

Combat History of Crew #147-29

By Dick Olson

On June 13, 1944 the 484th Bomb Group of the Fifteenth Air Force, headquartered at Torretta in southern Italy, earned the first of two Presidential Unit Citations for flying a costly mission to Innsbruck, Austria. The group lost 6 B-24s on the raid, including #42-94741, "Vivacious Lady". This is the story of the plane and its crew as told to the son of the co-pilot, Richard Olson, by the surviving crew members.

We were a good crew and we did some fancy flying," John Hassan told me. He was the navigator on the crew and he got his first taste of combat at Hickam Field on Dec. 7, 1941 when the Japanese attacked the base. He witnessed the destruction of the first B-24 lost in the war, a B-24A that was parked on the ramp outside the control tower where he was working as a radio operator.

"We were in combat crew training at Gowen Field in Boise, Idaho and the base commander was Colonel John "Killer" Kane." Kane had won the Congressional Medal of Honor for leading one of the groups that bombed the oil refineries at Ploesti, Romania in the famous low-level raid known as Tidal Wave.

"Training was almost as dangerous as combat," John said. "One snowy night we were on our takeoff roll when we blew a main gear tire at 65 mph. You normally don't survive something like that but your dad and our original pilot, John Kelly, kept the plane on the runway and under control and they finally got us stopped.

"John Kelly mentioned to me that he was eating in the mess hall one night when Col. Kane asked him what he thought of the training operation. 'For one thing,' Kelly told him, 'The tires on the planes are bald' and Kane replied, 'Well, we'll see about that!' There's Col. Kane with his Congressional Medal and John Kelly telling him to get some tires for the planes," John Hassan laughed. "Kelly is just a good guy with a big heart and a lot of courage. Well, your dad was the same way; He saved my life three times while we were together. They were men of such great personal courage that you weren't going to give them any BS or push them around. They just wanted to do their job to the best of their ability, but don't push!"

Walter Chapman, the bombardier on the crew, remembered a humorous story about a training session with Tommy guns at the rifle range. "We were told to only shoot them on semi-automatic, but your dad talked us into firing them from the hip on full automatic. We figured he learned that growing up in Chicago. We could have gotten in big trouble with the range officer, but we didn't care. Another thing I remember was that we had about 20 practice bombs that we needed to drop at night in order to finish our train-



POW camp photo of Richard Olson Sr

ing. We flew up to the range but they had turned the lights out on us. Then, we found that some of the bombs had frozen to the shackles. Al Houpt, our top turret gunner, and I ripped the bombs from the shackles and dropped them out of the bomb bay by hand. I went ahead and scored them as hits on the bombing range and we flew back to the base. I often wondered if we would have been sent overseas if we had returned to base with our practice bombs."

In mid-April, the crew went by train to Topeka and picked up a brand new B-24H, which they named Liberty Belle. John Hassan said they left Topeka for Morrison Field in Florida, flying loosely with 8 other planes that all left at about the same time. "A pilot was on his intercom and I distinctly heard him telling everyone on his crew to sit still and quit smoking be-

cause they were going to do a fuel transfer. About 2 minutes later one of the planes exploded in a big orange flash near Nashville, Tennessee. "Your dad and I reported that at Morrison Field but I never heard another thing about it."

I told John I had seen a picture of the fuel transfer pump for a B-24 and that it looked like something to be afraid of. "Listen," he laughed, "If your dad was alive he would tell you there was plenty to be afraid of on a B-24. One thing he used to say was 'You look like you're feeling pretty good about the situation and that's because you don't know how bad things really are. Get back to worrying like you should!'" The longest leg on the trip to Italy was the 16-hour flight from Fortaleza, Brazil to Dakar in West Africa. John Kelly told me "Hassan did a great job navigating across. I don't think we were more than a half-mile off course the entire trip." Bill Snyder, the Radio Operator, told me that they only had 200 rounds of ammunition for their guns on the way over, mainly to save weight, although they did have special containers full of mail in the bomb bay.

When the crew got to Italy, John Kelly became co-pilot on an experienced combat crew. This was a standard procedure to break new pilots in and get them used to formation flying under combat conditions. They could also get familiar with flak, fighters, and survival procedures under the guidance of an experienced combat pilot. The new pilot assigned to my father's crew was Hugh Sheetz, one of the original members of the 484th Bomb Group. The 484th had been flying operationally for only a few days when John Kelly and his crew arrived in Italy around May 1, 1944. On June 12, Sheetz and Kelly were flight-testing a B-24 that had just had an engine replaced.

The engine started to vibrate badly so they feathered the prop but it would not stay feathered. Eventually, the engine exploded