down and the loss in planes was at least 270, of which 223 were bombers.

The men without exception said the flak over Ploesti was the heaviest and most deadly in the world. The Germans were so adept at defense they were able to black-out the target completely by smoke long before the bombers could make a bomb run over the oil fields.

Air defense also was strong and even the fortresses making the evacuation run encountered fighter-opposition going and coming. The bombers were strongly escorted by fighters and one Mustang was shot down.

The first returning Fortress seemed scarcely to have touched its wheels to the ground before Second Lieut. James J. Mitchell of 23-48 Seventy-fifth Street, Jackson Heights, Queens, came tum-

RESCUED U. S. AIRMEN



Lieut. Col. James A. Gunn, 3d.

moment. He was a radio operator on a B-17 knocked out of the sky over Ploesti May 18 and parachuted safely into a cornfield.

As each flier checked in at the base headquarters his name and serial number were transmitted immediately to Washington so that the next of kin could be notified. Along with the Americans twenty-

nive British airmen were repatriated.

Officers and enlisted men were loaded down with Iron Crosses, Rumanian military caps and other souvenirs.

The man with the shortest combat record was Second Lieut. Robert H. Minervini of 8103 Winthrop Avenue, Chicago, Ill., who said: "I left the States May 18 and was a prisoner of war May 21.

Some of the men brought back were survivors of the low-level attack made Aug. 1, 1943, and they told harrowing tales of sailing over the target less than 200 feet off the ground, dumping their bombs and then being knocked down by deadly anti-aircraft fire.

As the personnel of a great air base lunged forward to embrace and congratulate the returning crewmen, the man whose daring exploit made their liberation possible was all but lost in the shuffle. He was Lieut. Col. James A. Gunn III of Kalamazoo, Mich., who had hidden in the fuselage of a German Messerschmitt plane and had been flown out to safety by the ace of the Rumanian air force—Capt. Carl Cantaculino, who was credited with shooting down sixty-four Allied planes before his country renounced the Axis.

When Rumania capitulated and released the Allied fliers, Colonel Gunn obtained permission to try to establish communications with officials of the Fifteenth Air Force in Italy for repatriation of the fliers.

OFF IN GUAM

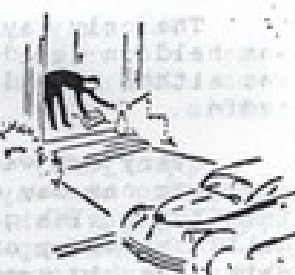
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GARSERVICE

At Camp Kilmer we weren't allowed passes off the base, but it was nice to go into a Post Exchange where you could telephone, order a hamburger and milkshake, buy gifts and talk to pretty girls.

Our new shipping orders were being typed up, so we had time on our hands. A bunch of us were over on the parade grounds when we started watching this street with red brick houses lining the street. This late Saturday afternoon while we were watching, these pretty girls were coming down the sidewalk and the German prisoners were coming out of the brick houses for their dates. The girls took their arm and would stroll along. All the G.I.'s watched this display for a while then we exploded. The fence was too strong, but there was a few hundred of us trying our best to take it down and we made a roar yelling at the Germans. The Camp Commander could not quiet us down and finally called out the Military Police for support. It was hard for us to accept the easy life the German and Italian prisoners had in the United States.

When I received my orders, I was to report to Lincoln, Nebraska for reassignment, but with a three week delay (furlough) then on to Pueblo, Colorado.

Another Sergeant from McAllister's crew, Hershall Good said he would see me there since we were ordered to the same base we could drive together, which we planned to do. At Camp Kilmer with my furlough in my pocket, I checked the train and bus schedule. The bus looked to be the best and it would drop me four miles from Deersville, Ohio. I caught the bus at 1800 Sunday night, so we had a night ride over the mountains. At 10:00 Monday morning the driver dropped me off on Route 250 and the Deersville Road. In a few minutes a young lady named Gayle McMillen turned off the 250 and picked me up and then dropped me off at the top of the hill. I thanked her and then grabbed my B-4 bag and started running down through the plum trees yelling for Mom and Dad.

