Charles Troy Courtney, Pilot
Bruce Wilkin, Co-pilot
Bernard Smukler, Navigator
Ralph L. Lewis, Bombardier
Chris Stiefvater, Engineer/Gunner
Curtis P. Nelson, Radio Operator/Gunner
Ellis P. Bergman, Waist Gunner/Photographer
Harvey Dominick, Nose Gunner (Original Singbiel)
Clifford Upham, Ball Gunner
Robert Peace, Tail Gunner

September 1944

Origina Pilot: Smokey Gunderson. Heavy smoker, like his name, relieved for medical reasons. Succeeded by Courtney soo after crew was assembled. OUT at Pueblo, Colorado. Charles Troy Courtney, our new aircraft commander, was from West Virginia, bringing with him all the grace and courtliness of the home state. He was recently married to Billie, a vivacious brunette from his home state. She and he adopted all of us as family, and ge was always intensely loyal to everyone on the crew, often defying the wrath of the upper echelon officers. He saw his responsibility to each member clearly, and was an excellent pilot. The original nose gunner was Elmer Singbiel, Detroit. Shot through the hand in Tunis with .45. Spent the rest of the war in the hospital.

Our new nose gunner, Dominick, had been shot down, evaded capture, and returned to fight another day. He told about hiding for days in a cave, and finally being adopted by a Partisan band and returned. Earl Roylance was the navigator on his original crew, and he also turned up later with tales of a Partisan band, and a hearty woman who nursed him back to health, carrying his pack for him, and generally looking after him.

The flight over:

We picked up B-24J, #449598. Fresh from Ford's Willow Run plant, and powered by four Pratt & Whitney R1830's, sporting the decals of their maker, Chevrolet! The tires were frozen to the runway so our first take-off was rather bumpy. After a short (relatively) flight, we were ready to go. Our route was to be: Grenier, N.H., Gander, Newfoundland, The Azores, Marrakech, across the Atlas Mountains, Oran (unscheduled – weather), Tunis (El Aouina) and finally Torretta, Italy. The first leg was uneventful. At Grenier, the tanks were drained and refilled, and other systems checked. We landed at Gander in the evening in a light snow storm. Taking off early in the morning for the Azores, we encountered the forbidding North Atlantic weather. First, we were between two layers of Stratus which were not horizontal at all making us continually check our flight instruments to stay level and on course. Icing conditions soon forced us to climb, which the silver bird did with amazing ease considering the load. At 32,000 feet, I looked back and saw the engineer completely unconscious – his oxygen station was empty. Also, calls to the bombardier were unanswered – he had gone to sleep during the climb and passed out. I quickly called Ellis Bregman, wait gunner, and he brought up a walk-around bottle reviving Steve. The navigator revived Lewis and we felt really

relieved. Meanwhile, Courtney had been flying the airplane, threading his way between towering cumulus and trying to maintain a reasonable course.

Our P.I.F.'s had told us that "cumulus-nimbus sometimes reached a height of 30,000 feet." Today we know that they reach 60,000 feet.

Finally, we let down to about 1,000 feet, the icing disappeared, we picked up the ADF fromm the Azores, and the rest of the flight was easy. In typical British language, the challenge or password was, "Is your cockerel crowing?" which meant "Is your IFF turned on?" I don't remember a challenge as we coasted in over the quaint landscape dotted with the peculiar cone-shaped rock granaries.

The climate here was soft,, misty, and relatively warm. We got to see little of the villages, though some of the crew went swimming on one of the beaches.

Next stop was Marrakech, in Morocco. I remember little of the base because we were busy getting fed, finding a place to sleep, and trying to pick up a few necessities from the PX. About this time we began to realize what it meant to be transient – most amenities were reserved for permanent party, and we were left to do without the usual candy bars, etc.

The leg to Tunis was interrupted by increasingly bad weather – we had a good flight over the Atlas Mountains and across some desert to the northern coast, but the weather got very bad until we were a few hundred feet off the water and we finally settled for Oran some distance from Tunis. The field was inundated by several days of rain and following instructions from the tower, we sank into the nearest mud hole. A Limey came out assuring us he would get us out, but all he did was to get us in deeper. Finally a tractor fit for the job came out and freed us and it continued to rain adding to the mud.

After a couple of days, we made the easy flight east to Tunis where it continued to rain day and night.

The flight up into Italy was uneventful as Sicily had already been taken and Mt. Aetna was still smoking away as it had for a thousand years of history.

We arrived late after dark at what our navigator said was Torretta. A jeep found us soon in the blowing rain, the sign "Follow Me" clear in our landing lights. After a short conversation on the radio, we were instructed to fly across the river to the east and land there. We did.

Our reception there was more hospitable – little did we know at the time that they wanted our aircraft, a brand new B-24 J with only an Atlantic flight on the Chevrolet R1800 Pratt-Whitneys. After finding a tent and some blankets and being exposed to some frightening combat photos (for sale by the local ground crew) we went to sleep. Early the next morning, we grabbed some breakfast and were loaded into a covered 6x6. The river had flooded and washed out the nearby bridge so we were to spend all morning riding up river to the nearest usable bridge to be delivered back to the place where we had landed the night before. It was still raining.

We had loaded the B-24 with almost everything we needed including wooden bulkheads to reinforce the bomb bay doors in case we had to ditch. But one thing we didn't give up was our 20 cases of K-rations. We managed to keep some 10 cases which turned out to be a wise move. The next day, someone flew out ship across the river where it was assigned to a squadron more needy than ours.

A new combat crew, born into an existing squadron, is an orphan of sorts. The older crews are wondering how good you are at flying close formations and how cool you'll be on the first mission. Also, they've been through the experience of losing close friends and they take their good time about making new ones. So unless you meet some old fellow crewmen, it's a gradual process.

We were spread out among several tents, using the beds (cots) of those either on leave or MIA. I was given a bunk in a 4-man tent with Joe Hooper (Pilot), Fred Bennehoff, Bombardier and Bud Beach, Navigator.

The co-pilot, MacDonald, was on sick call, supposedly because he couldn't fly a B-24. Superstitiously, he was right. I was received in a gracious manner by these fine people, little knowing that I was to fly with them when not flying with my regular crew.

I flew my first mission with a seasoned pilot whose name was Nixon. It was a real initiation. I remember over the target looking up and to the left at a flight of B-17s about 3,000 feet above us, and envying their extra altitude. That didn't help – suddenly there was a direct hit, and three of them exploded in a ball of AV gas aflame, burning chutes emerging too fast to count.

Back at the runway, I had my first stiff drink of something that did little to erase the events of the last 10 hours, but did put me to sleep in the tent.

Joe Hooper:

I flew two missions with the Hooper crew. On the second, we had just come off the target and were being led by some expert gunners firing the typical four bursts at a time, when suddenly the cockpit was filled with acrid smoke. I called Arnie, the engineer and told him I could identify the fire as electrical, and to grab an extinguisher, which he did. Glancing over at Hooper, I saw that he was half out of his coffin seat with his chest pack on. With the fire extinguisher's help, Arnie soon cleared the air of smoke and we discovered that Hooper, at the beginning of the bomb run had clipped on one catch of his chest chute leaving the parachute resting on the landing gear solenoid, thus overheating the solenoid and filling the flight deck and nose compartment with smoke. So much for fooling around with electricity as a kid – the smells stay with you for a lifetime.

Two missions later, I was back with my old crew, and Hooper was on out left wing. Coming off the target, their ship had one engine out and one smoking as it left formation, unable to keep up. We called "Pine Tree," which was the fighter cover when it was there, but we never saw nor heard of the Hooper crew again. This was one of our big morale problems, I think, because of the secrecy surrounding escape routes and sympathetic

allies. Sometimes crews would vanish only to show up months later with Walthers and scary tales. And sometimes with fragments of the parachutes that had saved their lives.

Merle Schick and co-pilot Calvert were a couple of examples. One of the crews we knew well was also stationed in our general area, but in another group. The pilot and co-pilot were Merle Schick and Calvert. The bombardier was K. D. (Redhead) Limbacher. The others I have forgotten. In February we were visiting the oil refineries up around Vienna several times a week. The Russians were advancing from the east, and heavy guns, as they were drawn back, were concentrated around the most valuable resources, oil refineries. One day we heard that Schick and his crew were missing. A couple of months later, Schick and Calvert turned up at the squadron, sporting pieces of their chutes and a couple of Walthers (premium German side arms) and with a strange story of survival. They had been badly shot up over Vienna and had headed for the Russian front to the east. Losing altitude fast, they approached the Hungarian border and waiting until the last possible moment, bailed the crew out, and got out last. They landed in the middle of Lake Balaton, a long narrow body of water, and were besieged by intermittent fire from both sides so all they could do was hunker down and wait until dark. Finally, the Russians came out to rescue them. All the rest of the crew survived also, but were on the western side and spent the rest of the war in a Stalag Luft. They visited Budapest and were treated to a concert by their Russian allies though what they had asked for was the Consul, not a concert! Eventually everything was worked out and they were sent back to their squadron to finish out the war.

Hooper and crew never showed up. Without any tent-mates, I and the rest of our commissioned crew were given a tent together. From that time on, we owned a tent of our own.

Forty years later I learned that Hooper and his crew, including MacDonald, were killed on that day and were forever in the cemetery at Epinal.

People not forgotten:

Greg Mazza. One early morning after picking up all our gear and piling into the truck to be taken out to the aircraft, I was sitting across from Mazza. Still half asleep, he took out his .45, cycled the slide and squeezed the trigger. Fortunately he pointed at the floor of the truck and the slug hit just between my feet. That woke all of us up.

Wasil Glushko. Wasil was our substitute bombardier on one mission. Approaching the I.P., in attempting to open the bomb bay doors, he accidentally salvoed the bomb load through the doors. We made the run, then pulled out to the side fearing that the dangling doors would come off and cut the following aircraft in two. Finally the doors, swinging in the slipstream, came off and we finished the mission with the roar of the open bay in our ears. It was colder than usual that day. We were really glad to get our regular bombardier, Ralph Lewis, back from Nose Turret Navigation School in Bari!

Ned Vahldieck. One of the younger captains in our group. I remember he led us around twice at Vienna in order to make a good run. But he really gained fame when he made a

low pass over the squadron and blew down a couple of tents. I think he was fined $10.00 for this transgression.

We used to take our laundry to a poor family in Cerignola three or four miles to the east nearer the coast. One day, walking home, we passed the "bone yard," a junkyard where there was a graveyard of old aircraft wings, fuselages and various parts groaning in the cold wind. The road passed by the end of a runway belonging to another group and as we walked by, an aircraft was on final returning from the oil refineries around Vienna. The waist gunners waved only a few yards away, no doubt glad to be back. The instant the craft touched down, there was a tremendous explosion and a sheet of flame, flowed by a fireball and exploding ammunition. A bomb had hung up apparently, and jarred loose upon touchdown. It was the task of our bombardier, Ralph Lewis, to walk out on the catwalk to make sure nothing had hung up, and if it had, he risked life and limb to somehow kick the recalcitrant object out.

One day we were carrying 100 pounders (quite a few) and when we dropped, there was a terrific explosion immediately below us. Shrapnel came up through the bomb bay bending several shackles and generally raising hell. Our explanation at the time was that at least two of the bombs had tumbled and hit together armed, and done what bombs were supposed to do. This may have been the time the hydraulic tank was hit and our engineer, Christ Stiefvater, patched it with chewing gum which immediately froze. This was not an original remedy, but Steve kept the gum handy.