

# Story of a Cottontale

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Experiences of SSgt Jim Vaughn in the 450th Bomb  
Group

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When the U.S entered the War in 1941, James “Jim” Vaughn was a typical 19-year-old and just finished High School. He had aspirations of going to college and like many young mechanically minded men, was fascinated with the marvels of the aviation world. Jim gave up his aspirations to finish college and joined the millions who volunteered for service during the Second World War.

Jim Vaughn, like a majority of teenagers during the great depression, worked on his parents’ farm in rural Carey, OH. Jim, the oldest of four children, was born in 1922 to a poor family who greatly suffered from the Great Depression. World War II opened up a great opportunity for Jim to visit other states and get out of the farming business. Originally, Jim applied to be an aviator with the Navy, hoping to spend time in the sunny South Pacific. After submitting his paperwork, he waited for months to hear from the Secretary of the Navy about his report date to begin training. When he was least expecting it, Jim received his draft notice into the Army in 1942 and reported to Fort Benison, IN for initial processing. Bewildered, he further investigated and found out that his naval paperwork had been destroyed in a fire at the Mansfield Ohio courthouse, with no record of his application; he was stuck in the Army. Pvt. Vaughn was told to report to basic in Mississippi to learn to be a soldier. A few weeks in, the platoon’s drill instructor announced for anyone having a score of over a 100 on the Army General Classification Test to report to the orderly room. Having a mere eight pts over 100, Pvt. Vaughn was quick to jump on the opportunity to go into combat in the air. Vaughn spent Army Air Corps Basic at Fort Meyers, Florida and received a classification of Flight Engineer. Aircraft and Engine school was located at Keesler Air Base, just outside Biloxi, Mississippi, where Vaughn spent his time studying and seeking girls, with competition from other enlisted man. Finally, towards the end of training, Vaughn was assigned an airframe, the B-24 Liberator. Orientation and initial training for the B-24 took place at the retrofitted Willow Run Plant outside Belleville, MI; the most productive plant of its kind. After orientation, Vaughn was sent to Laredo, Texas for gunnery school and, as a flight engineer, was assigned to the top turret gunner position. Beginning with traditional skeet shooting, Vaughn mentioned that

they eventually graduated to in-flight training with cameras mounted to the guns. The instructors reviewed the film meticulously and graded performance, which could result in dismissal from the program. After gunnery school, Vaughn reported to Tucson, AZ to learn to become a flight engineer. After his extensive training, Vaughn was sent to Alamogordo, AZ (present day Holloman AFB) to join the newly formed 450<sup>th</sup> Bomb Group, assigned to the 723<sup>rd</sup> Squadron, and assigned to a 10 man crew, none of whom he had ever met. He was not sure how the Air Corps picked the crew, but they worked well as a team. His crew, lead by 2<sup>d</sup> Lt. Henderson, was issued a brand new B-24, ironically built at Willow Run, for training and to ferry to somewhere outside the U.S, to where was kept Top Secret even during each leg of the flight. The date was November 1943, one month later his crew would arrive in Manduria, Italy. Meanwhile, the 8<sup>th</sup> Air Force was already sustaining staggering losses during their daylight precision raids in Northern Europe and the 2<sup>nd</sup> Marines were landing on Tarawa in the Pacific. The U.S Army Air Corps had just stuck its foot in Europe was already taking heavy losses.

Shortly after noon on 20 December 1943, Vaughn and his unit arrived at the first B-24 base in Continental Europe. Manduria Air Base was once an Italian Air Force fighter base and been abandoned as Germany swept through which in turn left after the Clark's 5<sup>th</sup> Army pushed the Axis forces out of southern Italy. Manduria was a dismal place, hardly suitable for bomber operations. Only possessing a gravel runway, the Army Corps of Engineers proved to be a necessary support element providing fuel and bombs, and installing Pierced Steel Planking (PSP) for the hardstands. Since Vaughn's crew was one of the first at the base, they got first selection on real estate. With the help of the Corps of Engineers, they patched up a stone building, which proved to be much more comfortable than the pup tents the later arriving crews lived in. Even though Manduria was a miserable place with a low standard of living - most of it a mud hole, earning the title, "Lake Manduria" - the 450<sup>th</sup> made the most of it. With the help of materials acquired from bartering with locals and inherited from their retreating German counterparts, the 450<sup>th</sup> quickly built an Orderly room and Officer and Enlisted clubs. Their quick and

professional work earned the group the distinction of a “model for the entire Air Force.”<sup>1</sup> In addition to the building capabilities, the 450<sup>th</sup> had an excellent ground support staff, which kept planes airworthy for every mission. Vaughn and his crewmates had great respect for their crew chiefs who worked round the clock to make sure the planes keep flying and crews stay safe. Leading up to their first mission, the squadrons operated with only barebones ground crews, supplemented by a few British air and ground crews. The rest of the crews were stuck on Liberty boats in the Mediterranean and Africa because German Air and Sub opposition was still in full force.

The 450<sup>th</sup>, only in theater for 19 days, flew its first mission on 8 January 1944 to the Mostar Airdrome in Yugoslavia, only able to send 20 Liberators due to crew and aircraft restraints. The 450<sup>th</sup> flew several other missions and by mid- February was in the big leagues. Vaughn described these “milk run” training missions as good preparations for what they all knew was to come. As with most bomber groups in Europe, German flak and Me109s heavily opposed the 450<sup>th</sup> on all their missions. On Vaughn’s third mission, their squadron encountered heavy fighter opposition over the target, leaving their rudder hydraulic lines severed, and several crewmembers wounded. With no hydraulic control, the skilled pilots nursed the plane back to base and landed short of the runway skidding to a stop just short of an olive tree orchard at the end of the runway. Their plane, *Judy Lee*, was badly damaged and some of the crew wounded, so Vaughn and his surviving crew were issued a new plane and replacement crewmembers. Replacements and substitutes were common in WWII flight operations, as every crewmember knew how to perform every other job in order to survive. With the losses beginning to stack up, replacements and combined crews were becoming common. The heavy fighter opposition was about to stop though; beginning the week of 20 Feb 1944, General Hap Arnold sent his Air Forces deep into Germany to break the back of the Luftwaffe. The 450<sup>th</sup> participated in three of the major attacks. Vaughn, however, only participated in one.

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.450thbg.com/real/history/history.shtml>

On the morning of 22 Feb 1944, SSgt Vaughn was awoken and told group staff selected him to fly as a replacement crewmember on 1<sup>st</sup> Lt Nilsson's crew. Vaughn, who was supposed to leave for 7 days of rest and recovery to the Isle of Capri later that day, reluctantly agreed to fly as tail gunner for this mission, hoping it was another training mission. As the crews sat in the Orderly room, waiting for their mission brief the tension was relaxed. After the Group Commander revealed the group was heading to Regensburg, Germany to bomb the Messerschmitt Assembly Plant, the room suddenly fell silent; they all knew what this meant. By this time, their friends in the 8<sup>th</sup> had made many trips deep into Germany taking devastating losses, but for the 450<sup>th</sup>, this was the deepest penetration yet; they were in the "big leagues" now. Nonetheless, there was a job to do and the crews boarded their planes and left for the long mission ahead of them. Vaughn set off for his 14<sup>th</sup> mission to date and his first mission deep into Germany.

Even before the bombers got to Germany, many crews had to turn back, some with mechanical troubles, some having been attacked by harassing Me109s from Northern Italy. Just as the Intelligence Officer warned, the flak and fighters opened up as soon as the fighter cover had to turn back. Whenever the planes were not in flak, the Me109s would swarm in, sometimes flying within formations or making passes and disappearing. Already, many groups fell out of formation and many crew forced to bail out, some lucky enough to deploy their chutes. Luckily, Vaughn and his crew on the *Gremlin Gus* made it to the target and the bombardier took over, flying straight and level; the most dangerous part of the mission. Directly over the target, the *Gremlin Gus* took two direct hits in numbers three and four engines. After losing power to both right side engines and in a dangerous dive, the pilot punched the bailout bell and five crew members jumped out, never to be seen from again. Soon after, in a last ditch effort, the pilot was able to feather the engines and right the plane. Since the original flight engineer and co-pilot bailed out, the pilot commanded Vaughn to "Get (his) butt up here and help fly

this thing!"<sup>2</sup> Vaughn quickly responded and helped the pilot fly the plane south towards the Alps in Yugoslavia, instructing the remaining crew to jettison anything they did not need. With the plane nearly out of fuel, no ammo and no power to climb over the high Alps, Lt. Nillson instructed the crew to get ready to bail out. With all of the crew ready to bail out, Lt Nillson put the plane on autopilot and gave the crew the go ahead to jump. Vaughn jumped and watched his plane crash into the mountains. After the roaring engines blew up, suddenly everything was very quiet.

In snow up to his armpits, SSgt Vaughn landed upon Mt Dormitor, Yugoslavia in the dead of winter with no food, no water and only half of an escape kit which he had no training on. Unlike combat Airmen of today who receive many months of survival, escape, and resistance training, aviators of WWII received no training on a topic that became increasingly necessary as crews went deeper into Germany. Equipped only with clothes suitable for high altitude missions while plugged into the airplane, Vaughn used his parachute and basic survival instincts to stay alive. He spent nights shivering in the snow, waking up periodically to walk around to prevent freezing to death and frostbite. Walking all day with the sun to his left, he made his way towards what he hoped was friendly civilization. With only sheepskin-lined boots and painful feet that longed for his GI-Issued boots, he walked for 5 days and just as his spirits were crushed and he had given up hope; he came across some unwanted company. Suddenly out of the trees came four mountain wolves trailing their prey. With no sidearm to defend from his attackers, Vaughn threw snowballs at the pack scaring them off for a short while, but also drawing them closer. Around noon, with snow blindness nearly fully onslaught, he quickly ran to where he thought he saw a person, finding nothing but a faint trace of human tracks. In desperation, he followed the tracks to a small cottage and into the barrel of one of the biggest guns he has even seen, the bearer and his wife speaking no English. After convincing the couple he posed no serious threat to them; they reluctantly let him into their home and gave him food and water. Shortly thereafter, the

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<sup>2</sup> Personal Biography, James P. Vaughn

couple led him to their barn where Vaughn spent the night in the loft, using the hay to cover himself. His first opportunity to rest was greatly welcomed after five long days of solitude. Unbeknownst to Vaughn, the 450<sup>th</sup> flew again to Regensburg shortly after his bail out and received a Presidential Unit Citation for their excellent precision.

Shortly after sunrise, Vaughn woke to the sound of voices speaking in a tongue he had never heard. He cautiously looked to see three armed men in military type caps with a red five-pointed star on the front. Not being able to communicate by words forced the two parties to gesture to each other. Wanting to insure Vaughn was in fact an American Airmen, the three men motioned for him to come down and talk. Shortly after Vaughn reached the ground, an older man approached them and started to ask broken English questions, of which Vaughn answered to the best of his abilities but was sure neither understood each other. After questioning, they determined Vaughn was indeed American and needed help. After indicating he should follow them, the three men started off in a scattered formation with Vaughn accompanied in the middle. After a long excruciating walk, the group came across a hamlet of three houses, which the men checked over and deemed safe. Vaughn was led to the largest of the three to rest.

Surprisingly, his crew rushed to meet him as soon as he stepped in the door. All were greatly relieved they were reunited and in seemingly trustworthy hands. After a short while, they were also greeted with a hot, nourishing coffee substitute followed up by an intoxicating plum brandy. The next morning, after they awakened to more coffee and some black bread, the reunited crew followed three new leaders walking all day into well past dusk, taking only short hydration breaks. The crew walked for 31 days with 31 different sets of leaders, never seeing a town or another person, each night sleeping with the sheep in countryside barns. On the 38<sup>th</sup> day after bailing out, Vaughn and his crew crested a mountain to find a town of moderate size and several British Army personnel, whom greeted them

warmly. The British took great care of their American counterparts, providing them with new wool uniforms, real boots, hot food, and their first chance to bath properly in over five weeks.

The crew soon found out about the purpose of their new British friends. They were a covert operations radio unit based out of Cairo, Egypt. Their radio waves reached the 15<sup>th</sup> AF headquarters in Bari, Italy daily, whom were informed of the crew's presence. They also discovered they were in the town of Berane, Yugoslavia, the headquarters of Marshall Tito's Partisan Underground. Tito was seen almost daily, motivating his troops and townspeople to oppose the Germans and not give into German propaganda. On the 43<sup>rd</sup> day after bailing out, a single ME-210, a German bomber, flew over the town and dropped thousands of leaflets written in both Slavic and German languages warning citizens of the harsh consequences of harboring downed Allied aviators. Due to Tito's encouragements, these leaflets had little effects on the townspeople. Shortly after the ME-210 vacated the airspace, an Italian plane corkscrewed its way into the valley for a landing on the town's airstrip. No sooner than the plane taxied to a stop, the Partisans swarmed the aircraft, unloading supplies and fuel from the tanks leaving the absolute minimum for the return trip. Without wasting a moment, the Airmen and British soldiers boarded the plane for their short flight back to Italy. They left with a great respect for the people of Yugoslavia and Marshall Tito whom risked their lives every day to help a few Allied soldiers.

After the initial climb out, the middle engine started to shoot oil over the pilot's windshield, forcing them to fly instruments. Foreseeing they might be in trouble, another American aviator nudged Vaughn and offered him one of the five chutes and a pistol. Vaughn gladly accepted hoping he would not have to use after getting this far in his adventure. Luckily, he did not need the chute or pistol and landed safely at Lecce Air Base, Italy. Finally back in Italy, they were trucked to Manduria to find the 450<sup>th</sup> hardly recognizable. As with most bomb groups, the 450<sup>th</sup> had sustained tremendous loses and most of the original crews and aircraft were no longer with the group. In the month of February 1944



alone, the 723<sup>rd</sup> Sqd lost 53 men<sup>3</sup>. The next morning, Vaughn was transported to the 15<sup>th</sup> AF Headquarters in Bari, Italy, issued new uniforms and jackets, and questioned vigorously. Most stories varied slightly and discrepancies had to be resolved to determine who was actually helping the Allies on the side of the underground. Although the Allies had initially backed the Chetniks, ignoring Tito, these sorts of intense debriefings revealed that the Chetniks were actually playing both sides, handing some Allies into Germany hands. The intense briefing also helped later crews, giving them helpful hints to survive bailouts and evade the enemy. When the 15<sup>th</sup> finished questioning, the crew flew in a Lockheed Constellation to Bolling Field, in Washington D.C for more questioning at the Pentagon. After several days, the “Intelligence Weenies” finally released the crewmembers and gave them railway tickets and 30-day furlongs to their hometowns.

Vaughn returned to Carey, OH a hero, his parents and family not even knowing he was in the States. At the time, his experiences carried a Top Secret classification and Vaughn and his crew could not discuss any of the details with family or friends. After his 30-Day furlong, he reported to Fort Meyers, FL to be a gunnery instructor, a job he despised, as it would keep him on the ground and out of the sky. After purposely failing the entrance exam, he was sent to Laredo Air Base, TX to take the test again. Once again, he and several other flyers purposely failed the exam even though they were under the threat of summary courts martial. Finally, the Air Force came to their senses, with the bombing campaign slowing in Europe, and gave Vaughn a choice of assignments. Having never been to Massachusetts, he picked Westover Field to be a Flight Engineer Instructor and flew as much as he could. On his off time, he spent his time in the neighboring communities where he met his wife Jeanette at the local USO. They married on 6 February 1946 and recently celebrated their 62<sup>nd</sup> wedding anniversary.

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<sup>3</sup> <http://www.450thbg.com/real/history/723/february44.shtml>

After the war ended in late August of 1945, SSgt Vaughn stayed in the service as a flight engineer with the Military Airlift Transport Service (MATs) where he flew C-47, C-54 and other cargo aircraft. Jim loved everything about planes and much like my father, brought his son up around them. Jim spent 30 years and 11 months in the service; retiring during the middle of Vietnam and witnessing the Air Force become its own service and go through many changes during three very different wars. His legacy in the armed services lived on through his son, Bob Vaughn who attended the Air Force Academy and became a C-130 Hercules Pilot. After his military retirement, Jim and his wife road tripped around the U.S to figure out where they wanted to retire, jokingly saying, "Where ever this car breaks down is where we'll settle." They last stopped in the town of Okmulgee, OK just outside of Norman, where they still reside today. After the military, Jim taught automobile mechanics at the Oklahoma University for 20 years, eventually retiring in 1992. Jim is one of two remaining crewmembers from the *Gremlin Gus*.