



STAFF SGT. MILTON FEFFER (SEATED CROSS-LEGGED) AND MEMBERS OF THE 450TH BOMBARDMENT GROUP.

# The Kid

*by Judge Elizabeth R. Feffer*

In 1942, two days before his 19th birthday, native Angeleno, Milton Feffer, joined the United States Army. After training, in 1943, Milton was assigned to the Army Air Corps' newly-formed 450th Bombardment Group, a heavy bomber group that flew B-24

“Liberators” as part of the 15th Air Force. Milton met his nine other crew members at an air base in New Mexico in November. The crew was assigned to the 723rd Squadron, one of four squadrons of the 450th Bomb Group. The crew promptly named its airplane, a Consolidated

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STAFF SGT. MILTON FEFFER AND THE "LITTLE STINKER."

B-24, United States airship number 42-52090, the "Little Stinker." The crew painted its mascot, a skunk, on the plane. The mascot was so popular that members of the 450th simply referred to the plane as "The Skunk."

Milton and his crew flew the Little Stinker to Europe via the southern route, over South America and Africa, and eventually arrived in Italy in December 1943. The 450th set up its base in Manduria, Italy (located "in the heel of the boot"). From there, the 450th flew numerous daytime bombing missions, playing an important role in weakening the Axis forces. They attacked such strategically important targets as aircraft factories, assembly plants, oil refineries, marshaling yards, and airdromes in Italy, France, Germany, Austria, Czechoslovakia, Hungary, and the Balkans. In the air, the bomber crews were threatened by not just enemy aircraft assigned to protect vital Axis resources, but also deadly Nazi "flak." Flak consisted of exploding metal fragments that would rip through both plane and crew, resulting in numerous downed planes.

Early in combat, the 450th became known as "The Cottontails," a moniker given by the

Germans because of the distinctive white paint on the B-24s' tail rudders. The Cottontails took the propaganda term, and proudly turned it into their nickname.

The 450th flew its first combat mission on Jan. 8, 1944. Flight itself was hazardous. Because the air in a B-24 was not pressurized, its crew needed oxygen tanks to breathe, and heavy flight suits for warmth. Temperatures could dip down to 55 degrees below zero and crews had to battle frostbite on their flights. Pilots

had no heaters in their cockpits, but the heaters in the rear of the planes were ineffective anyway when temperatures fell to more than 30 degrees below zero.

Milton attained the rank of staff sergeant. Staff Sgt. Feffer was the Little Stinker's ball turret gunner, one of the most dangerous positions in an already hazardous assignment. Milton is credited with destroying at least one enemy fighter plane.

From its creation in November 1943 until its inactivation in October 1945, the 450th participated in 265 raids and destroyed 191 enemy fighters. The entire 450th received two Distinguished Unit Citations during operations in World War II. Milton participated in both missions that merited the citations.

The first was the Allied campaign known as "Big Week," of February 20–25, 1944. The 450th participated in three attacks that week, including on factories in Steyr, Austria, and on a Messerschmitt factory in Regensburg, Germany. The 450th braved the hazards of bad (freezing) weather, enemy fighters, and flak. The Little Stinker was damaged by flak during the mission, but was repaired and returned to service. One

Army general described Big Week as “the week that broke the Luftwaffe’s back.” These missions merited the first Distinguished Unit Citation.

Milton’s crew was also one of 28 B-24s that conducted a bombing raid on the Ploesti oil fields on April 5, 1944, meriting the 450th’s second Distinguished Unit Citation. The mission was the first high-level attack on the Romanian oil refineries. The B-24s dropped 85 tons of bombs on target, despite being heavily attacked by enemy aircraft. Five bombers were shot down by fighters, with heavy losses to the crew. Nineteen other aircraft sustained flak damage and five were damaged by enemy fighters.

The 450th’s casualties were so high that no men who started in November 1943 were still active at the war’s end. Milton himself was one of the 1,505 men of the 450th who lost his life or went missing.

On what was to be Milton’s last day of life, April 16, 1944, the crew rose by 4 a.m., put on their flight suits, and took off for their target, the railroad yards of Brasov, Romania. The Little Stinker had already completed 36 bombing missions by then. Usually

the B-24s were escorted by fighter planes, but on that day, while the B-24s were flying over the Adriatic Sea, the fighters were called off due to inclement weather. All but two B-24 squadrons were also called back to base.

The remaining 32 B-24s successfully dropped 79 tons of bombs on their designated target. The bombs hit not just the railroad yards, but also a nearby airdrome. The strike cut vital Axis supply lines to the west and also damaged nearby industrial areas.

Flying in two formations back to base, the bombers were attacked by 20–30 Messerschmitt 109s. The ME-109s fired 20mm cannons and rockets. From his ball turret underneath the plane, Milton quickly observed the incoming enemy aircraft and shouted out their presence to his crew. Milton was immediately shot and killed by 20mm machine gunfire. The tail gunner, Bill Rogers, was also killed at his post. A third gunner (and radio technician), Orin Dale Swift, was shot in the right hand and shoulder and knocked down. The aggressive attack lasted about 25 minutes.

Milton’s best friend, gunner Harold Gamache, expressed joy that “No one forgot ‘The Kid,’” Milton’s nickname.

The Germans continued to attack the Little Stinker. Enemy fire hit the gas tanks in the wings, causing gas to rain into the plane’s interior, and created a possibility of an explosion. For 10 minutes, the pilot, Robert Clay, valiantly tried to control the heavily damaged aircraft during its rapid descent from 25,000 feet to 18,000 feet. When it was clear the plane would not survive much longer, Clay gave the order over the intercom to bail out. The injured Swift did not hear the command to bail out because the attack had disabled the intercom. Fellow gunner John Briggs helped the disabled gunner put on his parachute, and the two jumped out together.

Clay himself jumped out of the plane just as the left wing tore off. While still in the air, he saw the Little Stinker crash into the Romanian countryside and burn. In all, eight men survived the downing of the Little Stinker. One other B-24 was shot down in the attack, but all 10 members of its crew survived. Seven other aircraft sustained flak damage but were able to return to base in Italy.

Within minutes of landing, Romanian villagers armed with pitchforks and other farm tools surrounded the airmen. The Romanians were under German control, and relieved the Americans of

their pistols, ammunition, escape maps, money, concentrated food, and everything of value except for their watches. Just before the German gendarmes arrived to take custody of the prisoners, the Romanians walked Clay past a church and told him that they had already removed the bodies of the deceased crewmen and buried them in the cemetery behind the church. The Romanians also handed Clay the dog tags and watch band for Milton. Clay put the items in his flight suit. By evening, the entire crew had been rounded up and placed on display for the peasants to see and to share in the excitement of capturing the American airmen.

Their German captors sent the captured airmen to a Nazi POW camp in Bucharest, where they stayed until Romania was liberated by the Allies later in 1944. Somehow, Clay managed to keep Milton’s dog tags and watch band in his flight suit the entire time he was in the POW camp. After the war, Clay located Milton’s father in Los Angeles,

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and attempted to give him Milton's effects. The elder Feffer was, however, so overtaken with grief that he refused them.

Clay remained in the Air Force for 20 years, and despite numerous moves around the country, faithfully kept Milton's property for another 63 years, until Milton's younger brother Irving Feffer (age 13 at the time of Milton's loss) contacted the surviving crew members. Milton's best friend, gunner Harold Gamache (who had confirmed Milton's death while still in the air), expressed joy that "No one forgot 'The Kid,'" Milton's nickname.

Clay told the story of the final mission to the Feffer family, and returned Milton's dog tags and watch band to them. He passed away just a few short weeks thereafter. Gamache and Swift also told the story of the attack to the Feffer family and sent several photographs of Milton and the crew as well as reports and flight logs.

After the war, the surviving crew members remained loyal to their lost crew members, and Gamache and others returned to the church cemetery in Romania to pay their respects to their friends. Unknown to them, after the war, the United States government had brought the remains of Milton Feffer and Bill Rogers back home, and re-buried them at the Golden Gate National Cemetery in San Bruno, California.

Milton Feffer was 20 years old when he was killed in action. All of the surviving members of the Little Stinker have passed now. There is a plaque honoring the bravery, sacrifice, and substantial contribution to winning the war of the 450th Bomb Group at the United States Air Force Academy, in Colorado Springs, Colorado. ■

(BELOW) STAFF SGT. MILTON FEFFER, THE SOLDIER STANDING DIRECTLY IN FRONT THE SKUNK, AND OTHER MEMBERS OF THE 450TH BOMBARDMENT GROUP SUIT UP BEFORE A MISSION.

