



On Wings of our Grandfathers

A short story of brotherhood and sacrifice in World War II.

by Craig Linn

February 23rd is a day that does not generally conjure up memories for most people. It is just another day of methodical drifting in a calendar, allowing passage through its number with no fanfare, split between holidays like Presidents Day and Easter. It is a day that most do not even give a second thought.

But for others in a small group, February 23rd marks a day of remembrance and reflection. It is a day of individuality, of brotherhood, and sacrifice by a group of men who were barely even old enough to be considered being called just that ... "men". It is a day where families paths were inexplicably altered, leaving questions and thoughts hanging in their minds to never be fully quieted.

Eighty years ago on this day, February 23, 1944, a group of men began their day just like they had done 30 times before since arriving in the theater of operations that most forget about. Wake up around 3AM, get a quick shave, get dressed and head to breakfast. A breakfast that told them more information about what lay ahead of them: A maximum effort breakfast as it was called, consisting of Scrambled Eggs, that loosely resembled the aforementioned name (starting off in powdered form), Fried Spam, Bread, and Coffee. This breakfast would give the men of the mission an idea on the target type that would lay ahead of them.

The men shuffled through each of their squadron "Mess Halls", which were nothing more than walled tents to provide simple shelter from the elements because of the base still being assembled. The men gathered their breakfast and coffee and positioned themselves almost like school kids, gathering in clicks and having discussions ranging from the weather of this known "sunny" part of the world to letters from home to guesses of what the mission would be for the day.

Once the men got done with their breakfast it was time to assemble for the intelligence briefing, where they would find out the mission for the day. Men were slowly meandering through the barley functioning door into a dark, stuffy room that held the odor of cigarette smoke and freshly brewed coffee. The men greeted each other with nods and slaps, indicating a brotherhood that few could understand. Neatly placed chairs were positioned in the room where men were taking their seats. Directly in the middle of the room was a projector neatly positioned, with a Sergeant from Group Intelligence organizing himself for the day's presentation. Along the wall were insignia's from each of the squadrons of this Bomb Group: 720th, 721st, 722nd, and 723rd Bombardment Squadrons of the 450th Bombardment Group. Next to each of those insignia's were chalk written names next to aircraft numbers, indicating the crews on the mission for the day. On the opposite wall was a map of Italy, with dots placed all around various locations with different colors. 21 yellow pins were placed at towns such as Castellucio, Torretto, Panatanella, Taranto, and San Giovanni, all which indicated the various Bomb Groups of the 15th A.A.F. A single red pin was placed at Bari, just north of the 'heel' of Italy, which indicated the location of the 15 A.A.F Headquarters. Directly west of Taranto, sat a white push pin at a place called Manduria with scribbling in pencil that said "Lake" next to it. The home of the 450th BG (H) or the Cottontails as the group has become known as in the 15th Air Army Force.

The group had only been on what loosely resembled an army base for about 2 months, trying to put together a functioning operational home for the group. "Inherited" from the Italian Air Force on the 20th of December when the upper echelon landed, the base lacked much in the way of established facilities. Compounding this, little did the 'brass' know that the Italian Air Force, or what was left of it, would be taking their sweet time leaving the base, which meant that finding a place for the men and for the group's offices would take time.

A yell of "ATTENTION" pierced the conversations in the room, drawing everyone to their feet and stopping all conversations in their tracks. "Good Morning Gentlemen!" came from the Group Commander Colonel John S. Mills. "At Ease" he quipped as he quickly walked up to the now covered mission map. The men shuffled back into their seats waiting to hear about the next mission that they would be facing.

Colonel Mills spun around after reaching the covered mission map and looked over at the group of men, who were looking back at him with guarded intent. "The Target for today....is...." with the mission map now slowly becoming uncovered from the curtain..."Steyr, Austria and the Aero Engine Works."

Some whistles came from the group, while others groaned knowing the pain and losses that the group ensued from the previous day's mission to bomb the Messerschmitt aircraft factory at Regensburg, Germany. The group had lost 4 aircraft on this single mission, including 1st Lt Nilsson's Crew from the 723rd, 1st Lt. Reno's Crew from the 721st, and 2nd Lt. Kraus' Crew from the 723rd. It was rumored that some of those crews survived the attacks from the previous day, with Reno's plane having been seen drifting down through the clouds with 2 engines shot out.

Colonel Mills started speaking again, "Gentlemen, this WILL be a maximum effort today. We will not have a repeat of our mission yesterday where we had multiple aircraft returning. This will not happen!" The group looked back at him with blank stares back, like they had any control over what their aircraft were going to do. "Understood?"

The room responded back with a hearty "Yes Sir!"

Mills returned back to the men, "That's good, because I'm coming with you boys.... to pound the hell out of this target!" The room erupted with cheers and whistles, giving the men a shot in the arm knowing that the "old man" is coming up with them for this critical mission of "Big Week". Mills smiled at his group and then slowly looked over to the Group Intelligence officer, "All yours" he told him.

The Group Intelligence stepped forward and started to lay out the mission for the day. Take off at 0841 and then proceed to the rally point near Mesaque, Italy with the 376th BG. From that point the group would head directly to the IP at Wels, Austria and then make the final turn for target. He indicated that the group would also be expecting a lot of flak and fighters, but also gave the group some good news. They would have fighter escorts from the 82nd Fighter Group, but only AFTER the IP. The Group Intelligence officer finished his briefing and then handed the briefing over to the Group Bombardier to talk about the target.

Major McKamy stepped up to the front of the room. "Lights please" he asked. The lights shut off and then the flicker from the projector started up, showing a target map of the

Aero Engine Works located in Steyr. "Bombardiers and Navigators, take note of the heading of the attack. Heading of 110. Bombardiers, note the twin stacks on the factory. Note the position of the fork in the road and the stream." The room was quiet with a focus of concentration. McKamy paused. "Gentlemen, we will be dropping like we always do, as attack elements. Make sure to get tight near the IP and follow your leads. This will allow us to get maximum effort on this target." McKamy looked out at the room, only seeing silhouettes of the men staring back at him. "Questions?". The room was hush with silence.

McKamy stepped down and Mills stepped back up to the front of the group. "I will be leading the Group today in Attack 1 and Major Miller will be leading Attack 2. 722nd, you'll be with me in Attack 1 as Low element. 721st, you'll be with Miller in Attack 2 as low element." The hush in the room broke as crews learned where they would be positioned. The men knew if you were placed in the low elements, you had better hope for a great pilot leading the squadron. Mills let the men keep chattering for a few more seconds then plainly stated, "Men, we are bringing up the 3rd wave of the attack in the 15th. The old man is throwing everything he has at this target, so let's put our bombs on target and then get the hell out of there. Understood?"

The room shot back, "Yes Sir!"

Mills and the rest of the headquarters group went for the exit, sharply someone shouted "Attention!", causing a cascade of men standing up at an instant. The men stood still not making a sound until the leadership had left the room. A voice from the exit exclaimed lightly, "Dismissed!"

The chatter swelled as the men started for the exit. 2nd Lt. Samuel Artzer and 2nd Lt. Hugo Paggi stood up and shook their heads, giving a slight glance at each other acknowledging what they had both heard, another mission in the meat grinder. "Big Week" as the brass called it, was the maximum effort of both the 15th A.A.F out of Italy and the 8th A.F. out of England to target and destroy as much of the German war machine as possible. For the 450th, this mission would be to help destroy another key supplier in the aircraft industry and slowly whittle away their ability to come up and fight the bombers. This would prove to be an effective means of limiting the ability to counter the American and British air effort but today, the B-24's would likely still be facing heavy fighter opposition while attacking this high value target.

Samuel Artzer and Hugo Paggi had been friends since the 450th BG was formed originally in Texas while assigning crews and before the movements to Alamogordo, New Mexico where the crews would train with each other to become a cohesive fighting group. It was in Texas where they met the rest of their crew 2nd Lt. Jack Graham who was Pilot of the crew and 2nd Lt. Harry Feltenstein who was the Co-Pilot. Rounding out the rest of the enlisted crew were Sgt. Ernest Hamric - Waist Gunner. S/Sgt Thomas Tornillo - Tail Gunner. Sgt. Ralph Vorhees - Flight Engineer and Top Turret Gunner. T/Sgt Ralph Pippins - Radio Operator. Sgt. Maynard Lawson - Assistant Flight Engineer and Waist Gunner. And S/Sgt J. Dean Moore - Armorer and Ball Turret Gunner. All of these men came to Manduria via the 'southern' route from Florida to Puerto Rico to British Guiana to Northern and Southern Brazil then across the Atlantic Ocean to Dakar and then to Casablanca and to Chatteaudun du Rhummel and finally to the base they now call home. Although these men all came from different walks of life, they all

had been through the test of combat and had even survived a crash landing on their first mission. Shot up from their first mission to Mostar, Yugoslavia the crew found themselves unable to make it back to Manduria and had to crash land on the beach near Vieste, east of Foggia. Because of the violent crash that ensued, both Jack Graham and Harry Feltenstein were pinned in the cockpit from the shifting control panel of their badly damaged B-24. Jack ended up breaking his arms so combat flying would not happen again, but Harry's injuries were not as severe and he continued to fly with the crew. Except for the mission at hand. Harry had felt sick on this day, so he went to the infirmary to get checked out. Because of his not being able to fly, a replacement Co-Pilot was assigned to the crew by the name of 1st Lt. Warren Blim.

Harry met up with the crew as they were exiting the briefing. "Hey Guys", Harry yelled to Sam and Hugo. "How did everything go?"

Hugo looked blankly at Harry and dryly responded, "Well piss on life!"

Harry pulled back, looking at his friend and then slowly looked over to Sam while Hugo proceeded to the operations tent. "Sam, what is that all about?"

Sam looked back over to Harry and quietly responded back "We are going to Steyr."

Harry looked back and responded with a blank look, understanding exactly what Hugo was meaning now. Harry shook his head and said back, "I wish I was going up with you guys. I should be up there with you."

Sam shot back quickly, "No. No you shouldn't." Sam shuffled his feet, trying to find any other words to say to his friend but at the same time getting lost in his thoughts of what lay ahead.

Harry responded back before he could say anything else. "I'll see you guys when you get back. OK?" He paused for a second. "We will talk when you guys get back."

Sam shook his head and then slowly started walking down the rain soaked, muddy path towards the 721st operations tent like the rest of the men flying that day, leaving Harry to watch his friend drift into the early morning light.

The rumble of the 4 Pratt and Whitney R-1830 14 cylinder radial engines was deafening to most people, but Sam and Hugo along with the rest of the crew were used to it. They had practically lived in a B-24 for the last 9 months. Training, practice missions, and then the real deal. So had the new pilot and co-pilot for the mission, Pilot Flight Officer George Stanley and 1st Lt. Warren Blim. Flight Officers were a fairly new thing to the 450th, but to the crew they all agreed if you can fly a B-24, you can fly a mission. So they didn't think much of George being on their crew.

The plane was also a "hand me down" for the crew. This B-24, an H Model, was called Stardust after the popular song by Hoagy Carmichael. It was a battle proven aircraft that had served its crew well, always bringing her precious cargo of men home to Manduria. But now it was in the hands of this new battle proven crew who did not have an aircraft, due to its loss on their first mission. The crew was 'hot swapping' with other crews' planes when the primary crew was on a down day. It wasn't ideal, but until the group started seeing more replacement aircraft being shipped over from the United States, this would be the situation for the crew for a while.

George was guiding Stardust down the moisture soaked taxi-way at Manduria behind a line of 35 other B-24's from the 450th. He and Warren were keeping a watchful eye on the aircraft in front of them, along with throttle settings and the operating condition of the engines. Nestled between George and Warren's seats was Ralph Vorhees, keeping an almost eagle eye on the other engine settings such as mixture, temperatures, fuel pressure and oil pressure. It was his job to keep track of critical engine performance until they got to the point he needed to man his top turret. The pilot and co-pilot were the 'drivers' of the aircraft, but the plane was Ralph's responsibility, which he took seriously. He knew the B-24's like the back of his hand and if anything needed to be managed or worked on while they were in flight, it would be his guiding hand that would keep things together and operating. George slowly brought Stardust to a stop, under the light squealing of the brakes, which caused the nose to drift up and down slightly. The Conga line had stopped, now all of the aircraft were patiently waiting for the green flare from the makeshift tower that was attached to the former Italian Bomber Base hangar. George called out over the intercom, "Alright guys, looks like we will have a little bit of a wait before we take off. Is everyone doing OK? Are your stations looking good?" Slowly all of the crew checked in to George, giving the affirmative that they were ready to go.

This base that they were about to take off from was a unique one. Manduria's runways consisted of a long, wide single runway made of crushed rock and packed dirt unlike the concrete runways the 8th Air Force enjoyed in England. Flanking around the runway to the east and west were the taxi-ways feeding the numerous hard stands for the aircraft which were again nothing like what the 8th Air Force experienced. These hard stands consisted of what were called Marsden Mats or PSP - Pierced Steel Planking, that formed a steel mesh to help the aircraft from sinking into the soft soil. This planking could be employed as a runway material, but in this case it was only needed on the perimeters to give the heavy bombers a somewhat stable base to park on when being worked by ground crews or being loaded by the ordnance crews.

In normal times the runway would not generally be a topic of discussion for the crew, but since the 450th had arrived in Manduria the crews always had to keep this topic at the forefront of their minds. Italy in the winter months can receive snow on occasion, but the majority of the weather that was experienced was torrential rainfall. Sometimes the rain could continue for days and unfortunately when this happened the base turned into what the crews referred to as "Lake Manduria." This lake built by mother nature left water and the resultant mud everywhere, making it a daily battle of the elements for operations and lives around the base. Today would not be any different, although the water had gone down enough that the runway was at least not under water.

George broke through on the intercom to the crew, "Green Flare boys." At the lead of the group was Colonel Mills' B-24. He would be the first down the runway, to start the group on their journey to Steyr and the Aero Engine Works. The flight crew of Stardust watched intently, as he started down the runway towards the centuries old olive trees protecting the end of the runway. The B-24 started off slowly, being held back by the 3 tons of 500 pound general purpose ordnance that had been loaded the day before. Slowly the speed started to increase on the Liberator, breaking the grips of Mother Nature's hold on the great aluminum beast. He was up.

No later had Mills started down the runway, the next aircraft was spooling up their engines to prepare for takeoff. This plane lurched forward at the release of the brakes, following the same path as Colonel Mills towards the partially sun kissed skies. This process repeated over and over for the next 10 minutes, slowly bringing Stardust up to the next in line.

"Pilot to crew. We're next up. Assume take off positions. Warren, Ralph...are you ready?"

Blim repeated back , "Let's take her up George."

Vorhees, still on his watchful perch between the flight crew quipped back, "Everything looks good skipper."

George brought the aircraft around the left turn from the taxiway and put Stardust on the active runway. He glanced out of the window to the right and saw the sprawling base laid out near them, with ground crews keeping a watchful eye on them. George barked out, "Rolling" as he shoved the throttles all to full open, breathing life to the massive engines. All 4 engines sung out in unison, sending the aircraft down the runway, vibrating the fuselage of the aircraft like it was about to come apart.

Warren was reading out airspeed to George, "50....60....70..." Vorhees interjected "Pressure's good, temperatures are good."

George had his eyes squarely on the runway in front of him, seeing the bomber in front of him reaching slowly to the skies as if acting like they were playing a game of follow the leader. He intently made sure the aircraft was in the center of the runway, making sure to stay out of the mud that was flanking both sides of the rain soaked field. Warren kept reading out the airspeeds, "80.....85.....90..."

George replied, "Rotating."

Stardust George pulled back on the yoke, and Stardust minutely grabbed the unguarded air, slowly rising off the runway to begin their journey. More and more the aircraft rose up. "Gears up" George stated, giving Blim the OK to raise the landing gears.

Blim looked out his right window to the location of the gear and he could see it slowly rising up and stated "Right's coming up."

Vorhees looked out the left window behind George Stanley's seat, taking note of the gears' ascension, "Left's up."

From below and in front of the cockpit, Sam Artzer called in, "Nose Gear is up." Stardust barely cleared the olive trees and started to climb towards the rest of the 721st Squadron they would be forming with on today's mission.

George called out over the intercom, "Navigator...give me a heading when you can."

Hugo looked down at his navigator table, where his mission map was laid out with all of his tools of the trade strewn out, "Come to heading 055, the group should be heading to meet up with the 376th now."

George responded back, "Copy ... 055. Here we go boys, start checking your stations out, we've got a ways before we get to target but let's make sure we are prepared."

Nearly three and a half hours later in the small town of Kematen am Innbach, Austria, about 6 miles west of Wels, a 15 year old boy was walking in the town center. It was just another

day for him, even though the country had been a part of the German Reich since the Anschluss occurred in March of 1938. He was going about his daily chores, which he despised doing. He understood it was his responsibility but it still didn't mean he had to like it.

As he was walking through the town center, the boy caught the sound of a low rumble. He looked around town thinking that it might be a convoy of trucks perhaps going to the nearby Luftwaffe airfield in Wels. His head scanned around the area instinctively moving to the roads he could see. Nothing. He stopped and held his breath so as to not make a sound to see if he could make out where this was coming from or if he was just making it up. It was still there. He focused even harder this time to find the source of that incessant hum, turning his head from side to side. Then he realized, it wasn't to his left or his right, it was above him!

He turned his head to the partly sunny skies above and then he saw it. The largest collection of aircraft that he had ever seen! Planes as far as his eyes could see, poking in and out of the clouds heading northeast to Wels, trailing behind them thin white trails of vapor from each engine on the planes. He started to count the planes out of sheer awe but then quickly realized when he got above 70 bombers, this was a very big force by the Americans. This must mean that they are going to a big target, he thought.

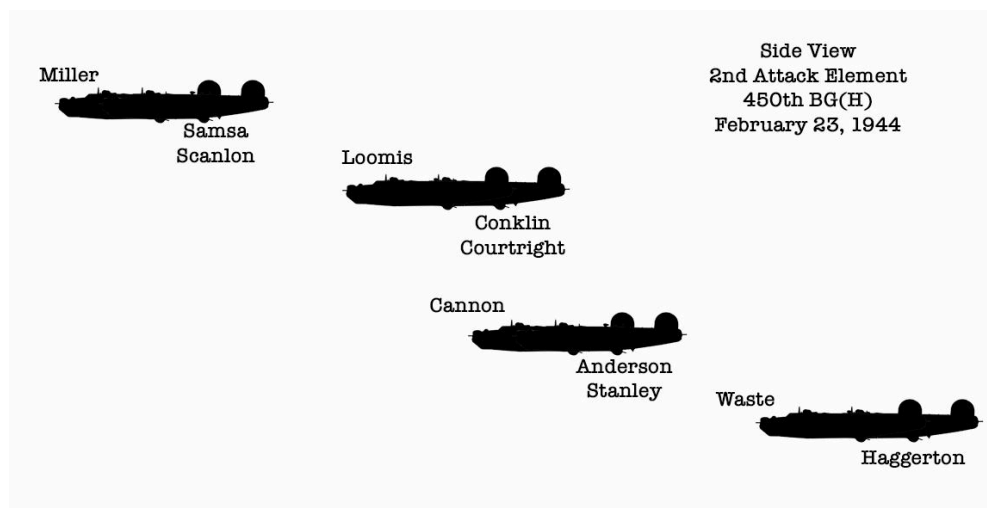
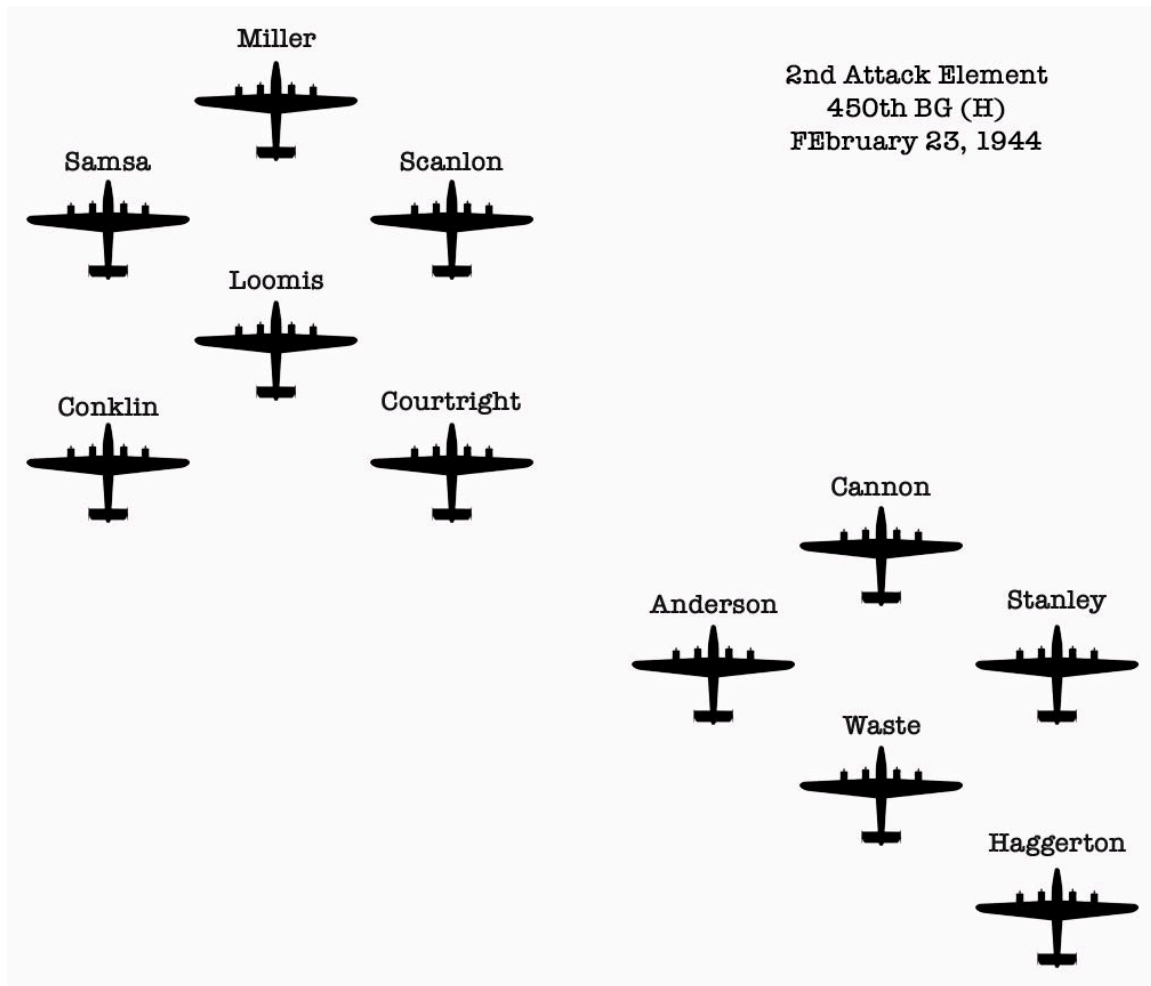
He walked over to the building to his left and stood up on the landing to help shield his eyes from the sun as it poked out from behind the clouds from time to time. From this vantage he would be able to see what direction they were heading. For a moment he thought about his mother and how she had told him to get home soon. He also knew that if his mother were here that she would get mad that he was outside watching this instead of taking shelter, but he had to see what was going to happen.

Just then he noticed smaller white trails heading towards the bombers. These had to be single engine planes, probably planes from the German Luftwaffe who had bases all over this region including the base near Aigen im Ennstal or Wels. There were so many! Some that appeared to be heading directly to the bombers and some that appeared to be following what looked to be beside them.

He stood in awe of what he was about to witness. But he did not look away.

At 20,000 feet the 450th was nearing the crucial point of the mission. The 376th Bomb Group had already started making their bomb run on Steyr and from the chatter received from the radio it sounded like the group was taking it on the chin in the form of Flak and fighters. Reports of Bf-109's, Fw-190's, Me-110's, and JU-88's were all attacking the lead group. Reports indicated that over 100 aircraft were attacking forward groups in the attack force.

The 1st attack unit consisting of 16 B-24's of the 450th commanded by Colonel Mills and the rest of the 720th and 722nd BGs were positioned, so far as can be surmised, at the front of the attack element for the group.



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The 2nd attack unit consisting of 15 aircraft was led by Major Miller in the B-24 named Buelah and was formed high right of the 1st attack group. This formation strategy was one that was developed by the 15th AF after hearing of how the 8th AF took its losses early in the war with their 3 ship formation practice. The 15th adopted a much different approach in how it deployed its formations, by employing a double diamond formation to give their attack groups a better coverage with the overlapping firepower of the 50 caliber machine guns.

Behind Major Miller in the 2nd attack group was 723rd Squadron aircraft consisting of Lt. Samsa in Round Trip Rosie in the #2 slot or left wing. In the #3 position or right wing was Lt. Scanlon in Teaky Tub. Lt. Loomis in Twin Tail was taking up the #4 position or the low 6 o'clock position off of lead. On Loomis' left wing or the #5 position was Lt. Conklin in Yellow 28. On Loomis' right wing or #6 position was Lt. Courtright. In the 721st squadron taking up the Low Right element of the 2nd attack group was Lt. Cannon in S.H. Mouse Esq. in the #1 position. On his left wing or the #2 slot was Lt. Anderson in Yankee Fury. On Cannon's right wing or #3 slot was F/O. Stanley in Stardust. The #4 slot or low six o'clock position off of lead was flown by Lt. Waste in Impatient Virgin. On Lt. Waste's right wing or #6 spot was Lt. Haggerton. 4 other aircraft in the 721st were to have made up the rest of the element but had to return to base due to mechanical issues on their Liberators. This left the Low right element of the 2nd attack group without a full complement in their formation.

Aboard F/O. Stanley's Stardust the crew had been dealing with an intercom system not fully working, amongst the background of inaccurate flak being lobbed to their altitude. Vorhees was kneeling between Stanley and Blim on his portable oxygen bottle. He slid his oxygen mask down and yelled to Stanley, "The intercom system should be back up and running. I had to jury rig it but I think it should work. We may not have full use of some other systems but once we get out of here I can get those working."

Stanley pulled his mask down, "Good Work Charles. That will have to do. Was Hamric able to get the targeting sight fixed for the nose turret? We need to make sure that thing is working."

Vorhees responded "I think so sir, but I will go and check."

Stanley shot back quickly, "I'm not sure you are going to have time Charles, the flak seems to be lightening up, so that must mean fighters are near. Get back into your turret and get ready."

Vorhees shot back, "OK!" and left his perch between the pilot and co-pilot and worked his way up to his top turret housing. The configuration of the top turret in the B-24 was much different than in the B-17. In the Liberator, the gunner sat in a chair mounted to the turret assembly instead of standing like in the Flying Fortress. Once positioned, Vorhees got his oxygen tube switched over from his portable tank to the aircraft oxygen system and turned on power to his turret. He started to sweep the sky, keeping a look out for the fighters they had already heard about.

"Pilot to crew. Comm checks." Stanley barked. The rest of the crew called in without incident. The fix that Vorhees did to the comm system must have worked. "Keep an eye out for fighters boys. That flak is letting up. Navigator. How much further to the IP?"

Hugo Paggi looked down at his small navigation table in the nose of the aircraft that held his navigation maps, slide rule, and speed calculator. He checked his watch quickly and gave a

quick glance out of the bombardier window that was not occupied by Sam because he was manning the nose gun. "We should be there in about 5 minutes," Hugo responded.

Flight Officer Stanley glanced out his window to see Cannon's S.H. Mouse Esq bobbing up and down from the intermittent flak being shot at the element. He did a quick scan to see Anderson and Waste were also matching the bobbing as best possible. He also noticed how well the formation looked at the main group of the 2nd attack element. Captain Miller and the rest of the 723rd looked really good. The same could not be said for the 721st. The formation was further apart then it should have been and it was farther away from Miller's Liberator. Stanley thought to himself, we need to close up!

Just then Sam Artzer called out from the Nose Turret, "I'm seeing fighters at the lead attack group!" All of the crew started to look to the 12:00 position of the aircraft, scanning the skies for a small dot that would represent a fighter.

No sooner than he had called out the first fighters, Moore from the Ball turret responded back, "Contacts streaking below us and circling back. Tail Turret keep an eye on them."

At this point Hugo and Sam switched positions in the nose turret, so that Sam could get ready for the bomb drop. Even though he was not leading the group as he did the day before, he would still need to 'pickle' or drop the bombs from Stardust. It would be Hugo's turn to man the twin 50's now.

The relative calm was suddenly shattered by the fury of combat. "HOLY SHIT! FIGHTERS EVERYWHERE!" Vorhees yelled from the top turret. At that instant a whole group of Bf-109's, numbering 40 - 50 strong streaked through the 2nd attack element from 12:00 to 2:00 high, blasting away with their 20mm cannon's and 7.92mm machine guns. Some were deliberately aiming for a specific bomber, while others were making quick attacks through the formation so they could set up for another run from the rear. The crew of Stardust were all training their 50 caliber machine guns to respond, unleashing the firepower of each weapon to help protect the vulnerable aircraft. Bullets pierced the B-24, but the attack did not mortally wound the aircraft.

"Everyone check in," Stanley stated over the intercom system. All the crew responded back, indicating that the aircraft seemed to be functioning.

"Tail Turret to Pilot" Hamric shouted out. Normally Ernest would be typically manning the waist gun on their plane, but since Tornillo was assigned to another crew today, the duties fell to him because he had the most knowledge of the system.

Stanley answered, "Go ahead Tail."

"Sir, we have some planes way behind us but they are going the same direction as us. They look like JU-88's!" This alarmed Harmic as the crew had heard of reports of JU-88's acting as rocket platforms for the Luftwaffe. They would stay out of range of the bombers and lob high explosive rockets with proximity fuses towards the formation. He kept his eyes peeled on the grouping of fighter bombers to see if they closed in any more.

More fighters made a streaking attack on the group, sending a flurry of high anticipation conversation across the intercom system. The sound of 50 caliber gun fire rattled its way through Stardust, filling her precious interior with the smells of spent shell casings.

Blim cut through the chatter on the intercom, "George, looks like lead element is about to make the turn at the IP."

"Got it Warren," Stanley returned. "Pilot to crew, standby for turn to IP."

Slowly the low element of the 2nd attack unit started their turn to the IP and the formation started to break down. The planes started to drift slowly out of the protective group bubble leaving each aircraft more vulnerable. Stanley struggled to keep his plane in the assigned slot for Stardust.

At this point the Luftwaffe fighters began another, even more intense attack on the low element. This time a coordinated attack from 11-2 high and from 6 o'clock hit all at once. A mix of 35 FW-190's, with their 20mm cannon and 13mm machine guns, and Bf-109's with their 20mm cannon's and 7.92mm machine guns made this round of attacks. They ripped through the formation causing damage to most of the aircraft in the 2nd attack group.

Lt. Samsa's crew in Round Trip Rosie were the first to be hit. Weapons fire from the attackers ripped through the aircraft and caused the #2 engine to explode. The plane slowly drifted out of formation to the left, breaking from the protective nest of the collective group, while the whole left wing of the Liberator erupted into fire. Of the ten crewmen on board, only two parachutes were seen to open before the aircraft crashed.

Lt. Waste's Impatient Virgin also took direct hits to the aircraft, causing a fire to break out through-out the upper portion and waist gunner positions of the plane, causing the plane to drop out of formation quickly as the fire raged. Four parachutes were seen to exit the plane before it started going to a flat spin, trapping the rest of the crew before it met its fiery impact with the earth below.

Lt. Cannon's S.H. Mouse Esq. also took hits to the #2 engine and cockpit area and quickly lost power to the rest of the aircraft. It too dropped out of formation as fire spread across the aircraft. Five chutes were seen to have opened before the plane exploded in mid air.

Lt. Haggerton's aircraft took the most extreme attack, being horribly damaged from 20mm shells from FW-190's and Bf-109's. The nose received the brunt of the damage from those 20mm shells, killing the front occupants almost instantly. As the aircraft started to descend, 4 chutes were seen to open before the aircraft exploded on the ground.

Seeing all of this unfold in their eyes, the crew of Stardust tried to salvage as much as possible of their remaining element. Stanley looked over at the #2 engine that was now smoking. "Warren, how is #2 engine looking?"

Blim shot back quickly, "Not good! Looks like we are losing her. Temps are way too high and oil pressure is gone."

"Cut fuel, start the fire extinguisher, feather prop," Stanley responded. The Pilot and Co-pilot started to work the emergency list as quickly as they could to save the aircraft, all the time still being under attack from the ensuing onslaught of the German fighters. The crew was responding back as quickly as possible, firing a hail of 50 caliber gun fire in almost every direction possible.

High above the formation of American B-24 Bombers was Bf-109 pilot Otto Haas. He was following the bombers on their route, which now indicated their target was Steyr based on the turn they just made. He kept looking over his left shoulder to see where the bombers were, making sure that he was setting his attack up for the greatest chance of success for himself and his wingman. He looked forward to the instruments, reading all of his engine gauges to ensure

that his aircraft was still functioning properly. His eyes drifted off to a picture on the left of his cockpit, showing a picture of his beautiful wife and baby daughter that he had never met. He stared at the picture, thinking back to a more peaceful time with his wife. He wondered if he would ever see that time with her again.

He snapped back to the situation he was in now. Making one more check over his left shoulder, he noticed he was in proper placement for his attack. He looked over to his wingman and gave him a hand signal to start their descent.

Otto placed his hand on the throttle of his Bf-109, cutting back power so as to not rip his wings off and banked hard to the left. He rolled over completely, bringing the group of bombers on the outside of the attack force into view. He noticed one plane that seemed to be separated from other aircraft that had a smoking engine on the left side. He made that his target.

He continued his dive and set his aiming point to the left side of the aircraft, slightly leading the target as best he could. With his speed still climbing, he backed off on this throttle a bit more ensuring he could pull out of the dive without blacking out too long. He checked his guns quickly, making sure everything was in order.

As if in slow-motion, he neared the crippled bomber to begin his attack. He glanced over his right shoulder to make sure his wingman was still there but he did not see him. He shot his eyes forward and started firing his 20mm nose cannon and engine mounted 15mm machine guns on the bomber. The tracers of his bullets were showing they were heading right towards the cockpit. This would have to do. He continued firing and then pulled up slightly, drifting the nose of his fighter up slightly, walking the bullets across the left wing of the bomber. As he zoomed past the bomber, he shot a view back over his right shoulder to see the plane more damaged than before and falling out of formation. He had done his job.

The young boy below the great air battle stared up in shock at what he was seeing. A plane had just been attacked and it was now drifting down. Then, as if grabbed by a large giant, the left portion of the wing, near the #2 engine, broke free and twisted towards the front of the wounded plane, causing a large explosion to occur. The boy flinched when the boom from the explosion finally reached him, keeping his eye trained on the sections of the aircraft as they fell through the skies waiting to see if anyone had made it out of the crippled bomber. Just then he did see four parachutes appear from the rear of the plane, which meant some of the men did survive.

He watched as the three sections drifted for what seemed like an eternity. After a few short minutes all of the pieces of the plane finally came to rest, with the cockpit section of the plane landing near the town and the nose section and rear part of the aircraft landing on a hillside just north of town.

The boy ran over to the nose section, looking through the twisted wreckage of what was once Stardust. He looked over all of the pieces of the aircraft, noticing dials and oxygen canisters and navigation papers floating around. Then he noticed something out of the corner of his eye, seeing something that no young boy should ever see. It was the bodies of three men. It was F.O. George Stanley, Lt. Warren Blim, and T/Sgt Charles Vorhees. The boy stared at the three men for a minute, looking to see if they may have been alive. They were not. He could not

help but stare at the them, wondering who they were and where they came from. He stood and stared at the men, unable to tear his sights away.

The boy was able to rip his gaze from the nose of the aircraft and went to other portions of the plane that landed nearby. He ran to the hillside north of town to the other sections of the aircraft and he was the first person to arrive at the gruesome sight. The remnants of the plane were making all kinds of sounds from the mangled wreckage. Small fires were everywhere but didn't seem to be getting any worse. He kept scanning the wreckage, taking in the sights and smells of the plane that had just fallen from the sky.

He looked up to the sky again, seeing what remained of the bomber force dropping their bombs on Steyr, resulting in a low rumbling of explosions from that direction.

Gazing back down at the nose section of the aircraft, he noticed the bodies of two men. Lt. Samuel Artzer and Lt. Hugo Paggi. Both men were intertwined in the wreckage of the nose section of the aircraft, neither moving or saying a thing. They both appeared as if they were just sleeping. The boy walked closer to the remains of these two great men, surveying the sight to make sure that no one was watching him. He reached down to each man, slowly and carefully reached for the dog tags that showed the name from each man. He slowly disconnected one of the dog tags off of each man, looking down at each one as it lay in his hand. Artzer...Paggi. He stared at the dogtags he just picked up, unable to break his gaze from the small aluminum ID tags. He slowly wrapped his hand around the two tags and crept away from the wreckage as more towns folk ascended on the wreckage, laying one last look on the plane that he had been so fatefully bound to on this cold day in February of 1944.

Group Headquarters staff stood in the makeshift tower at Manduria, heads turned to the skies as the group had started to return from their mission to Steyr. Colonel Mills had just pulled his aircraft onto its hardstand and was expected to come to the debriefing soon.

"We count 14 planes from the 1st Attack element sir," a sergeant interjected. "We are still waiting on the 721st and 723rd though sir. We have reports back from the 1st element that they took heavy losses."

Lt. Colonel Gideon looked out over the skies to the north, straining to look for a silhouette of a B-24. He scanned the skies for minutes, not seeing a thing.

Just then someone yelled, "There they are!" In the distance 4 B-24H bombers from the 721st and 723rd Bomb Squadrons made their way to Manduria. Some of the planes were battle damaged and others did not have any discernible or extensive damage to be found.

All 4 aircraft entered the pattern at Manduria and started their landings. In 10 minutes they were all at their hard stands, shutting down their engines. Their battle weary crews made their way out of the bomb bay of the giant bombers, all realizing that they had been to the depths of hell and back, and were now safely back at base. A few men got down on the ground, and kissed the dirt, never thinking that they would be so happy to return to such a desolate and forsaken place like Manduria. Others stood and looked at their planes, in awe at what they had survived. A truck rolled up to the crew of Lt. Bill Conklin, "Sir...we need to get you guys over to debriefing."

Lt. Conklin retorted back , “We know. Give us a second, ya.” He looked over his plane, good ole Yellow 28. She had brought them back...

Lt. Harry Feltenstein was sitting on his cot in the damp, water soaked tent that housed officers from the 721st. This was a tent that housed many of his closest friends, including Sam Artzer and Hugo Paggi. Now the tent was eerily quiet, leaving Harry as the only inhabitant to live here. Harry kept looking over to Sam and Hugo’s cots, thinking of his friends that did not return from the mission today. Something that Harry could not push out of his mind were the words that Hugo said to him this morning, “Well piss on life!” Those words kept echoing in his mind, over and over.

Harry laid down on his cot...staring in the darkness, thinking about those comments. Piss on life. Piss on life. Piss on life.

Just then one of Harry’s friends opened the tent flap, entering the tent to see his friend laying on his cot. “Harry...you doing OK?”

A single tear slid down his face, as he quickly wiped it away. Harry responded back, “Yea...I’m OK.”

But his friend could see that he was anything but fine. All men that went through combat knew that when you see your friends die, you are not OK. Men form a brotherhood in combat closer than any blood can place a person. Anyone that faced combat realized this, and those same men also knew that you could not be alone after you lost your brothers.

“Harry, grab your stuff. You’re coming over to our tent.”

Harry stared forward, unable to break the trance that the day's event had locked him in. After a few more seconds, he looked up at his friend, giving him a blank stare back.

“Come on, get your stuff,” his friend responded.

Harry slowly stood up, barely having the strength in his legs to stand up straight. He surveyed the room and then looked at his friend. He grabbed a few items, while his friend grabbed his foot locker. The friend exited the tent and left Harry to look over the vacant tent one more time.

The crews that survived this attack from the 721st and 723rd Bomb Squadrons were as follows: From the 723rd BS - Lt. Loomis and the crew of Twin Tail, Lt. Conklin and the crew of Yellow 28, Lt. Courtright and his crew. From the 721st BS - Lt. Anderson and the crew of Yankee Fury.

The crews lost on this mission to Steyr were: From the 723rd BS. - Cpt. Miller and the crew of Buelah, Lt. Samsa and the crew of Round Trip Rosie, Lt. Scanlon and the crew of Leaky Tub. From the 721st BS - Lt. Cannon and the crew of S.H. Mouse Esq, Lt. Waste and the crew of Impatient Virgin, Lt. Haggerton and his crew, and Flight Officer George Stanley and the crew of Stardust.

In all, the 2nd attack of Operation Argument, or as the flyers called it “Big Week,” was considered a success for the 15th Air Force when it came to target bomb assessments. With the

other groups that attacked Steyr, the 15th Air Force was able to lay claim to an effort that would see the reduction of the German Luftwaffe aircraft capacity throughout the rest of the war. But it was also a devastating loss to the 721st Bomb Squadron, who saw 39 men killed or captured as prisoners of war.

The 25th of February would see the 450th BG back in action for its last mission of "Big Week " but this time to Regensburg, Germany and the Prufening Aircraft Factory. This mission would result in the group's first Presidential Unit Citation for their mission success to this critical and strategic target. The 450th BG would go on to fly an astounding 244 more missions, ranging from attacks on Vienna, Weiner-Neustadt, Munich, Wels, and to the famed Ploesti.

Epilogue

My interest in the 450th BG started as a research activity to find out more about my Grandmother's first husband, Samuel Artzer. It has turned into a lifelong pursuit of knowledge to find out more on what happened on that fateful day in February of 1944. This research of the group has allowed me to get in touch with some amazing men of the 450th BG who helped me to guide my research to paint a clearer picture to my Grandmother Jane, including being able to meet Sam's Co-Pilot Harry Feltenstein. Harry was able to paint a very clear picture of how Sam was, and how good he was at this job of bombing targets. (Sam served as Group Bombardier on multiple missions). He was also able to give us a grim dialogue from Hugo on the fateful day that you read in this short story.. I will always treasure those days of getting to talk with Harry to learn a little more about Sam.

Eventually this research led my family and myself to the National Archives and the Missing Air Crew Reports to see what happened on the mission itself. It is here that we learned of the specific details of the mission and who was lost and who survived. This also brought us to the almost unthinkable outcome that we ever thought would happen.

While researching on some very 'new' internet message boards in late 1999, I had come to meet a gentleman in Austria by the name of Wolfgang who lived around Kematen, Austria where Sam's plane had gone down. He said he would be talking to a gentleman in his 80's that witnessed the air battle that fateful day. We waited on pins and needles for the next couple of days to get the response from Wolfgang on this meeting.

I received a message back from him late one evening and my jaw nearly hit the floor at the news he provided. A gentleman by the name of Mr. Prisenger (sp) had shared with Wolfgang that he saw the whole air battle that day. He watched everything that happened and even watched Sam's plane crash. He even showed him two very special and precious pieces of 'cargo' from that fateful day: Sam's and Hugo's dog tags. I showed my father the note stating this much and his response was something that I will never forget, "Oh my LORD!" He quickly ran upstairs to call my Grandmother Jane to tell her the news. A mere 9 months later my Father and Mother went over to meet up with Wolfgang, along with Hugo Paggi's family to retrieve their family members' dog tags. It was on this trip we found out that Hugo's brother in Law had been doing research on that day as well, believing he found even the pilot that had destroyed Stardust.

As we fast forward almost 23 years later, in talking with my niece who is a Senior at Colorado State University and is a major in History, I thought that we needed to piece together a story for this 80th anniversary of that day in February 1944. We talked about an hour one evening and then laid out how best to go about doing this story. She started scouring the internet and the 450th BG website (the site my "Brother in Arms" Mark Worthington has created) to collect as much data as she could find. And the data she and I found! From our research we were able to piece together some amazing details that I had never known about and we were also able to learn something about each and every crew that was lost on that mission. Painting that picture and doing this research with my niece Larissa will be one of the greatest gifts that I could ever get.

Today I continue on my effort to learn as much as possible about that day, but I realize that my 'mission' is likely coming to a close with the loss of the "greatest generation." I still think about those men that survived that day: Ralph L. Pippins, Maynard J. Lawson, J. Dean Moore, and Ernest R. Hamric and what their stories may have told us.

I also think about the last moments of Sam and Hugo, working as a team in the front of Stardust, working to bring themselves back to their families...

Authors note

In writing this story we tried to take every effort in the research to match and correlate information as much as possible, but with any great research project there is always more information out there, but it is just finding it. At the time of publishing the formation for the 721st Squadron was pieced together with information that was available, however some educated guesses were needed based on attacks and MACRs.

Most of the conversations are also supposition as well but have been extrapolated in conversations with other veterans during the period. The one phrase however it is very factual is the statement from Hugo Paggi to Harry Feltenstein. This was told by Harry to my family and I and was something you could see still resonated to Harry the day of the interview.

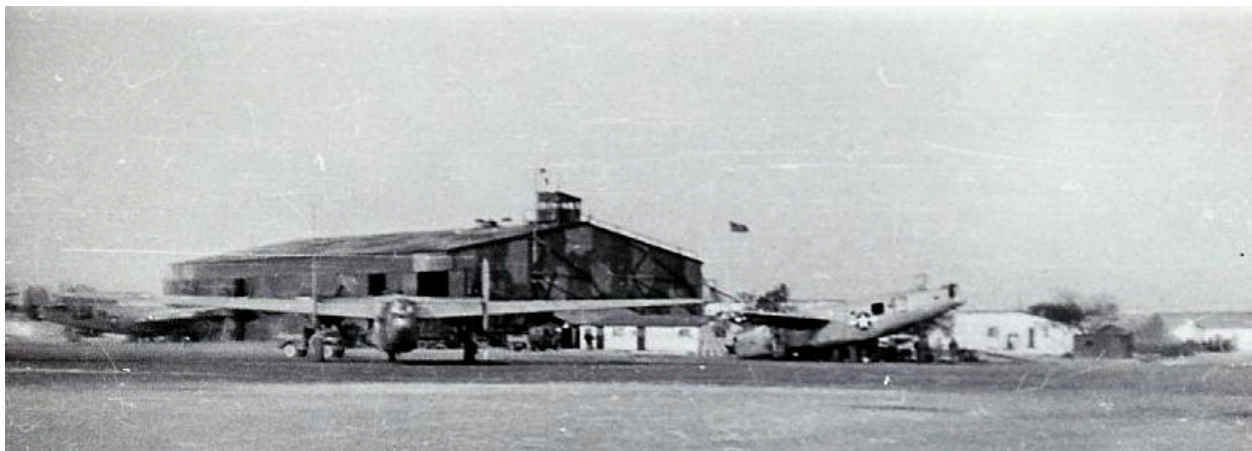
To learn more about these great men and the stories they have left for others to learn from, please visit 450thbg.com by the links below.

I hope you enjoyed the story.

Photos From Manduria



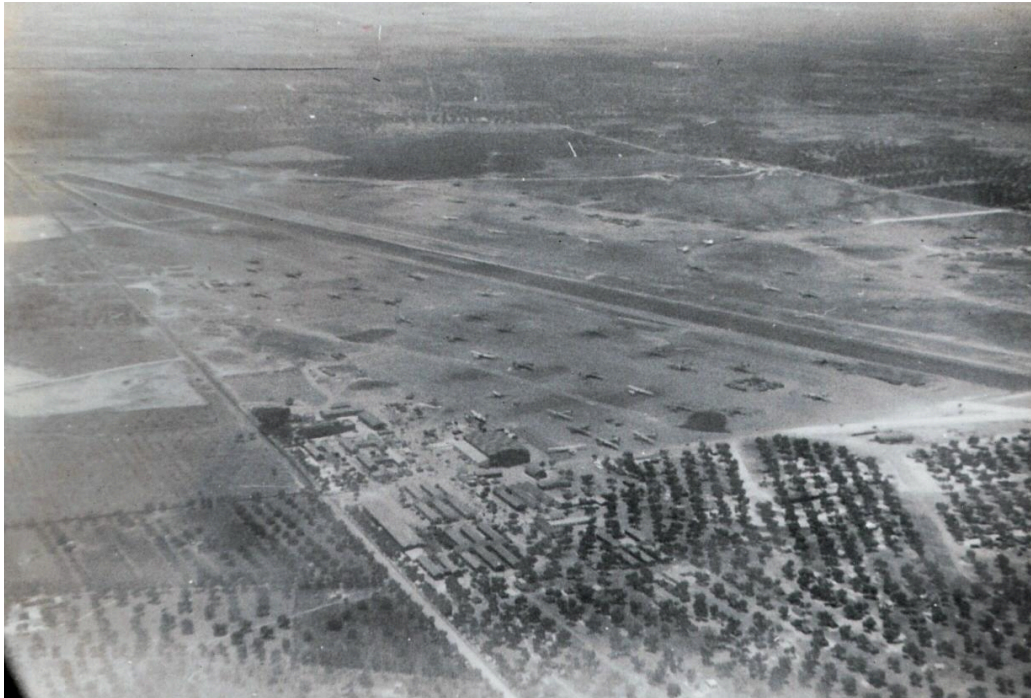
Typical mission briefing for the 450th
<https://www.450thbg.com/real/1stccu/pages/098.shtml>



Hangar and Tower for the 450th. This was the hangar left by the Italian Air Force.
<https://www.450thbg.com/real/miscellaneous/vester/vester.shtml>



Base at Manduria. Note the 'hard points' on each side of the runway and the taxi-ways in between.
<https://www.450thbg.com/real/miscellaneous/base/pages/023.shtml>



Base at Manduria with the hangar in the foreground. Note the 'hard points' on each side of the runway.
<https://www.450thbg.com/real/biographies/teed/pages/14.shtml>



View of "Lake" Manduria.
<https://www.450thbg.com/real/1stccu/pages/251.shtml>



450th in Formation - with white tails painted on the rudders.
<https://www.450thbg.com/real/aircraft/nonames/pages/75.shtml>



Vapor trails following the 450th into target.
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