



The 461st

Liberaider



Vol. 21, No. 2

DECEMBER 2004

SOMEWHERE IN THE USA

461st 2004 Reunion

by
Barbara Alden

Our 2004 Reunion in Louisville, KY was a grand success. There were around 135 attendees, although in August we only had 80 who were registered, but we came through with a good crowd. This year we, also, had the largest number of “kids” and “grandkids” with 29. We need to encourage more and more family members to become a

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Over There

This is the fourth in a series of articles by Vahl Vladyka. This one covers time overseas in Italy. The last article in this series will be “Coming Home”.

By
Vahl Vladyka

On December 20, 1944, our first morning at our squadron, Mac, Bob and I awoke in our canvas cots and took stock of our new home. Our first requirements necessitated getting partially dressed and walking 40 or 50 yards to the officer's latrine, Army lan-

guage for what my grandmother called her “privy.” This tarpaper-covered structure housed some half-dozen toilet seats mounted atop 55-gallon oil drums with bottoms and tops removed, all placed on two wooden beams over a large open pit, and, until one has used a six-holer outdoor toilet, the odor is above imagination.

We returned to our tent, washed up in a GI steel helmet, and walked to the mess hall for the first of many uninspiring

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Chapter Three World War II Experiences

This is the first in a series of articles by Bob Jones. This first one covers time during his training prior to going overseas. Future articles in this series will appear in this space in subsequent issues of the Liberaider.

By
Robert K. Jones

Well, enough of preliminaries so now to the nitty-gritty of this epistle, namely how I happened to be shot down and become a Kriegie (short for Kriegsgefangenen or Prisoner of War).

The 25th of July began at 4 AM when an airman came to the tent and awak-

ened us, as was the norm on the days when we flew. We went to have breakfast at the mess at 5 AM then on to the briefing room where rumor had already noised around that the target was to be the Herman Goering Tank Works at Linz, Austria.

We had been getting and reviewing intelligence reports and recon photos for a couple weeks which showed that the recently completed plant had turned out at least one tank which was being tested on a track adjoining the plant.

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Taps

May they rest in peace forever

Please forward all death notices to:

Hughes Glantzberg
P.O. Box 926
Gunnison, CO 81230
hughes@hugheshelpdesk.com

or

Bob Hayes
2345 Tall Sail Drive, Apt. G
Charleston, SC 29414-6570
BOB461st@aol.com

764th Squadron

<u>Name</u>	<u>Hometown</u>	<u>MOS</u>	<u>Date of Death</u>
Abadi, Abe	Elberon, NJ	1035	March 1, 2004
Dionne, Milton P.	Port Arthur, TX	60	August 7, 2004
Kase, Kenneth	Scarsdale, NY	1034	November 4, 2003
Lazier, John	Coal City, IL	612	April 21, 2004
Stephens, Farrold F.	Portland, OR	1092	October 2, 2003

765th Squadron

<u>Name</u>	<u>Hometown</u>	<u>MOS</u>	<u>Date of Death</u>
Drezek, Peter J.	Buffalo, NY	612	May 25, 2004
Duwe, Richard	East Troy, MI	932	February 2, 2004
Eidsmore, Lawrence M.	Oak Harbor, WA	612	June 11, 2004
Hoermann, Francis J.	Barre, VT	1092	August 25, 2004
Strano, James P.	Buffalo, NY	754	November 11, 2000
Whalen, Russell G.	Rio Rancho, NM	1092	January 1, 2004

766th Squadron

<u>Name</u>	<u>Hometown</u>	<u>MOS</u>	<u>Date of Death</u>
Comins, Jack	Escondido, CA	1035	September 17, 2004
Feld, Isadore	New Bedford, MA	826	June 13, 2004
Guay, Adrien A.	Fall River, MA	612	July 6, 2004
Stockler, Joseph A.	Strafford, PA	1035	October 7, 2004
Taylor, Howard E.	Des Moines, IA	757	July 5, 2004

767th Squadron

<u>Name</u>	<u>Hometown</u>	<u>MOS</u>	<u>Date of Death</u>
Delianedis, Socrates D.	Las Vegas, NV	612	August 6, 2004
Dilworth, William G.	Beloit, WI	748	March 27, 2003
Schrader, Edward E.	Delphos, OH	405	August 17, 2004



I'm new at this computer but very interested in the history of the 461st Group.

My first husband, James Harold Cain, flew out of Torretta from May, 1944 until the day he was killed, August 12, 1944 over Genoa.

He first flew as second pilot with Capt. LeRoy Russell in the Fertile Myrtle but soon took over as first pilot when Rusty was put to work on the ground. Rusty was a West Point graduate and came to visit me when he was home and told me of the last flight which Jim was flying and it received a direct hit in the bomb bay with all bombs on board. All 10 of the crew were killed over Genoa.

Rusty told me that Jim was a wonderful pilot who

had landed planes with wounded on board when the planes were hardly holding together. This happened several times according to him. Jim was due to come home within a few weeks.

He was a very special man and the only son of Grace Ann Cain Dieker and we had an 11 month old daughter, Jimmilla, named after him.

I would love to hear from anyone who might have known him or flown with him.

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Auburn, CA 95602-8075
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mnette9@aol.com

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Everyone attending the 2004 Reunion

part of the 461st and attend the reunions each year. It's always more enjoyable for the members to show off their "kids", and it's great fun for those of us who are "kids".

Thursday

The 461st Bomb Group's kick off event after registration was the slide presentation by Dr. Lazlo "Les" Hudra. The interesting presentation was about the bombing of Szolnok, Hungary in 1944. After that groups gathered in the lobby to renew friendships and catch up on the year's events.



Dr. Les Hudra preparing for his presentation as attendees arrive.

Friday

After breakfast we boarded buses for Churchill Downs and the Kentucky Derby Museum. We toured the stadium and stood in the winner's circle before viewing a short movie and then enjoying the museum. Linda Titus, my sister, and I were excited

when Marilu Meredith, Jim Dooley's daughter, found a movie showing our great-uncle Max Garner riding the winning horse "Cavalcade" in the 1934 Kentucky Derby.



First stop on Friday was Churchill Downs

Next we were off for a bus tour of Louisville and a delicious lunch aboard the "Star of Louisville" while cruising the Ohio River. The bread pudding almost rivaled that, which we had in Shreveport, LA in 2000.



"Star of Louisville"

This year "the Kids" of the 461st had their formation meeting with Jim Fitzpatrick, the board member-at-large, and our liaison to the board, leading the discussion. He talked about the importance of "the Kids" attending the reunions each year. First, he said, that it is a legacy to our fathers; second, it'll keep these reunions alive, and third, the distribution of information. We also discussed the dues issue and have several ideas for the board to act on. We found that we had too little time and so we plan on having a

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longer “kids” meeting next year. We might also come up with a better name, although this one is quite descriptive, and Jim did say that at our age, it’s an honor to be called a “kid”.

At the Annual Meeting we learned that the next reunion would be in the Washington, DC area, where the WWII monument and the new air and space museum are located.

Bob Hayes, also announced that he’d continue as our president for another year. He acknowledged all who are on the Board, as well as Hughes Glantzberg, our webmaster, and Liberator editor, David Blake, who graciously prints our Liberator, Ed Stevenson, our treasurer, and others who work so hard to keep our 461st Bomb Group running smoothly.

The group was so much larger than initially planned that our great cookout resulted in diners outside as well as scattered throughout the lobby. We enjoyed the hotdogs, hamburgers, potato salad and beans. It provided a wonderful venue for chatting for hours in the lobby.



Friday night cookout

Saturday

Again we boarded our “trusty” buses for a tour of the Bluegrass Country. We split into three groups and two groups had a close up tour of horse farms, and our group also toured a Horse Physical Therapy facility. It used a huge swimming pool, underwater treadmill and hyperbolic chamber in its therapy. It looked so inviting several members wanted to sign up. Our two groups had a delicious white-linen

lunch at the Holly Hill Inn. The third group also toured Frankfort including the Capitol Buildings and had lunch downtown.

Later that afternoon we met for pictures in the lobby where we first took pictures of the 461st members, then the whole group, and our third group was that of “the Kids”. We found out that Mrs. Fitzpatrick had her four boys there from four different states. What a great place to have a family reunion!

The dinner and dance was so successful that it has been years since we had dancers still on the floor at 10:00 p.m. It was amazing that Linda Titus, met Dennis Van Ornum, who was a classmate from Chico High, for the first time in 40 years. He is the stepson of Stan Staples, who was able to attend this reunion for the first time in years. (Linda lives in Nevada and Dennis in Louisville. It’s a small world, isn’t it?)

Sunday Morning

We started our memorial Breakfast with the reading of the 23rd Psalms and the names of those who have passed away since the last reunion. We next saw a video of Bob Hayes and a chaplain speaking at the **1999 Memorial Dedication for the 461st Bomb Group plaque** in Arlington National Cemetery. We ended the program Jeff Brock, Linda Titus and myself leading the singing of *God Bless America*. After breakfast we passed out squadron or group pins to the children of the 461st.

Again it was hard to say goodbye but another reunion was at an end and our thanks go especially to Bob and Peggy Hayes for all their hard work in making it such a success. This is one to remember with all of “the Kids”, and we look forward to seeing an even larger Reunion in Washington, DC in October 2005!!

For more pictures of the reunion, visit the website, www.461st.org.

Think Washington, DC in 2005!

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Main Street in the officers' tent area — our tent was directly behind the white building

breakfasts, usually half-inch thick pancakes, scrambled powdered eggs, or French toast, always served lukewarm at best. Whenever we were tempted to complain, we remembered our infantry comrades crawling through the mud and snow not too many miles north of us and wondered what they were having for breakfast.

Afterward we returned to our tent and mentally inventoried our furnishings. We were fortunate to have inherited an abode previously occupied. The original occupants had hired Italian stonemasons to build a four-foot high block wall foundation of caliche stone and, utilizing an extended tent pole, had erected the six-man pyramidal tent atop the wall. This architectural strategy enabled the occupants to stand upright all the way to the outer walls.

Plywood from bomb bay baggage racks had been salvaged for flooring, and the tent pole stood in an upright German 105 millimeter brass shell case, reminding me of the Mauldin cartoon, where Willie called to Joe, who was one of an artillery crew:

Fire two more fer effect, Joe. I'm makin' a stovepipe!

To ward off the winter, each tent was furnished a jury-rigged stove fashioned from another of the ubiquitous oil drums, with a simple drip pan in which the flame burned. A 50-50 mixture of diesel fuel and 100-octane aviation gasoline, guaranteeing instant heat and constant danger of explosion, passed through

salvaged aircraft fuel line from yet another drum situated outside the tent wall. One could easily turn up sufficient flow to bring the stove to red-hot temperature, and this sometimes occurred through carelessness. A member of the squadron bore severe facial burn scars incurred when he fell asleep with his stove still lighted, and the stove subsequently exploded.

Lighting was furnished by candles, but as time went on, we bought lamps from the Italians and dispensed with the candles. Stove fuel, the only available lamp oil, burned with a very sooty flame, necessitating daily washing of our lamp chimneys, a chore we rotated.

As an editorial note, there never was any shortage of gasoline produced in America for the war effort. The oil and gas industry in America simply cranked up production rates reduced during the Great Depression and supplied all our country's needs. Gasoline was rationed for non-military use for three reasons: 1) to save tires, 2) to save automobiles, and 3) to bring the civilian population realization that we were in a global war.

Final home touches were furnished by a small writing desk, a couple of upright chairs and an Adirondack chair, all home made by the original tent occupants.

Some time during that first morning, two enlisted men from the supply section arrived to pack the belongings of the officers who had been shot down three days earlier. This was done with care, and I understand that such effects were carefully screened to ensure that nothing of an embarrassing nature would be sent to relatives.

* * *

Later in the morning our entire crew was summoned to squadron headquarters, where we met our squadron commander, Lieutenant Colonel Otha Hardy, Jr., an older man. At that time of our lives, anyone over thirty was an older man. This meeting included another new crew, and for reasons known only to Colonel Hardy, it took place outdoors.

After a few words of welcome, our stern-visaged

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commanding officer gave us a brief orientation lecture, mentioning among other things that our tour of duty would conclude upon completion of 35 missions. In our ignorance of the overstaffing of the Group, we optimistically looked forward to finishing our tour and being home by late winter or early spring. Upon conclusion of his talk, he concluded with:

This area no longer is a combat zone. Occasionally a German observation plane flies over to take pictures. We have an understanding with him. We don't shoot at him, and he doesn't drop bombs on us.

With that bit of wisdom, we were dismissed, learning with surprise a few days later that Colonel Hardy had been transferred to Group Headquarters and assigned the job of Deputy Group Commander.

* * *

After Colonel Hardy departed, Captain Robert Baker, age 26, was named squadron commander, followed a week or two later by his promotion to major. He had been a captain for three months! It took me *much* less time to become persona non grata with him.

My only further recollections of specific events during the next five days consist of hearing that a tremendous battle was taking place in Belgium at a place called "Bastogne," and that we were served a splendid Christmas evening supper, consisting of hot roast turkey, dressing, mashed potatoes and gravy, cranberry sauce, and assorted condiments.

On that first day, we also discovered the tiny officers club and bar, where one could always find a poker

game and purchase a glass of very bad Italian wine. Since I had not yet acquired a taste for any sort of wine, the quality of our vintage may not have been as bad as I then thought. However, the hard liquor was an entirely different matter - we *knew* that it was bad! Each evening after 1700 hours, three bottles of cheap blended whiskey were placed on the bar for the evening ration for 100 plus officers, always *Four Roses*, *Three Feathers*, or *Schenleys Black Label*, the last nicknamed *Schenleys Black Death*. We never saw any scotch or bourbon; gin in those years was beneath our dignity; and vodka was something they drank in Russia. I suspect that the scotch and bourbon ended in higher quarters. It frequently was written that nothing was too good for our boys overseas.

All my memories of our squadron area are gray, as in an old black and white movie. It seems as though it was always muddy or dusty, and there was no color to our surroundings. The rows of pyramidal tents were olive drab, and the permanent buildings were all caliche, with gray iron roofs. The earth itself was colorless, a rocky, caliche soil, devoid of fertility, capable of nurturing only dust-colored olive trees.



Squadron HQ in large building on right and officers' mess in large structure on left. Enlisted men's mess was in identical barn-like structure out of view on right

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The 461st Liberaider
461st Bombardment Group (H)
Activated: 1 July 1943
Inactivated: 27 August 1945
Incorporated: 15 November 1985

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The Liberaider is published twice yearly on behalf of the members of the organization. Permission is granted to use articles provided source is given.

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At the winter solstice, days were short, punctuated by frequent rain or snow, the latter on one occasion sixteen inches deep. The sturdiness of our tent was attested to by this heavy deposit. I quickly became aware that I needed to replace the galoshes that had burned, along with my other belongings, in the BOQ fire at Westover Field.

* * *

By the time we arrived in Italy, bombing of German-controlled synthetic fuel plants and oilfield facilities and refineries had so disrupted Nazi fuel supplies that the Luftwaffe was able to put up fighter opposition only on selected days. However, on those selected days, some unlucky aircrews ran into massed German fighters and serious casualties, as at Odertal on the recent December 17th.

Albert Speer, Hitler's Minister of Armaments, wrote that this lack of fuel, both for the Wehrmacht and the Luftwaffe, was the principal cause of Germany's defeat. As a result, bomber casualty losses were lower than anticipated, and all European bomber units had a surplus of flying personnel. Our squadron had two or three crews for each airplane.

* * *

My flying records show that I logged 65 minutes flying time on December 23rd, half as co-pilot, so I presume we were up for a local orientation flight. I vividly remember being informed on December 28th that I would fly the next day's mission as co-pilot with an experienced crew.

At 0300 hours, I was awakened by a flashlight in my face, as the CQ informed me of briefing time. I trudged to the mess hall in darkness, ate a breakfast of cold "flannelcakes", topped with cold syrup the viscosity of glue, visited the latrine, and climbed aboard a GI truck for the three-mile trip from our isolated squadron area to the airfield.

Mission briefing was conducted in a sizable baronial building at Group Headquarters, near the landing area, where were gathered some 80 or 90 flying officers called for that day's mission. On the far end of

the room hung a ten-foot high map of Europe, with a red ribbon wending its way from our field at Torretta, across the Adriatic Sea to Yugoslavia, thence to a railroad marshalling yard in Passau, Germany, a city on the Danube where it crosses the Austrian border. There also were ribbons showing the general location of the Soviet and western Allies battle lines. There was a somewhat less detailed briefing for enlisted men in another building nearby.

I was unacquainted with members of the crew with whom I was to fly, and to this day I remember not a single fact about any of them, except that they were as uneasy having a stranger in their right seat as I was flying with nine people about whom I knew nothing.

After briefing by command, intelligence and weather people, lasting some 30–45 minutes, we again climbed into the backs of waiting trucks and were hauled to a nearby shack, where we were issued parachutes; three sets of gloves — silk, wool knit, and leather; GI steel helmets (universally called "p__pots"); bullet proof vests (we later learned that these were of more value when sat upon); oxygen masks; lined flying bib-overalls; and sheepskin flying boots. Afterward we were trucked to our respective aircraft and dumped into the darkness before the dawn.

After following the pilot around the B-24J assigned to us that day and making the personal inspection required by Army Regulations and common sense, we started engines, taxied out, took off and joined the formation. My distrustful airplane commander, a first lieutenant, handled the controls the entire seven-hour forty-five minute flight, leaving me nothing to do except monitor our engine instruments and think about what lay ahead. There was little conversation.

En route we encountered bad weather conditions, which brought about a command decision to abandon the primary target and divide our 28 aircraft into two flights, each of which bombed separate alternate targets. Our flight turned back from the Alps and hit an undefended locomotive works and marshalling yard at Castelfranco Veneto, a small town 25 miles northwest of Venice, Italy.

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Intelligence evaluation of the damage triggered a commendation from Nathan Twining, 15th Air Force commanding general, but my personal evaluation was that this was a milk run, and that the duties allotted to me could have been performed by any student flight engineer. I resolved never to treat a substitute crewman in such a manner.

* * *

On this, my first mission, I discovered that standard operating procedure called for taxiing the overloaded B-24s onto the end of the runway, setting brakes, running engines up to takeoff power, and then releasing the brakes. Although I had not studied physics in high school, it occurred to me that this method wasted an enormous amount of what I later learned was inertia ("a body at rest tends to remain at rest"), so as soon as I gained confidence to do so, I altered the procedure. After running our pre-takeoff checklist, I would prompt the controller that we were ready, and when our green light flashed from the tower, I would roll from the taxi strip onto the runway, so that by the time we passed the customary starting point, we were moving 15 or 20 miles an hour. When I resumed flying for pleasure in 1975, after a 30-year hiatus, I was informed that rolling takeoffs were now standard.

* * *

Our surplus of crews, coupled with bad weather, limited my opportunity to fly further missions, but at last, on January 12th, we were scheduled, this time with all our crew except Mac, who was to be replaced by an experienced co-pilot this one time out. As luck would have it, the mission was scrubbed before takeoff, following which we flew three and a quarter hours of practice formation.

The same thing happened the next day, but on January 19th the weather cleared sufficiently for the Group to rally the formation and bomb a bridge spanning the Sava River and connecting the two parts of Brod, in what then was Yugoslavia. (Brod is now two cities, one in Bosnia and the other in Croatia.) Our experienced co-pilot and I shared the controls, with each of us logging two and a half hours pilot time, but I flew the bomb run. I remember taking my gloves off dur-

ing the bomb run and seeing steam rise from my hands in the minus 40 degree temperature.

Moose's diary notes that the city was defended by 74 heavy [88 millimeter or larger] anti-aircraft guns, and that flak was heavy. Moose had not yet been to Vienna, with its 1000 guns. However, we all were mightily impressed by the black puffs of exploding artillery shells we were flying by and through. Although we could not hear the explosions through the din of our unmuffled engines, our airplane sometimes was shaken by the shock of a near miss.

On January 25th, we again were scheduled, this time with Mac in the right seat. However, just before time to start engines, Major Baker drove up in his jeep and informed us that the mission was scrubbed, and we again would go up for practice formation. At this moment, I opened my mouth and engraved a permanent entry on Major Baker's *s___list* (Being on a superior's "s___list" meant that one was subjected to all the s___y assignments.), a classification dreaded by GI's the world over.

During my flight training, I had been singled out for praise for only one thing— formation flying. I felt as if I knew how to do that, and after a few missions, I regularly flew with our airplane's wings overlapping those of our leader. Therefore, Major Baker's *third consecutive daily* order to practice formation touched the nerve that controlled my vocal chords, and I responded by asking if I were the only pilot in our squadron to require such intense practice. The major made no verbal response, but his beet-red face spoke volumes as he slammed his jeep into gear and drove away, my career spinning in the dust from his wake turbulence.

* * *

Between missions we had vast amounts of idle time, and, during the next five months, I finally got my fill of poker. We also occupied our time by writing letters, reading, and finally knife throwing, a sport at which Cliff and I became rather accomplished. For some strange reason, every flier was furnished a combat knife and scabbard, as if we were going to fight our way out of a Nazi prisoner of war camp with cold

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steel. Somebody in Washington had seen too many bad movies.



Self at controls of #34 on mission — Photo by Stan Staples, with standard focal-length lens

* * *

Our squadron had an excellent supply of paperback books, printed especially for the armed forces in an unusual format never seen before or later. At the insistence of the copyright owners, all these books were destroyed after the war. I especially remember being introduced to the hard-boiled genre of detective stories of Dashiell Hammett and Raymond Chandler and the intrigue-laden novels of Eric Ambler and Graham Greene.

Our gasoline/oil stove kept the tent comfortable in the coldest weather, but safety dictated extinguishing it at night, so we all set about scrounging added blankets. By means never divulged, Bob obtained a down sleeping bag, but Mac and I had to settle for appropriating extra blankets from crews departing for home. I finally accumulated eight, with three folded between my canvas cot and me and five above. Army Regulations prescribed two per man.

Hot showers were available a few days each week, with water trucked from some unknown source and heated by the usual gasoline/diesel oil devil's mixture. However, during one two-week period in mid-winter, water was unavailable, so we sponge-bathed out of p___ pots or aluminum washbasins purchased from Italian entrepreneurs. On the day showers resumed, we gratefully stood in line in the snow, clad only in trench coats or overcoats and galoshes. Chlorinated

drinking water, however, was always available from a Lister bag, a cylindrical canvas sack some 24 by 36 inches, suspended from a tripod. We initially kept our individual supplies in our canteens, but we later acquired an Italian unglazed pottery jug, the latter having the advantage in warm weather of cooling its contents by evaporation.

* * *

Announcement was made weekly that today was ration day, and we would line up to buy toilet articles, including soap, razor blades, and toothpaste; also Cokes and beer in bottles, candy bars, chewing gum, and six packages of cigarettes at five cents per pack. As I recall, Bob and I were the only members of our crew who did not smoke, so we became very popular on ration day. However, candy bars were considered even more valuable — no one would trade candy for cigarettes.

Soap also was an important barter item. Italians who worked in our squadron area would carry home a week's supply of my dirty laundry and return it clean and pressed for 100 lire (one dollar) *plus* a bar of toilet soap. The same applied for dry cleaning, only the cash portion of the price was somewhat higher. One might wonder why soap should be required to dry clean wool clothing, but we surmised that the Italians also used it for barter.

My ration card indicates that we were entitled to wicks and flints for cigarette lighters, which reminds me that lighter fluid was 100 octane gasoline drained from a valve in the bomb bay of a parked airplane. I remember Ernie once filling his Zippo and lighting it, following which his entire hand was enveloped in flame from overflow fuel. It was a bit like trying to fill a water glass from a fire hydrant. He quickly smothered the flame and was uninjured.

* * *

Our airfield consisted of two parallel 6,000-foot gravel runways, with 1,000 feet of steel matting on each end. In true Army fashion, they were oriented due north and south, while prevailing winds were westerly, guaranteeing crosswinds for nearly every

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takeoff and landing. Circling the runways were gravel taxi strips and steel-matted hardstands for parking the aircraft of our group and those of the 484th, with whom we shared the field. Aircraft damage, especially to propellers, from flying gravel was a constant problem. The control tower was of such ramshackle construction that one might have felt safer flying missions than serving as traffic controller.



* * *

My third mission and Mac's first, on January 31st, was to an oil refinery at Moosbierbaum, near Vienna, after eight consecutive standdowns because of bad weather. (This was one of the worst winters in recent European history, as attested to by those at Bastogne.) Radar bombing technology had advanced to the point where we could bomb through cloud cover, but during this period, we would have been in solid overcast shortly after takeoff, in clouds so solid and high that we never could have found each other to assemble our formations.

Our target was located some 22 miles northeast of Vienna, sufficiently distant to be out of range of that city's formidable anti-aircraft weaponry. We bombed through a solid undercast by radar, and our accuracy probably was no better than the heavy anti-aircraft

fire from our target's 90 guns. Radar bombing never approached the accuracy of Norden bombsight visual targeting.

Mac noted in his diary that our problems stemmed from within, rather than from the enemy. Cliff, while trying to correct a malfunction in his ball turret, lost his oxygen supply and consciousness for a time and only quick action by Ernie saved his life. At our altitude, ones time in life without oxygen was measured in minutes. Cliff was luckier than some. It was a matter that always concerned us, and thereafter I instructed Mac to conduct an oxygen check by intercom every five minutes.

I unthinkingly caused a problem with the bomb bay doors, designed to slide open in the fashion of a roll top desk. At some point between takeoff and target, I experienced severe need of a toilet, and when I tried to use the relief tube in the bomb bay, I discovered that it was frozen solid. The urgency of my bladder, coupled with the necessity of getting back to the controls of the airplane, precluded my going back to the waist area to seek another tube, so I let fly on the bomb doors, which promptly froze in place. After we turned from the initial point and started our five minute bomb run, all efforts to open the doors failed, so when our leader dropped his bomb load, Bob toggled ours right through the frozen doors, and we flew home with corrugated doors flapping in the slipstream like some pre-historic bird.

* * *

After weathering the wrath of the ground crewmen who had to make repairs, Ernie procured a five-gallon bucket for future in-flight latrine use. Fortunately, its contents always were frozen solid within minutes and remained so until after landing.

Our next two weeks were uneventful. However, on February 14th, we were sent up in our lone aircraft to hone our instrument flying skills, a tutorial session we afterward turned into a sightseeing trip over Mount Vesuvius and Rome. We passed over the crater that had buried Pompeii in 79 A. D. at an altitude of about 400 feet, giving us a bird's eye view of lava still molten from the 1944 eruption featured on the cover of

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LIFE magazine.

From there we cruised northwesterly some 100 miles along the western slopes of the Apennines to Rome, which we circled several times to view the Vatican City, Colosseum, Forum and all the other historic sights. Mac's diary notes that it was a "Cook's Tour" he would long remember, and time has proved him right, for after a half-century, the day is vivid in my memory.

* * *

Some electronics wizard had figured out that German radar utilized to guide their anti-aircraft artillery could be deceived by strips of aluminum foil, called *chaff* or *window*, cut to exact size to appear on a radar screen as a flight of bombers. Amazingly, when we bombed by radar through cloud cover, it worked. As we neared the target, waist gunners would commence throwing handfuls of these strips from our waist windows, creating a virtual cloud of fluttering aluminum, and generally enemy shells would explode in a pattern 100-300 yards from our formation.

This wonderful invention worked to perfection for us on February 15th, when we bombed a railroad marshalling yard in Vienna, the most heavily defended city in occupied Europe. At our altitude of 26,000 feet, all of the very intense flak exploded in front or behind us. Mac had trouble with his oxygen but fortunately discovered it in time. On this day, the top turret gunner in our squadron's #27 airplane (Not old "You Bet", shown in our crew photo, but an earlier version.) ran out of luck (and proper crew procedures) and died from anoxia.

* * *

After I discovered that my incinerated galoshes could be replaced only at the army quartermaster store in Cerignola, a city of about 40,000 situated eleven miles from our base, Ernie and I made a foray into town by way of the hitchhiker's thumb. Having heard stories of GI's straying into undesirable parts of town and being robbed and beaten by Italian thugs, we carried our .45 Colt automatic pistols in shoulder holsters under our coats. If we were expecting bright

lights and gaiety, we were in for a big disappointment; four years of war had left an already impoverished community with only the bare necessities of life.

The one impression all of us will carry to our graves was the stench of human waste. Each morning women of poorer households would empty their chamberpots into the streets; we witnessed the contents from one sailing some considerable distance from a second story balcony. Afterward, the female person residing at the head of the street would sweep her gutter down to the next neighbor, and so on *ad nauseum* to the foot of the street, where a honey bucket brigade would pick up and remove the entire collection.

It did not take long for us to get our fill of such sight-seeing, and after we visited the quartermaster and made our purchases, we headed back to our new home away from home. By this time winter darkness had set in, and we were lucky to get a ride in the back of a GI truck headed for the field. As we lurched down the unpaved road, our eyes became accustomed to the dim light, and we became aware of two sizable boxes with the egg crate configuration familiar to all small town Iowans. After prying off one of the lids, our suspicions were confirmed. We quickly filled each overshoe with a dozen honest-to-goodness fresh eggs, pressed the crate lid back into place, and made a hasty, but careful, exit when the driver let us off near our squadron area.

Ernie and I divided our spoils of war, and that night I made a delicious three-egg omelet in a mess kit on our heating stove, flavored with cheese from a K-ration, ate it all, and got indigestion, probably from guilt.

On another foray into town, I had a chance encounter with Francis Sugrue, the "Hairy Ape" with whom I roomed for a short time while at Smyrna. We celebrated our reunion by polishing off two bottles of spumante, an Italian sparkling wine resembling champagne, for which I dearly paid with a next day's case of diarrhea.

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On January 29th, I celebrated my 22nd birthday at a party thrown by our enlisted crew members. When Mac, Bob and I arrived at our hosts' tent, we were greeted by the smell of chili and fresh coffee, and we enjoyed a good meal topped off by canned peaches. I was touched deeply by their companionship and show of affection, and even more moved when I discovered that they had risked punishment by stealing the food from their mess kitchen! It seemed that while one had engaged the night cook in conversation, another had slipped into the storeroom and tossed gallon cans of chili and peaches, plus boxes of crackers, through the kitchen and out the door to awaiting accomplices. It was a great and memorable evening.

* * *

Neither Mac nor Moose wrote of our closest encounter with disaster; perhaps they did not want to be reminded of it. The date was March 23rd. Loaded with 2700 gallons of 100 octane gasoline, four or five thousand pounds of bombs, full ammunition racks for our ten .50 caliber machine guns, and nine men, we had completed our warm up, run our checklist, and taxied into our usual running takeoff.

When we were about 50 feet off the ground, the propeller on number three engine suddenly went into flat pitch, causing the engine to "run away" to over 4,000 RPM's, 1,300 RPM over redline. Because of the loss of power and drag created by the flat propeller (visualize a boat with one oar rowing and the other edge up in the water), the airplane immediately yawed to the right, and the right wing dipped.

As I struggled to regain control and bring us back to level flight, Mac and Ernie retarded the number three throttle and unsuccessfully attempted to feather the propeller. Fighting the drag and operating on 75% power, we managed to attain three or four hundred feet of altitude, our airplane overloaded by 8,000 pounds over design weight. As I cautiously began a slow turn, Mac informed the tower of our situation, and all traffic was cleared while we circled the field and landed.

Safely back on our hardstand, where Mac, Ernie and I were trying to act as if it all had been just another

day's work, Ernie grasped the propeller blade nearest the ground and wobbled it *fore and aft* about twelve inches.

We later learned found that our problem was caused by a manufacturing flaw in the propeller retaining ring, a broken spring some three or four inches in diameter and weighing perhaps four ounces. One of the ground crewmen gave it to Ernie for a souvenir, and he gave it to me, but it has disappeared, along with most of my other souvenirs of Italy, in one of the 27 moves my wife and I have made during our marriage.

* * *

About this time, perhaps on February 9th, we drew the assignment of weather reconnaissance. Mac, Bob, Ernie, Annie, and I, plus one or two of the other crew members along for the ride, arrived at the field well before briefing and mounted a war-weary that had been stripped of turrets for utility use. Aluminum fairing covered holes where turrets had been removed, giving our transportation the appearance of a patched-up war veteran.

We were instructed to take off and fly directly north over the spur of the Italian boot, to the Adriatic Sea, and make radio reports of the weather we encountered. Our stripped down airplane was positively nimble for a B-24, and by the time we reached the Sea, we were at 10,000 feet altitude.

There was no weather to report! It was one of those rare perfect days, cold and absolutely clear, without a cloud in sight. I am certain that this must have been the aftermath of passage of a cold front. Only twice before had I encountered such weather while airborne — once on a night flight on the light line from Little Rock to Memphis, and once in Massachusetts, when we could see the entire Cape Cod from 40 miles distant.

After making our report, we were instructed to return to the field, so I made a 180-degree turn and centered our heading on a radio compass reading of zero to our tower. Contrary to normal procedure of reducing power and losing altitude at 160 mph cruising speed, this one time I left the throttles as set and merely low-

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ered the nose and pointed it toward the field. At this moment, we discovered that we could plainly see our twin landing strips some 40 miles to the south.

We quickly accelerated to 190 mph indicated, and in what seemed a few minutes we were over the landing strips at traffic pattern level—1000 feet above the ground, as I recall. When we reached the tower, I reduced power, placed the airplane in a 30-degree bank to the right, and made a 360-degree overhead approach, leveling the wings at about 300 feet and then landing. We were in the traffic pattern less than a minute.

* * *

Our crew was not called for the February 21st mission to Vienna, but “Annie” was drafted to fly with Major Baker as substitute radio operator on the command airplane. More than half our aircraft were lost. Our tower received a short wave radio message in Morse code from “Annie” that two engines were on fire, and that they were headed for the Soviet lines in Hungary.

It was several anxious days before we learned that Baker's pilot, Woodruff, had made a safe landing with the Russians, but it was a full 30 days before the Red Army allowed them to return to our squadron. We all were grateful to have our radio operator back in one piece, but the Soviets confiscated the airplane. This left the Army Air Forces with only about 15,000 Liberators.

February 22, 1945, was George Washington's birthday (the father of our country had his own day in those years), but it was no holiday at Torretta. However, we breathed a collective sigh of relief when we entered the briefing room and saw that our target was a marshalling yard at Ingolstadt, Germany. It was my fifth mission, the fourth for most of our crew, and we already had enjoyed Moosbierbaum and Vienna, City of Our Dreams, so the prospect of a milk run was music to our ears, even though we had drawn the old war-weary #62 airplane, painted olive-drab.

Our 34-airplane group was unable to bomb the primary target because of weather, so Colonel Lawhon selected the alternate at Kempten, Germany, sixty miles northwest of Innsbruck, Austria. Our assigned

bombing altitude was 13,000 feet, but because of a layer of clouds at that altitude, we dropped down to 12,000 for the bomb run, which was completed without flak or other incident. According to the strike photos, we pasted the targeted marshalling yard. Although the website Group history makes no mention of it, my recollection is that our box somehow became separated from the rest of the Group. I definitely recall that we had no fighter escort.

Our own private little air force then commenced a climb back to 19,000 feet for our return over the Alps, but within 15 minutes, we were jolted out of our complacency by an intercom report from our substitute tail gunner (Wally was ill with mononucleosis) that we were being followed by a single German fighter about a mile to the rear. I relayed this to our box leader, and everyone immediately came to full alert.

Moments later Bob, who always knew our exact location, called on the intercom and yelled, “*That crazy bastard is taking us right over Innsbruck!*” I reached for the switch to radio, to inform (in somewhat more moderate language) our leader, when, as they say in storybooks, all hell broke loose. A salvo of flak, with fuses cut to our exact altitude, thanks to our German fighter friend, hit every airplane in the box, wounding three people in various airplanes, including Cliff, who took a shard in one knee.

Ernie tucked an aluminum oxygen bottle under his left arm and went to the bomb bay to assess damage, when a second salvo hit, a shard of which drove a fist-size hole through Ernie's bottle. During all of this, our box, in combat jargon, “hailed a__”, scattering across the sky like a covey of quail.

Our elevator trim tabs were shot away, and Mac and I had our feet on the instrument panel, pulling back on both control wheels in an effort to keep the nose up. Mac instructed gunners in the waist to move anything movable to the rear, including Cliff, improving our balance and permitting me to handle the controls alone, by now with my feet back on the rudder pedals. Bob, our designated first aid expert, applied sulfa powder and a bandage to Cliff's knee, then hurried back to the nose and his duties. We quickly located three other airplanes from our box, which we joined

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in the number four, or slot, position. However, until we returned to Torretta, we never again that day saw our flight leader and the other airplanes from our original bombing formation.

Our abbreviated box made its way over the Dolomite Alps and back to the field, with ad hoc leader Stan Staples bleeding from where his big toe had been amputated by flak. Our airplane's hydraulic lines were severed, which meant we had no flaps for landing and only the single application of the brakes provided by the accumulators. The nose wheel was badly damaged and its tire flat, but my offer to make a pass over the field for those who wanted to bail out was declined by all.

According to standard operating procedure, Moose was delegated to crank down the main landing gear manually, but when Mac and I forgot to put the gear lever in the "down" position, he was trying to compress hydraulic fluid with a one-inch diameter steel crank. Something had to give, and Moose's adrenaline carried the day, putting a permanent bend in that piece of equipment.

Concerned that our damaged nose wheel might collapse and cause a crash, I had arranged with the crew that, once on the ground, I would punch the bail-out/ditch warning bell each time our declining speed would cause the nose to lower, at which point, another crew member would dash to the tail. In this manner, we traversed the entire runway balanced on the main gear, turning off on the final taxi strip and only then coming to rest on the nose wheel. We had not required our single available application of brakes. It was just like the one in the training film in my den, except the B-24 in the film crashed when the nose wheel settled on the runway.

Seeing our red flare, the squadron flight surgeon dashed to our airplane, ducked under and up into the open waist hatch, exclaiming, "Where is the wounded man?" At that precise moment, someone walked back into the tail, and the entire rear of the airplane settled to the ground around a startled Captain Nathan, at the same time giving Mac and me, still strapped in our seats, a splendid view of the sky.

All eight aircraft returned safely, although all were

badly damaged. Old #62 had over 250 holes—Ernie said he tired of counting at that number, and the hydraulic system was a disaster. After extensive repair, it was flown only on a test flight, following which it was junked.



#62 — our literal version of the famous 13th Air Force Liberator based in India, the *Assam Dragon*



Photo taken after Kempton. Rear L to R - self, Bob, Ernie, Mac, tail gunner. Front L to R - Moose, George. Lots of smiles, *now*.

* * *

Our escort on many missions was furnished by the now famous 332nd Fighter Group, the Tuskegee trained P-51 pilots led by Benjamin O. Davis, Jr. Colonel Davis, son of a brigadier general and West Point educated, entered the United States Military

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Academy in 1928 and graduated in 1932, and during those four years, no other cadet ever spoke to him, because he was black. He was stationed in Guam in 1951, while we lived on the island, and later retired as a lieutenant general.

The Black Eagles were greatly admired for their reputation of arriving on time and staying with our bombers the full route. Unfortunately, this could not be said of some other fighter groups. Many survivors blamed our group's staggering losses at Odertal, Germany on December 17th on the failure of their P-38 escort from the 1st Fighter Group to remain with our people all the way to the target.

During Major Baker's absence, I privately was informed by our squadron operations officer that I was to be trained to become a flight leader, and for the next few missions, our airplane flew near the leader of our flight. On one of these, I was designated deputy flight leader, by virtue of which we carried a bombardier against the possibility that the leader should become incapacitated. As part of my duties, I was ordered to monitor the command channel.

We were to be escorted by aircraft from the 332nd Fighters, and as we neared rendezvous time with our African-American escort, I overheard a nervous voice on the command channel saying, "Where is our escort; I don't see our escort." To which, a soothing voice responded, "Don't worry, white boy. We are up here looking out for you." I peered through my plexiglass overhead and saw several red-tailed P-51's making lazy circles in the sky some 5,000 feet above us.

One of my friends, Ralph Heinze, also a pilot, lived in the next tent, and on one of our shared missions high over the Alps, he lost all power in one engine and part of a second. Our command pilot ordered him home, with two of our 332nd friends as escort. When we returned to our area after the mission, I hurried to his tent to check on his well being. Ralph told me that shortly after his escort and he broke away from the group, four German fighters attacked. Our two P-51's promptly shot down two and chased the other two away, following which, they returned to Ralph's crippled aircraft and escorted it out of the combat zone. I said to Ralph, "I'll bet you could have kissed them."

With widened eyes, he replied, "I would have kissed their a ____!"

* * *

Days dragged into weeks as we settled into our routine. In March we flew seven missions to Austria and one to Muhldorf, Germany. On the 25th, we were scheduled to bomb German jet fighters, parked because of lack of fuel on a grass airfield near Prague, Czechoslovakia, but after flying all the way to the land of my grandfather, our group turned back and bombed an alternate target at Wels, Austria. With Major Baker back in command, we again were being assigned our worst airplanes and positioned well in the rear of the formation.

Our airplane that day, old #26, built in a hurry and used hard, flew slightly askew. From the rear, it resembled a trotting dog, nose not quite aligned with tail. Our inability to trim the airplane, coupled with being in the rear of the formation, resulted in inordinate fuel consumption, and as we approached the Adriatic Sea, homeward bound on this, our longest mission, one of our fuel tanks ran dry. Ernie had been transferring fuel as if he were the mad scientist on the late show, and when the second and then the third tank emptied, we were reduced to running all four engines on crossfeed from one tank.

By this time, we were in the traffic pattern, and when the tower told us to pull up and go around, because of another airplane dragging in a final approach below us, I informed the tower that we were low on fuel, I intended landing, and it was the other pilot's choice whether we landed on the runway or on top of his airplane. Black smoke instantly poured from all four exhausts of the aircraft below us, and we made an uneventful touchdown.

We had frequent visitors to our tent, and when Bob, Mac and I heard a knock on our wooden door that night, we shouted the usual, "Come on in." The door opened and in walked *Major Baker*! After we jumped to attention, he told us to be at ease and then informed us that the refueling crew had pumped 2,650 gallons into #26, which meant that we had 50 gallons, less than 2%, remaining upon landing. We inferred from

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his manner, and from the fact that he had come to our tent, rather than summoning us, that he was making amends for the criticism to which I had been subjected for making an emergency refueling stop at a fighter base while on an earlier mission.

* * *

On that earlier day, after the fighter people had given us an emergency fuel ration, two ground crewmen approached and asked if they could hitch a ride back to Torretta. Since we were flying alone, and egged on by some of our gunners, I flew down the Adriatic coast about 40 feet above the water. Moose and some of the other fellows still laugh about our passengers crossing themselves all the way home. Doubly unlucky Joseph Hazzouri, one of our hitchhikers, was assigned to fly with us when we returned to the United States after the war ended, but I made no further assaults on his nervous system.

On March 31st, on a mission to heavily defended Linz, Austria, we were assigned a passenger, Colonel Skanse, a retread from the 49th Wing air inspector's office. This bespectacled, white-haired, old gentleman (he probably was 30 years younger than my present age) displayed all the composure one would expect from the First World War fighter pilot he had



After the mission – Col. Skanse, self, Mac

been. Our gunners watched in disbelief, as he munched a candy bar inside his oxygen mask, while passing through exploding flak on the bomb run, afterward expressing disappointment that the undercast, for which we were praying, prevented him seeing the bomb strikes.

Upon our return to base, he shook my hand and, with great sincerity, told me to call upon him if ever I felt the need. On a later day, I almost had occasion to accept his offer.

* * *

On April 24th, some interval after his return from Hungary, Major Baker was assigned to lead our flight on a mission to the railroad marshalling yard at Roveretto, in German occupied Italy. At that stage of events, two days before the final 15th Air Force combat flight, most missions were designed to hamper German withdrawal to the Alps.

Our crew, accustomed to Major Baker placing us somewhere in the rear, gasped almost audibly when we noted that we were to be in the No. 2 position of the major's box. As additional surprises, we were assigned #35, an airplane that handled decently, and I was ordered to monitor the fighter/bomber radio channel.

At the major's portion of the briefing, he mentioned that there had been some lighting up of cigarettes before *returning* airplanes descended to 10,000 feet altitude, emphasizing that this was very dangerous because oxygen masks were still in use down to that level. He reminded everyone to abide by SOP (Standard Operating Procedure).

By this time, Mac and I had become sufficiently proficient to fly with our airplane's wing tip overlapping that of the airplane leading ours, and since Major Baker was in the right seat, where he could see us readily, and I in the left, I resolved to give him a demonstration of how to fly formation. By intercom, my gunners kept egging me on: "Stick it in their waist window, Vahl!" and "Look at those guys watching us!" The major looked back at us numerous times, and we were close enough to see each other's sunglasses.

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As we reached the 12,000 foot level on the return, he removed his oxygen mask and, in defiance of his own instructions, lighted a cigarette, took a deep puff, exhaled, then suddenly turned to see me watching his every move. He finished his smoke with his cigarette cupped in his hand and his back turned to me.

* * *

Major Sid Rainen was our affable squadron executive officer, and he had been in Italy forever, since ground personnel were not rotated out. On one occasion, he was trying to impart instructions to a crew of Italian construction workers, none of whom understood English, and at that moment, Ernie happened by and volunteered his Italian fluency. After the workers received all their instructions, they immediately awarded Ernie a battlefield commission, dubbing him *Il Commandore!*

Major Rainen sometimes informally passed out information and orders before our occasional movie. One evening he scolded that condoms issued to the squadron were not being used. Apparently it did not occur to him that most of us had little need for condoms in that sterile environment. By the time the movie started, several dozen condoms had been inflated and sent floating through the air, resembling Britain's blimps during the blitz.

On another evening, he told us in a fatherly way that the inspector general was going to conduct an inspection the next day to ascertain who was hoarding all the missing blankets. Early the following morning, everyone pried up plywood floors and hid all but the regulation two blankets. Perversely, the inspector general never appeared.

In 1951, I was having lunch at a delicatessen restaurant in Kansas City, and whom did I see at the next table but Major Rainen, still the genial gentleman from my campaigning days. We had a nice visit.

* * *

Scattered through the officers' tent area were two or three houses, built by Italian stone-masons of the omnipresent caliche stone. Some enterprising officers of the original group that came to Italy had decided they

wished to fight the war in comfort, so they commissioned local men to construct these metal roofed huts, each about 14' x 20', for living quarters. When an occupant rotated out to the States, he simply sold his interest to someone deemed compatible by those remaining.

One of these habitats, *Casa Manana*, was directly in front of our tent. It was occupied by replacements such as I, but earlier on the scene by a few months. Stan Staples and Stan Porch, both pilots, were fine fellows, and the former, a retired professional photographer, and I have kept in touch since the war.

One night while I was visiting their *Casa*, austere by most standards, but princely compared to our tent, a resident bombardier asleep in his cot experienced a nightmare. He first began talking in his sleep and then began to shout about his airplane being on fire. One of the other occupants arose to awaken him, but just at that moment the poor fellow shouted, "We're on fire! Bail out!" And with that, he "bailed out" of his upper bunk, landing with a thud on the tile floor. None the worse for wear, he climbed back in his bunk and immediately resumed his slumbers.

Late in our tour, both "Stans" invited me to move in and occupy a recently vacated bunk, but I gratefully declined, since I did not want to "bail out" on Mac and Bob.



L to R - Stan Staples, Stan Porch, self

Bob, at 27 our senior citizen, quickly established a well-deserved reputation for knowing his business of navigation, and within a few weeks after our arrival,

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he was being called to Group headquarters to help plan missions.

He also possessed another hidden talent, that of table tennis. At the Group tournament, he placed second, and the winner and he won the Wing doubles championship, for which they were rewarded with a week's rest leave at Cannes, on the French Riviera.

* * *

All our crew, except Bob, enjoyed the second week of April on the Isle of Capri. Mac and I stayed in a luxury hotel on Anacapri, the highest point on the island, where movie stars vacationed before the war. Our mess was served by white-jacketed professional waiters, utilizing spoon and fork in one hand to deftly dish out the Spam, while a string orchestra softly played Italian music. When I asked the musicians to play "Neapolitan Love Song", they responded, "No capice." I was surprised, since Naples was only twelve miles distant, but even after I hummed a few bars, they still were mystified. Only after I returned to the States did I learn it was written by American Victor Herbert!

Ernie and I spent several days touring about the island in a rowboat, which also could be fitted with a sail. Our Italian boatman, upon request, would render (and I use the term advisedly) *Santa Lucia*, and take us where our whims dictated, all for one pack of cigarettes per half-day. He even let me steer the boat under sail and expressed surprise to Ernie that I could steer a straight course, until Ernie told him I steered airplanes for a living.

Early on we visited the Blue Grotto, a breathtaking cave accessible only at low tide. Our boatman waited on the exact ebbing, bade us lie down in the boat, and then swept us through a small opening into a sizable cavern lighted by sunlight passing through crystal clear water in the large opening under the surface. The azure glow created by refracted sunlight made a lasting impression on the occupants of the several boats present.

A tiny bar was made available for crew parties, and on our turn we were the only occupants, which proba-

bly was fortunate. The menu of available drinks was painted around a black disk, in the manner of numbers on a clock, so we decided to start at the drink situated at twelve o'clock and drink our way around the dial. In the words of Winston Churchill about to address the French General Assembly in French language, this was "a formidable undertaking", which proved far beyond our capabilities. An hour or two later, having only made our way to three o'clock, we staggered out into the rain, where Wally climbed completely up on my shoulders for Toad's Wild Ride down wet cobblestones. I plead *non compos mentis* to Wally's claim that I actually ran part way down the rain-glazed hill. I am informed that Moose then took me on his broad shoulders to complete the trip to level ground. We all slept late the next morning.

A somber note was cast on our leave when we assembled in the plaza on Saturday morning to learn that President Roosevelt had died. His picture had hung on the wall of our family home since I was nine years old, and I had cast my first vote for him in the previous November. Knowing little of our new president, we were needlessly concerned about his ability.

By this time, it was apparent that the war in Europe was winding down. At each mission briefing, the red lines representing Soviet and western Allied lines were perceptibly closer, and when we returned to base on April 16th, our crew faced only four more missions, the last of which took place on April 26th. I have read that this date was the last combat flight of the Fifteenth Air Force.

* * *

By late April, the troops were getting restless. Locked in grade by Army policy that denied promotions to student officers in flight training, and later by my problems with Major Baker, I had been a second lieutenant for 26 months, a duration in that grade almost unheard of in wartime.

Our gunners were having similar problems, with more than 300 men flying combat as corporals, two grades below the staff sergeant ratings authorized by Tables of Organization. Stephen Ambrose wrote in "The Wild Blue" that all gunners were supposed to be staff

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sergeants or above, because the Germans gave such grades preferential treatment in prison camps, but this intelligence apparently had not filtered down to the 765th Squadron. Moose spearheaded a group seeking and getting a meeting with Major Baker to redress their grievances, and a few days later, at a routine pilot's meeting called by the major; I stood and again broached their problem.

Major Baker finally admitted that promotions to sergeant rightfully belonging to flying personnel had been granted to ground personnel, and when I pressed him to promote our men two grades at once, to their rightful ranks, he stated that this was impossible and once again displayed his displeasure with me by the color of his face. I left the meeting vowing to take the matter to Colonel Skanse, if the men's promotions were not forthcoming. On May 1st, less than a week later, over 300 flying personnel, mostly corporals, were promoted two grades to staff sergeant. Since Ernie already was a sergeant, he was promoted two grades to technical sergeant.

A few days later, I was astounded when called to squadron headquarters and informed that I had been promoted to first lieutenant, for I had given up all hope of promotion and also any ideas about making a career in the Army Air Forces. Mac and Bob also were promoted a few weeks later.

* * *

World War II in Europe ended on May 9th, and on that day we flew a volunteer mission to a camp in Austria, we were told, imprisoning Allied flyers. As we passed over the compound in three-airplane boxes, dropping food and medicine to those below, our crew informed me that we were being greeted by hundreds of men waving and jumping into the air. We returned to our base with feelings of great satisfaction.

That afternoon was one of celebration and reflection. The wine flowed like wine, and a few became drunk, but most sat quietly and talked of the future, while an Italian band played something resembling music. A pilot named Skinner was Officer of the Day, and when two inebriated gunners started shooting at each other with .45 pistols loaded with birdshot from sur-

vival gear, Skinner was dispatched to quell the disturbance, at which point, the gunners turned and shot at him. Skinner made a strategic withdrawal. A P-51 Mustang, piloted by a friend of Major Baker's, buzzed the officers' tent area, blowing ashes from our incinerators, while down at the flight line, someone fired a Very pistol in the air, with the projectile landing on and burning a hole through the wing of a parked B-24. Otherwise, it was all quiet on the southern front.

Over 50,000 American air crewmen died in World War II. While many gunners and a few flying officers (Bob Curland, for one) originally were drafted into the Army, no officer or enlisted man ever was forced to fly in combat. All of those 50,000 and all surviving fliers were volunteers.

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Sincere thanks to Ralph J. ("Moose") Benso and again to John Ross ("Mac") Mc Donald for furnishing me with copies of their diaries, without which this narrative would be incomplete. Also to Stan Staples, for photos he gave me in Italy.

To Mac, Bob, Cliff, and George now deceased. In January of 2001, I learned from the Liberaider that George died in 1996. I never was able to locate him.



Vahl and Merijane Vladyka

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The rumor was proven correct when we sat assembled and they pulled the curtain off of the briefing map. This was to be a maximum effort of the 15th Air Force and we were putting up 22 planes led by Major Burke who was CO of the 766th Squadron. Most of the 22 crews had less than 10 missions under their belt and only a couple had 40 or more as we did.

The Intelligence Officer showed all of the mass of material that the recon P-38s had been gathering and we Navigators and Bombardiers had been studying for a couple of weeks. The Group Commander gave us the usual pep lecture emphasizing that this was to be a very important strike and the first on this target but if we did a good job we wouldn't have to go back.

I've forgotten to mention that about the first of July Lt. Minsberg had gone back to his old crew and finished his 50 missions with them a couple days earlier. Fisher, our former co-pilot had taken over as pilot and we had been given a replacement co-pilot named 2nd Lt. Captain Emory Jones. Jones was a very nice fellow and fit in with the crew very well. He was from San Antonio but wasn't as loud as most Texans I've known. I should say that he was less than an inch taller than I was and of the same general build and complexion so that we could have passed for brothers.

I'm certain that the entire crew was as apprehensive as I was, about this mission which was our 43rd and getting very close to 50. We were counting on being done and on the way home by the end of July or early August. Experience had shown that if a crew was going to become a cropper it usually happened on one of the first few missions or one of last ones.

An item that had been causing me some problems was the aforementioned Flight Officer rank which I still held more than 6 months after graduation, when the normal was to have been 3 months. The 484th had put all of its FOs in for promotion before we left the USA but when we were transferred that went a winging and the 461st had to begin the process all over. At any rate some promotions did come through but no

FOs.

The Fifteenth Air Force had a policy of not sending any officers home as less than 1st Lt. Since 15th Air Force could promote on it's own authority this was not a problem for commissioned officers but Flight Officer was a non-commissioned rank we had to get the paper work through from Washington and be sworn in as 2nd Lt. before 15th AF could promote us to 1st Lt. so we could go home. This was becoming a worry but I heard from people who were shot down later that all the promotions came through 3 days after we were downed but it didn't help me any since I had to be sworn in to be commissioned. There were some people who finished their 50 missions and had to wait for a promotion before going home.

Looking back on things I now realize that there were fewer high-ranking officers on any of the crews for this mission than was usually the case. I'm not sure if this was design or not but except for Burke the highest rank was 1st Lt. as nearly as I can recall. We were briefed to expect heavy flak, which we were used to, and probably strong fighter defenses because the Germans were known to be pulling back and concentrating their fighters near important targets such as Linz, since, some of the more distant targets such as Ploesti had been hit so hard as to be no longer worth defending.

We got off the ground on schedule at 0700 and got assembled in formation, in clear weather, and headed toward the north with no problems as we proceeded toward the center of Austria, going near Graz and making a feint toward Wiener-Neustadt, which we had hit several times before, then headed to an IP of Spitz still in good weather and visibility.

We had fighter escort up to the IP but they as usual sat off to the side thinking that there would be no enemy fighters in the flak areas near the target. As we turned over the IP and for as long as we lasted we were attacked continuously by what later reports said were 25 ME-110s and 125 FW-190s.

We had seen very few of these craft before and were not familiar with their tactics. They came at us from

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all directions with seemingly little regard for their own safety, flying straight at us, in the midst of heavy flak, firing all the way until it looked as if they intended to ram us and indeed missing by a very few feet. Our gunners reported at least 5 enemy kills and several probables but we were too busy to confirm since there were so many to shoot at and at point blank range.

Shortly after we turned on the IP toward Linz we sustained several hits by 20 MM and 37 MM shells which did major damage including several feet blown off the left wing tip and an explosion in the nose area which I didn't see since I was working from the radio table behind the pilot.

Several shells had burst in the left side of the bomb bay causing fires fed by oxygen, gasoline and hydraulic fluid from broken lines, which ran along the left side of the Bomb Bay. These fires were playing uncomfortably close to the bombs and their fuses. The radio operator and I went into the Bomb Bay and tried unsuccessfully to put out the fires with extinguishers.

I went up to the pilot and reported that it was hopeless and that we had best salvo the bomb load through the Bomb Bay doors that seemed to be hung up. He tried to salvo but for some reason could not. The planes were supposed to come from the factory with a circuit which was designed to prevent inadvertently dropping bombs through the doors but that circuit was supposed to have been disabled for combat.

At any rate we could not drop the bombs and the flames were getting hotter and I was fearful that the bombs could go at any time. I and the radio operator tried unsuccessfully in the front rows of bomb-bay to release the bombs manually with a screw driver while two gunners tried to do the same from the rear racks with no luck. I went back to the cockpit after much futile effort and reported that we were unable to drop manually. On checking my watch I realized I'd been off oxygen for more than ten minutes at 25,000 ft.

About then Fisher rang the emergency bell and told

me to bail out. Dillon and I kicked the left Bomb Bay door hard enough to finally get it off its track so the slip stream tore it off. Then he and the Engineer/Top Gunner went out while I went to the radio table to get my chute. By then the pilots were getting very anxious for me to go so they could follow.

I realize now that I was probably moving slow and erratically by then for lack of oxygen. The next thing I remember was sitting in the chute and looking down from about 10,000 feet having apparently been unconscious when I bailed out and pulled my rip-cord. I saw other men in chutes in the area but none close enough to yell at. There were still lots of planes of both our and German types in the area and much shooting overhead but the canopy kept me from seeing a lot up there.

I was scared about what was going on but my main concern was extreme pain in my left crotch area which I thought was a hit from flak or a bullet but I couldn't see or feel any blood. As I have said I was prone to motion sickness and so for a few minutes I sprayed the area and myself with vomit as the earth got closer. I was getting very anxious to get on the ground no matter what might happen when I got there.

As I got closer to the ground which now seemed to be happening very fast I got more scared because we had heard rumors of what one could expect in the hands of the Germans. I could see trees very near below me and had the presence of mind to try to slip the chute away from them as we had been instructed to do. It didn't seem to work very well and by then all I could do was hope. The chute and I were oscillating when I hit the ground such that I lit swinging backward and hit very hard with a jar that really shook me.

As soon as I could get my wits about me I removed the chute and balled it up preparing to head for some trees about 150 feet away. I hadn't seen anyone around before I landed in this potato field that at least was soft and probably accounts for my not being more badly injured than I seemed to be.

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As I prepared to run toward the aforementioned tree covered area along a small stream to hide the chute and myself, three nice looking girls who seemed to be about 16 to 20 years of age came up out of nowhere and began jabbering and motioning and pointing. I couldn't understand them but finally gathered that they wanted the chute, which was silk. I dropped it there and ran in the direction they had been pointing and they picked up the chute.

I probably killed a couple of minutes in this exchange and probably misunderstood the gestures because by the time I got to the wooded area I saw a man in an old shabby uniform and a gun about 50 feet away and coming my way but apparently not yet having seen me. I dropped down flat with my face in the dirt in an area of tall grass and weeds, which I hoped, might hide me.

It wasn't long until I heard a yell that sounded like -"heisen" but I remained quiet until the word was repeated two more times with increasing volume and urgency. I finally turned my head to look up into a gun muzzle pointed at me with a very ugly face behind it about 10 feet away.

I decided that it was time to stop trying to do other than recognize and go along with the situation in which I had no control. I thought I might as well be 'Mr. nice guy' and do as he said although I really thought my life was down to a matter of seconds. I stood up and smiled amicably but he didn't seem very happy and kept excitedly yelling "heisen, heisen" and getting closer until finally he could and did jab me in the chest with his gun and motion upward with it.

I finally got the idea that he desired me to raise my hands, which I then did immediately. I think the soldier who was about fifty years old and acted about as scared as I was and probably with good reason since I was wearing a .45 even though I never did even think of using it. After I raised my hands he was happier and then he got behind me so he could jab me with the gun and exert his authority.

He took my .45 and called to the girls and made them give me back the parachute so I could carry it. I

was wearing my usual heated suit that was the newer double insulated dark green type and not the earlier blue bunny suit that were never any good except to cause burns from shorting. It was pretty heavy to do much walking or running in but at least unlike many others I was wearing GI boots instead of the heated slippers that went with the suit.

With me carrying the chute and the soldier behind me, jabbing me with his gun about every step, we made our way about a half-mile uphill, where, we came upon a small military installation. It turned out to be a flak battery of about 100 men set in the middle of a wooded area. Some other men came out of a central building with a porch on the front and took the chute, which, after carrying it that distance I was very glad to be rid of. My captor who was apparently a Volkstrom (land watch types composed of men over 50 and boys under 16) soldier turned me over to this new group who were regulars of the Luftwaffe flak battery. They motioned me to sit on the porch which I did expecting any moment to be shot. After a minute or two Fisher was brought in and in a few more minutes so was Jones and they too were seated on the porch. It was beginning to look as if we would not be shot for a few more minutes.

We said a few stilted words to each other, like, "This is sure going to be rough on the folks" before the guards decided we weren't allowed to talk and jabbed us a few times with their gun muzzles to get the point across. They brought in Hill and Dillon and the lastly Gryswinski on a makeshift stretcher because he had been hit by a 20 am round in his ankle and was in extreme pain. Some others of our crew and other crews were picked up and taken elsewhere but Mancourt and Lucero never did show up.

After we sat there for about a half-hour the guards were ordered to bring us inside the building which turned out to be the Battery Commander's office and he proceeded to interrogate us by asking first for name, rank and serial number which we gave him as we had been told to do. The Commander could speak fair English but was not very adept at treatment of POWs and not versed on US Air Corps ranks. He and all the German military there and later became

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very excited when they discovered they had two men named Jones who looked enough alike they could be brothers which they immediately assumed we were in spite of our denial.

The main and most amusing confusion we faced, which went over our heads at the time but persisted until we got to the Dulag (more later) was concerning 2nd Lt. Captain Emory Jones, which caused the Germans to think that he was of high-rank, since, some of the German ranks were a little like that. (Colonel- Major etc.) At any rate they assumed that he was the highest-ranking POW officer and so had to be in charge and make all the decisions for we underlings. As I said this lasted even after our group had grown to more than 100 men with a couple Majors and lots of Captains in it.

After the German officer had spent about 15 minutes trying to question us and yelling charges about us being spies and gangsters (a favorite term of theirs, along with "terror fliers") and threatening to shoot us he waved us toward the door and jabbered at the guards in German. As we got outside the door on the porch each of the guards injected a round into the chamber of their guns and waved us toward some 3 foot diameter trees nearby.

I looked at Fisher and Jones and noted that they were as pale as I felt because I was sure the guards had been told to take us out and shoot us. However when we got to the trees they motioned us to sit down while they stood guard. In a few minutes some one brought some ham sandwiches and some kind of drinks which were at least cool and I breathed a little easier since it didn't look like this was to be our last supper.

We spent a couple hours lulling in the shade wondering what had happened to the others and what was going to happen to us and the guards even let us talk among ourselves which was a big help in getting over our fright and planning future actions. We had been shot down and bailed out at about noon and at about 3 PM they got us on our feet and began walking (herding) us to as it turned out the small town of Enns. It turned out to be a two and a half hour walk

and was made doubly difficult by our having to carry Grysinski on the stretcher with him screaming in pain at every step or so it seemed.

We came to a station where we boarded a train for the short, 10-mile haul to the Linz railway station where we were joined by many of our fellow POWs as we were beginning to think of ourselves. Over 200 had been shot down that day and most of them from our 461st Bomb group.

The civilians in the station were very unhappy with us and I'm certain would have killed us right then if the military guards had not been there to prevent such action. It was the first time that Linz had been the target of a major bombing raid and whereas our group had not reached the target due to the fighter action, the rest of the 15th Air Force had almost obliterated the tank factory.

The 461st had lost 12 planes on the bomb run and 4 others did not make it home to our base out of 21 planes committed. 113 officers and men of our group were shot down over the target area that day and about 80% survived to become POWs.

At the Linz railroad station we were loaded on German trucks about the size of GI 6X6s and taken westward to a Gestapo barracks near Wels, Austria. The trucks were something different in that they used a system of burning wood in a box on the side of the truck to generate methane gas, which was piped to the engine carburetor as fuel. They had a top speed of about 20 mph with the load we had and could not make it more than half way up most of the small hills en route. The trucks would get about half way up the grade and stop and then the guards and we would get off and push them to the top of the hill where we would get back on and ride to the next hill. This happened at least ten times on the 30-mile trip and I will say that it boosted my ego to think that our work in destruction of oil facilities and installations had reduced the German military to this degree. It was obvious in many more ways that our bombing was hurting them more than I had previously thought.

We got to the Gestapo installation at about 8 PM and

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were put in solitary type cells. My room was 12 feet by 12 feet and about 14 feet high with a single small window near the ceiling. There was a wooden pallet about 3' by 6' and 30" tall with a 3'X6' bag on top filled with excelsior type wood shavings which was obviously meant to be a mattress for a bed.

The window was open and it seemed very cold. In a short while I was brought a sandwich and bowl of soup but I was hardly hungry and tried my best to get the guards to have someone close the window but to no avail.

I pounded the door several times to try to attract attention to get someone to close the window or raise the temperature since I was freezing. After a while I began to realize it was designed that way and my complaining was music to their ears. I tried to sleep on the pallet with the pad on top of me for warmth but it didn't work and I was shivering so much I fell off the pallet once.

They had taken away all my gear except what I was wearing, including my watch, so I don't know what time (probably about 2 AM) when a man came to the room and took me to an office where a Gestapo officer was holding court.

I stood at attention close in front of his desk and answered his questions about name, rank, and serial number. Then he got around to asking some questions about what kind of planes we were flying and what Group and Squadron and crew designation to which I could only answer "I don't know".

It is very difficult to remember and repeat conversations but he finally asked "spreiken ze deitch" which I had heard before and I said something like "Hell no! Do I look like a dumbbed Krout?" He took offense at this so he reached across the desk and grabbed the front of my flight suit and backhanded me across the face a couple of times. This made me so mad I wouldn't open my mouth again in spite of his threats to shoot me for spying and insulting Germany among other major and minor crimes. He finally gave up and sent me back to freeze again.

I learned later that I was lucky that I clamed up be-

cause others were grilled for hours if they just said they didn't know the answer to his questions.

Back in the room I couldn't sleep in spite of being very tired. I just shivered away the night. By now the initial excitement and fear and apprehension were beginning to wear off and I could think a little bit logically about other things like investigating the pain in my left upper leg and groin area which had been hurting very badly but not incapacitating me. On examination I discovered that the parachute strap must have been loose enough that the sudden jerk had rubbed the skin off in that area but it was already scabbing over and numbness was setting in which lasted for over three years that was very disturbing but had no other effect. I didn't even claim a Purple Heart later as I should have!

I kept expecting to be called for further interrogation but morning came at last and I was brought some food, which passed for breakfast, but I was still too scared to be very hungry. I can't remember how long I sat there in solitary for what was probably only a day but it seemed at least twice as long. The Germans finally took the entire group that they had gathered from the July 25th bombing raid and marched us down to the Wels railroad station and put us on a train in chair cars, under heavy guard.

We were headed for Frankfurt on the Main and I don't have any idea what the route was or what area we passed through except that we did go through Munich where I remember some local civilian ladies handing out some coffee and cold drinks to us the same as they were dispensing to their own soldiers who were passing through. I even recall that on more than one occasion some of the SS troops we came in contact with shared their cigarettes with we POWs but that was not my thing so only of passing interest.

The train ride was not too long or uncomfortable and we arrived at the Frankfurt station just after dark the second day on the train, having now been in the hands of the Germans for about three and half days. We were taken off the train and assembled into a circular group surrounded by our heavily armed guards with their guns pointed at the crowd of civilians

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around us who were obviously bent on doing us harm if they could.

As rapidly as they could and obviously with good reason the guards and the other military people in charge of the group got us headed out and marching away from the station toward Oberursel a suburb about 6 kilometers northwest of the railway station, where the Dulag Luft was located.

After the incident at the station I don't think any of us nursed any crazy ideas of trying to escape during the march because we were followed by a group of irate civilians who seemed bent on killing us. Upon our arrival at the Dulag Luft I at Oberursel we were again placed in solitary confinement cells which were much smaller than at Wels. By now I was finally beginning to be hungry and welcomed a bowl of what purported to be cabbage soup but was really hot water with a little salt and pepper that a cabbage leaf might have been waved at. It tasted wonderful!

The worst thing about my solitary cell was that it wasn't solitary at all in that I had many fleas and lice to share it with. The most amusing but near tragic happening occurred right after I had eaten the soup and now needed to have a BM most urgently and was luckily able to make the guard understand my needs so that he took me to a latrine while he stood outside. I looked all over and couldn't find a stool commode but did find a small booth with an unscreened drain in the bottom and being familiar with similar facilities in North Africa I squatted and utilized it for my needs. When the guard noted what I had done to the nice clean shower he almost shot me outright on the spot.

I cooled my heels in the cell for two days before a German Private came and took me to be interrogated by the real experts, meaning that this was their only business and were masters of the art of using everything in their power to get us to talk and tell more than we knew we knew. There were two interrogating officers although one was obviously the senior and the other still learning. We went through the same old name, rank and serial number and the easy to answer I don't know items, which they didn't ex-

pect me, a mere FO to know anyway. We even passed easily over not knowing anything about radar or the 'Mickey ships' although I had actually gone to a three-day school about radar at another base near Cerignola.

They had managed to disconcert me with a sheaf of info like my mother's maiden name and other intimate details of my life that I couldn't understand where or why or how they could have obtained. Then they pulled out a copy of the secret orders which we had opened in the B-24 after leaving the USA and to our knowledge and information there was only one other copy in existence and it was in Washington DC. I was flabbergasted but tried not to show it. At any rate the implication was that they knew everything so there was no use trying to deny or mislead them.

They were just beginning to get tough with threats of shooting me for spying and the like when all hell broke loose in the corridor outside the room we were in and a young German officer poked his head in the door and yelled "we got Gabreski" which caused my interrogators to jump up and dance out the door yelling "we got Gabreski" over and over. I sat there for a very long time with nothing going on except much joyful racket outside the room and since I didn't know who Gabreski was I was very much in the dark. My interrogators had apparently lost interest in me and never did come back. After about two hours a guard came in and took me back to my cell and that was the last of my grilling.

The next morning I and my cell mates who had me pretty chewed up by then were taken to a large barracks type holding room where I joined a large number of people from our group, who had also completed interrogation. We could now converse but we didn't very much for fear that the place was bugged.

I was finally realizing that we were not going to be executed for a while and probably never. I was now becoming more worried about how the situation was going to worry the folks and less about my own problems. The food was little and of terrible quality but I wasn't so very hungry yet and neither were my

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cohorts.

After a couple of days we were assembled and marched back to the Frankfort station where we boarded about ten forty and eight type box cars with about 50 POWs and two guards to a car. We made up a train of eight or ten cars headed, we were told, for our final home at Stalag-Luft I near Barth in northern Pomerania. Some of our comrades had flown out of England so they had some idea where Barth was because they had used it as a navigational turning point on missions into Germany.

The rumors abounded but it was generally thought that we could be headed for worse places. The most important happening on the two-day ride was when as we were just entering a railroad marshaling yard near Kassel, a raid by 8th Air Force began and some of the bombs came uncomfortably close. Some of our men complained loudly and bitterly about not being allowed off the train to seek safety but I figured that as long as the guards stayed with us we had little reason to complain.

The bombing appeared to be good and very effective, since the marshalling yard appeared to be obliterated. I got a lesson in the effectiveness of such bombing of marshalling yards when we were able to proceed

through the yard less than two hours after the bombing because the Germans utilized hand labor by thousands of political prisoners to make repairs while they would otherwise have still been assembling forces to do it with machines.

It became apparent that it was much more lastingly effective to have fighter-bombers drop single bombs on the tracks about two hundred yards apart in the open country to tie up traffic for a much longer time.

Since the boxcar was very crowded (to the extent that on one occasion when the guard on our car wanted to go to the opposite end he had we prisoners hand his gun down to the end for him while he elbowed his way through the bodies. Incidentally, whether rightly or wrongly, our officers in charge had asked us to give parole which we did since the alternative would have been to have made the trip without shoes or pants. There was always much argument among our people about this and other similar conduct because some felt it amounted to a violation of the basic rule that a prisoner was still a fighting man and should resist with all possible ability in order to occupy as much of the enemy's resources and manpower as possible. Sometimes this policy is foolhardy and must be ignored.

Early in the morning of a fairly clear and cool day we arrived at the Barth RR station.



FATE OF WORLD WAR II ACES BEHIND THE IRON CURTAIN

By
Dr. Laszlo Hudra

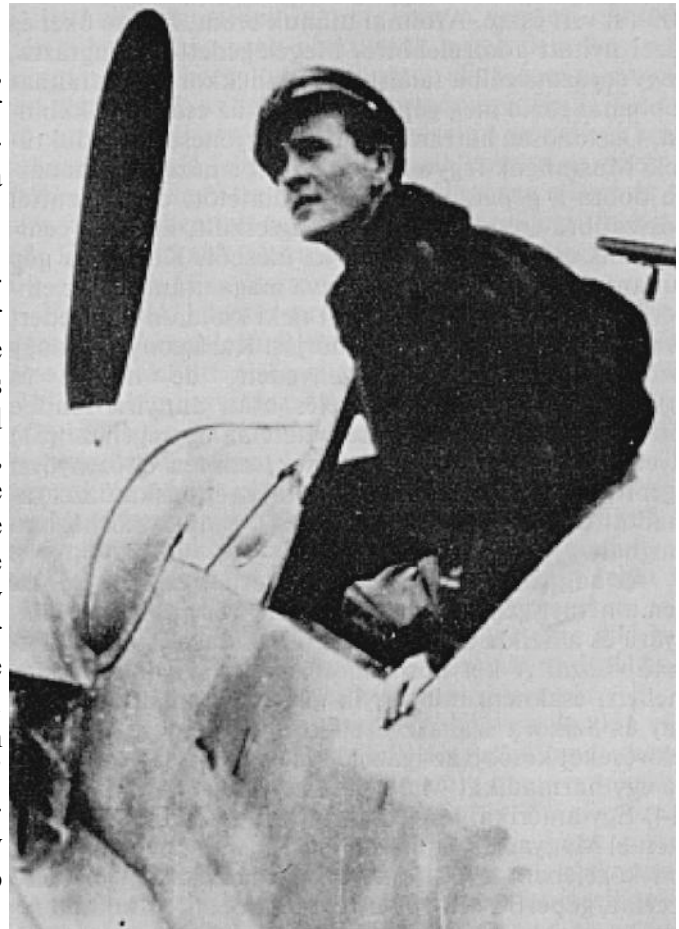
With the presence of the occupying Red Army after World War II, the communists gradually took over the small country of Hungary, just like in the rest of Eastern Europe. The country's armed forces had to be rebuilt.

Because there was a big shortness of training officers, many members of the former Royal Hungarian Air Force served in the newly organized Hungarian People's Army Air Force. They loved flying, and felt a patriotic duty to serve their country.

But toward the end of 1949 newly trained young, communist officers, educated either in the Soviet Union or at home, started infiltrating the armed forces. The communist party leadership, after liquidating its army's high command (among them generals who participated in the anti-German underground movements in 1944), started preconceptual actions against the officers of the Air Force. The communist Minister of Defense and the remaining members of the high command became paranoid about the possibility of World War III. They thought the "old" officers who served during the former capitalist regime would endanger and divulge the preparation details of the coming war to the enemy. They did not trust them and their hysteria resulted in accusing the "old" officers that as the "built-in enemy" they were traitors who would plot against the communist regime and the "beloved" Soviet Union. They might sabotage or even defect with their aircrafts to imperialist countries in case World War III breaks out! Everyone knew that the time had arrived to replace the "old" officers. Arrests and military trials followed the Stalinist ideology and the political reasoning was obvious: they did not need the "old" officers' professional knowledge and experience any more. But the true reason was their objections to the forced military development, and criticizing the accelerated training and promoting of the new communist officers. The Soviet military advisors did not like them, either.

One of the most decorated fighter pilots in World War II, Lajos Toth was born in Ujfeherto in Hungary in 1922. His father, a professional soldier insisted that he should follow the family's tradition. He became a cadet

in the Military High School in Pecs. Upon graduation he was accepted by the Royal Hungarian Air Force Academy in Kassa (a Hungarian city for 1,000 years, now belonging to Slovakia), and was commissioned a Second Lieutenant at the end of 1942. He was assigned to the 1st Fighter Squadron and sent to the Eastern Front. He was given a nickname "Drumi". His unit flew Hungarian made "Heja" and later Messerschmitt 109 fighter planes. He shot down 11 Soviet airplanes,



2nd Lt. Lajos Toth in his fighter plane

and was awarded the Officer's Signum Laudis and the Knight Cross of the Hungarian Order of Merit, with swords on military ribbon. When Germany occupied Hungary on March 19, 1944, his unit was transferred back to the air defense of Hungary and he was promoted to squadron leader in the 101st "Puma" Fighter Group. He ended the war with 28 kills, and was decorated with one of the highest military badges of honor, the Officer's Cross of the Hungarian Order of Merit.

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2nd Lt. Lajos Toth, decorated with the Knight Cross of the Hungarian Order of Merit

After the war he joined the revival of the Hungarian military aviation. First he was a trainer of officer cadets in the new Air Force, and then gradually advanced to the positions of deputy commander or commander of squadron, regiment and division. He was very popular and well liked. When he learned of the arrests of his fellow officers, one after the other, Lajos Toth who was then a captain, started thinking about escaping to the free West. Two of his NCO trainers successfully deserted to the West in a Soviet Jak-9 plane. When he criticized the poorly performing Soviet aircrafts and the lack of maintenance manuals and spare parts, the communists arrested him. He was court-martialed on fabricated charges, sentenced to death and was executed on June 11, 1951. He was 29.

Twelve other defendants in the same trial, all pilots in the former 101st "Puma" Fighter Group were sentenced to various prison terms, ranging from 3 to 15 years. Among them were three aces with at least five kills during World War II. Two death sentences were commuted to life imprisonment.

A few former officers thought they would be rather safe in civilian life. Another ace with 36 victories, former Captain Dezso Szentgyorgyi became a civilian pilot with the Hungarian airline MASZOVLET after the

war. During the "purges", he was arrested. Although his attorney proved that Szentgyorgyi was not a spy, he received a 5-year sentence for "spying for imperialist Western countries".



"Puma" fighter pilots discuss their experiences. From left: Captain Dezso Szentgyorgyi (After 1945: 5 years), 2nd Lt. "Drumi" Toth (after 1945: executed), Cica "Pussycat" Tobak, Unknown

After the collapse of communism in Eastern Europe in 1989, the newly established Hungarian Air Force Veterans Association initiated the search to find Toth's grave. Although he was rehabilitated and posthumously promoted to Lieutenant Colonel in 1990, his grave was nowhere to be found. When he was executed, according to the then usual communist custom his relatives were not even notified, and he was buried somewhere under a false name. The search finally succeeded in 2002, when his grave was located under the name of "Ferenc Horvath". The Hungarian Defense Ministry recognized him as its own, and ordered a hero's reburial with full military honor in 2003.

Farrold Franklin Stephens

Farrold Stephens was born in Trail City, South Dakota on May 11, 1919. In 1937, he graduated from Gettysburg High School where he studied drama and music.

That same year, Farrold and a couple of friends drove out to Portland, Oregon, where he worked for Montgomery Ward, while honing his talents. However, with the attack on Pearl Harbor, Farrold enlisted in the Army Air Corps. He became a squadron leader and pilot of a B-24 bomber in 45 missions over Europe. Then he transferred into the Air Transport Command ferrying planes throughout the world.

After the war, Farrold returned to Portland where he became the staff singer for KGW radio. Farrold began his formal musical training at Juilliard School of Music, New York. While there, he met Robert Shaw, and became a member and tenor soloist of the Robert Shaw Chorale. Farrold also sang with several symphonic choruses under the baton of Arturo Toscanini. After two years, he was invited to be the voice and diction coach for the Portland Symphonic Choir. In the summer of 1949, Farrold earned a scholarship to attend the Music Academy of the West in Santa Barbara.

Returning to Portland, Farrold met Alice Wanke to

whom he married in 1950 in Portland. Farrold and Alice returned to New York where he received his B.S and M.A degrees from Columbia University Teachers College. Mauritz Bomhard, founder of the Kentucky Opera Association, lured Farrold to Louisville to sing lead Tenor Opera Roles. Farrold appeared as soloist with the Louisville Symphony while on the faculty of the University of Louisville and Southern Baptist Theological Seminary. Farrold continued his music career in Dallas on the faculty of Southern Methodist University, then on to San Diego State College. In 1966, Farrold returned to Louisville to teach voice at Kentucky Southern College.

While performing and teaching, Farrold held many church related jobs. These included Broadway Baptist church in Louisville, First Presbyterian in Dallas, Texas. He also directed the Navy Blue Jacket Choir in San Diego. Farrold sang with numerous symphonies throughout the United States, including: Dallas, Portland, Miami, Houston, and Louisville.

Farrold and Alice have been living in Portland since 1971. While here, Farrold directed the Portland-based, Civic Choraliers. He also directed choirs at St. James Lutheran church and St. Thomas More. Farrold continued his singing well into his seventies, performing one of his last concerts at the age of 72.

Farrold passed away October 2, 2003, 10:18AM, Portland, OR.

A love of tradition has never weakened a nation, indeed it has strengthened nations in their hour of peril; but the new view must come, the world must roll forward.

Sir Winston Churchill (1874 - 1965), speech in the House of Commons, November 29, 1944

PETER J. DREZEK, SCHEDULER,
WORLD WAR II VETERAN

From the Buffalo News May 25, 2004

Peter J. Drezek, who flew 51 missions as a ball turret gunner on a B-24 bomber in Italy during World War II, died Sunday in Veterans Affairs Medical Center after a long illness. He was 84.

A lifelong Buffalo resident and graduate of Emerson Vocational High School, Mr. Drezek served in the Army Air Forces during World War II.

A scheduler for Bell Aerospace in Wheatfield, he retired after 42 years there. He was a past county commander and finance officer for the Region 9 Veterans Committee Workers and a past commander

and 60-year member of Adam Plewacki Post, American Legion. Mr. Drezek was a chairman of American Legion baseball, and was the "pop-corn man" at VA Hospital, where he made and sold popcorn for volunteers and patients. Having volunteered there for 16 years, he was honored last winter by the center for 7,500 hours of service.

Survivors include his wife, the former Florence G. Lasek; a daughter, Beverly Alaimo-Diloro of Cheektowaga; a son, Donald of the Town of Tonawanda; and a sister, Helen Holakowski of Sloan.

A Mass of Christian Burial will be offered 9:30 a.m. Thursday in Immaculate Heart of Mary Catholic Church, 381 Edison St. Burial will be in St. Stanislaus Cemetery, Cheektowaga.



Wendover Field

Mail Call

This message is from Ernest Parsonson. He does not have internet access. I am his sister writing this information to you from him:

"This is in response to your request in the Liberaider for information on the pilots who flew on the December 17, 1944 mission to Odertal.

"I was the "A" Flight Leader for Squadron #764 on this mission with Captain Mixon in the right seat. Although William Garrett was listed as a Principal Pilot on an unnumbered Operational Memorandum dated December 28, 1944, he had finished his missions before the Odertal attack. The squadron navigator or a group navigator flew on all "A" Flight missions. In anticipation of this, my regular navigator, Dan Levin, was offered a chance to go to radar school to become a much needed "Mickey" operator. The Odertal mission was his second mission as a Mickey operator and he was in the number two position with Charles Saur who was moved to that position when I moved up to the number one position. This I confirmed with Dan in a telephone conversation a week or so ago. At the time, I had a long conversation with Mixon on the call he received on the radio from the German pilot who called Mixon by his name and asked him what he thought of his B box now. I don't remember the order of the other pilots who flew that day. I hope this helps you."

Ernest Parsonson
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Sterling Heights, Mi 48312

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I received the following from Tom Moss (trmwm@msn.com) and thought it was worth repeating here in the Liberaider:

Do you realize that the only time in our lives when we like to get old is when we're kids? If you're less than 10 years old, you're so excited about aging that you think in fractions.

"How old are you?" "I'm four and a half!" You're never thirty-six and a half. You're four and a half, going on five!

That's the key.

You get into your teens, now they can't hold you back. You jump to the next number, or even a few ahead.

"How old are you?" "I'm gonna be 16!" You could be 13, but hey, you're gonna be 16! And then the greatest day of your life . . . You become 21. Even the words sound like a ceremony . YOU BECOME 21. YESSSS!!!

But then you turn 30. Oooohh, what happened there? Makes you sound like bad milk. He TURNED; we had to throw him out. There's no fun now, you're just a sour-dumpling. What's wrong? What's changed?

You BECOME 21, you TURN 30, then you're PUSHING 40.

Whoa! Put on the brakes, it's all slipping away. Before you know it, you REACH 50 . and your dreams are gone.

But wait!!! You MAKE it to 60. You didn't think you would!

So you BECOME 21, TURN 30, PUSH 40, REACH 50 and MAKE it to 60.

You've built up so much speed that you HIT 70! After that it's a day-by-day thing; you HIT Wednesday!

You get into your 80s and every day is a complete cycle; you HIT lunch; you TURN 4:30; you REACH bedtime.

And it doesn't end there. Into the 90s, you start going backwards; "I was JUST 92."

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Then a strange thing happens. If you make it over 100, you become a little kid again. "I'm 100 and a half!"

May you all make it to a healthy 100 and a half!!

HOW TO STAY YOUNG

1. Throw out nonessential numbers. This includes age, weight and height. Let the doctors worry about them. That is why you pay them.
2. Keep only cheerful friends. The grouches pull you down.
3. Keep learning. Learn more about the computer, crafts, gardening, whatever. Never let the brain idle. An idle mind is the devil's workshop. And the devil's name is Alzheimer's.
4. Enjoy the simple things.
5. Laugh often, long and loud. Laugh until you gasp for breath.
6. The tears happen—endure, grieve, and move on. The only person who is with us our entire life, is ourselves. Be ALIVE while you are alive.
7. Surround yourself with what you love, whether it's family, pets, keepsakes, music, plants, hobbies, whatever. Your home is your refuge.
8. Cherish your health: If it is good, preserve it. If it is unstable, improve it. If it is beyond what you can improve, get help.
9. Don't take guilt trips. Take a trip to the mall, even to the next county; to a foreign country but NOT to where the guilt is.
10. Tell the people you love that you love them, at every opportunity.

AND ALWAYS REMEMBER:

Life is not measured by the number of breaths we take, but by the moments that take our breath away.

We all need to live life to its fullest each day.

* * * * *

When I read Stephan Ambrose's book about the 15th Air Force, *The Wild Blue*, I laughed at the comments about "...the almost superhuman strength to fly..." a B-24 (at page 77 of the book). At age six, I suffered a scalding burn on my left arm that removed all the skin on that arm. Where my shirt sleeve was rolled up, the sustained heat damaged the muscle of my left bicep so that it never grew to more than 80% of normal. As a result, I never could chin myself more than six times. At 5'10" and 160 pounds, I could fly formation with that left arm with anyone, and I once traversed the entire length of our runway on landing, without touching down our damaged nose wheel and its flat tire. It took some considerable time for me to learn that it was all about finesse and anticipation, not muscle.

Vahl Vladyka
vmvladyka@austin.rr.com

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As I write this issue of the Liberaider, I can't help but think of some E-Mail I've been receiving over the past week or so about the tail markings of 461st aircraft. The argument centers on whether the 461st ever had any aircraft with the 49th Bomb Wing tail marking rather than the known red upper and red bar lower of the 461st. The 49th BW used a circle upper and a number lower that indicated the group (2 for the 461st). If anyone would like to comment on this and provide some proof, I would love to hear from you.

Hughes Glantzberg
Hughes@hugheshelpdesk.com

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I was not on the Odertal Mission of 17 Dec 1944, a possibility that Hjalmar Johansson wrote in his letter published in the June 2004 Liberaider. My name should be removed from the names of those who may have participated. However, I vividly remem-

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ber the return of that formation to Torretta Field.

That afternoon our crew, having completed 13 missions, was preparing to leave the next morning for a seven-day R & R to the Isle of Capri. Several weeks earlier, while winterizing the new site for our officer's tent, the Italian workers ran out of cement after assembling the tufta block walls and pouring half of the floor. In time new bags of cement were received and the floor was finally completed so now our home was ready for occupancy. Surmising that this nice day might mark the last of the good weather, our enlisted crew members were assisting we four officers to move before we left for Capri. Our belongings had to be carried out of the old location, the stove and metal chimney dismantled, the tent taken down and mounted over the walls, the stove and pipe installed and our cots and personal items placed inside our new home.

While this work was in process a clerk from operations appeared and said there was a visitor at the office who wanted to see Lt. Clair Alexander. I replied, "What?" for I could not imagine who would be looking for me. So he repeated his message. I told him that I was busy as we had to finish before it got dark. My crew told me to take off for they could complete the move without me. I found Wright Bronson from my home town of Akron, Ohio waiting for me. I barely knew him but I did know his kid sister, Millie, for she was a high school classmate of my sister. She had sent him my Group and Squadron

numbers and asked him to look me up. Wright was a civilian engineer working for the B F Goodrich Co. and his job was troubleshooting their products being used by the Army.

I showed him around the Squadron area and we talked about people we both knew in Akron plus I answered his questions about my being a bomber pilot. I invited him to stay for dinner but he said he had a meeting in Foggia the next morning and wanted to find his way back to the main highway before it got dark. The two of us walked over to his Jeep and there we picked up the growing roar of the returning Odertal Mission. When it got close enough so that I could make out the remnants of the four formations I must have shown my anxiety for Wright asked about the obvious open spots and the feathered engines. I could only mumble that they must have been hit hard. As the bombers circled in their preparation to land a number of them shot red flares and he questioned this. I replied that it generally indicated dead or wounded aboard. With this he jumped into his Jeep and with a wave of his hand sped off in a cloud of dust.

We enjoyed our stay on Capri, which included Christmas Eve. For us it was a week of diversion, free of the threat of combat. However, I have never forgotten the sight of that straggling return of the Odertal Refinery mission and what its ragged condition signified.

Clair Alexander



Diary of Gerald Maroney

May 27, 1944 started out as an ordinary day. Well, as ordinary as a day can be when you are flying on a combat mission piloting a heavy bomber.

It was to become quite a day for my B-24 and me. I am sure there are many stories that could be written by many pilots about this day, but this is my story. It was a day when death passed me by many separate times within the space of perhaps less than two minutes.

The CO (Commanding Officer) came about 2 AM as usual to awaken the crewmembers who were to fly the day's mission. Breakfast around 2:30 AM. Briefing at 3 AM. Into the trucks for the half mile ride to the planes. Then the long nervous wait for the flare from the tower to indicate it was time to start the engines.

It was to be a milk run (a short easy one). The target was to be an airfield near Toulon. The briefing indicated not much flak now many fighters around the target. The day was lovely. I felt pretty good about the whole thing.

At 11:23 AM our formation was flying smoothly at 17,000 feet and we were crossing the French coast Cap d'Antibes. The flak arrived quite suddenly (usually you see it in advance and fly into it). I saw only one burst before my plane was hit squarely and solidly below the right wing. This was the first break with eternity. If the shell had exploded a few feet higher it would have blown the wing off.

Engines 3 and 4 on the starboard side were immediately out of commission. I knew I was out of the mission and the urgent business at hand was to keep the ship in the air. I headed the plane toward Switzerland with the intention of either landing there or bailing the crew out over neutral territory.

In almost one motion I jettisoned the bombs with the pilots emergency release and feathered the two starboard propellers. This means turning the blades of the props so that the thin biting edge of the blade is facing the direction of the flight achieving less wind

resistance too if the broad surface of the blades faced the wind. But the props wouldn't feather. Apparently the burst had destroyed the feathering motion built into the hub of the prop. I knew now that the trip to Switzerland would be postponed and we would have to bail out.

Here again we had bad luck. Without an order from me (I was too busy to give one) the bombardier thinking to cut down on the drag closed the bomb bay doors from his position in the nose. The hydraulic system operating the bomb bay doors is powered by #3 engine. After #3 engine becomes inoperative there is pressure left in the hydraulic lines for only one more use of the system. He used the last of the pressure to close the bomb bay doors! That meant that the normal escape routes for the pilots, radioman and engineers was cut off! Now the greatest dread of airmen in flight – fire – broke out in one of the two damaged engines. Flames raced back half way to the tail assembly. This was not to prove significant to the eventual outcome, but it did create a tremendous mental hazard.

My co-pilot was a big fellow to begin with. When he donned his flying suit, mea west, parachute and flak suit, he loomed colossal. He had to walk the length of the plane across the very narrow catwalk over the bomb bay to reach the waist windows for his bail out. I don't know how he ever managed it.

The drag on the right side caused by the unfeathered propellers was tremendous. This plus the lift from the good engines on the left side made the airplane almost unmanageable. It threatened at any moment to flip over.

By this time all the rest of the crew had bailed out safely. Now it was my turn. With all my strength I leveled the plane as well as I could and left my seat.

I hopped the three or four feet to the "deck". The waist windows were too far back for the time I had if the plane had again gone into its grotesque and dan-

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gerous attitudes. If I was going to leave the plane at all it had to be by the nose opening. This was about 5 or 6 feet forward of me through a narrow tunnel. I could see that it was open. Some luck anyway. The bombardier and navigator had used it for their exit.

I started through the tunnel toward the opening and almost immediately a strap on my "back pack" parachute caught on some hook or jagged metal caused my the flak burst. I couldn't move forward. I was stuck in the tunnel! For the first time I started to panic. I pushed and strained forward but I was still stuck. The ground was coming up fast. Happily at this point I calmed down a little. I slowly back up, flattened myself against the tunnel floor, and inched forward. I fell through the opening.

The ordeal was far from over. When I left the plane, I could not have been more than a dangerously low 500 feet above the ground. The "ground" was the summit of Pdelaigh, Alfes Maritime near the resort town of Florence and almost 20 miles north and east of Nice.

The most horrible part was yet to come. I was inactive now, slowly descending through the soft and warm air. I had a few seconds to feel good. But the derelict made a violent and uncontrolled steep turn

and came back at my dangling parachute. The right wingtip missed my parachute by less than 30 feet. The plane continues on about ¼ mile and started another turn back in my direction. But now the thing could no longer stay in the air. It fell the last 50 feet to hit the ground and explode and burn with a thunderous roar. The concussion swayed me gently. I thanked God as fervently as anyone ever thanked Him for anything. I was safe.

Not yet! Now occurred the shortest and most terrifying of the incidents. I couldn't believe it. I was drifting directly into the huge fire. I could feel the terrible heat rise. At the last possible split second there was a slight wind shift, and I drifted miraculously away to land, unscratched, about 35 feet from the late airplane. I landed just the other side of the very peak of the mountain and so was shielded from the exploding .50 caliber machine gun bullets.

It was 11:25 AM.

All given measurements of time and distance are, of course, approximate.

There followed 3 ½ months of cat and mouse with would-be Nazi captors, but all that time could not match those incredible 2 minutes.



The Island of Vis

The coordinates latitude 43°10' North, longitude 16°8' East, had a special meaning to Fifteenth Air Force air crews. They defined the location of the Isle of Vis (pronounced Vees). It played an important role in the history of World War II, by providing a safe haven for Fifteenth Air Force air crews returning from missions to Austria, Poland, Hungary and other targets, with malfunctioning or badly damaged aircraft, or those not having enough fuel to make it safely back to base. On one especially hectic day, 37 B-24s landed at Vis. On many occasions aircraft would have to be left on the island for repairs, sometimes to be scrapped, or a stop made to refuel. When aircraft had to be left behind, crews would sometimes return with a plane from another group or be taken to Bari by boat.

While mainly remembered as a port in a storm, Vis was much more than that, and it was unusual in a number of ways. It was manned by individuals from the US Army Air Forces, the British Royal Air Force and tech representatives working together for a common cause. Vis was not just a place where damaged, or out of fuel aircraft could land; it was used as an operational base for Allied aircraft. Yugoslavia was invaded by the Germans on 6 April 1941, with its surrender on 17 April. An agreement was reached whereby the territory was partitioned, with a new Croat state established under Italian control. Vis was liberated by Tito's Partisans in September 1943, and was later used by Tito as a base for directing operations against the German troops in Yugoslavia. The Allies requested, and were given permission by Vrhovni Stab (NOVJ (Supreme Command of Yugoslav Partisan Forces) to build and equip an emergency landing strip and base on the island of Vis.

In January 1944, a British Commando Unit arrived on Vis, with a radio station for communication with US and British aircraft. In April 1944, a 3,500' steel matting runway was constructed, along with hardstands, defense, and other facilities to service and repair aircraft. The runway on Vis was situated on a flat area between low, rocky mountains bordered by farm homes, barns and vineyards. The accommodations were not luxurious, but adequate. Vis was

home to a variety of aircraft and units over a period of time.

Early in May 1944 a squadron of Spitfires was based at Vis for defense. German aircraft never reached Vis. Eventually, Vis was equipped with salvage teams, first aid and medical personnel, a fire fighting unit, aircraft repair teams, a hospital, heavy truck and bulldozer units for removing crashed planes from the airstrip. From July to September 1944, 215 Allied aircraft landed on Vis, 204 were repaired and flown out.

Detachments of the RAF 205 Wing (Wellington and Halifax bombers), Balkan Air Force 254 Wing (Baltimore and Beaufighter bombers) and other units were based on Vis at some time. Notable were the 352nd and 351st Yugoslav Squadrons (RAF) flying Spitfires. As part of the British Balkan Air Force, their operations were limited to flights over Yugoslavia. The Island of Vis will be remembered by many, for its contribution to winning the air war in Europe and the Balkans.

Vis is an island of the Dalmatian group, located 45 miles west of the Yugoslav coast. It covers thirty-three square miles with the highest point being Mount Hum, near the west end of the island. Today, the population of the Island of Vis is around 5,000 individuals, scattered among thirteen settlements. The largest of these are Komiza on the west coast and the town of Vis (formerly known as Issa) on the bay of Vis. With the exception of a few springs near Komiza, there is no fresh water on the island. There are fertile valleys of red soil where many vineyards are located; they grow grapes for Viska vugava, Plavac and white wines. Vis is connected to the mainland by a daily ferry, which runs from Split on the mainland to Komiza, and the town of Vis. The towns and settlements on the Island of Vis are connected by asphalt roadways. Its main industries are fishing, with a fish processing factory at Komiza, citrus farming and wine making.

The main town, also known as Vis, is a charming, picturesque village on the north coast of the island. The town and the island are virtually untouched by time. It was not opened to tourism until 1989, so this

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industry is still in its infancy. With its interesting history, traditional musical and other events that take place in July and August for entertainment, Vis is a great place to spend a quiet holiday. Underwater diving has become an increasingly important part of the tourism; with excellent diving sites off the coast of the island.

The history of the island and the town of Vis go back to ancient times. The town of Vis was founded in the 4th century B.C., by the Greek tyrant of Siracuse, Dionisius the Older. It was then known as Issa. It became an independent city/state, forging its own money and founding its own colonies elsewhere. Later it prospered under Roman rule. From 996 to 1797, it was a Venetian possession. During the Napoleonic Wars it changed hands among the British,

French and Austrians, and after the Congress of Vienna in 1815, it belonged to Hungary until 1918.

The colony of Issa was built on the terraces on the northwestern site of the cove. It was fortified in the 17th century by a protective wall along with four towers. Portions of the walls may be seen today. Walls and mosaics from baths built in the 1st century A.D. still remain, as do other preserved building of the 16th and 17th centuries. These include Gariboldi Palace, the summer residence of the Croatian poet Marin Gazarovic and the Dojmi-Delupis house with its collection of archeological finds from the island. Vis is a special place to visit, and a photographer's delight.

(Ed. Note: Thanks to the 460th BG Black Panther and Zeljko Bocek of Sisak, Croatia for this article.)

Tail-End Charlie

By
Guyon L. Phillips
461st BG 767 BS

When the orders came out, I immediately saw that we would be flying #7 in a seven-ship box – Tail-End Charlie. It was typical to put a new crew at the rear since that spot was easier to fly, and you'd create less of a problem if you couldn't keep it in tight. The downside was, that your fanny was exposed to a favorite rear-end attack by fighters, and you knew it.

The mission for 25 April 1945 was to hit the marshalling yards at Linz, Austria. Linz had a history I was unaware of – it was heavily defended, and the 15th had experienced more than nominal losses in missions over the previous year. A little known fact, was that it was Hitler's hometown, and that had to be another reason for greater defense against attack.

We were out about an hour when #6 began smoking from his #1 engine. After a few minutes – and nothing on the radio – he peeled off for home, and I moved up to #6. Upon moving up in ranks, you didn't feel like a rookie any longer. Within another hour or so, what do you know - #3 developed the same problem and off he went. Now I'm really moving up in the world – up to the left wing of the

leader where you could see what's going on up front.

Droning on, we reached the Italian Alps that looked quite small and unspectacular from 25,000 feet. Before Walt Dubina, my engineer, got up in the top turret, he appeared at my side and handed me my flak vest, the bottom of which I tucked carefully over sensitive areas. Then he handed me that special steel helmet with the hinged earpieces to fit over your headset – biggest helmet I ever saw.

Seems like we'd hardly left the IP when the black puffs began to appear, right on our level – none higher, none lower. They had the altitude nailed. Of course we had thrown out our chaff to confuse their radar, but all it did was to give them what they needed to zero in on us.

Bearing on, the puffs became thicker and thicker. Of course I'm glued on the lead ship for a tight bombing pattern, but I would sneak a peak now and then as the flak became more intense. I was focused on #1 and holding tight when a burst – with the black puff still intact – passed between me and the lead ship. I jumped, and when I did, the big helmet dropped over my eyes and I had to take my right hand off the throttles and shove it back up. That caused me to

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slip slightly out of formation, and I quickly goosed it back up tight again.

After bombs away, we made a steep right turn out of there as fast as we could. With the bomb bay doors open, you felt like your drawers were down, and you were naked and exposed. Actually, those doors were so flimsy, I knew they offered little or no protection.

Later, my gunners told me they saw several fighters make a pass at us, but that our Mustang fighter escort ran them off without incident. Mustangs – that brought back memories – I was in Single-Engine Advanced on my way to Mustangs or Thunderbolts, when they jerked out all the taller guys and sent us to Twin-Engine in preparation for B-17s or B-24s.

The only thing I remember about the trip back was being on-the-step gradually losing altitude, and flying very fast – but not fast enough for me to get away. Someone said that the greatest feeling was to be shot at and missed, and it sure felt good.

After reaching Torretta for formation peel-off and landing, I picked up conversation on the radio that one of our planes was in trouble. We learned that Doc Demmond of the 765th had his left wheel to drop off the strut when the gear was lowered. He circled the field several times and most of his crew bailed out. We understood he was given the choice to head the plane out over the Adriatic and bail out, but he chose to bring it in.

He retracted his main gear, but the nose wheel had locked in the down position. Everybody gathered to watch, and he couldn't have done a better job in easing the big bird down on the gravel runway, finally sliding just off the end – a job well done. We never figured how you could lose a wheel off a strut.

At critique, we learned that one of our planes had been hit by flak and gone down – the pilot's name was Toothman. There was no report of anyone seeing chutes. Thirty-odd years later, I ran into a young man in Virginia by that name. Now Toothman is not your everyday name, so I asked if by chance he had any relatives who might have been in the Air Force. Turned out that Larry Toothman had indeed been his

uncle. Later I had contact with John LaZier and Roy Wieland, two of Larry's crew, and was able to get more of the story after all these years. Larry's co-pilot was killed by the hit, but the other nine of the crew got out, only to be taken prisoner for the brief period before the Allies reached the area. Larry was severely injured, but survived – was told he passed away in 1984. Had a chance to meet John at the Dayton Reunion of the 461st.

One of the planes that had aborted dropped his bombs on what he considered a target of opportunity. The CO reprimanded him for taking the chance of hitting Allied forces which were close to the target area, to which the pilot replied, "I figured they weren't ours when they started shooting at us."

Then my name was called. I stood up and was told that I had retracted my gear too quickly after take-off. For some strange reason, we were always told to ease back on the yoke at 110 MPH and just let the plane fly itself off the ground. It didn't take me very long in pilot transition to find out that the plane was sluggish and underpowered, and that a little gust or change in wind would drop a heavy plane back on the runway. I had long since decided to keep the plane on the ground until 120, knowing that when you pulled back it would lift off cleanly and for good. Needless to say, I passed up the opportunity to expand on that point with the CO.

To my knowledge, that was the last combat mission of the 461st. Within a couple of weeks or so, we were put on the priority Green Project to fly a squadron ship back via the southern route to the States for redeployment.

A lot of training time went into getting us ready for combat – I flew my first mission as co-pilot on a milk run up to the Po Valley to knock out bridges over the Adige River to block the retreating Germans, so my crew got in only one mission before it was all over in Europe. Again, we were there long enough to know what it was like to be shot at, and the good feeling to know they missed. Four of my crew have passed on, but am still in touch with all the others. Fifty-eight years have gone by quickly, but the memories are still there. We had a good crew – we were a team.

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We're on the web!
Visit
www.461st.org

Webmaster Comments

The website (www.461st.org) continues to grow thanks primarily to the donations of material I receive from all of you. I could do none of what's there without your help. I wish to thank each and every one of you for your help in making the 461st website one of the best on the Internet.

I'd also like to call your attention to the Reunion section of the website. I took numerous photographs at the reunion. These coupled with the ones donated by Orville Hommert make for a pretty complete picture of what the reunion was like this year. Check it out.

During the reunion, many thanks were offered for the work that goes into producing "The Liberaider." The thanks and enthusiasm that this publication is met with was truly encouraging. It is a labor of love to produce this newsletter and to know how much it is appreciated by the members and their families is inspiring. In order to publish this piece, Dave Blake and I have to have some help that most of you are

unaware of and thanks is in order to three companies and five individuals. Through the generosity of friends, Dave is able to print this newsletter at The Mission Press in Merriam, Kansas, a suburb of Kansas City, owned by Dave and Michelle Bounds who graciously allow the loan of their equipment when it's time to print The Liberaider. Thanks is also in order to Phil Farabee (Phil's uncle was a crewmember on Col. Paul Tibbets B-29, The Enola Gay) who helps out with the book binding aspect. When it's time to mail the booklet, it would be difficult at best without the expert help of Jackson Davis of Great Plains Direct and Robert Burdiss of Burdiss Lettershop Services in Lenexa, Kansas. They address the booklets from our mailing list, get an excellent postage rate for us and put it in the mail. All of the help mentioned is at no charge to the 461st Association. They do it to help honor all who served so faithfully so that we may enjoy our freedom today. With friends like these, a person cannot go wrong!