

The Last Flight of Crew #14

December 17, 1944
15th AAF 49th Wing 461st B.G.
765th Squadron
Flying out of Cerignola, Italy - near
Foggia.

By:

Trefry A. Ross, S/Sgt., Radio operator, right waist gunner. Written on December 17, 1976. 32 years have elapsed so my narrative may have a few discrepancies; although I doubt it, as it seems like it happened yesterday, and most of the happening is quite vivid in my memory.

"Alright you guys, outa the sack. Come on, let's go! Keerist! You wanna sleep all day - come on, let's go — Jesus, watta bunch!" My eyes open slowly, and staring at me in the dark is the orderly with his flashlight. It's 3:00 a.m. in the morning and time for another flight over enemy territory. I lie there trying vainly to remove my body from my warm sack; and sack it was. In order to keep warm we (the enlisted men anyway) used to crawl into our mattress covers - which in essence were sacks - this way we could keep a little warmer. The original "Italian sleeping bag" You might call it. Anyway I'm lying there listening to "Put-put" get the razzing from Frank. Put-put is Fred Gaul, the flight engineer, and called Put-put because one of his jobs is to fire up the little gasoline engine (like a power mower) which powers the airplane until the engines are started. Frank Yesia, the ball gunner, is the wise guy. Frank is from Cicero, Illinois, home of the gangsters, and although Frank is far from the so-called "tough nut", he is still held in awe by a few of us as having come from that tough part of Chicago - Al Capone's old stomping grounds. Anyway - he's needling Put-put - the youngest on the crew, and the "goat". We all have a good laugh and finally manage to shake ourselves loose from the sacks.

Our enlisted men's tent was comprised of 6 men: Thomas Deibert, S/Sgt., top turret gunner; Joe Mergo, S/Sgt., tail gunner; Roy Doe, Sgt., nose gunner; Frank Yesia, Cpl./ ball gunner; Fred Gaul, Sgt., flight engineer - waist gunner; and myself, right waist gunner - radio operator. We were a close knit crew. I think we were possibly the most congenial crew in Italy. We all got along great. The officers, who lived in a separate tent in another part of the airfield, were considered by us as "regular guys". They were a good group. I know this "comaraderie" was not universal. I firmly believe we had a unique crew, and it was a shame it all came to an end this 17th day of December 1944.

So, here we are struggling into our clothes, each man dressing as he saw fit - it was an informal uniform we wore, we weren't going to stand inspection or bow before the C.O., so we chose the most comfortable and warmest clothing each

preferred. I usually wore my O.D.'s (wool shirt and pants) for warmth. We later picked up our electrically heated suits, parachutes and oxygen masks at the flight line. We finally get dressed and stagger over to the mess hall for breakfast. One thing I can say about combat crews and combat flying - we never wanted for a warm place to sleep or good things to eat. It was hell over the target, but, before and after, we had it pretty damned good! So here we are, eating our eggs and bacon, plenty of it, along with coffee and toast, and razzing each other about last night. Wow! What a night that was. First, I'd like to explain how it was when we weren't flying. One night we had movies or played ping-pong. The next night the Enlisted Mens Club was open. So, on alternate nights, it was either movies or the Enlisted Mens Club. The movies weren't bad, held outdoors, usually an old Betty Grable or Bob Hope movie, but anything was ok as long as it had a few laughs in it. The Enlisted Mens Club was just the mess hall, after 8:00 p.m. It was a bar, period, but the drinks were cheap enough - 50¢ each, or 3 for a dollar. Needless to say, we all ordered 3 at a time. There wasn't much choice. I can't remember for sure what else there was, but I know we always had 101 proof British Rum and grapefruit juice from the kitchen. It made a potent drink. At 3 for a dollar it didn't take many to relieve our frustrations and anxieties. So, at breakfast this morning we were discussing the last night's events. It wasn't much - after about 6, or 9, or 12 rum and grapefruits we were feeling no pain. Roy Doe was singing over and over, "Roll me over in the clover, lay me down and do it again, roll me over in the clover, lay me down and do it again--". I can still see it as plain as yesterday, and hear Roy singing. It wasn't long before he was out of it, so we got the stretcher and lugged him home to the tent. Knowing 3:00 a.m. was going to come around quite soon, we all joined Roy and flaked out. So here were a few hours later, eating like nothing had happened, (I wish I could do it now) and razzing each other.

Breakfast over, we had to go the general briefing for the flight and then we went to our respective special briefings. My Radio Operator briefing usually consisted of frequencies for the day, and I picked up my chaff (aluminum foil) which I threw out over the target to foul up the enemy radar. Next stop was the plane. Each man had a specific job to do - a general pre-flight. We checked our guns, loaded them — I checked the radio equipment, etc. We put on our electrically heated suits - which were a thin suit, similar to thermal underwear, laced with wiring and had a plug which we plugged into a jack on the airplane. Over the

electrically heated suit we put on a heavy jacket and pants which protected the relatively thin and fragile electric suit and was heavy enough to protect one from the cold in the event of an electric failure - even though it seemed as if you were freezing to death. So here we were, all dressed up and no place to go, as it were.

Tom Qualman, the navigator, comes by and says, "Well, it looks like we are sitting around here for awhile. The magneto on #3 is kaput and we'll have to wait for it to be fixed." Before long we are wondering if we are going to make it. You'd think we'd be tickled pink to be able to abort, even before leaving the ground, but as I had said before, we weren't a "normal" crew. Even when we had first arrived in Italy we wanted to fly the very next day, but training and other events took precedence over foolish actions. So, even after a good number of missions, we were still itching to fly and perform our foolish action. Finally came the order to get ready. We were going to fly! If we could get off and catch up with the rest of the group we could go. Keerist! You'd think we were going on a picnic instead of a deadly bomb run.

We're off, climbing through the grey overcast to find the sun at 20,000 plus. Where is everyone? Jesus! - we're all alone, we'll never make it - but we try. Soon, far out over the Adriatic, we spot the rest of the group and try to catch up. We are heading for Bleckhammer - the oil refineries - the dreaded target - No. 2 on the list, right after Berlin. The second toughest, and the longest distance from Foggia. All of a sudden I'm feeling cold. What the hell, my electric suit must be going out. Keerist! It's freezing! About this time, I look out the left waist window and see the group way off to our left. I'm to myself what the hell they are doing way over there, and here we are flying tail-end Charlie when we should be right wing (as we had worked our way up), but having left the ground late due to magneto trouble we had to settle for what we could grab and that was easing into the slot at the ass end.

I couldn't help but think about what we had been through, all the previous missions, all the flack, all the tensions, watching the others go down, fail to come back, working our way up from tail-end Charlie to right wing. Boy! Only one more to go and we would be squadron leader! I recalled the first few days, when I talked with some of the crews that had been here for awhile. We were talking about R & R (that's short for "rest and rehabilitation"). It was a known fact that our rest camp was on the Isle of Capri, on the far side of Italy from where we were. So, I innocently ask - "Well, how is it on the Isle of Capri - how's the wine