



World War II

1943-1944

Diary of William G. Smith

450th Bomb Group, 722nd Squadron: Manduria

445th Bomb Group, 703rd Squadron: England

The following pages are from the diary of William G. Smith, my Father. He served with the 450th Bomb Group, 722nd Squadron based in Manduria, Italy, December 1943 through March 1944. He also served with the 445th Bomb Group, 703rd Squadron based in Tibenham, England, March 1944 through July 1944. He graduated from Gunnery School in Harlingen, Texas as a Technical Sergeant. He was trained as a Radio operator and a Waist Gunner for a B-24, Heavy Bombardment unit.

He trained with the 450th Bomb Group in Alamogordo, New Mexico.

After my Father passed away on March 16, 2016, at the age of 93, our family discovered his war diaries on his computer. As most WWII veterans, he never talked much about the war when my brothers and I were growing up, but in his later years he began to share his stories if we asked questions. As I read through his diaries, I realized that my Dad was blessed with the gift of writing, which allowed him to freely share his thoughts, fears, and details of what it was like as a crew member on a B-24.

In his seventies he informed us that he had hired a family friend to type his diaries, which he never offered to share with us. Needless to say, we were thrilled to find these treasured diaries saved on his computer.

As a gift to his children, grandchildren, and great grandchildren, I have assembled his diary notes and memoirs in a book. Personal pictures, pictures from the internet, and maps were added to aid the younger generation in understanding the history of World War II.

Kathy Towle

Daughter of William G. Smith



February 1944

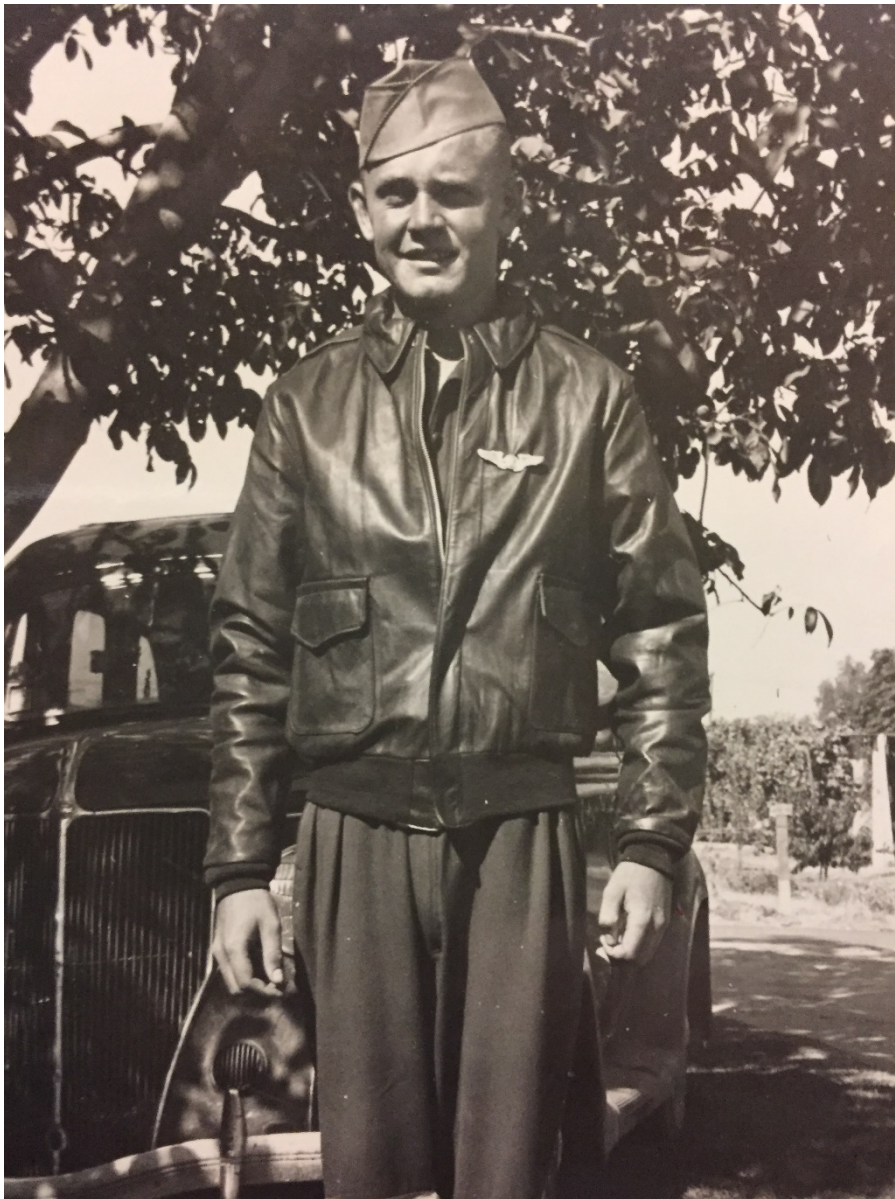
On the day this picture was taken the men had just finished a mission.
The crew was transferred to the 8th Air Force, in March of 1944

Front Row L. to R.

Replacement (name unknown)
Sgt. Lloyd McLaughlin - Gunner
Sgt Guy Walters - Gunner
Tech Sgt. William G. Smith - Radio Operator
S/Sgt. Roy M. Gaertig - Gunner

Back Row L. to R.

Lt. Raymond K. Jennings - Bombardier
Lt. Gerald Myers - Navigator
1st.Lt. Horace G. Ferry - Pilot
Lt. William Sisserson Co-Pilot
Tech Sgt Loran Rodman - Engineer



World War II began for me as a young farm boy. I listened to the first accounts of the attack on Pearl Harbor by radio on December 7th, 1941. Ten months after Pearl Harbor as a recruit in the Army Air Corps, I traveled as a member of a B-24 Heavy Bombardment air crew. I flew my first mission off a muddy Italian air strip in December 1943. From the day of that first mission into the Balkans, life for the Fresno farm kid changed with the reality that life itself was man's most important possession.

Chapter 1

The Call to Serve My Country

December 7, 1941 brought World War II for the United States. I listened on the radio Sunday morning as reporters told what they knew of the Pearl Harbor attack. The news was censored from the start so that we did not know of the true damage to the U.S. fleet until months later. Sunday night we listened to Walter Winchell with his latest flashes regarding the Japanese fleet sighted steaming toward the Philippines and Indonesia. Little did I know at the time that my future wife was living in Honolulu on December 7th, 1941.



Douglas A-20 Havoc http://olive-drab.com/idphoto/id_photos_bombers_a20.php

Hammer Field became an army air base with a squadron of A-20 attack bombers stationed there. The A-20's would come roaring over our place at fairly low altitude as they headed for the coast for submarine patrol. I remember looking up and wondering what it would be like to fly. Eighteen months later I knew.

In 1941, I was a student at Fresno State College. I watched with fascination the unfolding of World War II from Hitler's march into Czechoslovakia in 1938 to the 1939 invasion of Poland, Russia in 1941, and the Japanese strike at Pearl Harbor. The day after the strike at Pearl Harbor, we all gathered around the radio to listen to Roosevelt's speech declaring war on Japan and Germany and Italy too, I believe. Rumors abounded that Japan was ready to invade the U.S. West Coast.

Ten months after the attack on Pearl Harbor, I was in the army. I boarded a train and headed for the reception center at the Monterey Presidio. I spent five or six weeks at Monterey awaiting assignment to the Army Air Corps. Upon assignment to the Air Corps I was sent back to the Fresno Fairgrounds where there was a temporary Air Corps reception center set up. The Fairgrounds was covered with tar papered barracks buildings. It was a cold wet December and I shipped out a few days before Christmas. Our troop train headed north across the plains of Montana and Wyoming. We arrived in Sioux Falls, South Dakota on Christmas Eve of 1942. I

had never been farther away from Fresno than San Francisco. I had never been as far south as Los Angeles.



At Sioux Falls on Christmas day I was about as lonesome as a kid could be. We were assigned to training squadrons for training in communications. That later part of December 1942 and January, the thermometer hovered below zero most of the time and sometimes as low as minus 38 degrees Fahrenheit. We bunked in the same type of barracks as in Fresno. These barracks were about 100 feet long and 30 feet wide. We had three pot-bellied stoves down the middle aisle. The only insulation on the buildings was the tar paper over the outside siding. The stoves were well stocked with coal day and night. I had never seen coal used for heat before and could not believe how dirty coal was to use. The coal smoke billowed out of every building on the base. Thirty minutes after a fresh snow, the snow would begin to turn grey from the coal smoke. The coal supply was a mountain of coal that must have been at least 300 yards long and forty feet high. Freight cars were constantly bringing in new supplies of coal.

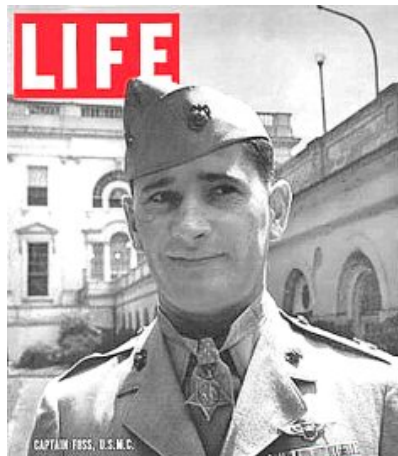
There were 20,000 recruits assigned to the Sioux Falls Army Corps Radio School. The day started at 4:30 a.m. We had fifteen minutes to wash, dress, and fall in formation to march to the mess hall for breakfast. For a California kid to stand in formation when it was 20 degrees below zero was a shock to the system to say the least. After breakfast, it was back to the barracks to make your bunk, gather your books, and march off to classroom.



Sioux Falls, South Dakota

At noon, we fell into formation and marched to the mess hall. After lunch, we marched back to class. Class was out about 2:30 or 3:00pm and then we marched to the field for close order drill and calisthenics. After dinner, we went back to the barracks and studied for about an hour and a half. Classes were held six days a week and each squadron had a different day off so Sunday wasn't necessarily a day off. After the first five or six weeks, we could get a day off and get a pass to town. Sioux Falls was a town of about 40,000 so at least every other person on the streets was a service man. Most of us were 19 to 21 years old. A few were as young as 18 and a few as old as 30. We were in training to be sent out as communications men to various air corps facilities and the Army Signal Corps. The course was about five months long. All aspects to radio communications were covered. Morse Code had

to be sent and received until a speed of 18 words per minute was attained. Radios were studied, built, disassembled, and re-built. Theories of physics were presented. Most of the instructors were either civilians or ex-science teachers now in uniform.



Joe Foss, 1943
<http://www.arlingtoncemetery.net/jjfosss.htm>

One day in the spring of 1943 Joe Foss, Marine war ace and native of Sioux Falls came back to his home town. Foss was one of the first aerial aces of the war to return from the Pacific having shot down more than twenty Japanese planes. He was a national hero. The whole town turned out to welcome him and we marched in the parade down the main street of Sioux Falls. This was our first dress parade and we were might proud. The cold days of January and February turned to the slush of March. We kept plugging away with test after test. In April, the different services of the army began recruiting for ground officer candidates and bomber crews. Officer candidates were needed for the infantry. Flying radio men were needed for bombers and would also be trained as

gunners. The air war in Europe was in its infancy and experiments in daylight bombing were being tried with devastating results. Losses were high and replacements were needed. If you volunteered for flying duty you would be a non-commissioned officer after six weeks of aerial gunnery school and then would be assigned to a bomber squadron with another raise in rank.

Flying duty would also give you a 50% extra bonus in pay. A tech sergeant in the air made more than a second lieutenant in the infantry. It sounded pretty good to me so I volunteered for flight duty.

We graduated from radio school in May 1943. Some shipped out to the infantry, some to ground duty at various posts in the army air corps and I shipped out to aerial gunnery school in Harlingen, Texas.

Going from South Dakota to the Rio Grande valley of Texas was taking on a temperature change of at least 50 degrees. When I left South Dakota, there was still snow on the ground and when we got to South Texas they were having a hot spell. We almost died in our wool winter clothes before we received our summer uniforms.



Harlingen, Texas Air Base 1943

Harlingen Air Base in May 1943 was by far superior to any base I had been on. It was certainly far ahead of Sioux Falls. The base roads were lined with palm trees. The barracks were two story wooden buildings. The Sioux Falls tar papered shacks couldn't compare. The food was excellent. Sun-tans were the uniform of the day. It became clear that to be in any kind of flight training brought a better standard of living in the Air Corps.

The gunnery school became an intensive six weeks of training. It was fun and exciting. We were thoroughly indoctrinated into the world of ballistics, machine gun operation and maintenance of turrets, ground firing practice, airplane recognition, aerial gunnery practice, and a hundred other facets of gunnery.



AT-6 Trainer <https://www.britannica.com/technology/military-aircraft/Interwar-developments>

After two weeks of ground school, we took to the air in AT-6 trainers. The pilot sat in front with the gunner sitting backwards in the rear with a 30-caliber machine gun on a swivel. We flew over the Gulf of Mexico where the target consisted of a twenty-foot sleeve being towed by another airplane. The sleeve was cloth, white, and towed by a long, thin cable. The gunner's plane would attack the sleeve from different angles and the gunner would fire at will as his plane dived and banked against the



Gunnery School: Harlingen, Texas

sleeve. Each gunner had a different colored ammunition so that his individual hits could be recorded and graded on the ground. My scores were above average. Learning to lead the target was easy as I used my days of duck shooting in days gone by. One clear day as my plane made a dive at the target over the blue Gulf waters, I fired a burst and the tracers told me I was nailing the front section of the target. As we pulled out I looked back and saw the target drifting loose in the Gulf breeze toward Mexico. My bullets had hit dead center, but too close to the front end of the sleeve and I had hit the cable cutting the sleeve loose. The sleeve was later recovered by a small craft. When not flying, we shot skeet to develop the secret of leading the target and the swing and follow through of the gun. Firing a 50-caliber machine gun on the ground at a moving target was hard on the ears even with ear protection. Ground targets were canvas sails mounted above a jeep that ran on a track behind an embankment of dirt. The jeep would travel 30-40 miles per hour with only the white sail showing. The gunner would fire colored ammo to indicate his hits. Another method of teaching the elements of lead was where the gunner would stand in a turret on the rear of a truck with a 12-gauge shotgun. The truck would roar around a track at a speed of 35-40 miles per hour. The track was about $\frac{3}{4}$ of a mile long with twenty-five skeet houses shooting out clay pigeons at different angles as the truck approached them. The gunner would fire until he had passed all 25 stations. One good day I remember hitting 23 out of 25 targets.

One of the tests to pass was the taking apart and putting back together with gloves a 50-caliber gun. A bomber gunner had to be able to fix a jammed gun in the cold of high altitude flying. We were tested in a decompression chamber for light altitude adaptability. About 8 or 10 men with a couple of medical technicians were placed in a large cylinder like chamber and closed in an air tight room. We put on oxygen masks and pressure was reduced to a high-altitude equivalent of 30,000 feet. We were warned not to do it if you had a cold as you would have trouble with your ears. I had a slight snuffle and didn't think anything of it. However, when we started down I had trouble clearing my ears and the chamber stopped at 18,000 feet. After a bit, I signaled to go ahead down to the equivalent of ground level and we all scrambled out of the chamber about 2:00 a.m. I awoke with a terrific ear ache. I took a handful of aspirin with no effect. Finally, daylight came and I walked down to the dispensary. The pain was unbearable. About 8:00 a.m. I saw a doctor. He gave me a shot of codeine and I was checked into the hospital. The next day I was still in big pain. The doctor told me he could relieve the pain by cutting the ear drum, however, that would end my flying days. I told him I would stick it out one more day. By the following morning the pain began to ease and the next day I left the hospital and returned to duty.



Technical Sergeant William G. Smith,
Graduation from Aerial Gunnery
school, Harlingen, Texas in July 1943

Graduation finally came in July 1943 and with it came sergeant stripes and the silver wings. I was assigned to a cadre in Clovis, New Mexico. I spent only a few weeks in Clovis. It was a time when plans were being laid for the biggest bomber force the world had ever seen. It had become apparent in the skies over Europe that mass formations of bombers would be required to survive the German defenses. Bomber crews were to be formed in a hurry and training was to be expedited. After three months of phase training the bomber crews were thought to be ready for combat. So, after a few weeks in Clovis, I was assigned to a new bomb group being formed in Alamogordo, New Mexico – the 450th Bomb Group – B-24s. A bomber group consisted of

four squadrons. At full complement, it would be made up of 18 planes to a squadron. When I arrived at Alamogordo, there were four planes for training in the entire group. There was a shortage of planes to say the least. The group was being put together by a Col. by the name of Mills. I was one of about five or six radio operators along with a few pilots, engineers, bombardiers and navigators. No gunners had been assigned to the Group yet.

I checked into the base headquarters and was told I was in the 722nd Sq. After going over my records, a lieutenant pointed the way to the 722nd area. I found the barracks I was assigned to and found it empty, except for three other men. One of them was Loran Rodman who would later be the flight engineer on my crew. Rodman and I would end up flying 38 missions together out of Italy and England. We found ourselves being the nucleus of a brand -new bomber group. No crew assignments had been made so with time on our hands, Rodman and I walked over to the N.C.O. club for a couple of beers. And that's how I passed my first day with the 450th Bomb Group.

After a couple of days, I was told to be ready that night for a practice flight. I went down to the flight line at 7:00 o'clock and reported to the plane commander. I was about to get my first lesson in flight communications with a Sgt. Reagan as my instructor. A new pilot and new navigator were to be checked out the same night. So, with two pilots, two navigators, and two radio operators we boarded the plane which I thought at the time was a gigantic four engine monster. The B-24 was big for that day in time. However, present day fighters are almost as big and carry just as big a bomb load.

The new crewmen were given detailed instructions for about an hour in each of their jobs by the respective instructors. At any rate, in about an hour we taxied down to the runway and

took off to make a simulated attack on Salt Lake City. We kept sending and receiving messages to various ground installations along our route and I quickly learned that sending a message by telegraph key was much more difficult from a bouncing plane than from a desk on the ground. That first outing took about 5 hours as I recall, but it was quite a thrill. In the weeks and months to come, we would make many more practice missions over the western half of the United States. Most of the training missions would be flown in daylight hours as daylight bombing was to be our mission in this war. The key to victory was going to be overwhelming air power. Thousands of planes and tens of thousands of airmen would be thrown against Hitler's fortress Europe before the war would end. Many hundreds of the bombers would be lost along with thousands of the airmen. Little did we neophyte airmen realize that hundreds of those of us training at Alamogordo would not survive the vicious air battles to come in the months ahead. We were young and invincible. "Nothing can stop the Army Air Corps" was the song of the day. The eventual goal of the Bomb Group was to train 720 airmen to fly 72 B-24 bombers. In the following weeks, more men and more planes arrived and the squadrons slowly formed into reasonable fighting formations. Training was intensive as we were drilled over and over that your life depended on knowing your job. The key to survival was the ability or inability of the pilots to learn to fly tight formations. Enemy fighters loved to dive thru a loose formation.



September 1943
Furlough Home to Fresno: Cousin Harrison, Richard,
Bill, Anna, Don

In September 1943, I got my first furlough. I spent a couple of weeks at home, knowing that I would be shipping overseas as soon as we finished our phase training. Pop had a hard time accepting my being sent into combat. Approximately October 1st I boarded a train back to New Mexico to rejoin the 450th. Barney was in the Army somewhere in training in the middle West. Lois and Evelyn were still in grammar school. I think Don was in junior high along with Dick. I've forgotten whether they were all at the train station when I left. I do remember how hard it was to leave. I knew that I would not see the family again until I returned from my upcoming combat tour...if I survived.

Getting back to Alamogordo, I resumed the routine of flight training as a radio-gunner. Rodman and I were assigned to Lt. Sharff's crew for a few weeks and then were reassigned to a lead crew commanded by Lt. H. George Ferry. My radio assistant was Don Timmerwilke. Bill Susserson was co-pilot. Myers was the navigator, Jennings bombardier, tail gunner was McLaughlin. Guy Walters manned the left waist gun. I manned the right waist gun when not working the radio. "Rebel Kemp" was the nose gunner. Rodman was the engineer

and operated the top turret. I also operated the top turret at times. Timmerwilke would operate the ball turret.



722nd Squadron:

Back Row: S/Sgt. Tom Bishop, S/Sgt. Lloyd McLaughlin,
S/Sgt. Don Timmerwilke

Front Row: S/Sgt. Guy Walters, S/Sgt. William G. Smith

Not Pictured: Lauren Rodman, H. George Ferry, and
Bill Sisserson, "Rebel Kemp."

During the following weeks, we trained as a crew making assimilated bombing runs on most of the big cities in New Mexico, Texas, Oklahoma, Utah, Idaho, and a few others I do not remember. We made some low level runs across the desert firing air to ground. We all got along pretty-well as a crew. Towards the end of phase training a new command pilot by the name of Orris was brought in and replaced Ferry as squadron C.O. of the 722nd. Ferry figured he was being shafted and he proved to be right. Ferry and Orris couldn't get along – a fact that later would prove to be a Godsend for the rest of our crew.

The weeks of training became intensive and the tensions rose a little as we got close to "shipping over". None of us knew what theatre of war the 450th Group would be sent. Rumors abounded. India was one rumor that wouldn't go away. We knew that Pacific duty was the least dangerous in time of the last months of 1943. Assignment to the European command would be the toughest as we had been briefed on the losses being taken in that theatre. A tour of duty in the Pacific meant at least 50 combat missions. A tour in the 8th Air Force out of England was set at 25. The average losses at that time were running 4 to 5% each mission. Averages didn't mean much if the Luftwaffe decided to concentrate on your group. In that case losses could run 10 to 20% each mission. When the thousand plane raids over Germany began to happen in the spring of 1944, the U.S. newspapers carried headlines on losses of 50 or 60 bombers a mission. What they didn't mention was that losing 60 bombers meant losing 600 men in a few hours in the sky over Europe.

The month of October 43 was spent honing our individual skills at our job. One-day Col. Mills decided the military discipline of the group was something to be desired in the 700-man air compliment. Orders were given that rank would be recognized and that a salute was in order even among the same crew. Along with that was an order for the entire group to go on a forced march across the sands of New Mexico. The march lasted one day and saluting lasted about a week. It didn't take long for each crew to realize they were one machine with ten cogs meshing together to do the job of keeping a four-engine plane in the air – hopefully to complete all the missions to be assigned.



B-24, Plane 144, assigned to the 722nd Squadron
<http://www.450thbq.com/real/aircraft/rumbuqay.shtml>

November 1943
The 1800 ground personnel head for New York to board a ship for wherever our overseas base was to be.

It became apparent we were headed for Europe. Each crew was assigned a brand-new B-24. Every inch of the plane was inspected. I checked over the radio equipment with the ground crew. Some parts of the equipment had notes attached by some gal who had worked on that piece of equipment along the way on some assembly line. Notes like "Good Luck", "Give 'em hell", etc. Some had left phone numbers and addresses from San Diego or Willow Run. Our plane number was 144. These would be our call numbers for the months ahead anytime a pilot



B-24 Radio Desk myradiowaves.com

was in touch with the tower or a radio operator was in touch with ground control. Radio equipment on a B-24 consisted of a bank of receivers for different frequencies in the middle of the plane against the back firewall to the bomb bay. The radio desk was on the flight deck behind the co-pilot. A long-range transmitter and receiver were on the flight deck along with the desk and a telegrapher key. A small window looked out to the right side of the

plane and No. 3 engine. The antenna for long range transmission was a copper wire on a reel that was released in flight out the bottom of the plane with a lead weight attached. As I recall, the weight was 7 or 8 pounds. You would tune your transmitter as the line was released. You needed adequate altitude to make this equipment work properly. Since 50 years have passed, I now have difficulty in describing the working details of this equipment. However, to this day, 50 years later, I could still tap out a message in Morse Code if I had to.

The day finally came to leave New Mexico. Destination was the staging area in Kansas where we would get our overseas orders. Each plane navigated separately to the staging area. We stayed a few days in Kansas and received orders to proceed to Palm Beach, Florida to commence our flight overseas by way of South America. In Palm Beach, we received the route orders to Trinidad. We stayed in Palm Beach a few days and were briefed thoroughly on overwater flight. We were issued supplies for our journey including a jungle machete. Forty-five caliber automatic pistols were issued to each crew member.



Jungle Machete

"We were issued supplies for our journey including a jungle machete." William G. Smith



"Forty-five caliber automatic pistols were issued to each crew member."

William G. Smith

Chapter 2

The Flight Overseas

December 1, 1943

We took off and headed South. The morning we left we were briefed to watch for enemy submarines which were playing havoc in the Caribbean with our ships. Our orders were clear now as to our route and destinations. We would proceed – each plane made its own way alone – south to our first stop in Trinidad for refueling and rest one night. Then on South to Belem, Brazil, Natal Brazil, across the Atlantic to Dakar, Africa and then north to French Morocco and finally into the southern tip of Italy.



I've forgotten how many hours it took to get from Palm Beach to Trinidad. Our air speed was about 150 mph. We came into Trinidad late afternoon. The air strip had been hacked out of a jungle and it was raining cats and dogs. We were fed supper and given quarters for the night. The next morning, Ferry, the pilot, Myers the navigator, and myself were briefed on the next leg of the trip along with the recognition codes of the day and other procedures to follow. We were warned against getting close to any submarines sighted as the Germans could do considerable damage with their 5" deck gun. At the last minute before takeoff we loaded a dozen cases or more of Trinidad rum onto the plane. We lifted off in the rain and headed for Belem, Brazil.

We were flying at about 8,000 feet somewhere between Trinidad and Belem over water when one of the gunners in the rear came over the intercom in an excited voice that a sub was on the surface to our right. Everybody that could, looked and sure enough there was a sub a few miles away. There was not supposed to be any U.S. subs in these waters so we presumed it was enemy. Myers made a quick fix to pinpoint the location while I contacted the navy base in Belem. I radioed in the information as to the location and that we thought it was a German sub. He was still on the surface as we pulled away out of sight. Belem acknowledged my message as we proceeded toward that base.

Late that afternoon we set down on a steel mat runway in Belem. We were picked up at the plane by a couple of jeeps and taken to base headquarters. My radio transmission had sent off a dozen PBY sea planes to look for the submarine I reported. Headquarters wanted more information if we had it. After briefing we were assigned sleeping quarters. The next morning, we took off in the rain again and headed for the eastern tip of Brazil—Natal. The PBY's incidentally never found the sub.

We landed in Natal in the afternoon. The weather was beautiful. Summer in Brazil is in all its splendor in December. Mechanics worked over all four engines and found some trouble in No. 4. They decided to change the engine. That procedure along with having to scrape up some spare parts meant we would be laying over for a few days before crossing the South Atlantic. While the ground crew worked over No. 4, we headed for the beach. The sun felt wonderful. I remember the delicious pineapples we bought and ate on the beach. After a day or two of laying around on the warm sand, we could care less if they never fixed engine No. 4. Sitting on the beach and looking out over the blue Atlantic, I thought how wonderful it would be if time stopped here and we could spend the duration of the war sitting on the beach in Brazil eating pineapple.

Reality came back the next day when we were told our plane was ready. Preparations were made to prepare for the 1,600 miles across to Africa. We were briefed to take off early as it was a 10 to 11-hour trip. Gas tanks were topped off the night before. Radio equipment was checked and re-checked as our only contact with land would be my long-range transmitter. If we strayed off course or got lost, there was nothing but water below. Proper use of fuel was vital. Thinking back now on this 50-year-old adventure, it is hard to realize how primitive our equipment was compared to jet air transportation of today. But, it must be recognized that air ships had come a long way in 1943 from the time that Lindberg had soloed the Atlantic for the first time just 16 years before.

Sometime about 6:00 a.m. we lifted off the runway in Natal. The plan was to keep low, climbing gradually as we headed east over the Atlantic to save gas. I was to reel the transmission antenna out the bottom of the plane as soon as feasible so that land contact could be maintained with Natal until we got midway when I would attempt to contact Dakar, Africa. It was necessary to stay in radio contact with either Brazil or Africa in case we had any trouble.

Going down in the Atlantic, you would have *some* chance of being found if your radio transmissions were being picked up at the time you hit the water. Be that as it may, I began to let the antenna out the bottom of the plane, eager to maintain contact with Natal. In my eagerness, I let the reel loose too soon and the lead weight at the end of the antenna snagged a tree top just before we cleared the jungle below. Consequently, the entire wire was yanked out of the plane. The B-24 numbered 144 made a low turn over the water and headed back to Natal. We had to layover another day as it was too late in the day to take off again after the antenna was fixed. The following morning, we took off again. This time I paid more attention to the trees below before tuning the transmitter.

We skimmed over the water and headed due east. Ferry made a slow climb as I let out the antenna. We leveled off at about 8,000 feet and I contacted Natal. For the next 5 hours, I periodically gave position reports to Natal. At the half way mark, I switched frequencies and tried to contact Dakar. Any transmissions were coded for the day. For a period of 40 or 45 minutes, I was unable to raise Dakar. I began to worry as Natal had faded out to nothing. Suddenly, I heard a faint response from Dakar. I was relieved as reception got better. I remember the operator in Dakar was too fast in his sending and I had to tell him to slow down. Finally, I got him down to about 15 words per minute and I sent my reports in periodically at about 12 wpm.

It was a clear day about 5:00 o'clock in the afternoon when we sighted the coast of Africa. I sent the estimated time of arrival. We were right on course. I brought in the antenna as the pilot contacted ground control at the Dakar tower. Now I have forgotten the name of the field. There was a small detachment of U.S. troops there. We hit the runway at sundown. Hundreds of blacks working on the field were on their knees with head down facing east to Mecca as they did every day now. Ferry taxied into our assigned space and shut her down. A jeep full of G.I.'s came out to the plane and wanted to know if we had brought any booze. Rum was pedaled out the waist window at \$20 a bottle. Sales were shut down after a couple of cases. After all, it was still a long way to Italy.

We were put up in a crude barracks building and given straw filled mattresses to sleep on. After a good dinner, we strolled around the base looking things over. The weird looking flat trees of the African coast and the coal black—almost blue-black Negroes were interesting to say the least. Many were civilian employees of the base. McLaughlin bought a small monkey from one of them, complete with collar and leash. The monkey was about half tamed as he had probably been in the wild a month or two pasts. The blacks made a practice of capturing the small monkeys by putting out pans of wine. A drunk monkey was not too difficult to capture. We named him "Flak" and the monkey went everywhere McLaughlin went and ended up flying a few missions.

The next morning, we took off on the next leg and the destination was Marrakesh, Morocco. The trip was uneventful. Timmerwilke and I took a horse drawn taxi into town. Had a couple of drinks and returned to base for tomorrow's next leg of the trip.

From Marrakesh, we took off for Algiers. We stayed there a couple of days waiting for weather to clear. Algiers in 1943 was straight out of the movies. Beggars were everywhere. A couple of the crew and I walked into the casaba. As we climbed up the stair cased streets into the native quarters it was a different world. The Arabs sat in the doorways, trying to sell something or anything. Their clothes were ragged, torn and dirty. They begged for food and cigarettes. We didn't lose much time in turning and walking back to where we had come. Some Arabs followed us out into the main streets of Algiers still begging for anything we would be willing to part with.

Chapter 3

The Mediterranean Theater



December 21st, 1943

We took off from Algiers for the final leg of our trip; Manduria, Italy, which would be home for the 450th Bomb Group. We crossed the Mediterranean in overcast skies. Manduria was a small village south of Brindisi on the heel of Italy. The nearest town of any size was Lecce. Our airfield, cut out of a grove of olives, consisted of a single dirt strip overlaid with layers of crushed Italian white rock. As we approached the field, we could see a scattering of tents and a few stone buildings. A small hangar was situated to one side of the complex.

The base at one time was an Italian fighter base. For the past month or two, the 98th Bomb Group had been stationed here, having been in the Mediterranean Theatre since the Allied

invasion of North Africa. It had started to rain as we left the aircraft and we proceeded to headquarters.

The base was dreary in the rain. A few B-24's were in their hardstands as most of the 98th were on a bombing mission. Our ground crews were nowhere to be seen. We heard that their ship had been bombed in the harbor at Bari. Supplies and ground personnel would be delayed a week before they arrived at Manduria. With no supplies, there were no plane parts, no beds or blankets, and damn near no food. We were to sleep on the floor in our fleece lined flight clothes before the Red Cross would finally get some cots and blankets down to us.

December 23, 1943

The rain continued that afternoon in an on and off pattern. It was about 4:00 p.m. when we heard the droning of the returning 98th. We hurried to the flight line to see what a combat outfit looked like. A flare shot up from one of the circling planes, indicating wounded on board. The B-24's splashed down the muddy runway one by one, the plane shooting the flares being

one of the first. Tired looking, grim faced, the crews climbed out of their planes. Their boots dragged thru the mud as they sloshed for the debriefing room. I walked over to the plane that had let go with the flares. Most of the crew was still in the ship. Blood dripped from the rear bomb bay. A couple of the gunners had been seriously wounded. Medics climbed into the plane and lowered a stretcher out the waist window. I don't know whether the gunners survived or not. Flak and bullet holes were numerous throughout the fuselage. The rest of the crew departed from the ship. With heads down and muttering something about "our fighters never showed", they headed for debriefing.

I stood there in the rain in a state of shock. Three planes with thirty crewmen hadn't come back. It was a rude awakening. Anything glamorous about flying had disappeared in the rain and I walked to my crewmates standing in the hanger.

December 25, 1943

It was wet and cold. We lined up outside for Christmas dinner which wasn't too bad for the limited mess hall facilities. Some turkeys had come from somewhere. We broke out our mess kits and filled them with turkey, gravy, potatoes, dressing and even some cranberries. It was the best meal I had had since leaving the states. With no ground personnel available, the air crews took turns dishing out food. When one bunch finished eating, they replaced someone on the serving line, and so forth and so forth. When we finished eating, we sloshed thru the mud to a couple of barrels of hot water to wash our mess kits. It was the second Christmas I had spent in the Army and I prayed that I wouldn't have to spend a third.



The rains continued into the New Year. The water leaked into our sleeping quarters and our sleeping blankets got wet. I got a terrible cold and fever. On checking into the infirmary, I was told by the flight surgeon I would have to get to a dry area if I was going to recover. He ordered me to Bari where there was an army hospital. I rode in the back end of a 6x6 truck the hundred miles or so to the Bari hospital along

with 3 or 4 other sick airmen. The

hospital was a long stone building. It was dry, but there was little heat. A bed with sheets was a delicious luxury. Many in the hospital were half-crazed airmen who had seen too much combat and were waiting to be shipped back to the states. Many would end up in psychiatric hospitals.

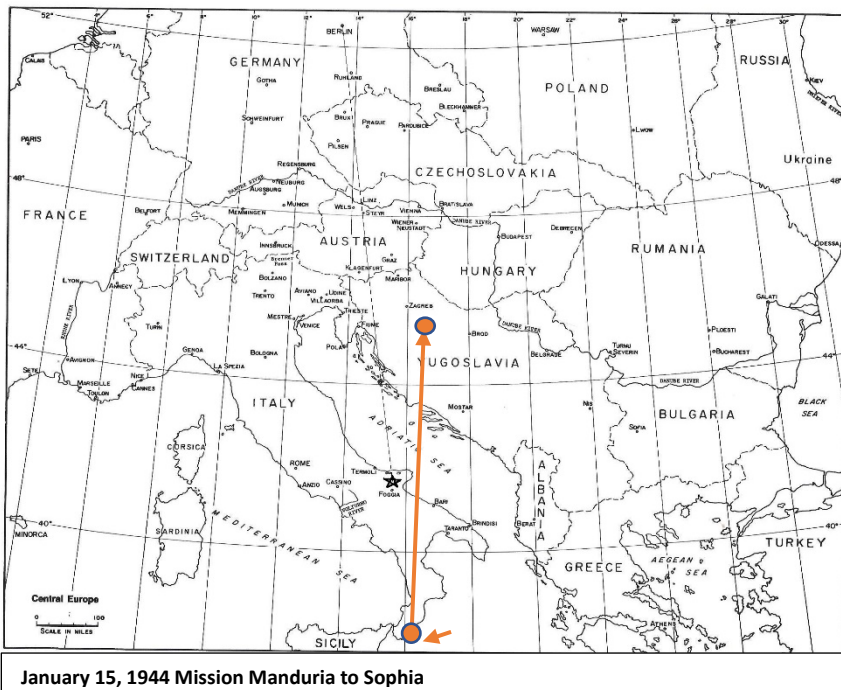
I stayed in the hospital a few days while being given antibiotics. As I lay on that bunk in that cold hospital ward, I was full of apprehension. I hadn't flown a single mission. But I had been close to those who had, and tinges of fear were creeping into my mind. As I recalled the week before when the 98th returned with their wounded and now in this hospital ward, I was hearing the cries of the combat weary and the stories of some who had been to Ploesti. Some of the men just lay in their bunks and told no stories at all. These did not want to talk about it.

January 8, 1944

When my fever broke I was sent back to the Bomb Group. Still not feeling too well, I flew my first mission. We climbed to 21,000 feet and headed into Yugoslavia to hit a rail marshalling yard. The weather closed in and the mission was aborted. We brought the bombs back to base. The radio equipment went haywire and 144 was grounded a couple of days while the ground crew worked on the communications system.

January 14, 1944

Our crew flew with the Group, again into Yugoslavia. We were flying deputy lead when we lost an engine. Ferry dropped us out of formation and we headed solo for a secondary target on the way back. We dropped our bombs on a railroad yard and headed home alone with three engines churning. When we got back to base we learned that the plane that took our place as deputy lead was blown out of the sky with a direct hit from an anti-aircraft shell.



January 15, 1944 Mission Manduria to Sophia

January 15, 1944

We flew another bombing run into the Balkans. The target was again railroad facilities—this time Sofia, Bulgaria. The flak was heavy and we took a few hits. I manned the guns in the right waist window, waiting for fighters. The wind ripped thru the open window and the temperature was 30 degrees below zero. We flew thru the flak barrage at 21,000 feet and dropped the bombs.

The bursting flak scared the hell out of us. The good thing about the day was that no fighters came upon us.

January 16, 1944

Our crew was slated to fly again. We rolled out of bed around 5:00 a.m. and headed for the cook shack. Breakfast was dehydrated eggs and strong coffee. Briefing was somewhere around



Capt. Charles Bowman, of the 450th Bomb Group, briefs crew members at the Manduria Airfield, Italy. 1944 National Archives
http://abmc.nomadmobileguides.com/bundles/SicilyRome/bundle/Package/Content/neutral/assets/NARA_73649A.C.jpg

6:30 a.m. We sat on wooden benches while the briefing officer pulled down the wall map. The target was at the end of a red string that ran from our base to a couple of targets in Northern Italy. The string split in Northern Italy—one to Verona (the primary target) and one to the secondary target. Flak and fighters were supposed to be encountered. We left briefing and rode out to the plane in a jeep. We took off in the mud and headed north with about 28 planes. When

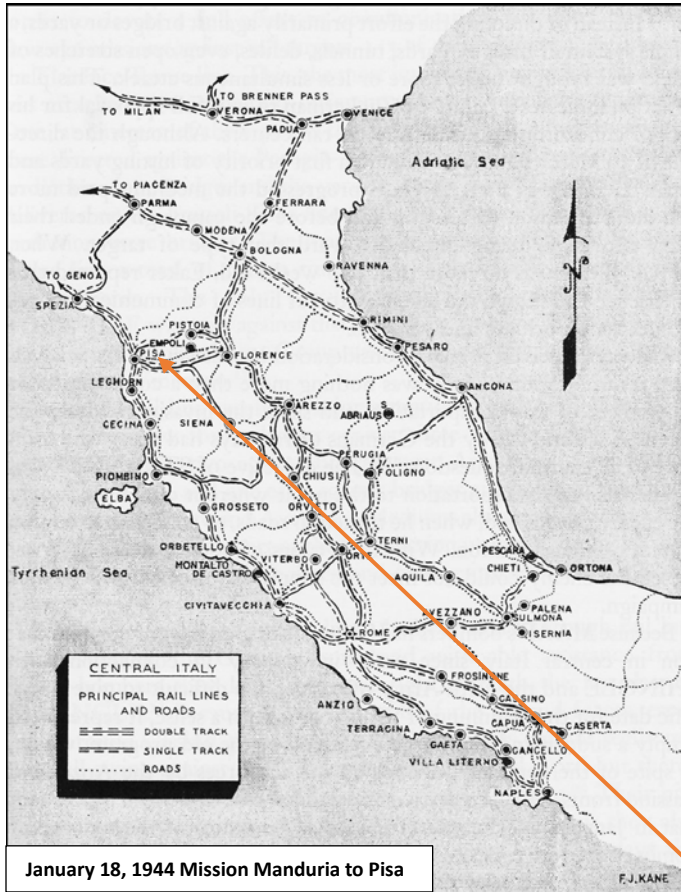
we got into the area of Bologna the 723rd with 13 planes headed for Verona. The rest of us split off toward a marshalling yard on the Adriatic coast. We encountered a few fighters and heavy flak. We picked up a few flak holes as the rear element fought off a couple of fighter passes. All our aircraft returned to base. However, the 723rd was another story. They lost two planes to fighters and two of the remaining eleven came back badly shot up with some wounded gunners. Again, blood dripped from the bomb bay as the frozen blood warmed in the lower altitude of the runway.

January 17, 1944

We took off again after another target in the Balkans. The weather got bad about halfway, and we were called back. We landed with a full bomb load.

January 18, 1944 Our mission today was another sortie after railroad yards. This one was to Pisa on the Mediterranean coast. The briefing officer spent considerable time pointing out the

Leaning Tower of Pisa. If there was any question of being able to drop everything on the target, the bombs were not to be dropped. Under no circumstances were we able to drop any bombs near the leaning tower. The Group salvaged the bombs onto the rail yards from 20,000 feet. I was lead operator so we had an extra man on board for the waist gun. I lay on the deck and watched the bombs release thru the open bomb bay and head for the rail yards below on a clear, cold January day. The target was plastered. We banked in a wide swing to the left and headed back along the Mediterranean coast. Again, a lot of the planes including us received a few holes in the fuselage from flak.



We had flown five missions in five days, getting no credit for the abort on the 17th. I was dead tired. The high altitude had sucked my strength.

January 19, 1944

We were given a rest. The air crews rested most of the day while the ground crews swarmed over the aircraft patching flak holes and checking everything from engines to guns. As we stretched out on our cots, the air was filled with conversation of what had happened the past few days. We had lost 3 planes and 30 men. At least a half-dozen gunners had been wounded. A couple of planes were so shot up they were being used for salvage. With a combat tour consisting of 50 missions before going home, things didn't look too good. The bad weather outside added to the gloom. The percentage for survival was odds that I didn't want to think about. During the day one of our ground crew had painted the name we had chosen for No. 144 on the nose of the plane— "RUM BUGGY". We still had a couple of cases of rum left, having sold most of it along the way. I slept the afternoon away. Rodman woke me up and we headed for the chow line. After dinner, I returned to my cot and slept thru the night. Someone woke me up at 5:00 a.m. with "Smith, get your ass out of that sack." We're flying today." I put on my flying clothes and staggered toward breakfast.

January 20, 1944

It was another cold, wet day. After breakfast, the air crews shuffled into the briefing room, sat down, and waited for the briefing officer. Major Gideon started the briefing as he pulled the large map down to the floor. The red string was a short one showing the route to the rail yards outside of Rome. Two other groups of B-24s would rendezvous with us and then the B-24 groups would link up with 85 B-17s out of Foggia. That day we had P-38s and P-47 escorts. We formed up over the Mediterranean and then headed into the rail yards and dropped the bombs from 21,000 feet. As we approached the target the anti-aircraft shells mushroomed all over the sky – to the front of us, under us, to the right and left. The flak barrage was brutal. It was the heaviest barrage we had yet encountered. The plane bounced and heaved as the barrage got closer and the flak drummed against the fuselage with spent fragments. For the first time, I was really scared. The mission was carried out with no losses to our group.



B-24 Waist Gunners

<http://www.worldwarphotos.info/gallery/usa/aircrafts-2-3/b-24-bomber/b-24-waist-gunners/>

January 23, 1944

According to my diary, we flew another mission to the Rome area on January 23rd with light opposition.

January 24, 1944

We suited up for a mission into Yugoslavia. I do not remember the specific target, but at this date so many years later, I think that it was an airfield. We formed the Group at 20,000 feet over the Adriatic and headed East into the Balkans. We were about a half hour from the target when one of the guys in

the rear of the plane called out fights coming in. I was at the right waist gun and began frantically looking for the Luftwaffe. The 720th was flying to our lower right and fighters were sailing through their formation. To our front Kemp called out a couple of fighters. I still couldn't see anything. The nose and top turrets rattled off a salvo. Our fighter cover hadn't showed up and the 450th was in their first major fighter battle. I was apprehensive to say the least as I strained to see the fighters. Most of the action seemed to be with the squadron to our lower right. Then a curious thing happened. A German fighter completed a pass on the 720th and flew directly under my waist gun. I pulled the gun down to fire – too late as he went under our plane. I say, "too late" as I didn't get off a burst. The truth was I probably had time to fire down on him, but I lost a couple of seconds in an unexplainable reflex. The skirmish was brief and we succeeded in driving off the fighters with losing only one plane. A lot of the Group suffered battle damage including us.

The downed plane was from the 720th and most of the crew were seen to bail out. One of the parachutes floating down carried a squadron orderly clerk by the name of Votoe who had talked his way onto the mission as a cameraman. Votoe had no flight training whatsoever and this was his first flight. We later learned he was interned in Turkey. We completed the bombing mission and headed back to Italy with no further fighter attacks. We had survived a German air attack of about 20 fighters.



The picture above is the crew from the 450th Bomb Group, 720th Squadron, which went down over Yugoslavia on the January 24th mission. All members bailed out and survived, but were taken as POWs. I believe Theodore Votoe, the camera man, is in this picture, front row, fourth from left.

January 27, 1944

Part of the 450th took off to bomb the harbor of Marseilles in the south of France. Our crew had a rest that day. I walked over to the flight line to see them off. The rain had stopped temporarily, but the runway was a mass of mud. As the B-24s lumbered down the dirt strip, the pilots used up every foot of runway to get up enough speed for takeoff. The mud sprayed as high as the top of the white tails which turned a dirty brown half way down the strip. We were anxious for them throughout the day. We met the planes in the afternoon. The Opposition had been comparatively light from fighters and the only damage was some flak holes in some of the ships.

January 28, 1944

We were routed out around 4:30 a.m. for a mission to Northern Italy marshalling yard. The weather was still bad, but it was supposed to be clear over the target. A light drizzle lifted



450th Bomb Group, 722nd Squadron 1943

about 8:00 a.m. The mission was a go. We were carrying twelve 500-pound over the Italian heel. By the time we were to take off, at least a half dozen B-24s were already airborne. Ferry gunned the engines and we started down the runway with the mud kicking into the air. The planes ahead were beginning to fall into formation at a lower altitude than usual. Ferry pulled us up over the olive trees at the end of the runway and we headed for our spot in the formation. As we pulled toward our position, we hit a tremendous force of prop wash from the planes above. The prop wash forced us downward and as I sat at my radio desk, looking out to No. 3 engine, I saw that we were being forced toward the olive trees on the mountain slope to

our right. The engines went into a high-pitched roar as Ferry and Sisserson gave them full power trying to pull out of the prop wash from above. The trees were coming up fast. I looked around and saw Ferry pulling back on the wheel with all his strength. His face was in contortions from the strain. We were heading into the olive trees at full power! I prayed to God as I was sure we were going to crash. The roar of the engines was deafening. There was no escape. We were too low to bail out. The pull of the dive kept me glued to my seat. My life was coming to a crashing end. There would be no tomorrow. Then I could feel the plane begin to rise as our descent began to reverse. I watched the tops of the olive trees go by a few feet below us as we pulled up and began the climb back to the formation. Both pilot and co-pilot were exhausted from the struggle and we had been airborne less than five minutes. I was still shaking a half hour later. The Group got into formation and we proceeded north to the target. We dropped our bombs through heavy flak and returned to Manchuria with light damage. We had completed our seventh mission for credit toward tour completion.

January 30, 1944

Our crew flew again as deputy lead. The target was Bucharest. Halfway to the target we lost the #2 engine. Ferry feathered it, but we couldn't keep up with the Group. We pulled away from the formation and made a turn toward the Adriatic. Ferry put the ship in a shallow dive for the cloud cover below as the rest of the Group disappeared. We were alone and about 200 miles from home. It was a big relief when we entered the cloud cover and fortunately we had pretty good cloud protection most of the way back to Manduria. No credit was received for this aborted effort.



January 31, 1944

After the usual breakfast of dehydrated eggs, we filed into the briefing room. The target was an airfield in Northern Italy. The briefing officer ran his pointer up the red string on the map. We would not have fighter cover. Flak and fighter opposition was supposed to be light. I picked up my

radio code material for the day and headed for the flight line. When the crew gathered at the plane, Ferry told us that we would be flying tail end Charley. This position was the last plane in

the lower right box of seven planes of the entire Group. In case of fighter attack, this was the most vulnerable spot. For a lead crew, this was a big come down.

I slid under the open bomb bay doors and climbed onto the flight deck. I checked out my equipment as we taxied out for takeoff. On this day, I would man the right waist gun as soon as we got into enemy territory. At 22,000 feet and halfway to the target, I left my radio desk with my chute in hand and made my way back through the bomb bay to the rear of the plane. I carried a small portable oxygen bottle, sucking up oxygen as I moved along sideways through the bomb racks to the waist gun. Our parachutes were chest type chutes that snapped onto the front of the harness we wore along with a May West life jacket. I got to the gun, unhooked the portable oxygen bottle, and plugged into the main oxygen outlet. I had two boxes of ammunition and I fed the belt of .50 caliber shells into the gun and jacked a cartridge into the breech. Next to the gun was an electrical outlet for my heated suit. The wind thru the open waist window blasted against my face which was partially covered with my oxygen mask. I



B-24s flying formation https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/450th_Bombardment_Group

stood against the gun and gazed out into the open skies as we were alone in the flight position with nothing on our right or rear but blue sky. There was only the sound and roar of the #3 and #4 engines. We droned through the cold air and ice sickles began to form on my oxygen mask from my breath. It was about 50 degrees

“In Gunnery School we were taught that the key to survival was the ability or inability of the pilots to learn to fly tight formations.” William G. Smith

below zero. After about an hour, we made a swing to the left and started the bomb run. Flak suddenly mushroomed around us as the artillery guns below found our altitude. We pressed on to the target in a straight line as

the bombardier lined up his sight. The flak was getting closer and I pressed my face close to the gun for some protection. The plane lifted as the bombs were released. We cleared the target area and made a turn toward home. Walt called out fighters on his side making an attack on the box of planes to our left. I kept looking out my side and seeing nothing except the drifting

flak smoke to our rear. Then suddenly, I saw white puffs of smoke bursting outside my window. Two holes, then three opened on our right stabilizer. These were large holes. These were from canon fire. I knew we were being blasted by a fighter. I strained to see where the shells were coming from. There was no sound over the intercom. I looked around to Walt at the gun behind me about the same time he looked toward me. He pointed to his ear indicating no sound. Our intercom system wasn't working. We stood at our guns waiting to see something to fire at. The white puffs of smoke had stopped and I looked at the jagged holes in the vertical stabilizer. I knew we had been hit by fighter canon fire, but I didn't know how. The bombers droned on toward the south of Italy and no further attacks were encountered.

It wasn't until we got back on the ground that we got the full story of what happened in the fighter attack. A single ME109 had closed in on our rear. Neither of the twin 50s in the tail turret were working. As McLaughlin frantically tried to get the guns to fire, the Germans lined up on a 6 o'clock position and moved in for the kill. Apparently to his surprise there no fire was coming from the rear turret, he pumped his 20 mm shells too far to the right and blew holes in the stabilizer, instead of blowing us up with a salvo into the center of the plane. McLaughlin couldn't call out the fighter as the intercom system was dead. He said the German came in close enough that he could see his oxygen mask. The German was no doubt an inexperienced pilot or he would have smoked us for sure. A couple of the gunners in a plane to our left saw the 109 pumping the shells at us and could not believe that we survived.

After de-briefing, our crew went back to the shed we called a barracks and had a few drinks of dago red. The mood of the group was one of gloom and at the same time one of relief that we had survived the day. One of the crews had not survived, having gone down to the fighters with the crosses on the wing. Their clothes and personal effects were gathered up by a couple of privates from the orderly room and taken to headquarters to be allotted out to a crew of replacements who were now showing up at regular intervals.

In the past three weeks, the 450th had had a baptism of fire. Fifty missions were the price for a trip home. The Group had flown fewer than a dozen and our crew had completed eight. It was hard not to think of the losses of the bombers and friends the past weeks. The book said we had 42 more missions to go. The odds said we couldn't make it. Rodman and I grabbed our mess kits and went to dinner. We would think about it tomorrow.

Thus, we ended the month of January alive, but shaken in confidence. The Group had lost about 12 planes and 120 men for a loss ratio of approximately 16% in the three plus weeks we had been in operation. The outlook was grim as we all knew we had not yet gone up against the big targets in the south of Germany or Austria where the Luftwaffe would be a hell of a lot better than the guy that had just missed us with the dead tail guns.

An Aire of disaster hung over the field. The dreary weather meshed with the realization that the chances of surviving fifty missions with the 450th were an unlikely prospect. Although my religious training as a boy was sparse to say the least, I became acutely aware that my survival

was going to depend on the help of a power far greater than anything available on that muddy air field in Southern Italy. I prayed to God more and more that I would be one of those who would see home again. There seemed to be no time for rest. We were flying every day or every other day depending on weather.

February 1, 1944

We had the day off for the Group. Trimmerwilke, Rodman, and I caught a truck going to Bari where there was a place run by the Red Cross that provided a library and snack bar. While there I met an old friend from Fresno---Ed Corn who was assigned to the ground crew of a bomber group in the Foggia area. We caught the truck back to Manduria in late afternoon and got ready for a mission the following day.

February 2, 1944

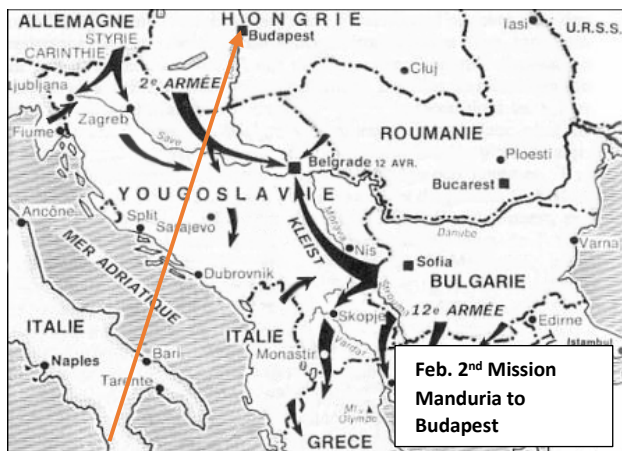
“Budapest is the target for today, gentlemen” droned the briefing officer as his pointer followed the red string across a map of the Balkans. The Group had received a shipment of flak

suits and everybody was eager to get to the supply room before they were all gone. It wasn't beyond some of the crews to check out as many as possible and sort of line their position with as much protection as possible. Flak suits came in various sizes, depending on the crew position. Mine draped over the shoulders covering the front and back about crotch high. A pilot's protection was down his front only. The bombardier suit was a long one to cover



Waist gunners on a B-24 Liberator wearing protective 'flak vests'. <http://ww2today.com/8-april-1944-seconds-to-aet-out-of-a-burnina-b-24>

almost to the knees. We all tried to steal an extra bombardier flak suit to stand on at the waist gun positions. In the next few days we were able to steal enough flak suits to pretty well line the immediate area below and to the side of our particular position. The extra weight was a little hazardous at takeoff, but everyone thought the risk worthwhile.



We made a routine take off and found our place in the formation. Again, we were assigned tail end Charley. The whole crew was furious—especially Ferry. Two consecutive turns in the position was unusual. Was this coincidence or was somebody trying to get rid of us? Ferry swore to find out when and if we got back.

After joining the rest of the wing, the 450th headed up the middle of the Adriatic and then toward Budapest. Heavy weather was

encountered and in a short time the mission was aborted and we returned to base. Rain was coming down as we touched down; consequently, the runway was soupy. Everybody piled out—cussing the aborted mission, the weather, and the whole idea of being stuck in this hell hole known as Manduria. Ferry said he was going to see the squadron C.O. About the tail end Charley position and Rodman and I checked in our flak suits and headed for the mess shack. The next week was raining most of the time. The Group was grounded because of bad weather over much of Europe. American troops had landed at Anzio and were having a tough time between the Krauts on one hand and the weather on the other. They could have used bomber support, but this was out of the question because of the weather. We hunkered down. Playing cards was the big pastime along with a trip or two into Oria or Manduria. Oria was an ancient Roman town on a hill only a few miles from the base. Manduria was a little larger and a little further away. The towns had little to offer other than a few wine shops where you could get a glass of “dago red” for 10 lire. One lira was worth two cents. There were no restaurants or any kind of food available in town. This Southern part of Italy was dirt poor even in good times, let alone in war time.

Day four and five went by with no let-up in the rain. The Italian farmers set up shop outside the base gate and tried to sell what little they had—mostly eggs and oranges—also green wine by the bottle.

One day the crew chipped in some spare change and Rodman & I walked down to the gate to make a deal for some wine and eggs. I remember the eggs were 20 cents apiece and wine was a dollar a bottle. We bought a couple of dozen eggs and a gallon of wine and proceeded back to barracks with the goods. Somebody scraped up an iron pot and we boiled the eggs. The eggs proved to be half rotten, but you didn’t notice this if you had consumed a sufficient portion of wine before peeling the eggs. The upshot of the deal was that most of us got sick in the early hours after midnight. I remember “heaving” up the mixture of wine and bad eggs about 4:30 in the morning with that being followed by belching the foul gas of rotten eggs. We spent considerable time looking for the egg vendor the following day to no avail. We were more than glad to go back to the consumption of dehydrated eggs at the mess hall.

During this week that we were grounded, Yankee ingenuity began to raise its head in an atmosphere of “anything goes” to kill time before the next mission. Hogan, a tail gunner on the King crew came back to the base one afternoon with a story about a pig he had seen a couple of miles down the road on one of the small farms. Plans began to form how to steal the pig. The latrines were in a stone building that was also a shower room. The cement walls made the place almost unbearable cold. This would be a logical place to hang the carcass. Fresh meat would be a treat to say the least. As soon as it was dark that night, Hogan and three other gunners set off in a jeep in the rain to try to confiscate the pig. In about an hour they came back empty handed and a little shook up after having looked into the barrel of a relic of an Italian shotgun held by the farmer at the pig pen. It seems this was not the first time that a G.I. had tried to steal this lonesome pig in the South of Italy that winter. The plan for fresh meat was abandoned after a couple of bottles of red wine.



Another thing that happened that week was a radio was bought from one of the residents for the sum of \$225. Everybody chipped in to make the buy and even though the price was highway robbery, we all got enjoyment out of it listening to the BBC and Axis Sally’s programs.

Axis Sally was the generic nickname given to female radio personalities who broadcast English-language propaganda for the European Axis Powers consisting of Italy, Germany, and Japan during World War II. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Axis_Sally

Mildred Gillars, German-American who broadcast for Germany

Rita Zucca, Italian-American who broadcast for Italy

Sally beamed her radio program out of Berlin. The strong propaganda signal covered all of Europe including our area in Southern Italy. One broadcast welcomed the 450th to the European theatre in the sweet voice of a German woman with the perfect control of the English language. Sally told us how sorry we would be to have set up a base in Italy and how awfully homesick we must be. The last point was well taken. At any rate, the American swing music on her program was the best and we tuned her on whenever we could.

That first week of February dragged by and the rain didn’t let up. Green Italian wine was in plentiful supply. Ferry had a bottle of scotch hoarded away and decided in the middle of that week of rain that he deserved to drink most of it himself one afternoon. That night he decided to have it out with Orris, the 722nd C.O., regarding our flying too many missions as tail end Charley. Ferry visited Orris’s quarters with .45 in hand to let the C.O. know what he thought of him. Cussing the C.O. out, needless to say, put Ferry on the shit list, almost court marshaled, and in no position for any future promotion to put it mildly. Ferry’s gun was taken away from him and he was led back to the sack to sleep it off.

February 10, 1944

We took off with a load of 500 pounders to pound the Anzio beachhead in support of the troops. It was too overcast to drop with any accuracy and we brought the bombs back. The Germans were making a big move to push the Americans back into the Mediterranean. Everybody was disappointed our mission had failed.

February 14, 1944

I was called out to be lead radio operator for Col. Mills, the Group C.O. Mills flew the right seat as co-pilot and Ferry was the pilot. The 450th was the lead group of the entire 15th Air Force and the target was Verona in northern Italy. Mills had me send a couple of coded messages back to 15th Air Force headquarters as we headed toward the targets and I received a couple of routine messages for Mills from ground control. Mills was a West Point man and was in his element leading the formation. To see what he could do of his battle group, he kept the gunners in the rear feeding him information on the formation. The Col. was 38 years old—almost a generation older than most of us. The strain of leading the 720 airmen across the South Atlantic and into combat seemed to put some extra lines in his face. His responsibility of leading his group of young airmen into a battle arena that was relatively new, had begun to take a toll, now ever so slightly, later ever so heavily. This war carried on in the frigid skies four to five miles above the earth had become a death struggle for control of the skies before the death struggle for control of the land below could take place. It was the job of Col. Mills of the day to lead the young airmen—to do a job that was cold, dirty, and at times hopeless. The job was to kill people and destroy cities. The enemy was the German air force, first and foremost. Destruction of the Luftwaffe in the air, on the ground, on the assembly lines below, was the prime goal for the immediate time. The quest for control of the air meant going into battle in the rare atmosphere of four or five miles high—where a man would die in a short time without his oxygen supply, where it was so cold that he could freeze to death without the heavy flight gear he would bundle himself in, where guns could freeze up and be useless, where a well-placed anti-aircraft shell from below could blow a ten-man crew to oblivion in the blink of an eye. This was a battle ground where there were no medics for the wounded. No doctors. Where the bitter cold could stop the bleeding. Where surviving the elements was a war in itself. The boy and his machine gun in the open waist window of a B-24 was cold, lonely, scared and unprepared for the emotional roller coaster of a bomber crew. Surely Mills knew better than the rest of us that the price of winning—not winning—nobody could really win—the price of completing the campaign would be high. The 38 year “Old Man” would survive the war, but hundreds of his “troops” would not.

The bombers strung out for at least 10 miles and the vapor trails from the engines filled the skies for many more miles. I sent position reports to headquarters on our progress. The weather began to close in. Any recall messages would come thru me. The under cast became a solid mass of cloud cover. Not far from Verona, we got the recall message as the whole of Northern Italy suddenly clouded over. The message to abort the mission came thru and the mass of bombers made a giant turn toward the south of Italy. We returned to base with bomb bays full. Another exhausting day had come and gone.



February 16, 1944

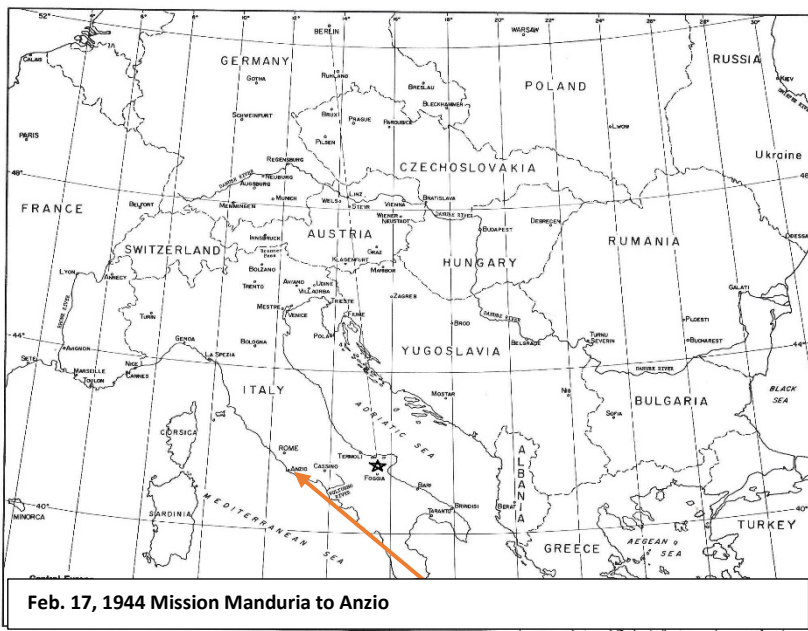
Today was very routine. The map of southern Europe showed a red string running from Manduria to Udine, Italy. The target was the rail yards at Udine. B-38's from the 82nd Fighter Group would be our cover and heavy flak could be expected over the target.

It was around noon when we began the final approach to the target. The group ahead of us (the 449th, I believe) salvoed their bombs into the rail yards with the majority of the flak bursts low and to their right. We followed them in at a slightly lower altitude. The B-38's were still with us and no German fighters were being encountered. I was at the right waist gun when a flak barrage suddenly began bursting in the middle of our formation. The bursting shells were everywhere. I put my head close to the breach of the gun—at least I wouldn't get hit from that direction. The shrapnel peppered the B-24 like hail on a tin roof. I was wearing a flak suit which gave some sense of security, minute as it was. About the time the bombs were released, a series of black shell bursts opened on my side of the plane. The lift from the release of the bombs and the closeness of the flak bursts tossed the B-24 about like a cork in rough surf. Ferry straightened the ship out seconds before we almost collided with our wing man. There was no letup in the barrage. The smell of powder smoke (cordite) from the bursting shells drifted thru my oxygen mask. In the final salvo before we cleared the target, I was hit in my middle by a hand full of flak fragments and for a few seconds lost my breath. I looked down and saw the small holes in the fuselage and know that if it hadn't been for the flak suit I would have had a perforated stomach. I felt the perspiration of fear in my flight gear. Ice sickles gathered around my oxygen mask. The Group banked to the left and headed home to the south. None of the 450th planes were shot down, but there were plenty of flak holes in most of the B-24's of the 722nd. We had survived another day.

By this time the 450th had lost a considerable number of men and planes. The weather and general conditions of our living at Manduria created a demoralizing atmosphere—almost hopelessness. Nothing seemed to go right. There were too many aborted missions. The food was lousy. We had outside latrines and had to walk thru six inches of mud to get to the toilet in the middle of the night. While we were out on one mission, our barracks caught fire and much

of our equipment was lost. It became a depressive experience. The condition of living on the ground in that God forsaken part of Italy was bad enough. But the trials and tribulations of air combat in a B-24 at 20,000 feet were worse. The terrible cold was forever there. The hideous artillery barrages we endured on almost every mission was a nerve wracking experience. Each flak burst made a small indelible print in the recesses of the brain and these prints would be there forever. Even 50 years later as I write this narrative I can still smell the cordite smoke of the bursts and the feel of the jolts of the close ones. I can still hear the sound of the fragments as they ripped into the fuselage. Life was lived in 24-hour intervals. If you survived a mission, you had lived another day. And you wondered why you were one of the lucky ones that day and your friend was not. Life became a roulette wheel with your number on the table. The grim reaper kept raking in the chips and you prayed none of them would be yours.

By this time, the losses were sure and steady. It was a big job for the ground crews just to patch up the surviving planes of the mission of the day—to prepare them for the next mission. After each mission, there was a period of an unwinding process in which I would thank God that I was back on the ground. There was a knowing feeling of hopelessness—resignation to the real possibility that we could not survive fifty missions. There were no alternatives. The odds were beginning to mount that you would be blown to pieces in one flash of exploding gas tanks or that you would float into enemy hands in your parachute. The prospect of being a prisoner of war was more and more appealing. At least the tension of the unknown would be lessened.



The chances of living thru the war as a prisoner were much better than the prospects of completing 50 missions alive. In the winter darkness after an exhausting mission we would engage in bull sessions in the spirit of false bravado that was essential for the 19, 20 and 21-year olds to maintain their balance. There was strength in numbers as we fed each other's courage or maybe it was young ego. The thought of faking illness before the

next mission was a fleeting one that occurred from time to time, but the thought vanished quickly. Dogged determination to see duty through to the end became the code of conduct for the time. We were the kids of the Great Depression of the 1930's. Discipline had been no problem before we entered the service and it was no problem now. We would fly back to the enemy in the morning.

February 17, 1944

Ferry's crew was not scheduled to fly. Gillespie's crew was short a radio man so I volunteered to get another mission out of the way. The target was an arms dump on the German side of the Anzio beach head. We came into the target from the Mediterranean side and it seemed that every 88 mm artillery gun in the German arsenal was firing at us. The flak was the heaviest encountered so far. Half of the group was shot full of holes and one plane from the 723rd took a direct hit. The crew bailed out and as we pulled away from the target, I counted 10 parachutes drifting toward the German lines. Another day and 10 more men were gone from the Group.

February 21, 1944

We were alerted to prepare for a maximum effort. Every plane mechanically sound would be put to the air on the next days.

February 22, 1944



We were up in the small hours of the morning and took on the usual breakfast of powdered eggs before briefing. In the briefing room, the crews took their seats and waited. Red Gideon took the stage and pulled the map down. You could have heard a pin drop. The red string ran from our base in southern Italy to Regensburg, Germany. The 450th was now in the big league. Gideon poured out the information as to what could be expected. We would have fighter escort from the 82nd P-38 group as far as their gas would allow; which meant not all the way

to the target. We would go thru three fighter belts each of which could send up at least 100 interceptors. Opposition from the ground and air could be expected to be fierce as our target was the ME 109 aircraft factory in Regensburg. This would be the opening salvo in a maximum effort by both the 15th and 8th air force from England to destroy as much of the Luftwaffe as

possible. The last week of February of 1944 would go down as the bloodiest air battles in history. Later after the war, the exploits in the air of that week would foster the movie "Command Decision" starring Clark Gable.

Third week of February 1944

This was a major turning point of the war. That week was the do or die for the American Air Force. Every available heavy bomber would be thrown against Germany. The objective was the destruction of the German Air Force. The cost was not to be a factor. Hundreds of bombers from bases in Italy and England would be thrown against every German air craft factory and every known German air base. It would be a weeklong ferocious battle for the control of the air over Europe. Hundreds of planes and thousands of men would be lost. Burning planes would litter the earth from the shores of the North Sea to the mountains of the Alps. Over 300 U.S. bombers would be downed that week with ten times that many airmen. The Germans would lose hundreds of fighters' aircraft as they tried to stop the bombers. It would be known in the annals of World War II as "The Big Week."

After briefing, I picked up my radio log and walked out to the "Rum Buggy". The sky was grey with a threat of rain. Ferry and Sisserson joined the rest of the crew and we had a brief discussion of the mission before climbing aboard. We were flying deputy lead in the 722nd. Gas tanks were topped off with a full 2700 gallons of fuel. While the two pilots and the engineer checked out the engines, the rest of the crew checked over their individual equipment. After checking the radio equipment, I worked my way back to the right waist gun and checked the position out. We were carrying extra ammo and I had managed an extra flak jacket.

In a little while we got the green flare from the tower and the B-24 lumbered toward takeoff position. When our turn came for takeoff, Ferry poured the coal to all four engines and we lifted off right at the end of the runway.

The 450th formed with the 449th and the rest of the Wing, heading north by way of the Adriatic Sea. At around 20,000 feet, the P-38's began covering us as the mission continued up the Adriatic. By the time we were over Northern Italy, with the Alps to our left, we were at 21,000 feet. I was in the waist with the cold wind blasting thru the waist window and the deafening roar of the #3 and #4 engines for company. Nerves were in end as we began getting near possible fighters. Flak blossomed out to our left from some batteries in the mountains. Their altitude was about right, but the bursts were a quarter mile away at least. By the poor accuracy we knew we were still over Italy. As I stood behind the 50-caliber gun, I could feel my right



Regensburg, Germany, Me 109 Production Line in a Factory 1943
http://kurfurst.org/Production/Bf109Gassemblyline_regensburg.jpg

boot of my electric heated suit begin to heat up. It got hotter and burned into my ankle. I was more than a little uncomfortable as I realized I had a bare wire against my skin. I dared not turn off the suit with the temperature at 40 degrees below zero. In a little while the burning became almost a dead sensation as my attention was more on the fighters that were for sure ahead.

Time ticked on as we drew north ever closer to the German border. No fighters were to be seen except the P-38's above. They were beautiful. Ferry came on the intercom with a warning to be on alert for enemy fighters as the 38's would probably have to turn back soon because of fuel. About ten minutes later my heart sank a little as I saw the 38's turn and head home to the south. The bombers continued alone. My foot began to hurt from the wire short.

Not more than ten minutes elapsed before the first German fighters were sighted. They began working on the Group ahead of us and a couple of bombers peeled out of formation on fire. Some of the crews got out with silk parachutes drifting down below us. Suddenly one of the engines of our plane began to shudder and bursts of smoke began belching from No. 2. Ferry and Sisserson cursed and discussed the situation with the engineer. Finally, they feathered the engine and as the prop was feathered into the wind, we began to slip out of position. We all knew we wouldn't be able to keep up with the formation for long. After a few minutes, Ferry came on the intercom and announced we were going to turn back and make a dive for the cloud cover below to try to get back over the Adriatic. Every man was in a sweat knowing that a lone bomber this far north was probably a dead duck. The three remaining engines whined into a high pitch as we picked up speed going down. Every man on that plane must have prayed in some way to reach the clouds below before the Germans hit us. Miraculously no German fighters bothered us. They were too busy butchering the bomber stream we had left. The Germans were attacking the formation with everything they had.

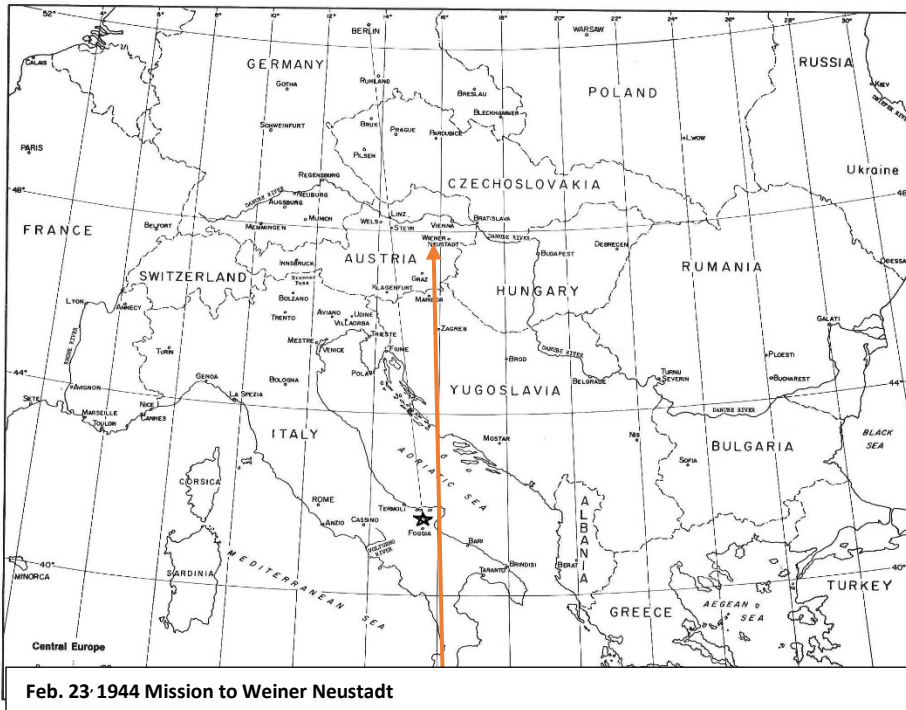
We moved into the cloud cover and I could almost hear my heart slow down. When we finally got into a low enough altitude, I unhooked my heated suit and the burning left me, but I knew from the feel in my foot that I had been burned more than a little.

Our B-24 came out of the cloud cover over the Adriatic at about 8,000 feet. We proceeded on to Manduria alone over the water, unaware of the outcome of the mission we had been forced to leave.

Upon landing, we checked into the debriefing room and related what we had seen. Word had already been relayed to base headquarters that the German air force had fielded a maximum number of fighters and were engaging the bombers.

It was midafternoon before the first of the returning bombers began to land. The opposition had been heavy and the 450th had lost four planes with a total of 41 men. Our squadron had lost the Vander Kamp crew. The other three crews were missing from the other three squadrons. The gloom was thick that night over the base in Manduria. I had seen the flight

surgeon about my burned foot and had wrapped it with gauze and medication. I was grounded at least for the next day. February 23rd was a no-fly day for me.

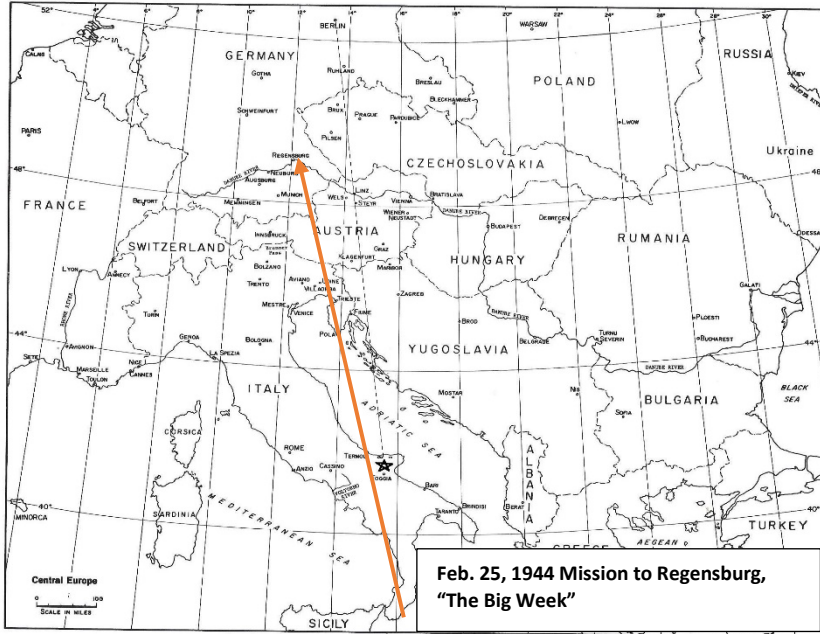


February 23, 1944

This was a fly day for the rest of the squadron. The target was Wiener Neustadt near Vienna. We lost four planes with 40 men that day.

February 24th was a day of rest for the Group. The air crews were exhausted from two consecutive rough missions. Most of the men just spent

The day relaxing around on their bunks wondering how long this peaceful interlude would last. About 5 o'clock that afternoon we got the word that the 450th would be flying the next day, the 25th of February. It was going to be a maximum effort and any plane flyable was to be ready. By midnight the ground crews had twenty-nine B-24's patched up and checked out good enough for a combat flight. It rained most of the night.



February 25, 1944

4:30 am we were awakened and prepared for the mission. I got dressed and proceeded thru the old routine of breakfast and briefing. In the briefing room, I sat with the rest of the crew and waited for the briefing officer. Finally, Gideon pulled down the map and my eyes bugged out as the red string ran from our base back to Regensburg. Not only that, the 450th

would be leading the entire wing formation.



Regensburg <http://regensburg-daily-photo.blogspot.com/2015/11/bombs-over-ratisbon-operation-double.html>

The 109 factories were plastered and whoever the bad bombardier was that day, did a hell of a job. A Presidential Citation was issued later and listed only four bombers lost. Seven never made it back to base, three barely making it to the Foggia bases to the north of us.

The bells were tolling for the 450th and there wasn't an airman in the Group who didn't think about the home he probably wouldn't see again. Now, almost fifty years later, I can imagine how the few married men among us must have felt. Gloom hung over the air crew's quarters as thick as the mud on the run-way. In the three days of



Messersmith Factory <http://regensburg-daily-photo.blogspot.com/2015/11/bombs-over-ratisbon-operation-double.html>

that last week of February, the 450th had lost one-third of their aircraft. Our squadron was lucky in only losing three planes. But only three planes meant thirty men that we had grown to know well. "Rebel" Kemp, our nose gunner had gone down while flying with another crew. Later, we learned he was a POW somewhere in the Balkans.

The 450th had been mauled enough to be taken out of action for a week. On the evening of February 25th, 1944, Axis Sally came on the radio to warn the crews of the 450th that Regensburg would be avenged. She told of the civilian casualties in the Regensburg attack and threatened disaster for the White-Tailed Liberators of the 450th. We knew that we must have hurt the production plant badly. The broadcast scared the hell out of us. Singling out the Group with the white tails was prophecy in the making. In a few weeks, the 450th would be temporarily deactivated due to losses.

February 26, 1944

Col. Mills called a meeting of the entire Group early morning, including ground personnel. I can still see Mills standing on the back of a jeep on the runway addressing the downcast men. He acknowledged the broadcast by Axis Sally and the threats to the white tails. In an effort of trying to lift morale, Mills put on a show of bravado by proclaiming that no bunch of Krauts would threaten his Group and that a new coat of white paint would be put on the tails of the libs. Sure enough, by the end of the day, every stabilizer of the remaining aircraft had a new coat of white paint. The air crews cursed and discussed the decision and proceeded to find the nearest supply of booze which was mostly green wine in the town of Manduria.

The fresh white paint on the "Cottontails" was meant to be a morale booster for the Group. Mills was trying to rekindle some of the fire that was present in the air crews a month ago. But the white tails became a demoralizing factor before the paint dried. The Germans would come after us for sure. What to do. There was no answer. The world of the air crews and the ground personnel was a million miles apart. The ground men were fairly sure of surviving the war and going back to the good life of a civilian after the war. The best airman could hope for us was that he would live thru the war either as a prisoner of war or as a very lucky man who survived 40 or 50 missions. If he survived the missions, he would never be the same young man as he was when he entered the service. He will have seen hell in person. He will have seen many old his friends die on that strange battlefield four miles above the earth. He will have known the bitter cold, the terrible fears, and the sickening revulsion of witnessing his comrades blown to bits over a burning city where the young, the old, the innocent, the wicked, the poor, the rich all hated the airman who was raining death and destruction on the people below him.

During the following week, the ground personnel were busy patching up the remaining bombers. One morning an announcement was made that anybody who wanted to see a performance by Joe E. Brown to be ready to board the trucks going to Lecce that night. In a driving rain, we piled into the back of a line of 6x6 personal carriers and took off for Lecce about 40 miles away. Brown had come to this out of the way place to put on a show for a grateful



Joe E. Brown, Comedian

bunch of home sick boys. The show was held in Lecce because it was the only town in that part of Italy that had a theatre of any size. The rain never let up the entire time we were on the excursion. I have always been grateful to the Comic for coming to our part of the war in a time when morale was at the lowest point of my young life, to say the least.

March 3, 1944

We pounded the beach head at Anzio again with questionable results. No planes were lost. It was my 13th mission completed.



March 5th Mission to Breslau, East Germany

March 5, 1944

We were routed out for another mission. At briefing, I learned that Ferry's crew would be leading with Col. Mills as co-pilot. I would be lead radio man for the 450th Group. When the target map was unveiled, I couldn't believe the red string. The red line ran straight up the Adriatic into Germany, past Munich, past Regensburg and on north to the city of Breslau in Eastern Germany. The

briefing officer hesitated in his spiel in apparent embarrassment. This was a suicide mission and he knew it. Why Mills was on this trip, nobody knew. Mills took over from the briefing officer and continued for a few minutes stating the necessity of conserving gas. With no evasive action over possible flak batteries, we could make it back with twenty gallons of fuel left over for each engine. Tanks would be topped off with 2,700 gallons. We were told that we would be going thru four or five fighter belts. The P-38s would escort as far as their gas would allow.

I left the briefing room to pick up the radio material for lead crew. Additional briefing was attended by pilots, bombardiers, navigators and radio operators. The rest of the gunners took off for the plane.

The atmosphere surrounding the base in Manduria took on a feeling of resignation. We became resigned to a certain destination. We knew some of us would be killed. We knew some of us would survive and go home. There was a kind of numbness that began to take hold. Fear began to be replaced by the feeling of resignation to the inevitable. There was resolution to finish something—whatever it may be. A bond was building among the air crews...a bond that only those who had experienced battle in the bomber missions would know. Ground personnel were of another world. They were our friends, but they did not belong to our world of air combat. Ours was a world of tension; of ups and downs; of tears and fears. Luck was an important part of our world. Without luck, you wouldn't make it. Luck meant having God on your side.

We waited at the aircraft for Mills in a grim mood. Sisserson was not going on the mission as the C.O. would be sitting in his seat.

Take off was routine and the 450th began putting the bomber stream together over the Foggia area. We headed north with Mills in command of the entire wing. I sat at my radio desk adjusting the receiver to wing headquarters. Any ground control messages to Mills would come thru me. As we flew over the Adriatic coast, all gun positions rattled off a few testing rounds and reported over the intercom.

The bomber stream continued north. Bending over the radio desk, I listened intently for anything from Wing. I looked out the small window to number three engine and my mind raced back home and then back toward the unknown ahead. It was hard to accept the wisdom of this mission only a few days after the mauling the 450th had encountered on this same route on February 25th. This would be a one-way ticket to a target so far into enemy territory with no fighter escort. How could we survive anything this deep into Germany? I did a lot of praying while listening to the routine messages coming out of Wing.

We continued, and the now familiar Alps came into view. I knew the fighter escort would be leaving us soon as they would be getting low on fuel. After that we would be under attack for hours if we were still airborne. The tension began to mount as the minutes ticked by. If we didn't get a recall signal soon we would press on to what would probably be a disaster for our entire wing of B-24's. I prayed to God for help as the giant white contrails plowed the sky behind us at 22,000 feet. Somebody in the rear announced the P-38's were turning back. I sent a position report to wing headquarters in the code of the day. As I listened to the acknowledgement, my mind flashed to the best ways to exit the aircraft if we were shot down. Parachuting out into the cold blue sky was a best-case scenario. I tried to not think of the other alternatives. I had seen spinning bombers falling toward the ground with nobody conquering the force of gravity as the crew went down pinned against the sides of the aircraft's interior. Breslau was a "bridge too far." The fighters would be swarming over us soon. I had the feeling of a condemned man moving toward his mission with the hangman's noose. We seemed to be crawling across the sky, slowly, ever so slowly toward sure destruction. At any moment, the

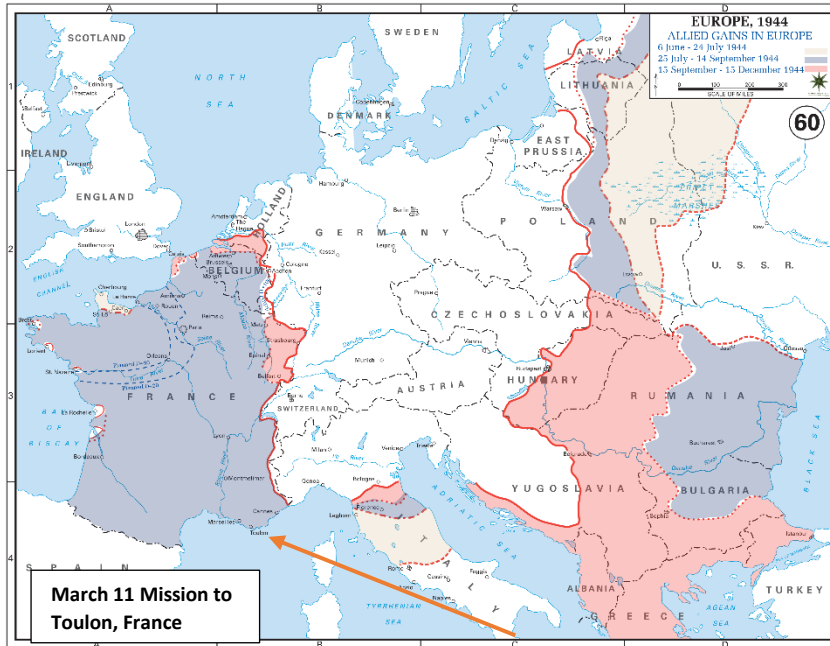
enemy planes would be upon us and the guns of the bomber would begin to rattle as the .50's try to ward off the onslaught as the 109's and 190's could press for the kill. I checked my chute. I patted the .45 automatic at my side. The catwalk of an open bomb bay would be my way out. I would do like I had been told----roll off the catwalk out into space and be sure not to pull the ring on the chute until I was at least 10,000 feet lower than the present altitude. Somewhere along this trip I was sure this would be my destiny. We droned on northward deeper into German territory and still no fighters had intercepted us.

Then the message came thru the air like a lightning bolt out of heaven. Wing was ordering the primary target scrubbed and we were to turn to the secondary target. As I wrote out the message, my whole body felt limp and I wanted to cry. I handed the message to Col. Mills and as I stood between the pilot and co-pilot, I watched the frown above Mills' oxygen mask turn to relaxed relief. It was the message we all hoped we would get for the past hour. There would be no suicide mission today.

The bomber stream made a slow turn over the Alps and we proceeded toward the new target of railroad yards in the Bremer Pass. We dropped our bombs thru heavy flak and headed south toward southern Italy. The 450th suffered no losses. Whether the rest of the wing behind us was so lucky, I did not know. Ferry's crew had survived another day.

March 10, 1944

Today was a day off for us. A gunner (Reese) from Brusek's crew and I got a ride into Manduria just for a break and to get away from the base for a few hours after evening chow. Reese and I stopped at a little wine shop in the town square and bought a glass of dago red. We sat there at one of a couple of tables in the small shop and leisurely sipped the wine, talking about home and what we would do when the war was over. About 7:30, a couple of M.P.'s came into the shop and asked if we were from the 450th. They informed us that the 450th had been alerted about an hour before for a mission the following day. We were to report back to base immediately and that they would give us a lift back to base. We piled into the jeep with the M.P.'s and took off for "home."



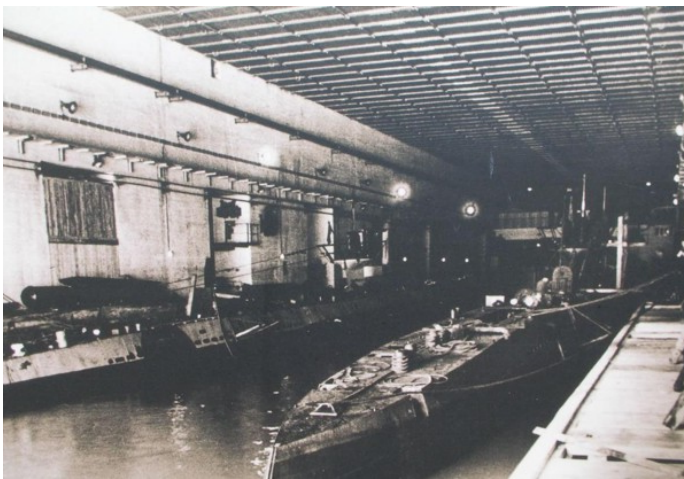
March 11, 1944

We were briefed for a mission to knock out the submarine pens on the South France coast at Toulon. We were told flak could be heavy and to look out for fighters. Fortunately, we would have some P-38s somewhere in the area for fighter protection.

Brusek’s crew would be flying on our right wing. Reese was Brusek’s radio operator.

The runway was very sloppy, but the weather had cleared. We took off nicely about in the middle of the pack. As we climbed into the sky and banked toward the assembly area, I looked down thru my small window and watched the aircraft taking off below. Suddenly there was a gigantic explosion at the end of the runway and a large black cloud of smoke mushroomed skyward. A B-24 had failed to get off the ground and had blown up on the large rocks beyond the runway. After a brief halt in takeoffs, the rest of the planes took off thru the smoke of the unlucky plane and its crew.

We formed into battle positions as we proceeded northwest over the Mediterranean. I remember it as a clear day. Fighters from the 82nd Group were part of the escort. In a slow



A German U-boat hides in an almost impregnable submarine pen in France during World War II. These concrete structures were held by the Germans almost until the end of the war. <https://donmooreswartales.com/2011/07/15/roland-petit/>

climb over the blue Mediterranean we attained the required altitude and proceeded toward Toulon.

About an hour from the target, I left my radio desk and, with parachute in hand, worked my way thru the bomb bay and to the right waist gun. Brusek was a good formation pilot and held his ship in tight on our right wing. As we approached the French Coast, our Group, being wing lead, headed inland

in-order to hit the sub pens going toward the sea. As we made the turn to begin the bomb run toward the water, we were attacked by enemy fighters. Bishop in the nose turret called out fighters at 2 o'clock high. Three 109's were coming in on Brusek to our right. Brusek was flying slightly lower than us so I had a shot even though the distance was too far for accuracy. I blasted away at short intervals. The 109's came thru the formation and as they passed thru, Walt blasted away at them from the other waist positions and got a possible kill out of it. Smoke from one of the Germans was an indication. At that point, it was hard to see if Brusek had suffered any damage. The fighters continued the attack as we approached the sub pens. A squadron of P-47's had showed up and a big dog fight was going on out to the far right beyond Brusek's position. The bomb run must have been at least 25 miles long and the flak became very intense as we pressed on toward the pens. The day was very clear and even though we were at 21,000 feet, I could see many submarines or ships of some kind scurrying out of the docks toward the open sea. Flak was bursting everywhere.

As I heard "bombs away", I looked out toward Brusek's aircraft, when suddenly a sheet of fire burst out along the entire side of His plane. He made a turn to the right to get away from us. In what seemed in slow motion, the stricken bomber banked to the right. Flames roared along the left side from the forward bomb bay to the tail. Eternity in time passed before a parachute opened, but only for a few seconds, and then it collapsed in flames. Two more chutes opened and then the entire plane blew to pieces. I lost sight of the two parachutes. In a matter of seconds, I had watched my friend Reece blown to a thousand pieces. Whether the B-24 had released their bombs, I did not know. Either the 109 attacks had ruptured a gas tank or they had taken a direct hit from the anti-aircraft barrage from below.

I was stunned---maybe numbed was a better word. We again were under fighter attack as we cleared the target area and got out over the water. Ice sickles were forming on my oxygen mask from the hard breathing that came with the excitement of the attacks. The docks we were leaving were giving off a lot of black smoke which indicated we had made some good hits. I looked out to empty sky where Brusek's ship had been a few minutes before. Death had come close in this clear blue sky on this day of March 11, 1944. I watched a dog fight a mile away that took on the appearance of a bunch of bees diving and pulling away from each other, each looking for position to make the kill. I was thankful our escort was keeping them away from us. As we distanced our self from Toulon, I watched the smoking docks fade away. I kept looking back and still could not believe the Brusek crew had vanished. The rest of the flight back to base was uneventful.

As we approached our field, the wreckage on the runway of the unlucky crew was still strewn over a wide area. Upon landing, we headed for debriefing to tell what we had seen. Two of the other squadrons had taken most of the brunt of the fighter attacks. The final count for the day was 31 enemy aircraft destroyed, although most of these kills were by our fighter escorts. Walt did get credit for ME-109. Our cost was two bombers and 20 men. Subsequent photos

showed pretty good damage to the sub pens. I felt a little better after downing a double shot of rye whiskey as furnished by the flight surgeon and his team.

March 11, 1944

When I Knew God

Late in the afternoon, I left a bull session in the barracks and took a walk by myself down to the end of the runway. I kicked around the remains of the wreck. I was sad, depressed and very scared. Kicking aside some charred material, I picked up a piece of human skull about the size of the palm of my hand. It was clean of any flesh and white in color. The intensity of the explosion had blown this poor airman to bits and pieces. I don't know how the medics with the body bags had missed this part of a human who I had no doubt known. But I did not know which member of that ten-man crew I was holding in my hand. Maybe the navigator or one of the pilots. What if it was the radio operator? Or the tail gunner? I kept rubbing my thumb over the bone as I stood in the middle of the wreck.

My mind was numb with fatigue and I tried to put the day together. The misty rain drifted across my face. Fresno, California seemed a million miles away from that Southern Italy air strip. For a minute I thought of home, but as my eyes began to water, my mind snapped back. I would think about home some other time. No time to be sentimental. This was war and on this day and I had completed my 14th mission over the submarine pens of Toulon, France

I walked back to the middle of the runway, carrying the piece of skull. As I came to the hard stands of the parked bombers, I began to count the number of planes on the ready line. There were only 28. A little over two months ago the B-24's numbered 68 for the four squadrons of the 450th Bomb Group. Many of the 40 bombers missing had been shot down. Some had been scrapped. Some had crashed on takeoff or landing just as the one now at the end of the runway. Some were parked on the other side of the field waiting for parts. Standing out there among the parked bombers, I was alone. I prayed for help from God, as desperate as any man has ever prayed to his God. I asked Him to spare my life and to bring me through this ordeal alive. The odds were overwhelming that without some divine help, the 450th Bomb Group would either end up in a German prison camp, or end up dead. So even though I had very little religious background, I stood among the bombers and prayed for deliverance from death. I think I know how David felt praying to the Lord as described the Psalms.

The sky was grey in the dusk of that cold day in March almost fifty years ago. That experience of standing alone in that graveyard of bombers is still vivid in my memory. I remember so well how completely helpless I felt as I prayed for strength and protection and the ability to go home someday. I carried the skull bone into the orderly room and told the clerk to see that the medics got it.

March 11, 1944

Low Morale for the 450th

I went back to my sleeping quarters and joined the men sitting on their bunks talking about the day's events. King was sitting on a box talking to his crew gathered around him. I remember him as a curly haired twenty-one-year-old pilot telling whoever would listen to him how he would hit the ground with .45 in hand when he is shot down. How he would ward off any civilian attackers until the German military would arrive. Later I learned that King's crew was one of the few original crews of the 450th who would survive and return to the states crew.

I remember a gunner by the name of Spector in almost hysteria as he tried to get an answer from the rest of us for our chances for survival. Tears were in his eyes as he began falling apart. Somebody shoved a drink into his hand. Spector gulped the rye down and walked back to his cot and fell asleep sobbing softly.

Axis Sally came on the radio as usual that night with the best music that side of the Atlantic. She was in rare form inviting all Americans to come over to the German side and save ourselves from sure destruction. We would be treated well, she said. We could wait the war out in a luxurious German camp and live to see our loved ones again. Sally said the only alternative would be death or being wounded in defeat. We had to put up with her baloney in- order to hear the best of Tommy Dorsey or Glenn Miller. Still, there was a certain demoralizing characteristic to her show, just as it was intended.

March 14, 1944

The mission to Toulon was the last I flew with the "Cottontail" Group. On our crew was notified to prepare for transfer to the 8th Air Force in England. God works in mysterious ways. Ferry's continual trouble with Orris had led to our transfer. Fifteen crews from the 15th AAF were being transferred from Italy to England. Ferry's crew was the only one to go from the 450th Group. God works in mysterious ways.

What the real reason was for our transfer, I do not know. Scuttlebutt had it that any crew with lead experience could be chosen. Shuttle missions from England to Italy were supposed to be in the works and experienced crews were needed for the job. Be that as it may, probably the most pressing reason for our being the crew to go to the 8th, was the fact that Orris wanted to get rid of Ferry. The feud between the two had never ceased. Our crew was elated with the prospect of getting out of Italy. But leaving the Group and what was left of our buddies we had known since the New Mexico training days was another story. Also, we had grown attached to old No. 144---the "Rum Buggy". The B-24 that had served us so well would have to be left behind. Little did we know then, but Orris in a short time after our leaving, would be shot down while flying the "Rum Buggy."

*The **Rum Buggy** was shot down over the Balkans in May 1944. The crew was a replacement crew on their sixth mission. Fifty years after the fatal mission, I received a letter from the pilot who flew the plane on its last flight.*

Chapter 3

Life with the 8th Air Force, England

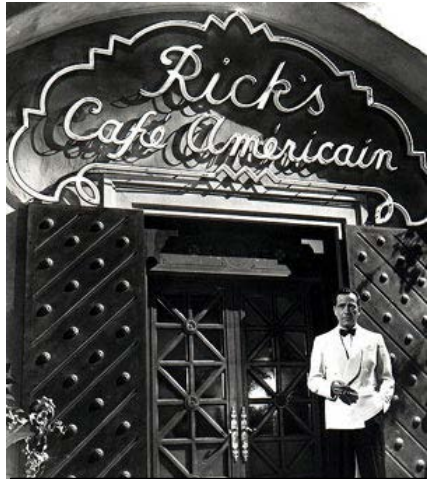
March 16, 1944

Our crew gathered our belongings, bid farewell to our fellow airmen and boarded a C-47 for the first leg of our trip to the 8th Air Force in England. Our first stop was Tunis in Tunisia. At one end of the main runway in Tunis were the remains of many German troop transports that had been shot down by U.S. fighters on that fateful Sunday some months before when the Germans tried to reinforce the Afrika Corps with fresh troops. It had been a real turkey shoot. I was amazed at the size of the 8 engine German transports with the giant I-beams running thru the aircraft. The wrecks looked like they could have easily transported a hundred well equipped troops.



After a layover of one night in Tunis, we flew to Casablanca where we were to await transport to the U.K. We were ordered to await the arrival of a converted B-24 transport which was a bomber that had seats where the bomb bay was removed and had a passenger capacity of twelve to fourteen plush seats. Some of these bombers were being used as personal transportation for high ranking generals. The plane would have to leave the capacity to fly from Casablanca out into the Atlantic far enough so as not to attract any enemy fighters. We would be alone and unarmed. The flight would run parallel to the Spanish and Portugal coasts and come down in a field in Wales.

It would be almost three weeks before we would get to the U.K. During that time, we had the run of Casablanca. Having escaped from Italy, Ferry's crew had no great urge to get to the 8th



Rick's Café Americain Casablanca

<http://www.tastefortravel.com.au/blog/8995/the-real-life-ricks-cafe-casablanca/>

Air Force where we heard the odds were worse than we had been used to. Every few days we would have a short alert time to get the crew together for the trip north. Each time one or more of the crew would be missing and the transport would take off without us.

Casablanca was fascinating. The American Bar was a hangout for American service men. It looked like Rick's in the film "Casablanca" with Humphrey Bogart. The first time I walked into the establishment a big Fresno State College bulldog met my eyes in a banner flag behind the bar. Most U.S. colleges had something hanging in the bar. One night after spending too much time in the American, Rodman, myself, Bishop and Timmerwilke came out of the bar and found an unattended horse and buggy parked at the curb. We promptly got

aboard and I grabbed the reins and took off down the street. The reins were crossed and I took a wrong turn at the corner and bounced the rig up on the sidewalk scattering the Arabs like chickens being chased by a hawk. We pulled up against a building and jumped out as the Arab driver ran down the street toward us waving his arms and I presumed cussing us out in Arabic. We took off before the M.P.'s arrived.

One day while in the city, I found a 10-year-old Arab shoeshine boy who could speak English well. He shined my shoes and asked if I would sell him some G.I. shoe polish. The next trip into town, I took a half dozen cans of shoe polish with me. The Arab boy was working his same area when he saw me and came running to see if I had any polish. I handed him the cans of polish and when he found out that I didn't want any money for the polish, he immediately became my bosom buddy. The kid knew his way around the city. He said that he could get me top price for any cigarettes I could supply.

The French Jews who lived in the magnificent villas on the African Coast at Casablanca had fled France when the Germans invaded. They were the customers for the black market. On my next trip into Casablanca, I bought three cartons of Camel cigarettes and found my Arab shoe shine boy. I told him I wanted \$10 a carton for them if he could find a buyer. We walked into the native quarter and wound thru the narrow streets until we found the buyer doing his business in a door way. He was sitting on the floor of the doorway wearing raggedy old clothes and a bushy beard. The boy explained we had cigarettes. The Arab pulled a roll of American money out from his coat and peeled off three \$10 bills and I handed him the cigarettes. The Arab boy was more excited about the deal than I was. We found our way out of the Arab quarter. The boy went back to his shoe shine business and I bought a round of drinks for Rodman and Timmerwilke in the American Bar. The next day I brought a couple more tins of

shoe polish for the Arab boy. It was another 10 days before we could get the crew together to leave Casablanca. We boarded a converted B-24 transport. It took off in the dark and flew



west out over the Atlantic until we were far enough out to evade German fighters and then headed north. We were unarmed and unescorted. It was a night flight. We landed in Wales in the early morning hours. We picked up our orders to report to the 446th bomb group in Bungay. We boarded a train that went thru London. On the way to Bungay, we decided to take a few days to see London. When we finally boarded the train for Bungay, the pilot and co-pilot were missing. The rest of us went on into the base and Ferry and Sisserson arrived a couple of days later.

We flew a couple of practice missions with the 446th. Pilots, navigators, bombardiers, engineers and radio operators had to learn

the new procedures for the 8th Air Force. After a couple of runs we were all checked out.

The Air War out of England was different from Italy. The living quarters were better, the food was better, and we could understand the residents.

I bought a bike for \$25 from some guy going home. Everybody rode bikes around the base and even off the base at times. If we could wrangle enough time off, we would grab the train at Norwich and head for London. Air raids were more of a nuisance to us than a danger, so we thought. We would usually get off the train at Waterloo Station and check into the Red Cross building for a bunk. The pubs were plentiful and they all loved the Americans with their money. The city at night was blacked out. It was so dark you couldn't see your hand in front of your face. Thousands of soldiers milled around the streets. Most bars (pubs) were standing room only. About 10:00 p.m. the bartender would shout "Time Gentlemen", which meant you had another 10 or 15 minutes to down your drink before the pub was closed.



Jimmy Stewart, 445th Bomb Group, 703rd Squadron. Stewart left Tibenham March 1944. <https://www.awesomestories.com/images/user/70e7f9a9df.jpg>

Last week in April 1944

We were transferred to the 445th Bomb Group the last part of April. I can't remember exactly why but the 445th and 703rd squad became our new home. Jimmy Stewart had just left the 703rd as squadron commander and was moved up to wing headquarters. We were disappointed we did not meet the famed actor, but we were welcomed by the group commander, Col. Terrell. Ferry, Rodman, and myself flew one check mission with Terrell primarily to see what kind of a formation pilot Ferry was. We flew around England for about an hour with a skeleton crew. I remember Terrell brought a good-looking nurse along for the ride and spent more time checking her out than Ferry.

April 28, 1944

We stood down as a crew for a mission to a marshalling yard in Germany. Bishop made the mission as a gunner on another crew. Rodman, Trimmerwilke & myself were out at the runway watching the planes take off when about half way thru the takeoffs a bomber exploded about half way down the runway. Bombs and gasoline made a gigantic explosion that sent plane parts and bomb casings flying everywhere. As we stood in a state of awe or shock watching the plane and crew blown to smithereens, a piece of a bomb casing whizzed by my head, missing by only a few feet. Thirteen men died in the mishap. The planes that had taken off before the explosion, continued to their mission where they encountered heavy flak. Bishop's plane suffered heavy damage with a count of over 40 holes in the fuselage.

April 29, 1944

Our crew was called out for a mission to Berlin. The briefing officer pulled the curtain from the



wall map and the big red string ran right to the heart of Berlin. Flak and fighters would be heavy. I remember the groans of the crews as the officer described the amount of flak guns able to fire on us at one time. The

April 29, 1944 Mission Tibenham, England to Berlin. 40 minutes from Berlin, the #3 engine dies. Mission aborted and plane returns to England.

number was six hundred—an incredible number of 88 mm and 105 mm guns. We got a jeep ride out to our plane and proceeded to check out our individual equipment for our first ride to Big B. The 445th put up a small force that day with only 14 aircraft forming the group. After gaining formation altitude, we tagged on to the bomber stream and proceeded across the channel and into Germany. I remember the fighter escort was heavy with P-47s and that was good as they had the range to stay the course all the way to Berlin. About half way to the target, two ships turned back because of trouble. Then there were only 12 of us. We droned on toward Berlin, with only occasional flak bursts and our fighters flying back and forth over the formation.



Top Turret of B-24 <http://www.lonesentry.com/panzer/may/top-turret.html>

About 40 minutes from Berlin, the number three engine began to act up. The oil pressure began dropping and the engine began to misfire. Rodman came down from the top turret to help the two pilots try to figure out what was wrong. I climbed into the top turret and slowly began revolving the turret, straining my eyes for enemy fighters. We began to fall back from our small group as the engine trouble got worse. I watched our

friendly fighters go off with the rest of the group as we dropped in altitude. The sky looked blue and beautiful thru the plexiglass of my turret. The sputtering engine shut down. Ferry and Rodman tried to feather it with no success. A dead engine needs the prop blades turned into the wind to stop from turning. However, the feathering switch wasn't working and the prop of the dead engine began to slowly windmill into the wind. We made a turn back towards England which was at least 300 miles away. We had a long way to go with a wind milling prop slowing us down. Ferry came over the intercom and gave the order to salvo the bombs. We were carrying six one thousand pounders and God only knows where they landed. I was getting concerned being in the top turret as the wind-milling prop was straight across from the turret. If the prop should twist off it could cut right thru that section of the plane and the turret and its occupant would be history.

Everybody was on alert for German fighters as we were a long way from home and not another aircraft in sight. A cloud cover was far below us, but it would be foolish to go for it unless we had to as it was necessary to maintain as much altitude as possible for as long as we could in order to cover the distance back to home base. The prop continued to twist into the wind, and we continued to lose altitude. After about 45 minutes, Ferry gave the order to start throwing out any excess baggage. Being this was a mission to Berlin all gun positions had a full supply of

ammunition. The ammo would be the last to go. Some of the extra flak suits were thrown out the waste window. Part of the radio equipment was dumped. I watched the prop continue to turn with Ferry, Rodman and Sisserson trying everything they could to get feathered.

We kept losing altitude. Still there were no fighters. After another 30 minutes or so Ferry gave the order to dump part of the ammunition. The waste gunners threw out 3 or 4 boxes of ammo which was another few hundred pounds. Slowly we ground our way back toward England. At one point, we ran into a big flak barrage as we passed over some German town.

After another period, Ferry got on the intercom calling for dumping more ammunition as we would be in the clouds below in short order. I got down out of the turret and threw out thru the bomb bay all the boxed ammunition as I left a string of about 50 rounds for each gun of the turret. I climbed back into the turret and watched the wind-milling prop a few feet away as we entered the cloud cover below. We were now getting close to the English Channel and losing altitude at an accelerated rate. I felt lonely and scared as I kept spinning the turret and trying to forget the twisting prop. I prayed that no enemy fighters would find us, as the ammo I had left would only be good for a couple of good bursts.

We flew on in the fog of the clouds. The navigator announced we were over the water. Everybody on the plane was sweating it out. Suddenly we came out of the clouds and the water below was too close for comfort. We still had a couple of thousand feet left, but we were still going down and the prop of No. 3 slowly churned away. The English coast looked beautiful as we came over land and headed straight into Tibenham. Ferry made a straight in approach and made the usual smooth landing. We had survived another day in this crazy war of the skies.



May 6, 1944

We flew a “milk run” over Brussels and bombed the railway yards. It was a routine flight with light flak. Several more missions were flown without serious opposition during the next 10 days.



May 18, 1944

We flew a sortie over the marshalling yards at Reims, France. The mission to Reims lacked fighter opposition as we had good escort coverage. However, the flak was extremely heavy and we took on more than a few flak holes. Luckily nobody was wounded.

We were accumulating a few missions toward a finished tour which was still a long way to go. For a few days between May 20th and May 25th, we were one of the crews picked to practice low level bombing runs over the English countryside. The idea was to develop some expertise in skip bombing for the coming invasion of the continent. A few bombs would be sent in at ground level and try to take out the big gun emplacements on the French coast ahead of the invasion troops. The idea probably had some merit, but the odds for survival were slim and none. After a few days of practice, bomber command called it off and there were never ten men more relieved than our crew. We had lucked out again.

May 25, 1944



Our target was the rail yards at Tours, France. The flight was relatively easy, but as we dropped the load of 500 pounders, we took a flak burst too close to No. 2 engine. Ferry feathered No. 2 and about the same time No. 1 and 3 began to miss. Our aircraft began to lose altitude and the Group pulled ahead as we began to drop like a rock. In a couple of minutes, we lost 3,500 feet. Ferry leveled out for a short time and then began another steep descent. I began to send a series of SOS calls as we were coming up on the English Channel. We were alone and going down. I kept the key going with SOS calls at short intervals. Ground control on the English coast acknowledged as we started over the water. We were in serious

trouble and every man on the ship knew it. Down we went as the two coughing engines weren't much help to the one good engine still firing. Then out of nowhere came a couple of spitfires. They throttled down and began to criss cross over us as the water below got closer. We could have been dead meat for the Germans without the fighters. My SOS had been picked up and the escort was a beautiful sight. The bomber was still losing altitude as we cleared the coastline and headed for a nearby RAF base. We made a landing on the South Coast. Most of the RAF compliment was watching the old crippled bomber set down on their runway with three sputtering engines. The crew was shaken a little as we left the aircraft. The RAF personnel treated us well with good food and quarters. The next day we left the plane and got a ride back to our base. One more time God was flying with us.

May 28, 1944 Mission to Merseburg aborted, but given credit for the mission.



May 28, 1944

Today was a mission to Merseburg. This was an abort; however, we did get credit for the mission.

May 30, 1944

We hit an airfield near Bremen. Flak was intense and we took a few holes in the fuselage. I had completed twenty-two missions at this point with thirteen to go. Ferry's crew was living on borrowed time. The 8th Bomber Command had boosted the

number of missions to 35 needed to complete a tour and get a ticket back to the states. D-Day was coming up and nobody knew how many bomber crews would be ground up in the invasion of the continent, hence there would be few crews completing their tour of duty before D-Day.

Chapter 4

D-Day: "The Longest Day"

On June 3, 1944

All leaves and passes off the base were cancelled. The base was beefed up with security. The big show for the invasion of Europe was about to begin. We knew we would be part of it, but didn't know what part.

June 4, 1944

The ground crews began loading the bombers with 500 pounders. Every available plane was loaded and late that afternoon we got the word that we would be taking off before daylight in support of the ground troops who would be hitting the beaches at dawn. Excitement ran high. Briefing was to be at 1:00 a.m. and all air crews were advised to try to get some sleep.

I tried to sleep, but it was a useless effort. Most of the men sat on their bunks, carrying on bull sessions and speculating on the coming event. All the efforts of the 15th and 8th Air Forces the past year had been focused on this day. We talked about the hundreds of bombers and thousands of men lost over the city Berlin, the Schweinfurt ball bearings, the Regensburg aircraft factory, the Ploesti oil fields, and all the hundreds of other targets. All these missions of destruction rained down over the enemy the past months were now to be tested on the beaches of France. If we had done our job, the German forces could eventually be defeated. No one knew from Eisenhower on down to our level what kind of air opposition would be encountered. The one thing we did know was that everything but the kitchen sinks would be thrown against the Germans by land, sea and air.

June 4, 1944

At midnight, we got the message that the missions had been called off and the invasion delayed by Eisenhower because of the weather. Aircrews were advised to get some sleep as the delay would be no more than 48 hours. The loaded bombers stood ready on the hardstands and the lights went out over the base. I fell into a deep sleep, the last good sleep I would get for days.

June 5, 1944, we milled about waiting to see what orders would come through. The weather was overcast and tensions ran high as the afternoon passed by. Around 6:00 p.m. we got the word the mission was on again. The invasion of Europe was to begin June 6th. This fact was suddenly reinforced when around 8:30 or 9:00 p.m. dozens of gliders were in the sky being



An American-made CG-4 Waco glider is towed into the air by a C-47 Skytrain.<http://militaryhistorynow.com/2014/09/29/soar-winners-the-glider-troopers-of-ww2-2/>

towed by what appeared to be C-47's heading for the coast. These were the paratroopers to be landing somewhere deep behind the lines. Their losses would turn out to be heavy to say the least.

Sometime about midnight, the air crews gathered in the briefing room and we heard an address by Eisenhower and Roosevelt to the allied forces—land, sea and air. The time had come. We were told of the historic importance of our undertaking that some would die. This was not anything new to the air crews. Too many had died already. We knew that nothing over the beaches of France would be any worse than over the skies of Germany the past months. We also knew that our part of this show would probably be a cake walk compared to the troops on the ground.

June 6, 1944

We had breakfast about 2:00 a.m. and then went to briefing. The briefing officer pulled down the map of Western Europe. Our wing of B-24's would drop our bomb load on the coastal defenses ahead of the ground troops. Flak was supposed to be heavy. The extent of intervention by the German Air Force was an unknown factor. After dropping our bombs, we were to continue flying east into the interior of Germany, making a wide sweep of the skies and finally turning back toward England at a point somewhere around Strasburg. We would not have fighter cover part of the flight. The plan was for the bombers to tour the skies of Europe that June 6th morning after our bomb drop to flush up German fighters to keep them away from the beaches of Normandy. We were decoys without a bomb load. We were told that there would be at least 11,000 allied air craft in the air that morning. If we got lost in the clouds, we were to tag onto any available



June 6, 1944 445th Bomb Group over Normandy <http://ww2today.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/06/>

formation and proceed with them. It was 4:00 a.m. when we lifted off the runway with our twelve 500 pounders. The weather was overcast. The thousands of planes began circling England, gathering altitude while trying to stay with their group. It was a nerve wracking experience. Aircraft were coming and going in every direction. At times, we would enter a cloud formation and

proceed with the climb in the blind. More than once we broke thru the overcast, making a sharp maneuver to avoid hitting another bomber. We continued the climb and the time began to drag. We needed 15,000 feet before proceeding across the channel. Finally, we attained the altitude and proceeded to close the Group formation. I was manning the right waist gun on this mission and I had a ringside seat to the greatest armada the world had ever seen. As we headed across the English Channel the weather cleared for a brief period and we had a clear view to the water below. Below us were hundreds of ships of every size proceeding east toward the French coast. Sitting out what appeared to be three or four miles from the beaches of Normandy, were the giant battleships. The flashes of their big guns were clearly visible as the shells erupted from the broadsides. As we approached the coast, heavy flak began to find our level. Normally, in a mission into Germany, we tried to stay clear of the area below because the auto-aircraft gunners on the French coast were probably the deadliest of any gunners in Europe. They had been practicing on incoming bombers for the past four years.

The barrage was intensive. We dropped the bombs and continued into the bursting shells. The exploding fragments peppered the fuselage with a steady barrage that sounded like hail on a tin roof. The black bursts of smoke were too close for comfort and the smell of cordite filtered thru my oxygen mask. No enemy fighters were encountered. We cleared the flak area and continued course in an easterly direction. The sun was up and we were heading straight into it. A few months before, German fighters would have been coming out of that sun, four and eight abreast at times, with their wings flashing as their guns poured their load into the oncoming bomber streams. And there would be huge explosions and men would be flung all over the skies amid spinning wreckage as the 109's cut their deadly swath thru the formation.

But, not this morning. The Luftwaffe was nowhere to be seen. Too much was going on back on the beaches of Normandy, for them to fool with us. We continued into Germany, finally making a U-turn for home.

Our course back was south of our early morning route. Paris was to our left. We began to drop altitude and a P-38 approached our formation, heading in our same direction. He throttled down and brought his plane underneath us, like a chick getting protection from its mother hen. The fighter was in trouble and stayed with us back to the English Channel where he peeled out and headed for his own base.

It was about noon when we landed at Tibenham. The crew reported to briefing what we had seen on the mission, which was nothing unusual for the air war. We had dropped the load thru overcast and had seen no part of the German air force. Our part of D-Day had proven to be almost a milk run. The strategic bomber command had done its job in the months before today. The toehold on the coast of France was holding and the allied troops were moving inland. The long-awaited invasion of Europe was a success, at least for this day.

We ate a big lunch and plodded back to the barracks to catch some rest. I was as tired as I had ever been in my young life. An hour after I passed out exhausted, I awoke to Rodman shaking me. We were being alerted to fly a second mission. Amid the groaning of every airman in the barracks, I piled out of my bunk, got to a wash basin, threw some cold water in my face and staggered to the briefing room.

June 6, 1944, 3:00 p.m.

We were being briefed for a mission in France. A bridge was the target and somebody thought they needed the heavy bombs to do the job. The Germans were using the bridge to move equipment up to the front and time was of the essence. By 4:30 p.m., we were airborne and on our way. I can't remember the number of aircraft sent against the bridge that late afternoon, but it wasn't a big force. The formation was assembled rapidly and we headed across the channel at a lower than usual altitude. We encountered the usual flak over the French coast, but again no enemy fighters. The weather began to close in as we approached the target. The bridge was well defended with anti-aircraft guns and we dropped the bombs thru an overcast. The flak guns around the bridge brought down a B-24 on the bomb run. I don't remember whether the bomb results were good, but I do remember the weather turned real nasty. The formation broke up coming back across the channel, with the weather bad enough for us to make a forced landing at a RAF base on the English coast. To top it off, it was a fighter base and the runway was too short for comfort.

The RAF boys treated us well and we stayed overnight. They had suffered some losses over the beachhead in the morning invasion and half the base was drunk. We proceeded to help them drown their sorrows with their good supply of Irish whiskey. It had been a very long day and

one American bomber crew had the good fortune to be the guests of a group of English fighter pilots on a rainy night, the 6th of June of 1944. This truly was the “longest day”.

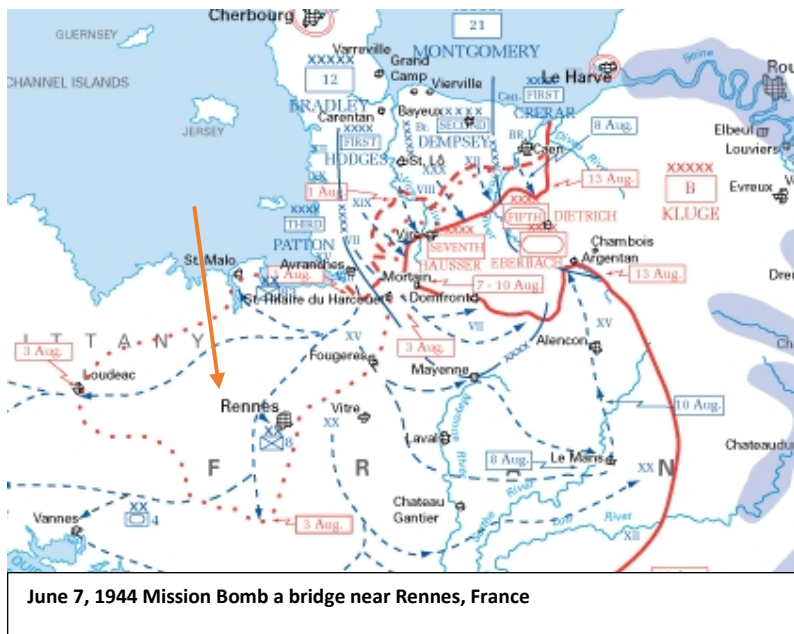
Chapter 4

Missions After D-Day

June 7, 1944

Rest Day

The next morning, we flew our ship back to home base. There was no mission on the 7th, but the night of the 7th, I didn't get much sleep as the Luftwaffe made a couple of attacks on our field. The second time they came in, I was too tired to move as a single Kraut fighter strafed the runway. I finally got back to sleep, only to be awakened in the small hours of June 8th. We were flying another mission.



June 8, 1944

Rennes, France

I was so tired I could hardly move. Breakfast was a haze and briefing wasn't much better. It was a short mission—another bridge in France. It was my 25th mission. Thirty-eight guns, according to my diary, defended the bridge. We started out from base with 35 aircraft. Our squadron was carrying four 2000-pound bombs. After the usual climbing to altitude over England, we took the route

across the channel toward Rennes, France to the bridge. The weather suddenly turned terrible and part of the Group got lost in the storm. We were at about 17,000 feet and still climbing to get the twenty thousand or more we needed before we got to the French coast.

In the confusion of the cloud cover, we lost half of our planes which turned around and went back to England. The weather cleared for a short while about the time we passed over the coast and there were only 17 planes of the 445th left for the mission. The two squadrons closed to a tight formation as we approached the bridge. Out of nowhere, a terrific flak barrage began to burst dead ahead of us. I was at the right waist gun and the bursting shells were rocking the plane as I had never experienced before. The smell of cordite was strong thru the oxygen mask as the fragments beat against the fuselage relentlessly. In patterns of four, the bursts were slightly to our right but level with our flight. The second squadron of nine ships were to our right and slightly lower and I could see the black puffs exploding what appeared to be the

middle of their formation. Two planes began throwing smoke. The two crews began to bail out. One B-24 blew up and the other went into a dive. How many got out, I do not know.

While on the bomb run, we salvoed the big bombs thru cloud cover that hid the bridge. We massed the target and the bridge stood for at least another day. Two bombers and twenty men were all for naught. For a 25th mission to be this rough, needless to say Ferry's crew was shook up. The clock was ticking and we had ten missions to go.

As I cleared the gun approaching the English coast on the way back, I was disgusted with the fertility of the missions, tired as hell, and extremely nervous about the prospects of completing ten more missions.

Our crew had the next 72 hours off. We sacked out one day and then caught a ride into Norway for some R and R. Trimmerwilke, Rodman, and myself made asses out of ourselves at one of the local pubs; but the relaxation was worth whatever the cost.

June 12, 1944

Rennes, France Railroad Trestle

The missions began to come in hot and heavy. On June 12th, we returned to Rennes area where we took out a railroad trestle under very bad flak.

June 13, 1944

Rennes, France

We made an afternoon flight to Rennes again. We dropped 1000 pounds and the flak was again intense, taking out one bomber and its crew over the target. The flight of June 13th was the 100th mission for the 445th Bomb Group. A big party got underway in the hanger and the entire Group, airmen and ground crews alike had a blast. Jimmy Stewart came over from Wing Headquarters and joined the celebration. There was no shortage of beer and ale. No mission was slated for the next day, which was truly fortunate, considering the hangovers the morning of June 14th.

June 15, 1944

Tours, France

We were back in the air where we attacked a target near Tours with good results despite the heavy artillery barrage. We did not fly the 16th and 17th of June and those 48 hours were welcome relief from the strain. I remember I slept as much as possible, knowing there were many missions left.

June 16-17, 1944

Rest Days

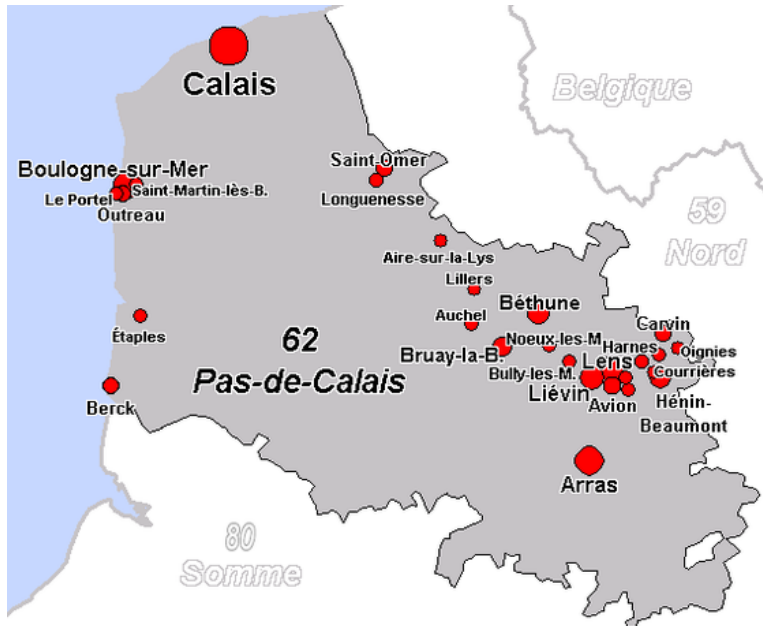
June 18, 1944

Airfield, Hamburg, Germany

Ferry's crew began a string of missions that would take the toll on all of us. Nerves were on end. We were so close to finishing our tour, and yet so very far. We were in the 20% still flying after twenty-five missions. Fatigue was a major problem. The mission of June 18th was against an airfield outside of Hamburg. It was my 29th mission and the flak was heavy.

June 19, 1944

Pas de Calais, France



We hit rocket installations in the Pas de Calais area. It was a short mission compared to Hamburg. Five hundred bombers pattern bombed the Calais area trying to knock out the V-1 installations that were blasting London with pilotless planes which were really a flying bomb. We dropped them a heavy under cast not knowing where the launch pads were, pulverizing a large section hoping to hit some of the rockets. The V-1 bombs were coming into London day and night. RAF fighters were able to shoot a

lot of them down, but half of them got thru. We were ordered to stay at least 10,000 feet above the London area and not to shoot at any of the rockets so as not to interfere with any British interceptors. The Spit fires could fly alongside of some of them, wing tip to wing tip, and fly the wing of the bomb up, sending it into a spiral downward before it got to the city.

June 20, 1944

Synthetic Oil Refineries, Politz



I flew my 31st mission. Briefing was earlier than it had been for a couple of weeks, so I knew it was a long haul. When the operations officer pulled down the map, the red string ran into Northeast Germany to the synthetic oil refineries of Politz. We knew this to be a heavily defended target as oil was the lifeblood of the German forces.

Our position was right wing off the lead ship. This was a big mission with both the first and second divisions participating. Hundreds of bombers strung out across the skies of Northern Germany, all heading east.

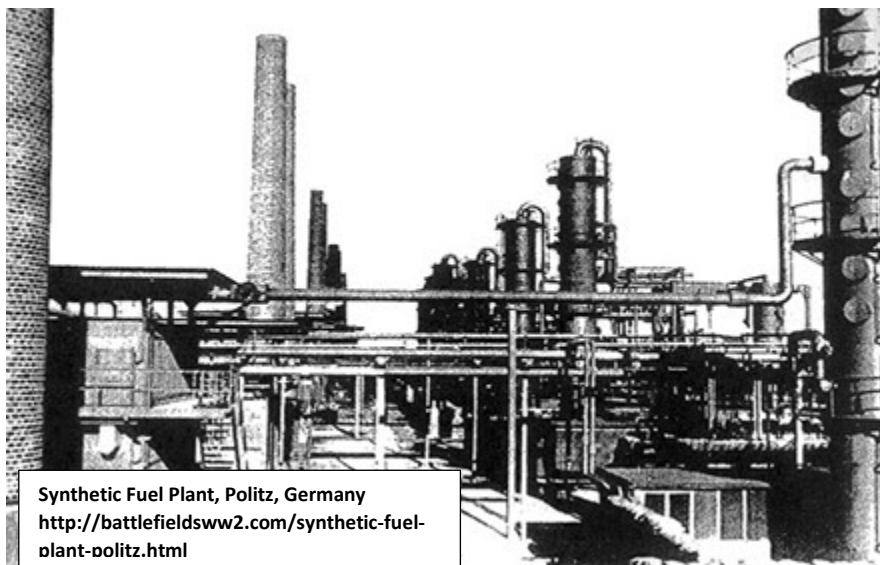
I remember it as a very cold, clear day. I don't remember what group of B-24's was ahead of us, but it must have been a new outfit. Their formation was lousy with their planes spread too far apart. About 200 miles from the target, the German fighters began the attack. I didn't have a gun to man as we were deputy lead and I was the backup radio operator if the lead ship went down. My job was to monitor the lead ship. If the lead ship was lost, it would be up to our crew to lead the Group into the target.

The Germans came in at one o'clock high, blasting their way thru the formation. We didn't get any hits, but one of our ships was knocked out and on fire as the crew bailed out.

In front of us a couple of miles away; the Group was being attacked by 109's and FW 190's. A couple of B-24's dropped out of formation and chutes began to blossom in the clear blue sky. P-51's appeared and drove the bandits off. Our formation plodded onward into the morning sun.

The bomber stream droned on toward Politz. The Germans stayed away as long as the fighter cover was with us. We were still a hundred miles from Politz and all eyes were combing the skies for fighters.

Our fighter cover disappeared again. Walt called from the waist reporting some of our fighter escort was strafing an airfield below. That little bit of news didn't make any of us very comfortable knowing our fighter protection was off on shooting spree four miles below us.



Synthetic Fuel Plant, Politz, Germany
<http://battlefieldsw2.com/synthetic-fuel-plant-politz.html>

We droned on across the clear blue cold sky, leaving heavy vapor trails from all engines. Suddenly, Bishop in the nose turret let out a blast of profanity over the intercom as we were about 10 minutes from the target. The bombers ahead of us had dropped their load on Politz and black smoke was rising toward the blanket of

exploding flak shells over the refineries. It was a terrible sight to behold. I stood between the pilot and co-pilot, ear phones plugged into the receiver, keeping track of the lead radio operator in case I had to take over.

We flew on and made a slight turn for the bomb run. The exploding anti-aircraft shells ahead of us seemed to be dead on at our exact altitude. We floated into the sea of exploding shells. The bomb bay doors opened

and our load was salvoed off the lead ship. No fighters, either ours or German were to be seen. No fighter was going to attack thru this sea of exploding hell. Our plane bounced thru the target area as shells burst on every side. Cordite smell drifted thru the oxygen mask. We lurched up and down, sideways, and raised up on the left wing as a burst blasted too close. All engines were still churning even though we had picked up a lot of flak damage. Bomb bay doors were open and the bombs salvoed. We plowed on thru the bursting shells ahead of us and finally cleared the target area. The turn for home seemed to take an eternity.

I looked back down on hell. The smoke from the oil refineries was black and rising toward the bomber stream behind us. Fire storms from the burning oil threw sheets of flame hundreds of feet into the air. The fires must have been horrendous to be seen flaming thru the black smoke from our altitude of 21,000 feet.

As we drew away from the inferno below, there were no enemy fighters for a short while. The interlude didn't last long. The 445th closed up formation in short order as a pack of FW 190's roared thru our Group. I heard the lead operator send back to base the bomb strike message. The lead ship was okay---at least the radio equipment was. Rodman was busy in the top turret. I stood between the pilots with nothing to do but monitor the lead ship and watch the action ahead.

B-24s Bombing Politz Factory <http://battlefieldsw2.com/synthetic-fuel-plant-politz.html>



The group dead ahead were being attacked ferociously by German fighters. The loose formation of their bombs was bringing in more German attacks. In one pass of 8 or 10 German fighters, three B-24's dropped out of the group. Two were burning and the third was upside down in a flat spin heading for the earth below. The Germans attacked aggressively and pressed

in wave after wave into the hapless group. The three downed bombers were still in sight when another of the group apparently shot out of control and slid into its wing mate and both went down. I was almost in a trance as I watched this tragedy unfold. I had seen it before and know the Group was doomed if they didn't get fighter cover soon. The Germans had a demoralized, inexperienced group of B-24's in their sight and were making the most of it. The attack continued unabated and two more bombers dropped out-----one blew up and one was headed down out of control, spinning straight down---nose first.

The attack was no more than five minutes in endurance. In that time frame the Group of B-24's ahead had lost five or six planes. Some parachutes were seen, but nowhere near the number of crewmen who had manned the unlucky bombers. For some reason, the Germans reined in their attack and headed down.... probably out of gas.

Our intercom was filled with excited chatter about what we had seen the past few minutes. We all knew our luck was still holding. It could have been us.

The Group ahead closed tighter and droned on toward home. It was apparent some of the ships were having trouble keeping up. About a half hour went by with no friendly fighters around. Then an amazing sight took place in the Group ahead. Two of the battered Group's B-24's peeled out to the right in perfect formation and headed toward Sweden which lay somewhere off to the right. The last I saw of the two bombers were in a shallow dive, picking up speed. The ships were seen entering the cloud cover below, making a run for neutral territory at a speed rivaling that of a group of fighters. They were flying straight north and the rest of us were flying straight west toward home. Whether the two crews made it to Sweden, I never knew. How badly they were damaged, we couldn't assess. They probably had seriously

wounded on board and took the shortest route to the ground. Nobody really blamed them. Back toward Politz, black smoke could be seen 100 miles behind us.

The P-51's picked us up again and swung lazily back and forth overhead. With the "little friends" around, it was a pretty good bet most of us would make it back to England. The lead ship was running on all four so they wouldn't need me for back up radio. I sat down at the radio desk and tuned in the BBC where a program of great music was picked up. I switched the music to the intercom system and the whole crew relaxed to "Begin the Beguine". We had suffered some damage to the plane, but no one was hit. The 445th had lost only one ship and the ten men along with a few wounded. It had been a tough mission, but a lucky one for us. The battle of Politz was my 31st mission.

The 20th of June had come and almost gone in the mission to Politz. We were all dragging with fatigue. Not only the fatigue of too many missions in too few days, but the long-term fatigue that comes with 31 missions. Thirty-one separate battles. When ten thousand Americans in a thousand bombers attack a German city defended by hundreds of artillery pieces on the ground and hundreds of aircraft in the air; it is a battle. A battle of smoke, of fire, of great cold, of fear. The battle rages on with men dressed in strange looking bulky clothes, fleece lined boots, faces half covered with a rubber oxygen mask that feeds the man life-giving oxygen thru a hose. Each man in the sky battle, whether German or American thinks he is right. They all pray to the same God as the men in the bombers try to kill the men in the fighters over the burning cities below. And the great artillery pieces and the crews that man the guns on the land surrounding the burning cities below fire off their shells at the bombers in the sky. The sky is filled with the black smoke of the exploding shells four miles straight up and some of the bombers explode into balls of fire and some white parachutes drift to the ground below. The Americans in the white parachutes come down into the inferno they themselves have set. And the enraged Germans of the burning cities attack many of the airmen as they hit the ground. They kill some of them with pitchforks and shovels before the men of the German Army can get to the Americans and lead them off to prison camp. In the sky above what's left of the attacking bombers turn away from the burning city and slowly fly back toward England whence they have come. And the men on the ground know that the bombers will return tomorrow and another battle will be fought in the skies over Europe.

June 21, 1944

we gathered in the briefing room in the small hours of the morning and stared at the map of Europe at the front of the room. A red string ran from our base in England to the city of Berlin in Germany. My thirty-second mission would be to the most heavily defended city in Europe. Six hundred heavy artillery pieces could concentrate their firepower on you at any one time. The unknown was the amount of fighter opposition we may encounter.

The briefing officer gave his spiel and we began the same routine we had done so many times before. I was more than a little nervous that this late in the game our crew would be on this



kind of a mission. We were all hoping for a few milk runs to finish our tour. But here we were---on one of the biggest efforts of the air war. The good news was that we would have P-51 cover most of the mission.

Ten dead tired men climbed into that B-24 on the morning of June 21st and headed for Berlin. After an hour or more, we found our place in the Group at the designated altitude approaching the European coast. We were not flying in any lead position so I would be spending my time between the radio desk and the right waist gun. The sky was clear and the stream of B-24 and B-17 bombers were roaring toward Berlin in numbers as far as the

eye could see. They said there were a thousand bombers in the stream that day.

Our target was a tank works. We were carrying twelve 500-pound GP bombs. The P-51's crisscrossed above us and the "little friends" gave us a certain sense of security even though "Big B" was our destination.

It was about 600 miles from our base in Tibenham to the German capitol. Some flak was encountered along the way, but overall, I remember the mission relatively easy until we got within fifty or more miles of the city. Many bomber groups were ahead of us and had dropped their load on their targets. The layer of black smoke hung over the whole city. The black layer of mushrooming artillery shells was awesome in its vastness. I had never seen anything like it. The bombers ahead of us were engulfed in the smoke as they leveled out for their bomb runs. Intermittent large flashes of fire signaled a direct hit on a hapless plane and the debris exploded over a big area of sky. As we got closer to the city the flak found our altitude and the smell of cordite was again penetrating my oxygen mask. We made a swing to the left as the lead ship ploughed thru the flak toward the tank works and we followed suit. All planes were dropping on the lead ship so we weren't carrying a bombardier. The nose gunner would be pushing the toggle switch for the release of the bombs. The bomb doors swung open and a steady course was held as we were on the bomb run. Bishop, the nose gunner kept his eye on the lead ship to know where to drop the load. We were bouncing all over the sky as the flak was bursting on every side. To our right was the 701st squadron in a cloud of bursting shells. After what seemed an eternity, we dropped the bombs. There was so much hell going on that it was anybody's guess as to whether we hit the target. The bomb bay doors closed as we tried to leave the target. A gigantic explosion of four flak bursts off our right wing rocked the plane and shrapnel holes opened along the right side of the ship. Then another salvo followed and I hugged the 50-caliber gun in a reaction that was probably stupid at the time. There was no defense against the murderous mushrooming black puffs. We just had to ride it out. We

bounced and weaved thru it and suddenly, we were out of range. The pilot called all positions for a damage report. There was plenty of damage, but nothing fatal. We had survived the guns of Berlin, but we still had almost 600 miles to get home.



Overall, Berlin was bombed 363 times by British, American and Russian aircraft.

The formation finally closed. Out of the 34 planes of the 445th that had gotten over the target, 32 had survived. We had lost two B-24's and twenty good men. The rest of the flight back to England was routine. The P-51's were everywhere and there was a no show on the part of the Luftwaffe. A few hours later, we hit the runway at Tibenham. After debriefing, I was so tired I

went straight to bed and slept until about midnight. I awoke hungry and staggered down to the mess where one of the cooks fixed me a couple of eggs and toast. I ate and returned to the sack and slept until noon the next day.

Bad weather set in for a few days so we got some well needed rest. Timmerwilke got a letter from Baldy, one of the gunners in the 722nd squadron of our old outfit in Italy. The 450th had been wiped out for all purposes and was in suspended operations until the Group could be rebuilt with new crews. He sent a list of lost crews. Almost all the original Group that we had trained with had been shot down including Orris, the C.O. of the 722nd. He became a prisoner of war and was later featured in a story in "Popular Mechanics" after the war. Of the original compliment of 680 airmen, we had gone to Italy with; there were only 110 of us who completed their missions, including our crew. The rest of the 57 crew men were either killed or prisoners of war. Forty-five years after the war, Maxine and I toured the military cemetery at Anzio on the Italian coast. I read off many of the names on the walls of the building that set in the middle of that cemetery, and there were many of my old buddies upon the wall with KIA or MIA after their names. MIA was missing in action. In the air war, missing in action meant that they had been blown to pieces and not enough of the body had been retrieved for identification purposes.

June 25, 1944

We were briefed for a mission to the rocket installations in the Pas de Calais area of the French Coast. The buzz bombs from Pas de Calais were raising havoc with London. An intense effort was being made to pattern bomb the area with hopes of hitting the launching pads. The problem was that many of them were mobile launchers set on railroad cars.

It was my 33rd mission. I had gotten the word that thirty-eight missions would be the price for a ticket back home.

With each mission now, apprehension mounted as we knew we were getting close to survival. Our crew had come thru so much. We belonged to a handful of airmen who had flown heavy bombers from both Italian and English bases. We had beaten the odds so far. Survival was so close, yet so far. Could we complete six more missions? An odds maker in Las Vegas would have bet against us. We were on borrowed time and that was a fact that no one disputed.

My nerves were frayed and every bone in my body ached with fatigue as I took my place for takeoff. We went thru the same old routine of climbing and circling our way to 20,000 feet over England before crossing that twenty-five miles across the channel to the French coastal area. The weather proved to be bad and the Group navigator couldn't find the target as we roamed over the coastal plain of France. We encountered heavy and accurate flak. An intense barrage found our altitude and as we plowed thru it many holes opened in the fuselage as the jagged fragments ripped thru the plane. I was at the right waist gun. After taking a real beating from flak, we turned for home with the bombs still in the racks as we couldn't find the target. Luckily, we lost no planes and Ferry's crew suffered no casualties. The mission was a bust, but we got credit for trying. Now I had five more missions to go.

June 26, 1944

48 Hour Pass to London

No mission for us, so the entire crew boarded a train in Norwich and headed for a 48-hour pass to London. The trip to London took about two hours, as I recall. We got off at Liverpool station and made a beeline for the nearest pub. The ale calmed our nerves and the war began to fade after a few glasses. The pubs were jammed with servicemen from a dozen countries---Poles, Canadians, Yanks, and yes, even some Englishmen. The Red Cross maintained a big hotel where an American could get a free bed. Timmerwilke, Rodman, and I ended up there after a couple too many ales and slept thru the night. An occasional exploding V-1 bomb was of no consequence. The feel of clean white sheets was a luxury.

The following day, Timmerwilke and I found ourselves in a fish and chips pub for lunch. The rest of the crew had split up---everyone knowing they had to report back to the base by noon the next day. Tim and I had a glass of ale with the chips and decided to walk to Buckingham Palace for a little sightseeing. As we came out of the pub the air raid siren began to howl. Flak fire could be heard in the distance. Then the sound of a motorcycle in the sky. And we saw the

flying bomb. A V-1 buzz bomb was heading our way. The flying bomb with the short stubby wing was coming right at us. Then the engine of the bomb cut out and it began a tailspin toward our direction, appearing to be out of control. Tim and I hit the gutter and lay against the curb in a prone position. The bomb spun and dived over us in a 45-degree angle and hit the ground three or four blocks beyond us. There was a big explosion and the pavement we hugged shook more than a little. We stood up, looked at each other, and in short order decided to hell with Buckingham Palace and went back into the pub to calm our nerves.

After a couple of quick glasses of ale, we realized London was a war zone that wasn't exactly the safest place to be for a little rest from the war. We considered getting the afternoon train back to Tibenham, but one ale led to another and the last train back to Norwich had gone. So, we stayed another night in London.

The next morning, Tim, Rodman and Walt went to breakfast without me as they later said they couldn't wake me. I finally got up, looked at my watch and realized if I didn't get moving, I could miss the train to the base. I got a hurried breakfast and coffee in the Red Cross club and hurried out to catch the rest of the crew at the train station. I was on a dead run going around a corner when I ran smack into a black staff sergeant. I looked up and recognized Joe Louis, the boxing champ of the world. He smiled and I said, "pardon me." Louis was in England on a boxing tour. His trainer, Blackburn was with him. I continued my run and made the train station about the same time the rest of the crew did.

The underground "tube" or train platform was lined with people in blankets and some had old mattresses. The underground rail system of London had become a second home to thousands of Londoners due to the German bombers. Many of these people had moved above ground the past year as air raids had become less and less of a danger because of better defenses and the great losses the German air force had taken the first part of 1944 in the Allied bombing of German aircraft factories. But, when the V-1 bombs began to drop into London, many of the Britons moved back down to the underground train platforms where they took up residence. It was a natural bomb shelter and saved the lives of thousands.

We boarded the train and slept most of the way back to Norwich. Everybody got back to base except Bishop, the nose gunner. Bishop didn't show up until 48 hours later. According to Bishop, he had been detained by the London Bobbies and the U.S. Military Police for breaking a window while climbing out of a married woman's apartment window when her husband unexpectedly came home. Bishop was A.W.O.L., but nothing was done about it. After all, Bishop was a live gunner and there were better things for him to do than spend time in the hoosegow.



June 30, 1944

Our crew received the air medal before a small ceremony with the base commander doing the honors. I took the medal back to the barracks and put it in my B-4 bag before I hit the sack for some sleep.

The Air Medal was instituted on May 11th, 1942. On March 9th, 1942, the Secretary of War suggested to institute the Air Medal an award to "any person who, while serving in any capacity of the Army of the United States, distinguishes himself by meritorious achievement while participating in an aerial flight".

Fresno Flier Wins Air Medal, Clusters

Technical Sergeant William G. Smith, 21, a son of Mr. and Mrs. W. G. Smith of Pleasant Avenue, has been awarded the Air Medal with three Oak Leaf Clusters for meritorious achievement in aerial missions over enemy territory in Europe.

A first radio operator and gunner on a B24, Smith is serving with the 8th Air Force in England, having been transferred from the 15th AAF in Italy, where he also participated in aerial combat.

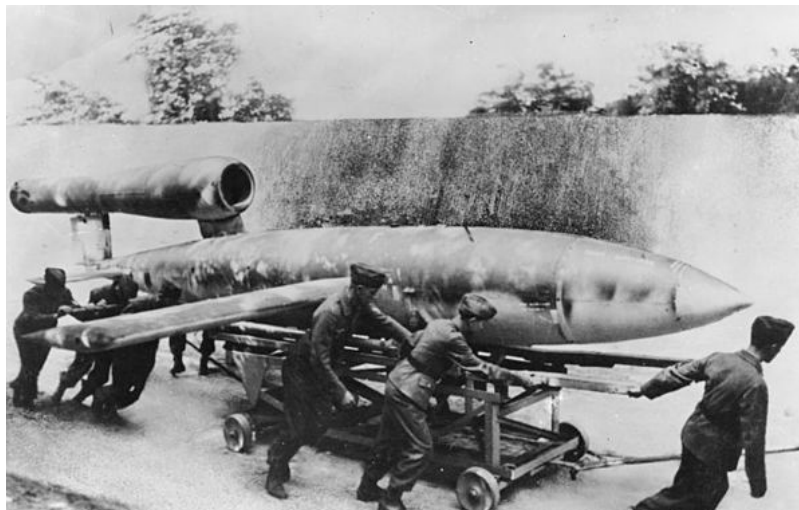
Smith was a senior in the Fresno State College when he entered the service in October, 1942. He went overseas in December, 1943.



Sergeant Smith

July 2, 1944

My 34th mission was put in over the Pas de Calais area of France. Flak was heavy and the weather was bad. We were one of twenty-two bombers taking off, but due to the weather only 13 of us made it to the target area. We dropped the bombs thru heavy under cast and hoped for the best. It was a milk run and we scrambled back across the channel to England as fast as possible. Only four more missions to go. My prayers were being answered so far. Would He let me finish the tour?



The V-1 flying bomb, also known to the Allies as the **buzz bomb**, or **doodlebug** was developed by Nazi Germany Luftwaffe. It was an early [cruise missile](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/cruise_missile) and the only production aircraft to use a [pulsejet](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/pulsejet) for power.
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/V-1_flying_bomb

July 5, 1944

We hit a V-1 bomb launching area near Paris. It was my 35th mission and was also a milk run with only light flak and no fighters. Ferry's crew was getting nervous. Like an exhausted swimmer wearing the beach, we closed our eyes and prayed for three more roundtrips into Hitler's Europe. We were close to surviving this

war. Sleep was harder to come by. We wanted to get it over with. Survival was within my grasp. I was very tired and my bones ached. Three more round trips, Lord.... Please.

July 12, 1944

Propaganda Mission

In the hectic days of finishing the tour, the dates of the calendar became blurred and I wasn't sure what day it was at times. However, the date of July 12th I recall as the propaganda mission. We carried a bomb bay full of leaflets which we were to drop before we got to the target which was the city of Munich. Bombs were to be released to the appointed time which was also the time the shifts were being switched. Munich was a big defense city. Half the planes were carrying 500-pound demos and half were carrying propaganda leaflets. Our crew was carrying the leaflets and I pulled a couple out of the rack for souvenirs. Many years later I donated one of the leaflets to the museum of the Confederate Air Force at Harbinger, Texas.

It was a maximum effort for the 445th. We put up every flyable aircraft which was 46 planes. It was the first mission briefing that stressed the importance of hitting a city with the full

intention of killing as many German aircraft workers as possible at the changing of shifts. I was relieved that our part of the mission was the leaflets and not the bombs. Results of the mission were unknown due to cloud cover. We all wondered how many German civilians died that day.

Returning from the Munich mission the crew was exhausted. When we landed, any flier who wished could get a shot of rye whiskey. The whiskey settled into my tired body and the war didn't seem so bad.

June 13, 1944

3 Day leave to London

After the Propaganda mission, our crew was offered three days off and we took the chance to go to London. The buzz bombs were still coming into the English city on a regular schedule. But the opportunity to stroll the streets of the big city was restful compared to flying over Germany.

The pubs were the social pillar for the American soldier. The ale was good and the war seemed to go away for a little time. I remember that the thought ran thru my mind that I would go A.W.O.L. on this last leave in London. After all, I had flown 36 missions. Wasn't that enough? I had beaten the odds so far. I could roam the streets of London and probably live. If the M.P.'s caught up with me, I would spend the rest of the war in a guard house, get a bad discharge and get home in one piece. To hell with the next two missions. I'll stay in London until they come and get me. But, then the bar keep announced, "Time, Gentleman!" It was 10 p.m. and the bar was closing, Timmerwilke and I floated out onto the sidewalk and started the walk back to the Red Cross Building. After a couple of blocks in the crisp air, we decided A.W.O.L. was not an option. We would have to go back and sweat out those last two missions. I overslept at the Red Cross hotel and missed the train back to Norwich. Timmerwilke and I were A.W.O.L. for one day, but luckily our crew wasn't called up while we were gone so there was no trouble over being late.

July 16, 1944

My 37th mission

We hit a target at Saarbrucken near the Swiss border. We dropped our load on a railroad marshalling yard thru cloud cover.

July 17, 1944

38th mission – Final mission

The last mission I flew was on July 17th. Another bridge near Rennes, France. We waded thru the flak and dropped the load once again. The sweat of apprehension, exhaustion, fear, and all the other feelings associated with “almost making it” crawled over my body and mind. This



would be my final trip to the flak fields. If I could get back to England on this day, I would go home.

We left the target and set course for England. Please, Oh Lord, give me a couple of more hours to get back on the ground. The flight back was so slow. Sitting at the radio desk, the minutes dragged by.

Some of the crew had flown a couple of times extra filling in with other crews so that we were finishing ahead of the rest of the crew. If I remember right, about half (5) of us were finishing with this mission including the pilot, Ferry.

As we approached the home field, Ferry let the tower know that 5 of us were on our last mission and that he was going to buzz the runway before landing. He got the O.K. and headed for the deck with all four engines roaring at full throttle. We came down the runway less than 20 feet off the ground in one last wild ride as the B-24 rose off the end of the strip and made a wide circle for the approach to landing. We hit the runway as smooth as any set of tires had ever touched earth. As we taxied in, I looked out my radio window for the last time. As I watched the slowing props, I could feel the tears swelling up in my eyes. The sensation of relief and thankfulness to God was overwhelming. I felt limp. I felt like crying, but I had to hide my feelings, although I was probably not alone. I'm sure now that the other men felt the same way I did.

Everybody climbed down and touched the ground with our hands. I stood under the wing of the bomber and looked up for a long minute as my mind tried to adjust to the fact that I had survived aerial combat. I had survived the war.

After briefing and an afternoon lunch, I went back to the barracks and lay down for a while. A great feeling of fatigue and complete exhaustion came over me. I decided to walk over to the medical building as my heart seemed to be laboring. I was completely exhausted. The flight

surgeon checked me over and sent me over to the hospital for a bed. My blood pressure was high. For the next four or five days, I remained in the hospital where I was given a complete exam. The real problem seemed to be plain old combat fatigue. I was discharged in about a week and put on the list for the return trip to the States.

August 11, 1944

I was presented the Distinguished Flying Cross along with some other members of our crew and squadron before a Group formation. I've forgotten the name of the Colonel who presented the medal.



The **Distinguished Flying Cross** is a military decoration awarded to any officer or enlisted member of the United States Armed Forces who distinguishes himself or herself in support of operations by "heroism or extraordinary achievement while participating in an aerial flight, subsequent to November 11, 1918."^{[2][3]}

EXPECTS FURLOUGH... Technical Sergeant William G. Smith, son of Mr. and Mrs. W. G. Smith of Pleasant Avenue, recently completed 38 missions as a radio gunner on a B24 Flying Fortress and is scheduled for a furlough to the United States, according to an announcement received today from Air Service Command headquarters in England.

The flier's parents have received no direct word of the furlough from their son, although he indicated in a letter written August 28th that he might be home soon.

Smith recently was awarded the Distinguished Flying Cross and he holds the Air Medal with three oak leaf clusters for meritorious service in aerial combat. He was a senior in the Fresno State College when he entered the service in October, 1942. He went overseas in December, 1943.

FRESNAN WINS DFC

Mr. and Mrs. William Smith, Route 11, Box 91, were notified today their son, Technical Sergeant William G. Smith, 21, has been awarded the Distinguished Flying Cross and has completed 38 missions over enemy occupied Europe.

Smith said his son promised to give details of how he won the honor on his first furlough.

The Fresno youth, a bomber radio operator and gunner, is a former Fresno State College student. He is a veteran of aerial warfare from Italian as well as English bases.

Chapter 5

Queen Mary to the States Coming Home with the Prime Minister

Having finished my tour of duty with the 8th Air Force on July 17, 1944, I boarded the grand lady of all ships on August 11, 1944—the Queen Mary. The Queen had been a world class passenger ship for a couple of years when World War II broke out in 1939. She was converted to a troop ship with double bunks high crammed into every state room increasing her capacity in excess of 10,000 troops. All branches of the service were represented in the passenger list along with one distinguished passenger named Winston Churchill. Churchill was heading across the Atlantic to meet President Roosevelt in Quebec, Canada.

Our contingent consisted of airmen from the 8th AAF—all survivors of the air war over Europe. A captain by the name of Hagenbaugh was the senior officer in charge and I was listed at the top of the enlisted non-commissioned officers roster, being the highest ranked T/Sergeant of the group. I met Captain Hagenbaugh when he presented me with a box of Service records for the 35 to 40 men under me. He told me I would be responsible for the safe keeping of the records during the trip aboard the Queen Mary. These were the complete service records for every man on the list since entering the service. I asked him where to keep the records and he said, “under your bunk bed”, and keep them private with access to no one. So, we sailed out of South Hampton with the Captain in charge of his box of records for 12 officers and me with my box of records for 35 non-commissioned officers.



Queen Mary arriving in New

York https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/RMS_Queen_Mary#Second_World_War

The Queen Mary was an awesome giant of a ship for her time. All the woodwork was of the highest grade of mahogany and oak. The main dining room was gigantic—or so it seemed to the kid from Pleasant Road who had never seen such a boat, let alone being a passenger of one. Being a British ship, kidney stew was one of the main dishes. Australian lamb was also big on the menu along with Kansas City steak.

Poker was the card game of choice out on the decks as there was no room in any state room for cards. Dice was being rolled everywhere as every man had received his month's pay before boarding. By the end of the second day out I was ahead about \$400. One of the guys in my group was Mick McLaughlin; tail gunner on Ferry's crew. He was a terrible player and by the end of the trip he owed me \$250, which by the way I never did collect. McLaughlin was 31 years old and the oldest member of the crew. I was never very close to him. I guess I never quite forgave him for the day when the German in the 109 nearly shot us down because neither of McLaughlin's guns were working in the tail. The conditions of the guns were his responsibility and they later proved to be not as clean as they should have been.

At the end of the 3rd day out, I returned to my bunk after breakfast and found that the box of records under my bunk was missing. After a couple of hours of searching for the record box without success, I contacted Captain Hagenbaugh to see what he wanted to do. We agreed that some airman wanted to get something off his record. Captain Hagenbaugh decided to wait until the next morning before reporting it to the Brass on the top deck. We figured there was a good possibility that whoever took the record box was probably only interested in taking something off his personal record and maybe would return the records to my bunk. Sure enough when I returned to my room after breakfast the next day, the records were back at my bunk.

With Churchill on board we had a lot of escorts. Destroyers seemed to be everywhere as we zigzagged across the Atlantic to evade any German submarines that may be after the Queen. German intelligence no doubt knew Churchill was on the Queen and what a prize the Prime Minister would be for the German war effort.



Winston and Clementine Churchill acknowledging troops aboard the Queen Mary with his Victory sign and cigar in mouth.
<https://it.pinterest.com/pin/291467407115353086/?lp=true>

Six days after leaving England, we sailed into Quebec. Thousands of GI's crowded every deck to see the Prime Minister leave the ship. Eventually, Churchill and his staff walked down the gang plank with the Prime minister looking back with a cigar in his mouth and waving to the troops his "V" for Victory sign so well known to the entire world. After all he had held the English people together for almost five years of war and the German war machine was on its last legs.

A few hours later, we sailed out of Quebec heading for New York. A couple of days later we sighted the Statue of Liberty in New York

harbor. Thousands of Americans roared their lungs out as they waved to the great symbol of Liberty. We were home.

We sailed into New York harbor six days after leaving England. The Statue of Liberty looked wonderful. I turned the service records over to the officer in charge of the entire contingent of airmen and Captain Hagen (I believe) turned his officer's records over at the same time.

The War is Over

In May 1945, the Germans surrendered and the war in Europe was over. The entire Sioux Falls Air Base was given leave to go to town to celebrate. Close to 20,000 men descended on the town of Sioux Falls which had a civilian population of somewhere around 35,000. The town and the G.I.'s went crazy. Booze was flowing like water. Some G.I. commandeered a Ford Model A and drove it thru the large doors of the Carpenter Hotel. I slammed my hand down on the bar and hit a piece of broken glass where someone had lost his drink. I cut my hand bad. I got it taped up and the party went on. Some of my friends were in the same situation as I was--- combat veterans from Europe sweating out getting sent to the Pacific to fight the Japs. Now with Germany's surrender, the odds were we wouldn't have to go back into combat. So, the party went on into the wee hours of the morning.

Later that summer in August, the Japanese surrendered and World War II was over. Millions of G.I.'s were discharged according to a point system. The first to be released from service was those with the most points---so many points for overseas duty, so many for combat, so many for medals, etc. A couple of days after the surrender I got my orders to report to Fort McArthur in Los Angeles for discharge. The inspection unit threw a going away party for me and the next day I made my farewells and boarded a train for a trip to California for the last time. It was three or four weeks before I got discharged and about October 1, 1945 I re-enrolled at Fresno State.