
* 100 Pound thin steel sand filled bombs with black powder in the nose to give off black smoke.

Rum Runner was repaired by the service squadron and returned to duty. It is doubtful that this aircraft survived the war as at one time because of severe losses the 824 squadron was reduced to just five aircraft. Normal complement was twelve, but often was as high as 20 aircraft. "Ramp Rooster" was damaged by flak and fighters on 17 December 1944, and salvaged a few days later. On average each original aircraft was replaced three times in the one year the 484th Bomb Group was operational.

Wishing you the best for a most successful new work.

Sincerely,
Bud Markel

Cheboygan, MI
Dear Bud:

I noticed in the Summer-Fall 1994 (#26) issue of the Torretta Flyer that M/Sgt John S. Vnuk passed away. My first meeting with John Vnuk is one I will never forget. It happened in October 1943 when I was assigned to the 824th Squadron.

I came to Harvard, Nebraska from Salt Lake City Air Base via a delay enroute, which I used to go back to Cleveland, Ohio to visit my new bride of several weeks. When I reported to the 824th Squadron orderly room, First Sergeant Shein told me to take my stuff out to the nearest barracks and find a bunk. There was not a soul in sight and I began to unpack my things into a foot locker, when in comes a soldier, like I'd never seen before. This man had obviously been around for awhile, because he had stripes up one arm and down the other.

You'll have to understand my awe since I was a mere Pfc. after being in the service for all of 7 months. I learned later that John had been part of an anti-sub patrol group up in Westover, MA. I believe, and many of these men formed the cadre for the 824th Squadron and possibly others in the 484th Group.

Anyway, I introduced myself. The first thing John said to me was an inquisitive "What are you doing here"? I explained to him that I had just come from a delay enroute and was assigned to the 824th Sq.

He said "It doesn't make any difference, just go over to the orderly room and get orders for a furlough, because this will be your last for some time to come." Apparently he knew a lot more than I did about my future. I told John I couldn't afford to go on furlough because I had spent my last dollar to get back to Harvard and I was broke. Without any further discussion, John said "How much would it take for you to get back home and return." I was taken aback by his question, never having seen this man before and wondering what his motive might be.

He then told me we were assembling for "phase training" in preparation for going overseas and that there would be no more trips home. I had no idea what that "last trip" home might cost me but after some discussion, we arrived at a number. John then reached for his wallet and handed me the money (my memory tells me it was \$100). All I knew was it was a lot of money to be handed to a total stranger without a handshake or I.O.U. The money meant more to me than the monetary value printed on the notes.

How could a total stranger be so generous? I can remember saying something like "I don't know when I'll be able to pay you back on my pay as a Pfc." He said he wasn't worried and he'd see me when I

got back. With that I went back to the orderly room and got my papers for furlough and got right back on the train for Cleveland the following day.

John and I saw one another at the Harvard Air Base during the three months or so that we trained there and I paid him back a little at a time each month till I repaid him in full. I know also it wasn't very much each month because my wife came out to join me and I had to pay her room rent. Then we went over to Italy and although John worked on the flight line and I in the Operations Section, we saw one another at the squadron area practically every day for the 18 months we were over there.

This little story about my first encounter with M/Sgt. John S. Vnuk happened some 52 years ago.

Regards,
Gordon Graham

Newport Beach, CA
Dear Bud:

Mike thought you would find this article interesting, it was in one of our local papers:

"More than a half century since he and his bomber crew were shot out of the Austrian sky and taken prisoner, Mike Hartunian's World War II odyssey is finally coming to a close. The 73-year old retired Newport Beach resident, who for years has been searching for the village near Vienna where he and his comrades were captured in 1945, has recently received correspondence from an Austrian man who recalls in detail the events of that harrowing day.

The new information provided by Franz Dechant, a retired postal worker from Fels Am Wagram in Austria, gives closure to Hartunian's story, a remarkable tale of two men whose paths twice have crossed in the unlikely of circumstances.

From my residence, I saw the... hit bomber circling over Kirchberg Am Wagram and the crew bailing out with parachutes," wrote Dechant, who was 13 when he witnessed the event. "It was on Jan. 15, 1945, at noon time."

Fifty years later, Dechant would learn from Hartunian that the plane was on a bombing run toward Vienna when ground fire disabled two of its four engines. Leaping through the open bomb bay doors at 12,000 feet, Hartunian, who was 23 and a bombardier aboard the 65,000 pound bomber, recalled that he drifted for what seemed like forever before landing in a vineyard outside Kirchberg.

Hartunian stood up and saw the mountains around him, the reality dawning on him that he was now trapped miles behind enemy lines. I saw a man down the road calling to me in German, saying 'come ze here, come ze here,' " Hartunian said. "Well, I looked around and realized that I had nowhere to go, so I started walking toward him." Hartunian was disarmed and taken to a house in Kirchberg, where he was reunited with Ahearn. It was there that he first encountered the young Dechant.

After awhile, a boy whom I figured to be about 12 years old came inside with a parachute," Hartunian said. "He saw my pistol on the table and picked it up, examining it like he knew something about weapons. There were three women in the room who were terribly excited about the parachute, because it was made of nylon."

Dechant would later describe to Hartunian how the downed bomber and the materials on board were scavenged by the war