Black Cloud of Metal

Jack Rau and the 450th Bomb Group

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Unless we are willing to escape into sentimentality or fantasy, often the best we can do with catastrophe, even our own, is to find out exactly what happened and restore some of the missing parts.
— Norman Maclean, *Young Men and Fire*

Prologue

Briefing was later than usual. However, most men had been up before sunrise, eating, writing, attending chapel, or sitting around. The mission was scheduled to take less than six hours. A noon-time bombing was planned. As with many winter days in southern Italy, on January 19, 1945, the sky over the fields of the 15th Army Air Force (AAF) was overcast and it was cold. The men who had been there a year earlier told stories about the steady rain, the mud, and deep cold of the winter of 1943/44. Those men had learned to prepare for winter. Newly arrived air crews had to quickly learn how to cope.

By 8:15 a.m. the crews had arrived at their planes and begun the pre-flight checks. They spoke with maintenance crews about faults and the corrections that had been made. The "Daisy Mae" was one of twenty-eight planes that the 450th (Heavy) Bomb Group (BG) would send off that morning from its field outside of Manduria, Italy. The plane was piloted by Bob Hogan. With Hogan were eight of the ten crew members who had shipped out of the United States together two months previously. Each crew member went about his business, checking instruments, the radio, guns, oxygen. There was talk of this being a "milk run," a less than dangerous mission. "See you later," a gunner said to a friend in the ground crew.

The engines were started just before 9 a.m. Shortly after, the planes began to roll down the taxiways. At 9 a.m. the green flare was fired from the control tower, signaling official approval for takeoff. The mission was underway. The first B-24H started down the runway, straining to gain lift-off speed to clear the olive trees at the east end of the runway. The 4,000 pounds of bombs each plane carried, along with the fuel, resisted the planes' impulse to become airborne. Less than a minute after the first plane started along the runway, the next had begun its takeoff. Within twenty minutes all the planes were in the air, gradually climbing toward 12,000 feet and the Group's rendezvous with planes from the 449th Bomb Group and subsequent meeting with two other bomb groups. Collectively, the force was headed to Slavonski Brod, Yugoslavia, Brod being a Slavic word for a ford or crossing of a river. Slavonski Brod stood on the Sava River, which currently separates Croatia from Bosnia and Herzegovina.

Brod, as it is commonly called, was a town of somewhat fewer than 15,000 people, on the north bank of the Sava. The convergence of rail lines from Zagreb, Belgrade, and Sarajevo at the town made it a significant target for the 15th AAF. Marshalling yards at Brod were crucial for transport of German supplies being sent to the front lines and for the simultaneous withdrawal of German troops from Yugoslav partisans and advancing Soviet Union forces. Brod, like many other rail towns across Yugoslavia, Italy, and Austria had been attacked previously by the U.S. 15th Army Air Force. High-level strategic bombing infrequently achieved the full—or even partial—results claimed by military authorities or passed along in press releases. Thus, return missions were ordered. Also, the Germans, using slave and conscripted labor, were efficient at making repairs—they had gained a lot of experience in the previous couple of years.

As they started the short flight over the Adriatic Sea and into Yugoslavia's airspace, the planes assembled into the formations they would maintain during the bombing run. The 450th was led by seven planes of the 722nd Squadron, flying in two parallel Vs, with the last plane tucking into the open end of the V. Such formations were standard, initially as protection against German fighters. However, both German planes and pilots were in short supply toward the end of the war. Now, the V formation was designed to assure a tighter space into which the bombs from all the planes would fall.

Robert Hogan, of the 723rd Squadron, piloted the "Daisy Mae" in the number-two position in the second attack unit. The lead plane of the unit was responsible for determining when bombs of all the planes in the unit were to be released. As deputy lead, Hogan and his crew had to be prepared to take over if the lead left formation for some reason. As on all the flights with Hogan as pilot, Jack Rau was the navigator. He carefully plotted their course and location. If they had to drop out of formation, he would be responsible for guiding them back to the base at Manduria.

Three hours after takeoff, the first unit of the 450th reached its initial point, the point at which they lined up for entering the air space toward Brod. At an altitude of 24,000 feet the temperature was -35 degrees (F), both inside and outside the plane. Many crew members wore suits that could be plugged into the plane's electrical system to supply heat. Rau reluctantly unplugged his suit and crawled back from his station in the nose of the plane to behind the flight deck. He moved into the bomb bay and removed the cotter heads from the fuses of the bombs. The bombs were now armed. Finished with the task, Rau headed back to his navigation desk. Ahead, crew members saw smoke rising above Brod from attacks by other bomb units a half-hour earlier.

Flak began to fill the sky, along with black puffs of smoke from exploding shells that carried pieces of metal designed to tear into engines and fuselages. Brod was protected, the Army Air Force Intelligence command reported, by seventy-four 88 mm anti-aircraft (flak) guns. The guns were situated in the town and in farms and fields surrounding the town. Although not the largest flak guns in the German arsenal, the 88s were capable of sending shells to the bombers' altitude. Some of the planes dropped chaff (sometimes called window), pieces of aluminum designed to interfere with radar used to aim the flak guns. The black puffs of smoke of the exploding shells continued to fill the air around the planes. The pilots, and the navigator and bombardier in the nose of the plane, could easily see the smoke around and in front of them.

Bomb-bay doors opened as the planes of the 723rd Squadron began their four-minute bomb run up to and across the rail yards below. Smoke from the previous bombing obscured the details below, but provided a sufficient aiming point to the lead bombardier. Alva Smith, the bombardier on Hogan's plane, closely watched the lead plane so he could release his bombs on cue. Others in the crew waited tensely, buffeted by the flow of the plane and the percussions of the flak. They were most exposed during the bomb run although it was a small fraction of the time they were in the air. During those four minutes the planes moved along a recognized course, giving gunners on the ground a steady, if advancing, target. The plane crews knew they were at their most vulnerable during those four minutes, but there was nothing they could do to diminish that exposure. The abstraction of war became acutely real as the enemy below, and out of sight, fired at them.

It was the 18th mission for some of Hogan's crew. The presence of flak was not new to them, but it was always frightening. Their anxiety intensified given the precariousness of their position and the possibility of a shell exploding too near the plane.

No Army Air Force bomber of that period could withstand a direct hit by large fragments from a flak shell. The "Daisy Mae" was no exception. Less than one minute before bombardier Smith shouted "bombs away," flak fragments tore into the left wing of the plane, between the two engines and into one of the fuel tanks. The plane was thrown fifty feet upwards and the wing burst into flames. In his contemporaneous diary, Max Schuette

recorded what he saw from immediately behind my father's plane. "…the shell exploded on impact outboard of his number one engine—the one farthest to the port [left] side of the aircraft. …we clearly saw the red and orange flame from the burst shell and the black popcorn-like cloud that swirled around us after impact… The outboard section of his port wind dangled uselessly in the air. Quickly she nosed down, swung off to the left & hurtled down."

Within the plane, the men were stunned, not immediately comprehending what had happened. However, Hogan quickly knew—the plane was lost—and he ordered a bailout for all crew. He struggled out of his seat and moved to get out of the cockpit. His co-pilot, Mark Lapolla, wrestled with headphone and flight suit warming wires to get out of his seat. He became entangled and watched Hogan scramble out of the flight deck. Chester Zukowski, the flight engineer and top turret gunner, did not immediately recognize the problem, but when he saw Hogan move out of the flight deck, he instinctively knew to follow.

The wing exploded and folded back along the side of the plane, burning furiously. The plane peeled off to the left into the center of the formation and then turned over on its back, the bombs spilling from the plane as it turned. Hogan's memory was that a few seconds after he ordered the bailout, the plane exploded, whether only the wing or more of the plane, his memory was unclear. On the ground, Beslic Andija was home, as school had been dismissed early because of the bombing raids. He recalled seeing the plane turn over twice and fall in flames. From other planes, Sidney Spyer, Jr. and Edward Grancagnolo later reported seeing the plane break into flames and go into a tight downward spin.

In the seconds after the hit, Zukowski and Hogan dropped from the plane. Zukowski thought he had been thrown out of the bomb bay, perhaps from a second explosion or the tilt of the plane. As he hung from his parachute, he saw the plane hit the ground and explode in the hills less than three miles from Brod. Other than Hogan and Zukowski, neither crew members nor photographer on the flight escaped. It has never been clear why no others escaped. I have often asked why others did not escape. A hatch in the nose of the plane provided an out for the navigator and bombardier, but it was not used. Had they been stunned or wounded by the exploding wing? Did the radio operator, also near the flight deck, hesitate more than a couple of seconds—and that was too long? The tight spin of the falling plane created strong centrifugal force, perhaps precluding movement by the men within.

I have tried to imagine what it was like in the plane as it spun toward the ground. The nine men remaining in the plane could only struggle to try to escape, terror seizing their minds, perhaps blocking effective action. Rather than a means to return them to safety, the plane was now their captor, torturing them in their final moments.

Was prayer possible for Rau, a strong believer, or did it not occur to him in these moments? Did he think of his wife, Marjorie, and two-year-old son, Bill? Did the war have any meaning for him at this point?

I have pondered these and other questions as I've tried to learn more about my father, about who he was as a person, and about his war-time experiences. I have tried to imagine myself trapped in the metal prison walls of the plane. Only for a few seconds can I hold my mind on the terror of death that comes to me as I imagine how he must have felt. I cannot visualize those moments. I don't deny his death, but I cannot allow my mind to linger on the final seconds before his death. My imagination stops, turns away from the final breath.

* * *

In my mid-50s I began a search to know who my father was. I had learned early on in life that the subject was too raw for my mother to talk about him. His brothers and two sisters-in-law told a few anecdotes, but I didn't absorb them. When I heard about and joined the American World War II Orphans Network, a loose group of adults who had lost fathers in the war, I became more interested to know about my father. I didn't even know the dates of his service, or the date or circumstances of his death.

Inquiries with the National Military Personnel Records Center revealed that a fire in 1973 had destroyed a large portion of military service records for men who served in World War II, including records relating to my father. For a while that stopped me. Later I did some background reading and eventually made contact with the 450th Bomb Group Memorial Association. The association organized annual gatherings to honor colleagues and swap stories. I attended one of the gatherings and began to find men, or names of men, who served in the same Squadron as my father. I arranged interviews with about ten of the men, some of whom generously provided time to talk with me, their written diaries they had kept, and photos. None, however, knew my father.

In good research mode, I continued to dig, at the National Archives, the Air Force Historical Research Agency, and other smaller depositories. I learned much about the 450th Bomb Group, but little about the 723rd Squadron or men who served in that Squadron.

I began writing this story when it became obvious to me that I was not going to learn more about my father. After some research and interviews with men who were in the 450th, in 1992 I wrote in a notebook:

> As I go through this search, I feel detached from John J. Rau, except as a name. In part that is because of the nature of the evidence—only Chester Zukowski knew him, but not as a close friend. Everything I find is a detached narrative of the circumstances surrounding his life and death. But I don't have an image of him. The detachment other men felt for those who died scares me; it seems to confirm my worry that he was alone, lonely.

The best I could do was create a history of the 450th Bomb Group, including many details about flight and ground experiences that are often missed in military descriptions. I tried to fit my father's time into that history. The result was a dry narrative, lacking a sense of emotion and feel for men in the Group. I put the manuscript down, filed it away, thought about it only occasionally, and essentially gave up.

In time, I felt the only way to complete the story was to imagine what life was like in the early and mid-1940s with the United States at war, keeping some of the interesting details of men's lives. I've included more focus on my father. I traveled to Manduria, Italy, and saw the location of the airfield from which he made his final takeoff and the shells of what had been the Group's administration buildings. I traveled to Brod, Croatia, and met a man who had witnessed my father's plane being hit by flak. He took us to near the location where the plane crashed. He said that none of the pieces of the plane remained, having been collected by "gypsies." Despite my research, meetings with former members of the 450th, and travel, much remains missing. Only a novel can fill those gaps.

Chapter 1: Organizing and Training

The 450th Bomb Group (Heavy) was unique to the U.S. experience in World War II. It was created simply to serve in the war, to become a part of the 15th Army Air Force (AAF), itself created in late 1943 for service in southern Europe. The role of the 15th AAF was to drop bombs on manufacturing, production, and transportation sites along the southern flank of the German expansion.

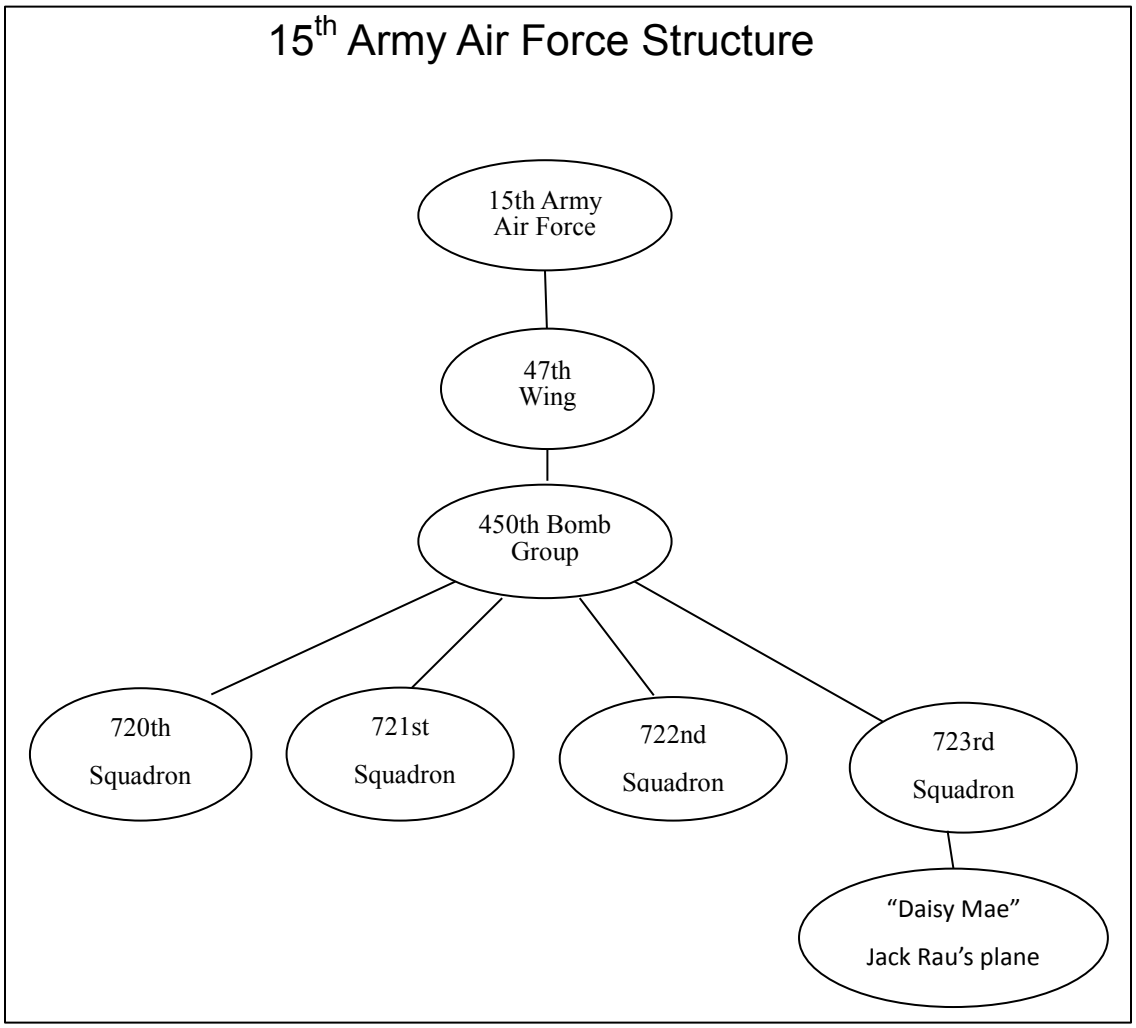
Most of the men who served in the 450th were like those in other hastily formed bomb groups. They may have been enchanted by the power of flight as they grew up in the 1930s. They probably watched exhibitions of planes; some may have been able to catch a ride in a plane. Others acquired technical skills for eventual maintenance on plane engines, guns, or radio equipment. Some were good at mathematics, others at organizing. All were young, between 18 and their mid-20s. Many were recent high school graduates, some had been to college, most had some work experience before enlisting in the AAF. Like other men in the AAF, those who served in the 450th Bomb Group were quickly trained in the doctrines and techniques of aerial warfare and as quickly replaced as they were lost[*] during combat.

The 450th was activated in May 1943 and decommissioned shortly after the end of the war. B-24s, manufactured by the thousands during the war, were the exclusive air machine of the Bomb Group. Five other bomb groups in the 15th AAF flew B-17s and there were seven fighter units with the 15th AAF.

Like other military units, the 450th Bomb Group became a fairly self-contained fighting unit in which the men—no women served with the 450th—developed friendships during the duration of their service. For many men, military service was the first time they had traveled away from home and the social and moral constraints they had learned while growing up. They were mixed with individuals of other ethnic, religious, and regional backgrounds and were expected to work and live together. Not only were the men learning military standards and behaviors, but absorbing new social experiences. At the same time, the Bomb Group was connected to complex command, administrative, and supply systems that stretched across southern Italy and back to the United States. Wars only appear big from the outside and in retrospect. Thus, the fifteen combat crews in each of the four squadrons of the 450th formed, albeit temporarily, communities within themselves and were members of but one

[*] The term "lost" used here refers to planes that were shot down or crashed during the missions because of mechanical reasons. The crew and the planes were lost for further use.

of 21 bomb groups in the 15th AAF, which itself was formed later and was smaller than the better-known U.S. 8th AAF which flew out of England.



Only 21 years before the beginning of U.S. involvement in World War II, General Billy Mitchell, an early advocate of airpower, organized a demonstration of bombers to show that aerial bombardment could sink naval vessels. The demonstration was successful and convinced a number of military leaders of the importance of creating a bomber force. Some of the men who served in the 450th had not been born at the time of that demonstration, but shared in the outcomes. Thus, as the men of the 450th first trained, then flew across the Atlantic Ocean, and eventually undertook bombing missions against enemy targets, they were in an air force only two decades removed from the origins of high-level bombing.

The planes of the 1940s were a technological advance from those used in World War I over Europe. The heavy bombers, notably, were a new invention, dating from the late 1930s. Their range and payload were impressive for the day. Not just one or two men were needed to guide the plane, as in earlier years, but the B-24 had a crew of ten, three of whom were exclusively gunners to protect the plane from aerial attack. The hollow shell of aluminum was designed to carry bombs, up to 5,000 pounds of explosives, and to hit a target with those bombs from an altitude of 20,000 feet and more. Such high-altitude bombing was no more than eight years old when the 450th assumed its position in the war against Nazi Germany.

Strategic bombing was a new element to warfare. There was much to learn; there were many short cuts and improvisations. But the air crews were inspired and dedicated. They felt they were among the best fighting men that America had to offer. Air warfare was exotic and new and they were on the cutting edge. As men from that period reflected back on their time in the AAF, it was with pride that came from being unique. But there were also insecurities, fear, and cynicism.

Origins of the 450th

The 450th was activated on May 1, 1943. It was a paper Bomb Group at its origin, but over the next month acquired some real people. At the end of May the Group was transferred from Boise, Idaho, to Clovis, New Mexico. In mid-June personnel that were to form four model crews began a months-long training at the School for Applied Tactics in Orlando, Florida, in practical aspects of heavy bombing. Simulated combat missions were flown out of Pine Castle, Florida. Such was the training for the crews who would train the flight crews.

The model crews returned to Alamogordo, New Mexico, to a training base that had been so hurriedly scraped together that it lacked adequate housing and buildings for lectures. It was pretty much out in the middle of nowhere. Richard Hefner, one of the original members of a flight crew recalled:

> We called it [Alamogordo] `Oh, my god, no, New Mexico.' We called it that, ‘cause it was out in nowheres. It was where they [later] tested the atomic bombs at White Sands; there's nothing there. Oh, my god, no, New Mexico.

The men who gathered at Alamogordo from mid-July faced two months of intense training. The base was shared with the 449th BG and was crowded. New buildings were thrown up,

others sub-divided, maps and other visual aids added to the walls. More serious, however, was the lack of aircraft for training. The group was operating with only the four aircraft that had originally been assigned with the training crew. On July 20th, the Group had 580 of its designated 1,474 of enlisted men, mostly non-officer air crew members and mechanical ground staff. On August 10th, 12 additional pilots, 12 assistant engineers, and 12 radio officers/gunners arrived; a week later, 11 bombardiers and 30 more mechanics arrived. Over the next four weeks, other air crew members arrived, giving the 450th 24 complete air crews by September 20th. An additional 46 complete crews were added on September 24th, making 70 crews, which were divided into four squadrons. However, the Group had only nine B-24Ds* with which to practice.

The initial phase of training was Ground School—learning the elements of aerial bombing, hydraulics, engines, machine guns, maintenance, communications, and Air Force procedures. Much talk centered on the threat from German fighters and aircraft recognition was a major subject. The Intelligence Section created a blinking shadow box which silhouetted planes against a screen. "This devise [sic] was changed into a peep hole box using various plastic models of aircraft. Just to break the monotony, our Sergeant introduced a luscious `Petty' model [a pinup woman created by artist George Petty] into the peep box. Our C.O., Colonel Mills, received an interesting eye full when he peeped into the box," recorded a monthly report. Elaborate recognition devices and training aides were made and competitions between squadrons were held to achieve the highest identity percentage.

In mid-September, the B-24 Mobile Unit of Technical Training Command arrived and began the training of both flight and ground crews in B-24 aviation. Eleven-hour days were common, as the trainers pressed their subjects along. It was also a period of rapid change. Re-classifications of men and transfers resulted in a turnover of a quarter of the members of the Group. "The combat crews and other men in the squadrons were changed around until a satisfactory place was found for every man," a Group report noted. It was not until early November that formation flights were held. The first was on November 4th. Twenty-four planes took off at 8 a.m. and flew to Wichita Falls, Texas. Other flights over west Texas and Oklahoma occurred for another couple of weeks.

In three months, the Group had been put together and trained. Missing from the training were practice parachute jumps, gunnery against flying targets, sufficient formation flying, and practice bombing from altitude. Dale Robinson was a part of the original group and was

* The letter after B-24 refers to the model designation. As changes were made in the plane's design during the war, new models were given a letter in ascending order to note the updates.

a navigator. He notes in a handwritten account that the crew he was with had 100 hours of flying time, but only two hours was devoted to practical navigation. He remarked that it seemed that the Group commanders “thought a navigator’s purpose aboard ship was ballast.”

All was not work. El Paso and Juarez were the R&R spots for crews. Juarez seems to have been regularly visited, seemingly for sex. Pick-up sports occurred most days. Church services were sponsored each Sunday by individual squadrons; about 1,200 of the 1,600 men of the Group went to church in September. White Sands National Monument was site to many picnic suppers and "old fashioned sings" organized by the various squadrons and the officers’ club. Weekends involved get-togethers in the recreation hall, with suppers and buffets. Many of the men who were married were accompanied by their wives, who lived off base. Some 15 officers were married in October, apparently on the base. Dick Hefner was with his wife and said:

> Well, they thought we were silly. My wife and I went to town and bought a board, monopoly, and we started playing monopoly. And they said, `Hey, what you kids doing there.' And then two weeks later, the officers’ club was just filled with those boards. Everyone was playing, it was something to do, the only thing to do. So we would entertain ourselves that way.

Hefner also was one to find pleasure in what was available to him, and make fun where he could.

> Another thing of entertainment, I'd forgotten about this. They had a pin ball machine and it had camels on it and if you got three camels on the slot machine they'd pay off with nickels. This other fellow and I were in there one day and decided we find out how to beat the machine. So we found out by filling it up with nickels, holding the slot in and lifting the table to ease the ball down to the slot, stop real quick and pull the thing out and it starts paying off. Well, we were pulling out money like mad and the bus was out there waiting because they knew me and this other fellow, he and I were going out with our wives to go back into town. We were making so much money, we filled our hats and pockets.

By mid-October it was clear that the 450th was nearing the time when it would be assigned overseas, despite the lack of operational training. Some 400 officers and men were given

furloughs during the month to go home. The Red Cross, which had an office on the base, provided a total of $25,000 in loans to assist the men in traveling.

In mid-November the Group was ordered to its staging area at Herrington, Kansas. It was the end of U.S.-based training. The Group Monthly Report observed, "Lines of loved ones, wives and families saw the formation disappear in the clear New Mexican skies, and for seven days the bombers continued to leave until all 62 planes with their 868 officers and enlisted men had cleared the field." For ten days at Herrington the men filled out endless forms and the crews received briefings and material for use overseas. They also received new planes.

From Herrington began a several-thousand-mile odyssey, ending for most in southern Italy. The Group first flew to Morrison Field at West Palm Beach, Florida. "There were poker games, dice and mixed drinks in addition to a bit of sight-seeing all along the way, but the crews were eager to keep moving in anticipation of their new assignments," noted the Group's Monthly Report. From Florida, the B-24s flew either to Atkinson Field in British Guyana, to Waller Field in Trinidad, or Borinquen Field in Puerto Rico. This latter field, still in use today by the US navy and air-freight carriers, represented tropical luxury. The unit historian adds a quality of travel writer in his description: "The officers' club by the seaside, with its spacious parlors, open terraces, and patios gave us a glimpse of Spanish culture. The dance that ensured in the evening provided an atmosphere of Caribbean gaiety that did not last long enough." Others discovered the appeal of rum for the first time. For some men, there was an unease, a strangeness about leaving the U.S.

From these points in the Caribbean region, the Group's planes hopped to Belem, and from there to Fortaleza and Natal in northeastern Brazil. The trip retained a travel adventure quality for many of the men. In Belem, for example, "the smell of strong coffee, toasted Brazil nuts and fresh pineapple were in abundance as well as Swiss watches and the now famous Brazilian leather boot." Paul Farnia remembered it somewhat differently. He wrote in his diary on the first of December: "What a sad case this field was. Plenty of Malaria, intense heat, and terrible drinking water. We sure wanted to leave this place in a hurry. Hardly ate at this base." At Natal, the last stop before heading off across the Atlantic, "The P.X. did a landslide business selling Brazilian leather boots and Swiss watches" at prices half those in the U.S. Farnia's crew spent four days at Natal. It was like a vacation resort for many of them, if not always for Paul himself. "We had a beautiful beach for swimming," he wrote. "Boy did we all get sun burned. Every day while here all we did was swim. By the way

Nick [Lapovich] went swimming in his shorts and the Brazilian police arrested him. Got him out okay though."

For others, the crossing had the added quality of potential espionage. At the landing strips, crews were told to fuel their own planes to prevent water being mixed with fuel. Guards were posted day and night to prevent sabotage to the planes. However, there were no instances of interference with the planes or crews. Several planes developed mechanical and engine problems which required servicing. Hefner, for example, tells the story of his plane.

> I was with the first echelon [formation] taking off. At West Palm Beach, as I was taxiing out, the CO, John Mills, called and said, `Hefner, where are ya?' I told him and he said, `Go by base Ops and get my parachute, I left my parachute there.' Well, he had a parachute, a back pack that he had made himself, made out of pink material, like they used to make the pants out of the dress uniform. I went back and picked it up.
>
> I took off from West Palm Beach, to Puerto Rico. I had been out just about an hour and the engineer came up and said, `Hey, we're losing oil like hell in the number three engine.' Well, I let it run down, until the pressure still left me enough to feather the engine. I cut the engine off and feathered it and then tried to increase the rpms on number four engine. It wouldn't increase, I couldn't put more power on it.... So I went over to Haiti and I made a forced landing there because I had 14 men aboard and all the GI equipment and I wasn't going to go through weather on two and a half engines. It was a one strip field, up the side of a hill. When I came in and landed, I got it down pretty close to the end of the runway but couldn't get the damn thing stopped and went off the other end. Thank goodness it had been raining, it sank down, mired itself in the dirt at the end of the runway.
>
> I was there about a week and had to wait a couple of days for the wind to be blowing in the right direction, such a short field, first time a four engine plane had been on the field. I took it off and took it over to Puerto Rico and put it in the repair shop. I was there for about 10 days finishing up the repairs. They did just enough over in Haiti to get me over to depot over there.

Hefner and his crew eventually caught up with others in the 450th. "It was a real good tour of traveling, because I was one of the first to leave and one of the last to get over there."

The leg across the Atlantic, from Natal, Brazil, to Dakar, Senegal, was one of the longest, was completely over water, and carried the greatest anxiety for crews. Done at night so that navigators could read the stars, the journey was, in fact, less eventful than anticipated. "This trip across the ocean was at night; boy was I well—sort of scared.... Made it all right though. Most of the crew was asleep," Hefner wrote afterwards. For some crews the flight to Dakar became more of a challenge, as Paul Farina who flew the route several months later remembers:

> For navigation at night it is a combination of the pilot keeping the plane steady so the navigator can shoot stars. .... on this night, the weather was rough, the night was cloudy and stormy and there probably was not much opportunity to shoot stars. About the 10 and a half hour point of what was scheduled to be a 10 hour trip, I asked the navigator, "What about it, where are we?" He said this and that route; it was also about the time to turn on the radio compass to get the bearing into Dakar. When we turned on the radio compass we found we were off by about 30 degrees and the route the navigator gave would have taken us into the gulf...to splash down somewhere. So we took confidence in the radio compass and headed in on that and we landed approximately 12 hours after taking off. It was a long flight.

Dakar was a major staging area, for supplies to the North Africa campaign and eventually to the campaigns against Europe. As for the 450th, Dakar's airfield was a welcome stop. The official history reads: "West Africa was not unlike the semi-arid parts of America except for the peculiarly twisted trees that dotted the irregular terrain." Camp life was limited to bare essentials. Men went swimming daily and some went fishing in "narrow, wooden canoes piloted by tall, dark Senegalese natives, chattering in the Oloff [Wolof] dialect." Farnia recorded at the time: "Malaria was bad here and our sleeping quarters rough. Went to town and was sure amazed at their customs." Bad weather further north, along the Mediterranean coast, caused a back-up of planes that were not able to move on, to Italy. Thus, airfields became crowded with planes, all waiting for a break in the weather in order to move another step along. Again, a couple of enlisted crew members were ordered to stay with the planes during the night, to assure that no one came aboard. The base was guarded by Senegalese troops and the plane sitters were warned not to leave the planes and move around outside. It appears that President Franklin Roosevelt visited the 450th and other

groups at Dakar on his return to the US following the Tehran conference at the end of November 1943 with Churchill and Stalin.

The time in North Africa dragged on and on. When the weather cleared, crews moved forward to the next field. From Dakar the route took them to Marrakech, Morocco. The high mountains surrounding the city offered both piloting and navigational challenges. By all accounts, Marrakech appeared exotic to the U.S. crews. One man recorded: "Those who spoke French were able to bargain with the French speaking Arabs, and the rest were content with looking at women who displayed only their eyes over their veiled faces." But others found conditions appalling. Open sewers in the streets, tightly packed houses, and an unknown culture combined to produce strong reactions against the local inhabitants. For some men, such attitudes toward the unusual and unknown persisted during their time overseas. Some welcomed the opportunity to learn about other societies and approached their experience with openness and enthusiasm. Others experienced it as a lark, to be pursued because they had a new-found wealth with which to buy almost anything. Still others scorned all things foreign as dirty, primitive, and unwanted.

The Group's planes began to spread out after Marrakech. From Marrakech to Chateaudun ("a little village") in Algeria took two days. "The landing field was a strip of ground cleared of cattle and wandering Arabs. A Service Squadron on duty provided tents, straw for mattresses and a mess tent." Some men wanted to see the sights and arranged transportation into Constantine, about 30 miles away, to ancient Roman ruins and the Roman baths.

The 450th lost its first plane at Chateaudun. The plane hit a mountain while trying to get through the mountain pass into the airfield; all crew but one, the tailgunner, were killed. Another plane was destroyed at Agadir when a French plane overshot its landing and pancaked on top of a B-24. None of the crew in the B-24 was hurt, but the plane was totaled.

Italy was the next stop, but weather forced a landing and a stay of three days in Tunis. The delay seems to have caused little worry. The unit history noted that good accommodations and sight-seeing in Tunis kept the men occupied. Those so inclined became immersed in the wine. Finally, on December 20, 1943, the first planes of the 450th Bomb Group arrived at their destination, Manduria, Italy. Manduria was a small town south of the city of Taranto, on the heel of the peninsula.

The Ground Crews

Some 800 men flew to Italy, but the remaining 800, mostly ground crew members, traveled by troop ship. The ground crews of the 722nd and 723rd Squadrons left Alamogordo on November 26, 1943. They traveled by train to Hampton Roads, Virginia. On the day they left New Mexico, a steady rain fell and turned to snow. The train was late, and the men waited on the station platform, trying to keep dry and mildly warm. "The time aboard the train was spent playing cards, dice and all other games imaginable. The men were given a few minutes of close order drill and setting up exercise on station platforms along the way." Not surprisingly, after the intensity of training, the "trip seemed endless: through New Mexico, Texas, Oklahoma, Tennessee, Georgia, and up the East coast. Finally the train reached the port of embarkation, Hampton Roads, Virginia," reported the 722nd Squadron monthly report for December.

After several days, the men boarded the Liberty ships. The Liberty class of cargo ships was a symbol of the war years. Some 2,700 were built, as many as 100 a month. A ship could be built, on average, in 27 days; the record for construction was seven and a half days.

A member of the 723rd Squadron wrote of the departure: "We piled and crowded onto a ferry boat, while an Army band 50 or 60 strong played `Over There', `Pistol Packin' Mama', and the `Air Corps Song'. It was a long haul around the pier with our duffle bags to where the liberty ship was stationed, but once we were there to board, everything went with dispatch." Many of the members of the 723rd ground crew sailed on the “Benjamin S. Milam,” a 10,000-ton Liberty ship, with a crew of 60 merchant mariners and navy gunners. The ship waited in the harbor for a day while other ships gathered for the convoy. On December 4, 1943, the convoy left the United States. The 723rd men shared the ship with men of the 449th BG—about 500 men in all. The voyage was fairly easy and uneventful with little seasickness, which many men had feared.

The men spent most of their time reading—anything they could get their hands on—playing cards and shooting craps and waiting in chow lines. At night, the hold of the ship resembled a Monte Carlo—the long tables jammed with talkative gamblers.

Ground crew of the 722nd Squadron shipped out on the "Bret Harte," where life was somewhat different, as Sam Stein remembered. First, the ship was late in leaving and spent three days catching up to the convoy, the crew and passengers constantly looking over their shoulders for German submarines. Then the refrigerators on the ship failed. All the

perishable food was tossed overboard. From then on, "food was scarce so we had soup for our meals. The officers were invited to eat with the ship's officers so there wasn't a shortage for them." To keep their minds off their stomachs, the men could complain about the showers. The soap issued for washing was supposed to foam with salt water, but left the skin sticky. This was enough to discourage many men from showering at all. Others were put off by the overflow from the toilets which spread across the shower floors. "That turned us off," noted Stein, in artful understatement. "Some didn't change their clothes until they got to Italy," a month later.

After spending Christmas docked in the harbor at Bizerte, Tunisia, the “Bret Harte” arrived in Naples on December 26th. Temporary quarters were set up in "a building well ventilated by bomb bursts...." The crews spent four days there, until on New Year's Day, 1944, they boarded 21 trucks for overland travel to their base. Manduria was known to the men as their eventual base, but few knew where it was, including the officer who was in charge and spoke enough Italian to get the convoy thoroughly lost for several hours. The trucks arrived at Foggia, headquarters of the 15th AAF, late in the afternoon. K rations were eaten for dinner in a rain that occasionally turned to snow. The men in each truck spent the night "cuddled up to each other" and their duffle bags to remain warm. On January 2, 1944, the 722nd ground crews pulled into the 450th base at Manduria.

The 720th arrived at Manduria on the same day, having traveled overland from Bari where their ship had landed. The following day, eight officers and 187 enlisted men of the 721st ground crew arrived, joining the 78 officers and 124 enlisted men of the air echelon. All had arrived except the ground crew of the 723rd Squadron. Like others, the 723rd spent Christmas in Bizerte harbor, aboard the ship. Unlike the others, the 723rd stayed at Bizerte until December 28th, before sailing to Palermo, Sicily. The men camped in tents on a mountainside. On January 5th, the members of the 723rd reboarded a Liberty ship, waited several days for a convoy to gather, and eventually on January 10th arrived at Naples. There they learned the whereabouts of the Group. Three days later they climbed on trucks and were transported to Foggia and the next day arrived at the field outside Manduria. The "lost squadron" had finally found its Group.

CHAPTER 2: Mud

> Morale of the men was not exactly at its highest on the day of their arrival here at Manduria. The ground was thick with mud and the idea of living in pup tents was not a happy one. Most of the men could not seem to get enough chow and to go back for seconds, although they were not supposed to, was almost a necessity.
> – 721st Squadron, monthly report, January 1944

The discomfort of the initial days and nights at the Manduria base are remembered 50 years later by men who were there. Rain, ever-enlarging puddles, mud, cold—these were the common denominators expressed for those early days at the new base at Manduria. It would remain home to the Group for the next 17 months. The base would gradually be transformed and acquire a full character in the months ahead. But in early January the base was a disappointment: no barracks ready for living, no showers, open-pit toilets, no kitchen or dining area, no electricity, the landing strip a bog that turned into a lake when the rains continued from day to day.

The field at Manduria had been used by the Italian Air Force and a portion of the base personnel still lived there when the 450th arrived in late December 1944. The 47th Wing, made up of the 450th and three other bomb groups, was also headquartered at the field. The 98th Bomb Group, also in the 47th Wing, was using the field when the 450th arrived. The base had been created in the middle of olive groves and trees surrounded the landing field. Eventually, the squadrons would set up their housing and administrative buildings within the olive groves.

In the early days, most men lived in pup tents. The muddy ground assured a damp night and each two-man team scurried around to find even a slight rise in the land in order to avoid the settled water. Sam Stein, a mechanic, remembers his first night in a tent.

> We went to bed with all our clothes on. One blanket under you and one blanket over you. I also put my overcoat over the top blanket to try to keep warm. When we got up in the morning the lower blanket looked like a mold of our body due to the blanket in the mud. We looked for a better place to set up our pup tent but wherever you went it was mud.

Rain and more rain created “Lake Manduria” across the base. The winter of 1944/45 was one of the wettest for decades. Mud was reported to be a foot deep in places. The damp added to the cold of winter, creating deeply unpleasant conditions for all concerned.

A bit of rain

Speculation and rumor abounded, as men vied for anticipated housing in the Italian barracks. The Italians were scheduled to move out on New Year's, but it was a month later before all of the Italian personnel had left. On December 22nd cots were issued to combat crews whose comfort was deemed a priority, although no missions were yet scheduled. An open-air kitchen had been set up; a few days later the Group mess was set up. Food was served as men filed past. Rocks, the hoods of vehicles, and other stationary sites were used as tables in the open-air dining area.

Perhaps to ease their discomfort, the men of the 450th readily consumed all the liquor they had brought with them. The supplies of whiskey they had been told existed in Italy were, of course, non-existent; beer, too, was not available. Vino became the drink of choice out of necessity. Most men had not drunk much wine before—beer and hard liquor had been more common at home. Some did not like the local varieties, but of those who drank, most converted easily to wine.

At the same time, many of the men were inquisitive about the nearby towns and anxious to be away from the discomfort of the base even for a few hours. The Italian merchants began to raise their prices as the rush of new customers expanded demand, but most items the soldiers wanted were scarce or not available at all. The poverty of many people in southern Italy and the scarcities caused by the war left most of the Italians in Manduria and other towns with little material wealth. Although living conditions were similar to those in lower-income areas of the United States just 40 years earlier, most of the young men of the 450th

little understood the poverty they encountered in Italy. At first they found the landscape green, hilly and "picturesque from the air." The "women drawing water at the city fountain reminded us of water carriers seen in Italian tapestries," noted the Group's monthly report for December 1943. But the romanticized version quickly gave way to disgust at the begging by poorly clothed children and the pervasive signs of poverty. Most men went no further to know and understand the Italian people who lived beyond the base, although many local people were employed in various capacities, on base and off, by individuals or groups of soldiers. Italians were often hired for construction projects, to do laundry and cleaning, and other work around the base.

Unknown to the troops at this time was that many of their belongings had been lost during a German bombing raid on Bari harbor. The bombing was known, the losses were not, nor the resulting catastrophe. The German attack had been a surprise. The bombs hit a ship carrying ammunition. A massive explosion tore the ship apart and a hit on a gas line set fire to nearby ships. A total of twenty-eight ships were sunk or destroyed and others were damaged. One ship was carrying poison gas, a secret to almost all authorities except those on the ship. The gas was blown across the harbor and into the neighborhoods around the harbor. Almost immediately, men not affected by the explosions and fires were affected by the gas. Italians near the waterfront became suddenly ill; many died. Although gas was suspect, neither the port nor military authorities knew that it was in the harbor, for eventual use if the Germans instigated gas warfare. The deaths remained a mystery, if not a military secret, for years afterwards. Most men in the 450th knew nothing of the gas, even years later when it became public knowledge, only that they had lost a sizeable portion of the Group's supplies and individuals' belongings.

Thus, supplies and personal effects were scare. Most of the air crews had shipped their barracks bags with the ground crews. Clothes remained damp and mud-splattered. Shaving was possible, but only with cold water and many men began growing full beards. On Christmas Eve the Group acquired the machine that would make them into a proper military unit: a typewriter. They were now able to fill out requisition forms and acquire wood, nails, and other supplies to be found in town. Late the same afternoon, the mess crew served a turkey dinner. The Group monthly report expressed the feelings of all that despite the unexpected food, "It was a dismal Xmas filled with thoughts of home and loved ones; filled also with conjecture as to where we would spend the next one."

Christmas day was spent further improving the camp. Those officers who had barracks rooms in these early days built shelves and wardrobes for their clothes and other

incidentals. Empty oil cans, rigged with brass piping and valves stripped from Italian war planes were converted into stoves to warm the rooms that had been prepared. Aviation fuel provided the fuel for the stoves. The stoves were potential bombs and it was not long before the first fire occurred. On New Year's Eve night, someone kicked over a bucket of gas in one of the recently occupied wooden barracks. The gas and building immediately burst into flames. The Group report described "Clothes were being flung through windows, and officers clad in very little came dashing out with smoke-filled eyes. The dry wooden barracks...rose up like a pillar of fire." All the men escaped before the Italian fire department arrived. However, the fire was burning too strongly and only a trickle of water came from their hoses. "It was a Mack Sennett comedy incarnate! and the crowd roared." Then, .45 caliber ammunition began to explode and everyone dove for cover.

A short descriptive history of the 450th produced in May 1945 notes a building boom beginning in January 1944. An Italian admiral released supplies and “Thousands of feet of lumber, tin, nails, light bulbs, wire,” furniture, and generators provided the basics for the construction of officers’ clubs, mess halls, and office buildings.

Alex Esposito, a ground crew chief with the 723rd Squadron, provides an alternative experience:

> Living quarters was really bad but we managed. We had a couple of men in [the] outfit that really knew how to promote and scrounge materials…. They would take off at night with a GI truck and come back with loads of lumber and etc and nobody asked questions. We managed to set up ourselves pretty well.

Esposito was of Italian heritage, spoke fluent Italian, and subsequently learned that a brother of his father lived less than 20 miles from the base. Espositio used his language to his advantage. Italian personnel who had been at the base when the 450th arrived were prisoners of war. He wrote:

> I chose one man who was an Officer in the Italian Air Force and asked him to be our house boy. Four other chiefs and myself had our own quarters built by the Italians out of TUFA BLOCKS almost the same as our cinder Blocks…. So we had ourselves a house boy to do all our house work and take out Laundry to Town and get it done for us. He was also a damn good Barber…. He introduced me to my very first moustache. …. We also ate quite a few dinners in their [sic] Italian Mess Hall. …. We had quite a few Italians who lived off Base that worked on the

> Base but most of them lived on the base. Oh we would give them some goodies to take home, things that were not available to them such as Sugar, Coffee etc.

Gradually the administrative offices were set up and equipped. Rumors circulated about when the first mission would be flown. S-2, the Intelligence Section, had maps attached to the walls of the briefing room. Engineering, Ordnance, Armament, Communications, and Supply were, in general, decentralized to squadrons, although a long chain of command that stretched far beyond the squadron level made the decisions about bombing missions. Intelligence and Photography remained Group responsibilities. By early January, combat and ground crews were openly wondering when they would join the war.

Although the men had gotten over the initial shock of being Army Air Force campers and kept busy improving their living spaces and the base and settling into a routine, morale was not high. Sunny Italy was a disappointment; the tension of waiting for combat affected people's nerves. Basic services involved lengthy waits ("Mess line at Group mess hall a mile long," reported the official Group summary for January) and there was little for men to do during free hours except hang out. The Commanding Officer (CO) of the 721st Squadron, Captain Davis, gave his men a pep talk, urging them to work together despite the conditions and noting that the base was beginning to show improvements. He also warned the men about the high rate of STDs in Italy and reminded them of the 8 p.m. curfew in the neighboring towns. On January 5, 1944, the base PX opened for the first time to dispense the weekly supply of cigarettes. Leave was provided for those who wanted to visit nearby towns. Sam Stein and his friend Bob Ludwig, a radio operator on a B-24, went to the ancient town of Leece. The Red Cross had opened a recreation center there, with card and reading rooms and a snack bar. The two men had ice cream, coffee, a sandwich, and a cookie. The bill came to 7 lira each—seven cents at going rates.

Finally, on the afternoon of January 7th orders came down from the 15th AAF and the Wing that a mission was scheduled for the following day. Early morning briefing for crews from the 720th, 721st and 723rd Squadrons was followed by breakfast and preparation for takeoff. The mission was to Mostar, Yugoslavia, which proved largely uneventful. No fighter attacks and little anti-aircraft fire (known as flak, from the German word *Fl*ieger*a*bwehr*k*anone, literally "pilot warding-off cannon."), no losses or injuries. However, it is not surprising that this first mission "was not as successful as it could have been." In fact, some planes missed the target by miles. Too little training, anxiety of first combat, learning the feel of the planes and equipment all worked against an effective bomb run. Robertson noted that his pilot "went crazy in the flak around the target area [and] lost control of our

plane over the drop site. Our bombs flew in every direction on release due to the plane's erradic [sic] movements. He issued intercom warning to be ready for bailout." For other crews, the mission did subdue some of the tension that hung over the base and provided all of the men of the 450th with an initial realization of their role in the war. That evening, crews re-lived the day numerous times, sharing their stories with one another and those who had remained on the ground.

Another mission, to Zara, Yugoslavia, occurred the next day (January 9, 1944). Nineteen planes prepared to take off. One became bogged down in the mud of the taxiway and another returned early. The other seventeen planes reached the target, but clouds blocked their view and no bombs were dropped. As would happen frequently in the winter and spring months ahead, planes released their bombs over the Adriatic Sea during the return to base.

For the third day in a row, the 450th put up planes on January 10th. The target was the marshalling yards at Skoplje, Yugoslavia. The railway system that supplied Germany and was used for German troop movements was a primary target early and throughout the experiences of the 15th AAF. Again, the 450th bombs fell off target. The poor results were disheartening. "Great discontent exhibited by crews anxious to plaster the target," recorded the monthly Group summary. It was not so much that the men were risking their lives without results, for there had been minimal opposition from the enemy. Rather, it was a deep frustration that they felt their efforts yielded poor results.

A mission on January 13th to Perugia airfield in Italy drew flak, but it was the following day that the 450th combat crews, and crew members from other groups, finally acquired a sense of the seriousness of combat. The target was the airfield at Mostar, Yugoslavia, site of the Group’s first mission. Flak holed a number of planes and German fighters were present and shot down several of the bombers on the mission. A B-24, not from the 450th, exploded in mid-air. The sight remained in the memory of some crew members for years afterwards. And for the first time, the bombs of the Group hit home. No one on the 450th planes was hurt during the raid, but one plane crashed on returning to the Italian mainland because of problems with three of its engines. Despite the losses suffered by other groups, morale among crews of the 450th was high. Crews turned out at 9 p.m. that evening to examine the bomb strike photographs exhibited by S-2. Such Intelligence Unit reports summarized crew member impressions upon return to base and provided photographic evidence of where bombs fell. Finally, the men had the feeling of actually being at war and making a contribution to the war effort.

B-24 landing at 450th field

However, the initial missions demonstrated that only experience could overcome the disorganization and mechanical faults that characterized the 450th bombers and crews. Vernon Halsey, a tail gunner in the 723rd Squadron, reported that his guns did not work on three of the first five missions he flew in January 1944. He also noted that on several occasions the box (a group of 5-7 planes) his plane flew in became separated from the main formation and either bombed poorly or ditched their bombs in the ocean. One can almost imagine planes scattered across the sky and bombs falling indiscriminately, far from the intended target. When targets were obscured by cloud cover, most missions included an alternative site. However, in some cases, civilian sites were chosen. For example, on January 28, 1944, Farina wrote in his diary, "We had under cast bombed city instead."

As the missions got underway, life on the base was becoming more settled and normalized. By mid-January, the Group officers were settled into barracks, including the Chaplain who had acquired a room previously decorated by an Italian officer with pin-ups. Apparently the wall paper remained up. The medical corps dug privies, and administrative offices were hammered together and equipped. The first pay day at Manduria, January 20th, was widely welcomed, although the only immediate way to spend the money was to gamble and buy oranges, figs, and nuts in town. A couple days later, the 720th Squadron opened a barber shop with two Italian barbers (haircuts 15 lira, shave 10 lira, about the same in U.S. currency), and a base laundry was opened. Mail from home finally began to arrive by the third week in the month. The first outdoor movie was shown on the 26th of January, displayed against the side of a building.

The Italian Context

Manduria was an old, walled town. It was situated in Puglia, a region with historic ties to the eastern Mediterranean, ties once stronger than those to other parts of Italy. Small pockets of people spoke Albanian and Greek. Scattered remains of the Roman empire were evident and became stops on the guided tours arranged by Red Cross workers for the troops. The

old towns of the region had been under numerous rulers, including Normans in the 11th century. Foggia, which accommodated the main airfield for the 15th AAF, had been created by the Normans.

Like much of southern Italy at this time, the region remained largely agricultural, relatively isolated from both central and northern Italy and the wider world. Most people were not materially wealthy. In fact, much of the land was controlled by large land owners; their estates were not redistributed until the early 1950s. But during the war, the control of the landowners was slipping away. The presence of the troops at the airbases—with their access to disposable income and demands for services—provided local merchants and artisans with alternative sources of income rather than relying on the locally wealthy.

Lecce, near which was located the 96th Bomb Group, reflected the changing history of the region. About six miles from the Adriatic coast, the old town had picturesque twisting lanes within what was once the perimeter during the 16th century. After the end of the Roman Empire, the town was dominated by the Goths and then the Byzantines, till roughly the middle of the 11th century, when the whole of Puglia was conquered by the Normans. Later the fief of various overlords, it shared the vicissitudes of the Kingdom of Sicily (later known as the Kingdom of Naples and the Two Sicilies) until the unification of Italy in 1860. The second century Roman amphitheater and theatre were regular stops on the Red Cross cultural tours.

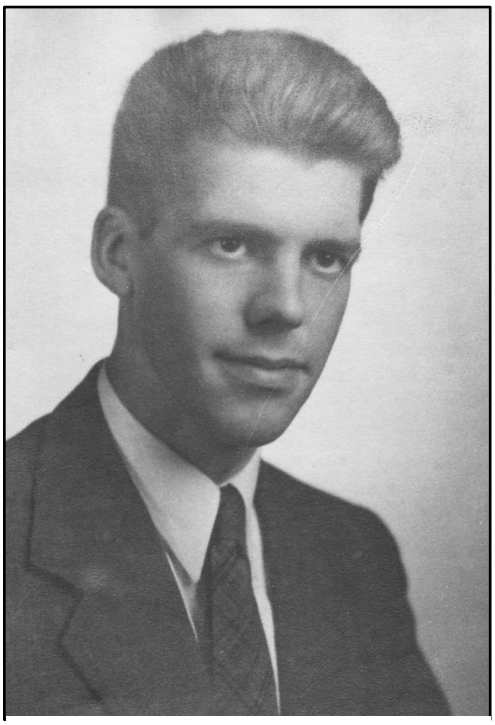
To judge by oral and written accounts, most of the men of the 450th had little interest in the history or geography of Manduria or the Puglia region. There was not a lot of time for sightseeing or local inquiry. It is doubtful there existed on the base English-language history books that provided details of the region. Language was another barrier to discovering the region and its people. There were only a handful of men of Italian heritage who spoke the language, with a few who spoke French and got by. Some middle-aged Italian men spoke some English, either from having worked in the United States or through contact with British troops in World War I. Italian language lessons on the base were informally introduced with some interest.

Most men had little need for or interest in Italian people. Until a few months before, Italy had been among the enemy countries of the U.S. Although moderating in the 1930s, anti-immigrant and anti-Italian feelings from earlier in the 20th century persisted for many Americans. The poverty of the Italians of southern Italy was frequently noted by soldiers, apparently confirming some of the prejudice with which they had grown up.

Chapter 3: Jack Rau

As the initial crews of the 450th settled into their base, Jack Rau was enjoying life with his new son, Bill, but conscious that he would probably have to join the service. He had already made a commitment by applying for Aviation Cadet status. He was drawn to the flying service not only because he was a good student but by the additional pay earned by flyers.

Jack had been born on May 28, 1918. He was the third of four children. His parents lived in a comfortable two-story house in the small northern New Jersey town of Fanwood. The house still stands and I spent a summer there in the early 1960s. I know little of his relationships with his brothers or his early life. He did attend the local schools and graduated from Scotch Plains High School in 1936. He appears to have been a good student, getting As in chemistry and public speaking and a B+ average in English and Algebra in his junior year of high school. The same year he pulled a C in physical education, apparently not much into sports or exercise. He wanted to go to college upon graduation.



Jack Rau

He entered Trinity College, a well-known liberal arts school in Hartford, Connecticut, in 1936, but dropped out after six months for financial reasons. In the middle of the Depression, perhaps it is not surprising that his and his family's financial situation was tight, but it must have been a major disappointment to my father to not continue with his studies.

In the late 1930s and into the 1940s he worked several jobs. He joined his father in building construction for a time and eventually was hired by Lawrence Engineering Company in Linden, New Jersey, perhaps designing, constructing, or testing the company's power engines. During the war years the company was contracted by the Navy to make auxiliary power engines for aircraft. My father was working at Lawrence when he enlisted in the military on July 13, 1943, in Newark, New Jersey. Like others who enlisted for military service, the terms stated that the enlistment was for the duration of the War or other emergency, plus six months, subject to the discretion of the President.

My parents became engaged in July 1940. They may have met at a dance, but when asked, my mother (Marjorie Coles) could not remember for sure. They were married on February 22, 1941, at a ceremony at her parents' home in Westfield, New Jersey, presided over by a Methodist minister. Her close friend Bobbi Tanner stood with her, and my father's brother Bob stood with him. They apparently went on a honeymoon for a few days, but I never asked where. I've wondered why they did not have a church wedding. Perhaps it was for financial reasons; both families were relatively comfortable, but did not have a lot of extra money. Perhaps it was a way to compromise between his Episcopalian upbringing and her Methodist experience.

Jack and Marge on their wedding day

My mother had graduated from Westfield High School in 1935. Her senior class photo is accompanied by a short statement that noted that her specialty was "Commerce" which meant secretarial studies or bookkeeping. She was active in school clubs. The blurb noted: "'Midge' of the rosy complexion and dancing blue eyes is one of our accomplished musicians. She appears to be very quiet, but her friends have found her otherwise. This girl will make some man happy as his stenographer." Such a send-off echoed her father's opinion for her future. She wanted to attend college, but her father—for financial or paternalistic reasons—said she could attend secretarial school while her brothers attended college. She was a secretary much of her work life into the 1970s, but remained resentful that she was denied the chance to attend college.

I have no knowledge of what their married life was like. They remained close to the homes of their parents, but must have had social relationships with school and work friends (Westfield is a neighboring town to Fanwood). My mother liked music and played the accordion, hefting the straps over her shoulders and pulling it apart to fill the bellows with air. I have a vague memory, from after the war, of hearing her play, but after re-marriage she gave it up, sold the accordion, and never played music again.

The war in Europe was well underway. The U.S. instituted a draft registration for men between the ages of 21 and 31 in 1940 and expanded the age groups in 1941 and 1942. My father must have registered. The Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor and the U.S. entry into

what became known as World War II in December 1941 must have raised worry and anxiety within my parents.

My mother and me

I was born at the end of December 1942. After he left the hospital that day my father wrote to my mother "Honey, I'm the happiest guy alive!" As they settled into the role of new parents, the presence of the war must always have been in the background. My father began investigating alternatives for military service. A brochure published in 1943 set out the process for becoming an Aviation Cadet. I expect the anticipation of higher pay (up to $325 per month for married aviators) must have been an inducement for Jack. In addition, he knew he had the capacity to absorb the mathematics and physics required of aviation officers. The basic requirement was being between 18 and 26 years of age. Then a series of tests, mental and physical, were given to further determine one's qualification for potential inclusion in air cadet training. Did my mother resist his learning about enlistment options? I would guess that at one level she did—she could be forceful in her statements, but did not like prolonged arguments, lapsing instead into passive silence. Both my parents must have known that military service was nearly inevitable. My father is likely to have argued that flight officers' pay made that option very attractive. He probably talked with his brother Bob, who had enlisted in the Army as a private in August 1942 and served in Europe with an anti-aircraft gun crew.

My father enlisted in July 1943, but was not assigned to an aviation cadet unit. The timing over the next several months has been lost. It appears that after my first birthday in December 1943—as the 450th Bomb Group was setting up shop in Italy—my father reported to the Miami Beach Training Center for basic training and subsequent Officer Candidate School. The 16-week course at OCS meant that by the middle of 1944 he was ready for navigator training. No letters survive from this period or until his death. My mother had kept some, but when she remarried in 1947 she destroyed the letters, in deference to her new husband, she once told me.

In June 1944, Jack began training as a navigator at Ellington Field, southeast of downtown Houston, Texas. The routine of the military prevailed. Each morning at 7:30 cadets marched

in “morning parade” to the accompaniment of military music. A description from that period notes that the review “puts each man on the alert and sends him, wide-awake, into his crowded day.” Ellington Field included pre-flight training, with much of the emphasis on military discipline, alongside practical academic training in navigation. Cadets marched to classes and stood at attention until the instructor ordered them to sit. I imagine my father grousing like other men by the discipline, but perhaps that is my personality intruding into his story.

My mother and I accompanied him during some phases of training. She recalled that a number of wives did the same. During further navigators' training in Illinois they shared an apartment with another couple, but it was awkward and difficult. However, with housing being scare, especially near military facilities, it was the only reasonable choice. I don’t know if my mother stayed during the entire navigator training periods or if she returned to Westfield, New Jersey.

By the end of the summer of 1944, Jack graduated from navigator school and was ready to be assigned to a military unit. He was given a two-weeks pass to travel home. I have a couple photos of him during that brief period before he traveled overseas. In one small photo, he is squatting next to me in his parents’ driveway. In the other, he is holding me alongside his parents. The only memory my mother shared of this time was that my father put his car—a 1939 or 1940 Ford coupe—up on blocks to await his return. My mother did not understand this decision, for she would have to use public transport or beg rides during his absence, and was hurt by it for years into the future.

My father and me

In September 1944, Jack reported at Westover Field in Chicopee, Massachusetts. A month later he reported to Mitchel Field on Long Island. Mitchel was a staging area for planes and crews before being sent to Europe. Finally, with over 140 hours of flying time, Jack was sent to Grenier Field, outside Manchester, New Hampshire. On October 3, 1944, Jack and a crew of 10 were ordered to Italy via the North Atlantic route. On October 5th the plane arrived at Gander Bay, Newfoundland and flew on to Manduria, Italy, later in the month.

CHAPTER 4: Into the War

None of the fellows wanted to fly, but something keeps them going.
— Sam Stein, diary entry for January 13, 1944

Stein's observation is confirmed by many flyers, both contemporaneously and in later years. He was an astute monitor of his own feelings and sensed those of others, even if they themselves preferred not to acknowledge or record their feelings at the time. The anticipation of a combat mission, the flight through fields of flak, the long journey back to base all produced high levels of tension and anxiety. During the initial missions, the anxiety was more of the unknown: what would happen when the German fighters attacked? What would it feel like to be shot at? Could the plane make it? Were the other guys capable in combat? Am I?

These and other questions were answered for most of the original crew members during the first month of combat. German fighters had attacked the formation, but U.S. P-38 escorts had done a good job of keeping the attacks to a minimum. Tight formation flying and vigilance by the gunners added to Group confidence. Flak for the 450th, as for many other Groups, had been sampled. Planes were holed numerous times and patched over. But nothing could be done about flak, for it was most intense and accurate during the bomb run when evasive action was impossible. Flyers sat in the metal tube and watched the black smoke of exploding shells, perhaps well below or away from the plane, perhaps at a level with the plane and along its course. There was nothing to do about it but watch.

Combat began to sort out the men. Skills were tested, changes were made to meet needs, personalities conflicted and melded. A few men were removed from combat crews, removed themselves, or were put in less responsible positions. For the most part, however, crews became tight-knit groups, confident in one another and prepared to sacrifice for one another. There were exceptions to this general profile. Fagan, for example, wrote years later: "Anyone who gets in the way of survival, friend or foe, cut 'em off at the knees." Yet there are numerous examples of individual self-sacrificing acts of bravery, of crew members risking themselves for others, of crews sticking with a pilot and a crippled plane and a potential crash even when given the option of bailing out and saving their lives.

As the weeks and months advanced, the overriding question became: how many more missions? The 15th AAF required combat crew members to complete 50 missions to finish a tour of duty and be rotated back to the Zone of the Interior (as the US was officially called).

A mission was generally determined to have occurred if the target was reached and bombs were dropped. Planes that returned early for mechanical reasons earned no credit. Missions called back because of inclement weather before reaching the target were of no use to crew members seeking to add to their total missions. Some targets were judged sufficiently difficult—such as Ploesti or Vienna—that crews earned a double credit. Those crew members who kept diaries indicate that each man kept careful track of the number of missions they had flown and/or completed. Most crew members finished 50 missions within four to six months of their arrival, indicating the intensity of flight time and, subsequently, the high turnover in crews as planes were lost or crew members completed their 50.

Getting their missions was one reason men continued to fly in combat. The more they flew, the sooner they could go home. Other reasons put forward by airmen, often in retrospect, include: it was just something you did, it had to be done, fear of ridicule from others, worry of being harshly judged by others if one slacked off or showed deep fear. In other words, the reasons were not unusual for men at that time—or now. There seems to have been little outward questioning about the larger motives of the war, one's role in combat, or the fears that filled flyers. Few men deliberately refused to fly, although it did happen occasionally, especially after a difficult mission when other planes were seen to go down. Joking, solitude, singing, smoking, drinking, talking, and praying all provided outlets for men to privately struggle with their fears.

There was speculation about the intent of a few pilots and their crews whose planes returned early more often than normal. Were the mechanical problems they claimed real or an excuse to abandon a mission? There is a story of one pilot who said on his next mission north of the Alps he would flee to Switzerland, to sit out the war there. Apparently he did.

Ground crew soldiers were in for the duration of the war. Ground crew members usually worked on several planes and some came to identify with those planes and the flight crews. Thus, combat missions were important to the ground crew because they felt they contributed to the end of the war, especially the original members of the 450th, where friendships had been formed between ground and combat crew members. As time went on, those relationships largely ended, as combat crews did not return from missions or completed their 50 and went home. With the arrival of replacement crews—from April 1944 on—few ground crew soldiers sought out or developed friendships with the flyers. While gathering information for this story, I asked many people if they had known my father—a replacement crew member. One man said to me, with a touch of guilt and sense of sadness in his voice, that it was too hard to make friends after a while. Men would come and go all

the time; it was too stressful to seek out new friendships among the flyers and too painful if they did not come back after a mission.

Army Air Force Strategy

The 15th Army Air Force was created for two purposes: provide an air force less constrained by bad weather as seen in northern Europe; and mount missions against the eastern and southern portions of the German empire. The 15th and 8th AAFs were to operate in conjunction with one another, their combined strength focused especially on destroying the German air force. In addition, the 15th AAF was to support the ground operations in Italy, attack German forces in the Balkans, and attack oil production and distribution systems. Destruction of the German air force in preparation for the Allied invasion of northern Europe was of primary concern to military strategists. German fighter production at Wiener Neustadt and Regensburg was targeted and planners were prepared to sacrifice 10-20 percent of the attack planes in order to hit these targets and draw out the German air force so it could be attacked in the air.

The Italian weather initially offered no great advantage over England, especially in the depth of winter and before fields and runways were improved. However, by the end of February the advantages gained from the new 15th AAF were becoming evident. Air and ground crews had gained needed experience; targets in Italy, the Balkans, Austria, and southern German were hit.

As 1944 advanced, the emphasis for 15th operations altered. By mid-year, the German air force was largely lost or ineffective. Oil was targeted from late April as were industrial centers in Austria and southern Germany. German supply routes in Italy and the Balkans remained regular targets throughout the 18 months of the 450th's presence in Italy and were attacked almost exclusively in the last months of the war.

The two heavy bombers flown by the 15th AAF were B-24 Liberators and B-17 Flying Fortresses. The latter are better known today, as they were also flown by the 8th AAF, out of bases in Britain. The 8th AAF was larger, formed earlier, and has been the subject of more writing and movies than the 15th.

The B-24s were used exclusively by the 450th, and other bomb groups of the 47th Wing. The first B-24s were built in 1939. They were designed to have a longer range, larger bomb

capacity, and higher altitude capability than the B-17s. Originally designed by Consolidated Aircraft Corporation of San Diego, eventually the B-24s were manufactured by four different companies around the U.S. A number of changes were made over the years, mostly to provide greater protection. During the war, over 18,000 of the bombers were built between June 1941 and May 1945. The 450th flew mostly in B-24H and B-24J models.

The planes were not very stable in combat conditions. Close-order formation flying was difficult because of the turbulence felt by the planes, the wings were unable to absorb much damage before collapsing or folding back against the side of the plane (which is what happened to my father's plane), and the fuselage tended to crack apart if a wheels-up landing was required.

In the earlier design of the B-24, the bombardier sat in a plexiglass nose of the plane. However, the entire plane was vulnerable to head-on attacks by German fighters. In the B-24H series, a nose turret was added and the position of the bombardier, although remaining in the nose of the plane, was shifted somewhat further into the interior of the nose. The B-24H series manufactured at the Consolidated Fort Worth plant also enclosed the waist-gunner windows with plexiglass. Planes from the Ford Willow Run, Michigan plant and Douglas' Tulsa plant retained the swing-open windows that placed gunners directly into the frigid air moving past the plane at 200 miles per hour.

Combat Missions

By the end of January 1944 the 450th had completed twenty missions, although individual crews had completed fewer because of days off and rotation among crew members. Only two planes had been lost in combat; several men were known to have been killed and wounded; the number of men missing in action was fewer than 20. The month had provided sufficient bombing experience to the combat crews of the 450th to prepare them for subsequent events.

Eleven missions were flown in February 1944 by the Group. Rain, overcast, and a soggy runway kept the planes on the ground on over half of the days during the first three weeks of the month. The missions were exclusively within Italy, against rail networks and airfields, in support of the landing of the US 5th Army at Anzio on the western side of Italy.

Tony Santomango was a bombardier on one of the planes that flew during February. On Valentine's Day, on a mission to Verona—that he noted was the site for Romeo and Juliet—

his plane was hit by both flak and fighters and went down. He remembered:

> I was in the bomb bay when the bail out bell was going. My chute was up in the nose; I couldn't carry my chute because I couldn't go through the bomb bay with it. I went back up the nose to get my chute. The navigator was still there, so I went out the [nose wheel] hatch and got hooked. He picked me up and dropped me. Some 40 years later I told him he had saved my life. He said no, I had saved his. He had froze; by picking me up he came out, too.

Santomango and the eight others who escaped from the plane were picked up by the German forces within hours. He was extensively hit by flak, was bleeding badly, and became unconscious shortly after he was on the ground. He received medical treatment, although he does not remember it.

> The next day they moved me up to a private room, with two beds and my second engineer was with me. I don't know how long I was there, but they then sent me to a hospital near Lake Como, up in the Italian Alps. They did an operation up there. I was up there for about two months. They operated, I lost my right eye; they said if they didn't operate it would affect the other eye. What was I to do; I was 20 years old, scareder [sic] then hell, so what would I say, "No?"
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> They gave me a lot of good treatment. Then I went up to [Stalag] Luft One. When I got there the three officers were there, the pilot, co-pilot and navigator. They thought I had died, the last they saw of me.

Others who flew on that day remember it for the intense cold. In the minus-sixty-degree temperatures at altitude, guns and men froze. In a number of cases, heated suits burned out or the generators that produced electrical current on the planes failed and the heated suits became useless. Numerous men returned to base with varying degrees of frostbite.

"Big Week" became the first full test of the 15th AAF, including the planes and crews of the 450th BG. In anticipation of an Allied invasion of Europe in May 1944, the high command had ordered the destruction of the German air force. The 8th, 12th, and 15th AAF were to be involved, the massive fleets of planes flying from England and Italy targeted to airplane production plants in Germany. At the same time, it was hoped the German air force would seek to defend the plants and attack in force, providing the Allied forces with an opportunity to destroy planes in the air, as well as production on the ground.

The 450th crews heard about the missions on the morning of February 22nd, during the briefing for that day's mission against the Obertraubling assembly plant for Messerschmitt fighters, near the airfield at Regensburg, Germany. It was the first Group raid into Germany and involved the long flight from southern Italy, up along the Adriatic coast, over the Alps, and beyond. It would be the longest mission to date. The Group war diary for the month of February notes the change that the mission brought: "The 450th entered the big leagues today...." However, it was only the 720th, 721st, and 722nd Squadrons that reached the target. Seven of the planes of the 723rd returned early, one bombed an alternate target, and one plane was lost from the Squadron. Several planes from the 450th were lost, but the results were judged favorable. Men, whole crews, and planes were expendable within the larger strategy.

Over the target, the Group was attacked by 25-30 ME-109s and 10-15 FW-190s, two of Germany's premier fighter types. The planes attacked in pairs, from 4, 5, and 7 o'clock high—that is from the right side and rear of the B-24 formation. There was no fighter escort during the outward flight, thus the 15th AAF planes had to defend themselves, although not for as long as did the 8th AAF planes that flew in over France and Germany. The 721st claimed two enemy planes downed and a probable. Once to the target, cloud cover made bombing difficult. Intense flak holed many planes and several men were hit with fragments. The 722nd lost one plane, piloted by Flight Officer Walter Vanderkamp. There were three survivors, one of whom was Paul Drury, the radio operator, whose testimony along with that of other observers provides the following summary account.

At about 12:30 p.m. Drury's plane was at 21,500 feet and near the target. The plane was attacked by fighters and one of the waist gunners and the tail gunner were hit and probably killed. The plane lost altitude, regained control, and then left the formation with black smoke pouring from it. The plane was quickly losing altitude although apparently under control; three men jumped, including Drury—their first and last parachute jump. The pilot, too, apparently bailed out, but his chute failed to open. The other six men of the crew were dead or died when the plane crashed. One of the dead men was Second Lt. William Brohm, the bombardier. He was the first man in the 450th from Fanwood, New Jersey, to die. My father was the second, eleven months later.

The long flight, the fighter attacks, inevitable mechanical problems, and general disarray meant that the formation was not all together as it headed back south. Although most planes landed together, several were long delayed, landed elsewhere, or did not return. Group Intelligence and Operations staff, some in the control tower, were getting constant

calls from delayed planes as they waited for the late returns. It was a long day for all concerned.

On February 23rd the target was Aero Engine works at Steyr, Austria. "When the briefing ribbon in Intelligence war room was stretched the whole length covering a maximum number of miles, the crew whistled," noted the Monthly Report for the Group. For the 450th it would be a much more difficult day than the one before. Bombing was, at best, only satisfactory. The Group mission reported that "There were approximately 25 bursts in the labor camp area, some among the office buildings and some on the highway between the shops area." For the most part, the manufacturing and assembly areas were not hit. The labor camp areas housed the conscripted and slave laborers brought in by the Germans from occupied territories, usually eastern Europe. Protection for these workers was usually minimal.

The war diary for the 721st Squadron records: "About fifteen to twenty minutes from the target and in normal formation, a number of enemy aircraft estimated at 50 ME-109s, 25 ME-110s, 15 FW-190s and 15 JU-88s. These were experienced Luftwaffe fighters which attacked our squadron and cut it to shreds. During the attack by the fighters, the flak was heavy and intense, but the men had their thoughts glued to the fighters." Four planes from the Squadron were shot down. P-38s met the formation about 15 minutes after leaving the target and there were no other enemy attacks.

Amazingly, the 722nd didn't suffer any losses. The 723rd lost three planes from fighters which attacked when their planes were between the Initial Point (Wels, Austria) and the target. Among those shot down was Major Miller, the CO of the Squadron. Out of the 11 aircraft in the 2nd attack unit, only four returned to base and two were badly damaged. Paul Farina, an engineer on one of the 723rd planes, vowed a private revenge for losses the Squadron suffered that day. He wrote so intensely he skipped using apostrophes: “Ive made up my mind tonight. Ill never give up flying till I get some `Jerries.' Ill get even though. A swell friend of mine went down Al Lantang. Gosh he was a swell kid, even from Lowell Mass. Ill always think of him up there.”

Among the seven Group planes lost that day, was one with nose art that named it the “Impatient Virgin II,” the plane serviced by Sam Stein and carrying his close friend, Bob Ludwig. The pilot and radio operator had joked with Stein before takeoff, the latter encouraging Stein to test the radio under combat conditions. Stein wrote:

> I bid them luck at take off. Bob's funny smile waving at me. When the planes came back I sweated and sweated. I thought another formation had to come back. I ran to the barracks trying to get more details but nobody knew much as they were busy with fighters themselves. I tried to hold in my tears but I just burst out crying. I'm half in a daze. God will take care of them.

The war continued. Sam was assigned a new plane—“Paper Doll”—on which to maintain the radio and other electronic equipment. Word came down to "prepare a maximum number of aircraft for an attack against Regensburg Prufening Aircraft Factory" on February 25th. The command strategists—who, at least on paper, come across as an amazingly optimistic group—noted "A successful completion of this mission would cost the enemy eight to nine months of ME-109 production and diminish Nazi interception of Allied bombings." Crews were also told that a successful mission would deprive the Germans of the ability to produce one-third of their single-engine fighters.

Throughout the night prior to the attack, the ground crews worked in a muddy field, loading 500-pound bombs, cleaning the guns, repairing and testing the equipment. Before sunrise the air crews were up. Briefing and breakfast followed. At 8:41 a.m. the formation took off. The 450th led the Wing with its five bomb groups with Deputy Group Commander Gideon in command. The results were significant, with reconnaissance photos showing widespread destruction of the plant. The 450th lost four bombers.

One of the planes lost was piloted by Bernard Gillespie. After dropping its bombs and returning south, the plane ran into a "terrific flak barrage." The number-one engine and parts of the supercharger flew off. The plane kept up with formation for a while, but fell behind on course back to the base. The plane was under control, but could not maintain speed or altitude. At 12,000 feet it was clear to the pilot that he could not coax the plane over the Alps. He turned right and headed for Switzerland.

Shortly thereafter, several ME 109s attacked from the rear of plane and the tail gunner announced that he was hit. The ball turret gunner, Bill Brazzle, said: "When ordered to bail out I went to the tail of the ship and he [Bob Vance, the tail gunner] was lying down. I took off his flak suit and looked around for his parachute but could not find it. Our plane then rolled over on its back and was spinning around straight down. It was then that I bailed out. Bob was one of the best guys I know and a great pal. It hurt lots not being able to get him out of the plane." Brazzle and the Engineer, David Martin, spent the remainder of the war as POWs in Stalag 6 in Hydekrug, East Prussia.

In addition to the losses, the experience gained in heavy combat, and the sense of accomplishment during Big Week, the 450th gained a nickname. The rudders of the 450th's B-24s were painted white for easier identification as the planes assembled into formation. Following the Regensburg raid of February 25th, one of the stars of German radio propaganda, Axis Sally (warmly referred to as the Berlin Bitch by 450th alumni), broadcast that the "White-Tailed Liberators" would in the future be singled out by the Luftwaffe. Some men even worried that the base would be the target of German bombing. During a Group formation in front of headquarters on February 28th, Col. John Mills, the CO, is quoted as saying, "We will put more white on them and hit the Hun harder in the future." “White-Tailed Liberators” soon was changed to "Cottontails" by the 450th itself.

The perception by the combat crews was that the Germans seriously sought to carry out the threat made by Axis Sally. Fighter attacks increased, and more losses were accrued by the 450th during the following two months than by other Groups in the Wing. Eventually, all the planes in the 47th Wing adopted a black and yellow set of markings on their rudders, but the nickname stuck for the 450th.

Within months, another version of how the nickname originated came forward and circulated within the 15th AAF. This version has a crippled bomber lowering its landing gear as German fighters moved in to finish it off. The lowered gear signaled surrender and the fighters moved in to escort the plane to a German-held airfield. The plan was a ruse, however, and the pilot of the bomber ordered his gunners to fire on the German planes. All but one of the surprised fighters were shot down and the white-tailed bombers became the special target of German fighters. This version lacks credibility. The bomber is never identified, nor does the story appear in any of the unit records from late February 1944. The 450th alumni group has officially rejected this version.

Flak or fighters—which created the most anxiety? For most crews, especially after April 1944, flak caused the most worry. Little could be done to avoid the shell bursts once planes were in formation on their bomb run. Crews had to wait and hope. With fighters, at least the planes had some defense. Crews felt they had some control, firing at attacking fighters, and perhaps even hitting one.

There were no missions between February 26th and March 3rd, primarily due to rain and overcast. However, to the various members of the Group `No Combat Mission Flown This Date' did not mean there was no work. Group Operations and Intelligence sections continued with preparing maps, flight plans, escape and evasion information, target

overviews, even if later weather or other factors caused the commanders to scrub the mission. The Ordnance section loaded bombs and the Engineering section prepared the planes in anticipation of a mission. It was not uncommon that missions were canceled after hours of preparation. Other bomb groups were much more affected by the rainy weather. For example, the 449th used a field at Grottaglie, ten miles or so from Manduria. Between March 3rd and 19th, the 449th was literally stuck in the mud of their runway, unable to take off.

The mission on March 3rd, planned for Budapest, Hungary, was abandoned before the briefing due to bad weather over the target. The alternative was an airfield at Viterbo, Italy, to be hit with fragmentation bombs designed to destroy planes on the ground. During takeoff a bomber of the 723rd Squadron crashed. Whether its load was too heavy or the plane had mechanical problems was never discovered. Unable to lift off the runway, the plane "keeled over on its nose and exploded. It was total destruction and death in a matter of seconds." It was the seventh crew lost from the 723rd in less than two months of flying. Farina, of the 723rd, had shared a barracks with this crew. Their loss was deeply felt; “This [was] the first time I really cried,” he wrote in his diary. Given the level of losses within the 450th, new crews were moving in, the first in a long string of replacements for the Group.

Only three missions occurred in the first half of March as rain and a very wet runway prevented the planes from flying. New crews received instruction in escape and evasion procedures, first aid, and communications. Lectures and some practice in formation flying were arranged for flight crews. Target study for bombardiers was instituted and navigators were shown training films on no-fly days. This ground training was obviously considered important by those who provided it, but was superficial, if not boring. Pete Setzer recalls getting no training in survival, although escape and evasion procedures were a favorite topic of Intelligence, or practice parachute jumps. There runs through the 450th history a pattern of improvisation, not only in preparing the base, but in preparing the men for combat. For many, the art of training others came down to classroom settings with lectures and films, but little practical learning occurred. Time prevented more thorough preparation for the demands of combat, and youth and maleness were considered adequate alternatives for whatever might happen.

The target on March 11th was a submarine repair facility at Toulon, France. Briefing at 6:15 a.m. was followed by takeoff at 9:30. The bombing results were poor, with a number of the 500- pound bombs hitting the town rather than the docks. German fighters attacked, but not aggressively, but when the planes were en route home a plane of the 722nd Squadron

was attacked from the rear and hit just after noon. A witness reported that "while heading for the coast of France, fire broke out in the right wing. Soon afterwards the aircraft blew up."

As was procedure, when the situation of men in lost planes could not be confirmed, they were listed as Missing in Action. Even when a plane was seen by a witness to blow up and no parachutes were seen, the absence of bodies led to the MIA listing. Families were notified through curt and bureaucratic War Department telegrams. When subsequent information became available, the MIA designation would be changed, usually to Prisoner of War (POW) or Killed in Action (KIA). Again, the telegrams went out.

Thus, the crew of the downed plane was listed as MIA. Based on the location of the crash site on Cap Cepet, south of Toulon, and an initial identification of ten bodies, the War Department notified the families in mid-September 1944 that all the men were killed. The family of one of the crew was dissatisfied with the information provided by the War Department—felt to be sketchy and incomplete, it lacked conclusive evidence of death. Five years later, in 1949, information was found that another B-24 had gone down during the same raid, at approximately the same time as that from the 722nd. Information from German sources provided evidence that the plane at the crash site was the other B-24. The War Department explained away the mix-up with bureaucratic language, referring to the complexities of keeping records during intense military activity. No trace of the B-24, or crew, was ever found. It was eventually assumed that the plane crashed in the ocean.

On March 17th, the weather improved and the planes took off for Schwechat airfield, southwest of Vienna, Austria. The target was completely overcast; most bombers dropped on ETA (estimated time of arrival), an accepted, but very loose way to carry out "precision bombing." Some targets, especially later in the war, could only be bombed when they were seen. But at this stage, especially in the Nazi heartland, bombing at "various points in the general area of the target" was considered acceptable when the target could not be seen. Farina’s plane dropped on Vienna itself after the “formation went right to hell over the target,” a point not recorded in the official documentation. One plane, from the 720th, was lost. All but the pilot survived, picked up by Yugoslav Partisans and eventually they returned to base.

On March 19th, Steyr, Austria, was the target. A heavy undercast obscured the target and most of the Wing formation turned back. The 450th continued on, perhaps because the group CO, Gideon, and the 723rd Squadron commander, Kellman, were piloting one of the

planes. Graz, Austria, became the target; we “layed it wide open,” reported Halsey. One plane was hit by flak and subsequently knocked down by ME-103s. It was the first mission for all the crew in that plane, except the co-pilot, who had arrived a week before. Halsey described the aftermath.

> Their buddies are gathering up their things tonight, and keeping their cigarettes and things that the supply room don’t want. One of the boys just gave me a half dozen stamped envelopes that belonged to one of the boys.

On March 23rd, crews were briefed before dawn for a raid on the ball-bearing plant at Steyr. About an hour after takeoff, the planes were called back to base because the overcast sky prevented them from making rendezvous. Two planes were lost, nonetheless. The plane in number seven position—low and rear of a seven plane box—pulled up into the plane in number four position. The latter plane broke in two and fell into the sea. The other plane went into a flat spin and crashed, too. It was the first mission for the pilot of the number seven plane. One of the planes involved in the collision had been assigned to Sam Stein for its radio work; it was the second plane to go down that he worked on. "The planes can be replaced," wrote Stein, "but those men are another story. They say in the army we are all expendable...BALONEY!!"

Throughout March 1944 raids continued, often with significant loses by the 450th. The lack of war experience of replacement crews was regularly evident, as again two planes collided in mid-air.

On March 30th, the marshalling yards and airfield at Sofia, Bulgaria, were the target in a full 15th AAF effort. A report on the survival of the plane of Lt. Pat Barbati illustrates the determination of bomber crews to get back to their base.

> Lt Dalgish was over this bombsight and remarked to navigator Robertson, `Boy, this is going to be a good one today'. Thirty (30) seconds before the bomb release point, a flak burst just in front of #2 engine. A large piece of flak came through the left side of the nose and knocked out the intervalometer, sheering wiring and hydraulic lines. A small piece of flak hit Lt Dalgish on the left shoulder which knocked him off balance, forward.
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> Lt. Robertson asked him if he was hurt; he said `I'm all right'; then he got up and with his left hand he pushed his salvo lever and released the bombs. A fire

> started in the nose caused by the electrical wiring being shorted. Dalgish and Robertson got the fire extinguisher down and put out the fire. Then Dalgish went back and checked the bomb doors, and returned and Lt. Robertson gave him first aid assistance.

Robertson adds to the detail:

> Only one engine was operating close to satisfactory. The bomb sight and panel were badly hit. We had lost our hydraulics, radio intercom, electric power, the bomb bay was damaged, couldn't close, and three bombs were hung up. Hydraulic fluid was everywhere. It is a red color so my first thought was that everyone was bleeding. A fire broke out in the cockpit...

The crew went to work to save the plane and their lives. The pilot and co-pilot struggled to keep enough speed on the plane to prevent a stall. Although the nose gunner had been hit, but not injured, by flak and had lost all hydraulic power to his guns, he stayed in position and worked the guns manually. The tail gunner cranked up the ball gunner and they then manually released the bombs that were hung in the bomb bay and cranked up the doors. The navigator provided medical attention to the bombardier, then plotted a course back to base. He crawled up to the cockpit to give directions and then back into the nose to watch over the bombardier. The plane fell two miles behind the formation, vulnerable to fighters looking for just such stragglers. Within minutes the fighters attacked the disabled plane. Staff sergeant Vernon D. Hasley, the tail gunner, hit one of the fighters at 200 yards and he went straight down in flames. Halsey, very modestly in his diary, wrote: “I shot down the third plane that attacked us, so he won’t be attacking anyone anymore.”

Without communications, however, the navigator became the plane's messenger. He warned the crew that bailing out was possible if the plane did not regain some altitude or if the German fighters returned. Just as it seemed that the crew would have to abandon the plane, six P-38s returned from escorting the formation. They chased away the remaining German fighters.

> Lts Barbati and Benz, CP, just babied her all the way home, engineer Adams cranked the wheels down manually and seven of us got in the rear of the plane. The hydraulic system was gone, so we had no flaps or brakes. Barbati sat her down on the far end of the runway and the seven of us ran as far back in the tail as possible to keep the nose up and stop us. Barbati gave all a choice to bail our

> over the field, but all stayed, saying if you can land her, we can ride her out. The landing was perfect.

In fact, the decision to stay with the plane was not as ennobling as indicated in the official record. Halsey reported that he and two other crew members were ready to bail out, but the others then changed their minds. Halsey was prepared to be the only one to go out, but peer pressure caused him to stay. Barbati, the pilot, was awarded the Distinguished Flying Cross for his efforts, but it is clear that all the crew members contributed to their successful return to base.

April brought better weather and twenty-eight missions for the 450th. Over twenty planes were lost, ten from the 720th alone. It was a month in which the 15th AAF provided support to the Allied breakout of Anzio, Italy, attacked German supply lines in support of Soviet Union movements in eastern Europe, and began to attack oil production and distribution centers, most notably at Ploesti, Romania. During April, also, the gunners on the bombers began dispersing tin foil—known as "window" or chaff—from the planes in the minutes before arriving over the target. In some cases, fighters released "chaff bombs" over the target prior to the arrival of the bombers. Another measure, known as "carpet," involved electronic transmissions from the air to jam the radar, but there was not sufficient equipment for the method to be widely used. The purpose was to jam the ground radar, disrupting the accuracy of the flak artillery, so that the shells would burst low. The air crews were pleased with the results. On the first mission during which the 450th dispersed the foil, the flak was intense but not accurate. The Army carried out an evaluation in October 1944 of the results of window and carpet. It found losses to flak in bomb groups protected by window were a third less than in those groups not protected. Carpet, when sufficient equipment was available to cover the operating frequencies of the German Wurzburg radar, reduced flak losses even more.

Bucharest was the target on April 4th. Takeoff was late, at 10:10 a.m., due to fog, which was probably just as well, as the latrines were full during the morning. Many men had the G.I.'s, either from nervousness or, as Sam Stein suggested, from something they had eaten. Bodily functions were not put on hold during flight. B-24 designers had been thoughtful enough to include rubber tubes at several points along the side of the plane into which the men could pee. At altitude, the urine might freeze as the men were relieving themselves, blocking the tube. Alternatively, the bomb bay could be used, "but as the urine went out the bay it got caught in the air stream which circled to the back of the plane where an air pocket vacuum pulled the frozen urine in. The tail gunner's compartment was not airtight, so the frozen

urine was sucked into that area," commented Leon Newby. To shit involved more work, as equipment had to be removed. When a man was too late—or too scared—the result was known as a "brownout." The designers had not got around to providing accommodations for shits, and many men used the green, waxed cardboard boxes their oxygen masks had come in. These were watertight and served the purpose. Several men tried to dispose of the used boxes through the waist windows only to find that the air currents pulled the box back in, creating another form of brownout.

For the fourth day in a row, April 5th called for another mission. This was the first mission by the 450th to Ploesti. Oil refineries surrounded the Romanian city. Ploesti pre-dated oil drilling in Titusville, Pennsylvania, by two years and remained an important center for the Nazi military, one which they were prepared to heavily defend. US air crews were briefed that one thousand anti-aircraft guns formed a barrier twelve miles in diameter around the city and refineries. Large smoke generators pumped out a dense black fog that obscured the refineries at least thirty minutes before the bombers, known to be headed toward the region, arrived. Ploesti was worth a battle to both sides and a battle it would be.

Fog postponed takeoff. In less than three hours they were on their bomb run. The Germans were prepared and provided the 450th with "the most severe enemy fighter action" yet encountered, noted the Group's monthly report. An estimated 40 to 60 enemy fighters attacked as the bombers approached the city and their aggressiveness increased as the target was approached. The whole battle lasted about an hour.

The monthly report from the 720th summarizes the experiences of that Squadron.

> The first attacks were from 12 o'clock, high, and were coordinated in pairs, threes, and fours. These dove through the formation and up under the second attack unit. After this attacks developed from all angles. Many attacks were made from six (6) o'clock in formations of six (6) in line abreast, breaking off at 50 yards. Many rockets were fired from planes which stood off at 10 o'clock. Three of our bombers went down over the target, where they had experienced flak and fighter action simultaneously. Our gunners claimed 3-5-1 [i.e., 3 fighters shot down, 5 probably shot down, and 1 damaged].

The monthly summary of the 723rd Squadron adds further detail.

> They had a nice bomb run and the bomb pattern covered the adjacent oil

> refinery doing great damage and starting huge fires. One hour and ten minutes before target time 2 FW 190's were seen flying in from the south and they stayed with our formation until the first attack was made acting as observers and, without doubt, radioing information as to strength and heading to attacking units. The first attack came 25 minutes from the target by 10/12 ME 109's who, using cloud cover, made a surprise attack from 12 o'clock high. These A/C dived through the first attack unit and came up under the second attack unit. Three of the group A/C were shot out of formation with the first pass. Lt. Lael, pilot from our squadron, was one of the three. The attack was coordinated and the fighters came through in two's, three's and four's. They would rally to the rear, make a side pass, gain altitude and then use the same tactics again. Nearer to the target, enemy resistance increased and 50/60 ME 109's and FW 190's, 10 ME 110's and 10/15 JU 88's were seen. Attacks were made from all angles singly and by pairs closing to within 50 yards before either pulling up or flying under. Coordinated attacks came from 6 o'clock low in formation of six flying two abreast, closing to 50/100 yards and breaking away on either side in a diving turn followed by a split S and then raking the under side of the attacked A/C. No break off in intensity was noted over the target and enemy fighters flew through to harass our formation. JU 88's stood off at 600/800 yards and fired rockets apparently directing the fire at the lead ships in each attack unit. All attacks were broken off 15 minutes past the target. Our Squadron lost one aircraft and were credited with ten enemy aircraft destroyed.

The persistence and aggressiveness of the German air attacks and the heavy flak over the target left many crew members badly shaken and exhausted. "Today's fight was very tiring, scary, and seemingly non-ending," wrote Dale Robertson. The losses of bombers during the raid added to a general air of depression and gloom. It had been one of the roughest missions to date for the 450th. Ploesti had begun to earn its reputation as a difficult target.

On the evening of April 16th, as several Group officers were putting on a show at their club, the Ordnance crews were equipping the planes. A portable generator ("put-put") caused a small fire and the fire trucks were called out. As they began to work the fire, the gas tanks of the plane exploded, rocking the entire base. The shock wave shook the officers' club and the fire was first thought to have been caused by an enemy bombing attack. When someone yelled, "Air raid!" the officers rushed for shelter. It soon became apparent that bombers were not overhead. At least five men were killed, a number of nearby planes were

damaged, and both air and ground crews were especially jumpy for the next few days wherever fire was involved.

Tragedies outside of combat continued. On April 18th, the crew of “Paper Doll” picked up their plane at Foggia where it had been landed several days before, when they could not reach their own field when returning from a mission. For unknown reasons, the plane exploded in mid-air as it was being ferried back to Manduria. Along with the crew, Lt. Basmania, who had just completed 50 missions and was heading home, was killed.

April ended with frustration and lowered morale. The losses during the last week affected everyone's mood and the bombing had been less than effective or successful. On several occasions, bombs missed their targets by a wide margin. "`What the hell is the matter?' was the common question being asked," the 723rd war diary noted. Bombing accuracy tended to go in waves, sometimes better and other times worse. The new crew members that arrived in later March and early April were one factor in the course of the bombing. They lacked the experience of those who had been in combat. Also, the losses did affect people's attitudes. Paul Farina, the engineer/top turret gunner in the 723rd, found that about midway through his missions he was feeling more and more jumpy and scared. He wrote: “Gee, I dont [sic] know what the heck is happening but I sure am starting to sweat these missions out from take off to landing.” At a later point, with just three missions of his 50 to go, he complained about the inexperience of a replacement co-pilot; “...ought to go back to pre-flight [school],” wrote Farina of the co-pilot, who fortunately was working with Bob Wells, a well-respected pilot.

Get to the target area, hope the bombardiers can sight, drop the bombs, and get out of there was an attitude that pervaded both older and newer crews. The risks remained, but they became somewhat more unacceptable as the losses steadily increased. Men could read the writing on the wall. Especially for those men who were nearing 50 missions, there was too little evidence that others like them were surviving and going home. Farina captured the mood when he wrote: “These missions seem to be getting worse & worse. I wonder if its [sic] possible for anyone to get fifty missions in.”

As May opened, the Group launched an intense effort to improve bombing accuracy. Target identification was increased for bombardiers, practice bombing runs and formation flying occurred over several days, and a new approach to bombing was introduced. Rather than individual bombardiers finding and dropping the bombs, the bombardiers in the lead planes of each box would assume that responsibility. The job of the other bombardiers was to

watch the lead plane. When its bombs went, they were to immediately trigger their own. The summer months were to begin on a new foot, the commander insisted.

After two recalls a couple hours into the missions, the 450th led the 15th AAF against the Ploesti oil fields on May 5th. "Our bomb run was as good as you can fly one. Our bombs hit in a good patern [sic]," reported one flyer. Being in the lead did provide advantages for bombing accuracy. The air currents were not yet disturbed by the movements of hundreds of other planes. The target, although shrouded in smoke from the German defenses, was not as obscured as after tons of bombs had fallen on or around the target. The flak gunners used the initial planes to tune their accuracy for subsequent planes.

Chapter 5: Settling In

Cold and damp persisted into February 1944. Sam Stein wrote: "When we didn't have overshoes to go through the mud and water some guys used condoms as galoshes." The mud was pervasive. A drill was ordered for the Group on February 6th as punishment for someone firing a gun the previous night. Again, Stein: "Walking in the mud you get taller and taller as the mud keeps adding onto your shoes."

Squadron mess halls opened in February. That of the 721st was in tents and had such luxuries as tables and lights. Talk had begun of building officers' clubs, for the Group and each Squadron. Life was improving around the 450th base; the Group was settling in.

450th airfield with Manduria at the top of the photo

Two trends were at work at once. On the one hand, Group members sought to establish a semblance of living conditions with which they were familiar. It was not a conscious attempt to re-create home, but an instinct which drew upon what they knew. On the other hand, being away from home allowed many men to experiment in ways they may not have otherwise. They could use their relative wealth to pay for goods and services that would have been expensive or beyond their means in the U.S.—or for work that would have been done by mothers or wives. Most had been involved in male activities before becoming involved in the war, but now male togetherness intensified. Gossip, sports, movies, touring, cards, and drinking were the norm.

The Base

The base was laid out on a large flat area, along the dirt road that ran between the towns of Manduria and Oria to the north. Small farms and olive groves surrounded the field. The Italian air force had used the field earlier in the war. Initially, little was done to the airfield to accommodate the U.S. planes. A few miles west, beyond Manduria, the land sloped down to the Bay of Taranto. To the east, the land rose slightly in rolling hills. The runway ran basically east-west.

As the base grew, individual squadrons developed separate areas, each within the olive trees. The 723rd was furthest east, toward the end of the runway. The other squadrons were grouped between the 723rd and the base headquarters. Group administrative buildings were on the south central side of the base, parallel to the Manduria-Oria road. Many of these buildings were pretty grubby, having been taken over and quickly occupied in December 1943. Partitions were added, windows that had been blocked up were opened, plaster was added to walls, and exterior walls were whitewashed. Where additional space was needed, new stone structures were put up. Signs designating each unit were conspicuously added. Eventually, the area was laid out with roads and stone-lined paths, gravel and sand were brought in to fill low lying areas, and buildings received coats of whitewash. Electricity was available, from the Italian commercial network and diesel generators.

It was necessary to completely renovate and reestablish the base sewage system. Two Italian master plumbers were employed from early 1944 to do this work and maintain the sewage system. The medical/sanitation officer reported, "There were no adequate latrines available and the previous occupants had defecated wherever and whenever the impulse

450th Administrative offices

occurred. Work details were formed, latrines built and excrets removed." Late in January 1944, "numerous dynamite blasts that made everyone run for shelter from the flying rocks and also made it necessary to make patches in a few tents. This blasting was necessary to make the latrines," reported the 721st war diary for January. The sanitation infrastructure kept up with expansion of the squadrons and Group so that by the end of March latrines, running hot and cold water, and showers were available.

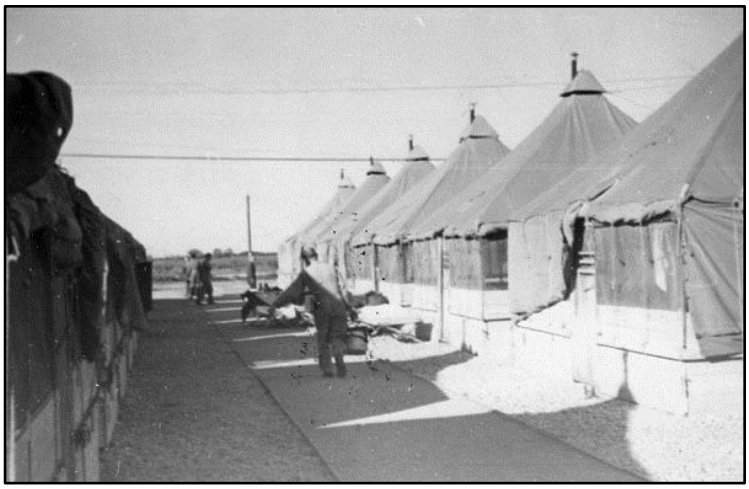
Italian labor was plentiful and workers were recruited for many chores. Stone masons were commissioned to build bungalows for some of the officers. Workers maintained the facilities, provided general pick-up, took care of garbage and rubbish, and a variety of other chores. Barbers visited the base often and men picked up and delivered laundry. Food stuffs were often used as currency. On the periphery of the base, in the olive groves, sex workers could be found.

Common facilities for the soldiers began to take shape during the spring of 1944. Officers in the 721st were assessed $5 in February to build an officers' club and were asked to contribute an additional $5 to assure the club was "New York Type." The Group opened its officers' club early in March with champagne, piano music, gambling, and lots of boisterous drinking. Squadron officers' and enlisted men's clubs, day and orderly rooms were all to follow in the coming months. A Group officers' mess opened at the beginning of March. Each recreation facility seemed to become more elaborate than the next. The 722nd day room had an Italian band every Saturday night, another had piped music throughout the day. Separate rooms for reading and writing, cards, and drinking existed. Some had fireplaces for winter evenings.

Improved housing

Each opening of one of the clubs called for a celebration and each was preceded by rumored wishes that women would be present. Rarely did that occur, however. Women from nearby Red Cross clubs or Polish and U.S. nurses from nearby hospitals occasionally joined Group officers for a meal and show and sometimes officers would bring a woman to a dance, but the base remained overwhelmingly a male enclave.

Housing continued to be a primary concern and a number of officers and enlisted men hired Italian stone masons and builders to construct small stone houses. For example, four officers from Group headquarters had built for themselves a one-room house which had hot and cold running water, a shower, and toilet. Stone had been used for hundreds of years in the region. Known as tuffi, the limestone was quarried and cut into appropriate shapes and sizes. Six-man tents were available to those not in barracks by early March. These soon acquired wooden and later concrete floors, which cut down on rats, sand fleas, and lizards and made them more tolerable. Late in February, the residents were ordered to dig slit trenches around their tents in the event of a bombing raid by enemy forces. In March, wooden floors were added to the tents, which made them more habitable.



Tent City

By July most of the "real estate boom"—as the Group historian referred to the building spree—had come to an end. "As a result of this building program, the group is now able to enjoy a maximum of comfort." The base had become as close to home as the men could make it while still enjoying their sense of independence and adventure.

Activities

Special Services provided regular live shows and films. There were two U.S.O. shows in Oria in March 1944, the second featuring John Garfield, Jean Darling, Eddy Foy, Jr., and Shirley Rogers. Sam Stein helped set up the electrical and PA system and was rewarded with autographs of the touring group afterwards. In addition, locally produced shows were regularly held, with both military and Italian civilian entertainers. Especially appreciated by the audiences were the American women on the USO tour.

Italian entertainers received modest praise, but the women were often derided for not fitting US male expectations of beauty and talent. For example, a show on April 21st drew the following note: "The `cuties' aren't exactly lithe and slender. Someone said there was [a] food shortage in Italy. These girls did not evince it." Commenting on the same show in the 723rd war diary for April, another writer remarked: "These Italian gals just can't dance. They must have developed their basic technique in some convent.... Besides most of the gals were carrying an excess of fat around the usual parts of their bodies...."

Also in April, work began on a 2,000-seat theater for the Group. The Group's monthly report noted that the theater would have a "rockstone...stage which measures 34 feet deep by 30 feet wide, and to be embroidered with footlights in the front and two dressing rooms in the rear. A projection booth is also being erected." The theater opened on May 22nd and every seat was taken for the movie "Sweet Rosie O'Grady" with Betty Grable.

Movies were common, as often as four days a week in May. Most were shown at a theater in Oria and men from the 450th had to scramble in the evening for transportation down the dusty dirt road. The films were those also being viewed in the States: "Heavenly Body" with Hedy Lamarr, "Let's Face It" starring Bob Hope and Betty Hutton, and "His Butler's Sister," with Deanna Durbin. G.I. films, as they were called, provided news and short subjects and patriotic themes. Most films were welcome diversions. When the films didn't provide the entertainment, the men took it upon themselves to do so. During a movie in March at Oria the projector bulb blew. While another was being sought, the audience amused itself with a peculiarly military type of pastime—numerous inflated `you know what' were spotted by flashlights in the dark. The `dinghies' floating all over the theater were the object of comment by all sorts of wags. There were no ladies present. Chaplain Stevens tried to divert the attention to more uplifting things by leading out with `Ham and Eggs.'

Some films were viewed with scorn or comic irony. The hardships of living at the home front, as depicted in "Government Girl," were dismissed by the soldiers, most of whom were ready to trade. The film "Bombardier" was deemed a comedy by the men as they watched the actor use his bombsight to drop the bombs into a smoke stake from 20,000 feet. The promises of military technology simply did not live up to the reality experienced by the flight crews and the propaganda for the home front was readily dismissed for its naiveté.

In April, a boxing ring was built with supervision provided by Chaplain Stevens as Acting Special Services Officer. The first bouts occurred at "Manduria Arena," as it was called. The Group's war diary described the events: "There is much booing, shouting and yelling. Good clean fun." Weekly, Sunday evening boxing marches remained a popular activity until the 450th left Manduria. African American M.P.s from the 734th Military Police Detachment and British anti-aircraft units were always strongly represented in the ring.

Sundays drew large numbers of men to church. Services also were held on Tuesday and Thursday evenings for those who could not attend on Sunday. In preparation for Easter services, Group Chaplain Stevens organized a choir with 75 men. Easter was celebrated on the airfield, with a B-24 as backdrop to the choir. Friday night services for Jewish G.I.s drew an increasing number as time went on. The first night of Passover was celebrated on April 7th. In years past, this celebration was usually with family. But this year, for Stein and others, it was a lonely affair. The next day he went to Taranto for the Seder. Sam Stein said he and "All the Jewish fellows from our group, British, American, Palestians [sic] and 140 refugee Jews mostly from Yugoslavia" gathered in a local restaurant where the Seder and Passover meal were held.

Sports activities were organized from early on. Basketball was played in the evening at the Municipal auditorium in Manduria. Volleyball followed and was enthusiastically played. Warmer weather found some of the enthusiasts playing nude. Spring and drier weather brought out the baseballs and softball teams were formed. Informal softball games occurred while ground crews waited for planes to return from missions.

Beginning in April, the proximity of the ocean lured some of the men. By May, afternoon visits to the beach were common. After the mission on May 19th, the first Group beach party was called. Group reports note that by the end of the month, "Beach parties are a fast spreading fad among the squadrons. The 723rd also decided to throw a real party for the boys.... With an accumulation of beer and coke rations, the party got an early start. By mid-afternoon the cooks had chickens and pork sizzling in the spits." The Squadron Commander,

Jacoby, "made himself comfortable with beer in one hand and chicken in the other." Mattress covers were filled with air to make rafts. For awhile, the beach was clothing optional. However, it appears that Red Cross workers and Army nurses also stationed in the area felt constrained from using the beach and trunks became required.

Adding to the sense of community was *Molto Buono*, a newspaper that began as a four-page, typewritten and mimeographed weekly produced by and for the 723rd Squadron. The first issue came out at the end of March 1944. A month later, the newspaper became Group-wide and was hand typeset and printed by "little orphans under the guidance of brother Vincenzo" at an orphanage in Oria.

The first issue carried a story about "Swede" Nilssen and four of his crew who had bailed out of their plane and managed to get back to base after a month. The paper also described a visit by a flyer to a woman in Lecce. He carried soap, candy, and cigarettes, but "found that the girl had turned professional... After taking the gifts she demanded cash. It was a sad Sammy that came back to the base that night, sans rations, sans favors."

The paper eventually acquired a more official quality, reflecting the views of the Public Relations unit of the Group, which came to produce the paper. Squadron gossip was recorded in a weekly column and Group achievements were standard fare.

R&R was first taken by a crew while others were engaged in Big Week, in February 1944. Capri was one site, Santa Cesarea was another. Both offered ocean, clean beds, good food, and relaxation. Of Capri, the *Molto Buono* reported a good hotel bar and "the women there are `molto buono'." Lecce was a favorite town to visit on days off, while Brindisi on the Adriatic coast received other 450th visitors.

There are numerous implications in the written records about women, but little explicit detail about the extent to which men sought temporary and longer-term relations with Italian women or American nurses or Red Cross workers. There is no doubt that women (usually referred to as "girls") were a regular thought and topic of conversation. Pin-up pictures adorned the walls of many living areas. Romance scenes in the movies and women with USO shows were greeted with loud approval. How much was this typical male bonding and horniness? There was a great deal of both, one playing off the other. How many men sought out women for sexual favors? Apparently, it was not uncommon for more senior officers to bring Italian or American women to their houses on the base at night; several

officers are mentioned in the oral literature. Enlisted men tended to find women off the base.

The military took seriously the likelihood of sexual relations with local women. Condoms were readily available to troops. Treatment of sexually transmitted diseases also was available. The medical officers regularly provided "sex lectures" and information about sexual diseases, but with limited success. The increasing number of STD cases in the Group in February 1944 led to an order in the 721st for weekly physicals. In comparison with the malaria control measures taken in mid-1944, a report in the 720th June 1944 war diary noted that medical authorities were still hoping for "some measures [that] could be taken to keep down venereal disease, then health would be excellent. It seems that personnel are not educable to total abstinence and moderation is not the complete answer for `venereal disease'."

One chronicler of the 450th experience remarked that drinking and cards were the primary activities of most men. The statement seems somewhat exaggerated, but does reflect interests of many of the troops. The alcohol that Group members brought with them from the States was gone early in January 1944. Italian wine became not only the drink of choice, but of necessity. Many younger men had little or no previous experience with wine, but quickly adapted. Not until May were beer and Coke available. "The squadron Post Exchange is very popular this week, with beer and coca-cola [sic] for each man. There was also a fine supply of cigarettes and candy," reported the 720th monthly war diary for May 1944. Later in the month a wide assortment of candy and ample cigarettes were available.

Usually, the war was well removed from Manduria. The scars of fighting were to be seen with each returning mission, but that fighting occurred hundreds of miles away. Nevertheless, the airfields in southern Italy were protected by anti-aircraft batteries and the British troops who manned the guns were frequent guests of the 450th and other groups. There had been occasions when the batteries burst into operation, but in late May and early June the action was more frequent. The responses of 450th soldiers reflect the underlying anxiety that plagued those far from the war and suggests the terror that must have been felt by the people who actually lived under the falling bombs.

On June 2nd, Sam Stein wrote that during the evening movie ("Let's Face It" with Bob Hope and Betty Hutton), the troops were notified that they were on alert for a possible air raid. Sam wrote: "I don't know if I should go to sleep or not. These day by day alerts are getting me gittery. It's getting too close for comfort."

The Group war diary reported that on June 4th "the ear piercing wail of the [air raid] siren sent everyone clomping down to the shelters. There were an assorted group of men down in the caves. Some had grabbed a steel helmet on the way out of their quarters; only a helmet and a pair of shoes, very stunning!" The bombing seemed to be occurring around Taranto and Brindisi and many men came out of the shelters to watch. However, "Suddenly the ground shook with the nearby batteries, the siren started its wail and intermittently could be heard the unsynchronized engines of Jerry." All clear at midnight. On June 8th the air raid siren sounded at 3 a.m. "In various stages of undress, the officers and enlisted men took to the shelters. Jerry had dropped a few flares and the ack-ack batteries shook the field with their thunder. It did not last long. After 0400 all returned to bed."

At the same time, there were rumors that German spies and saboteurs had infiltrated the area. Scouting parties searched the 450th base for suspects and guards were posted. However, the rumors were no more than that. The German spy who had been asking questions around the 450th (he was said to have looked and talked like a Nazi, wrote Stein) turned out to be a Wing Ordnance Inspector.

Rumors, wishful thinking, and gossip were the more prevalent invaders of the base. With limited information to understand Allied strategy and day-to-day conduct of the war in Europe, it is not surprising that both credible and fanciful beliefs circulated around the 450th—and beyond. Even from one day to the next, air crews likely did not know a future target or when individual crews would be assigned to fly the next day. Not knowing what was to come added to the stress and anxiety of most everyone on the base.

The fall of Rome on June 5th and the invasion of France on June 6th greatly increased group morale. The Group reported that on June 7th, "The S-2 [Intelligence and Planning] war room was the most popular place in camp. Officers and enlisted men crowded the maps for new names being thundered by the loudspeakers in front of headquarters. Everybody wanted to know how large, how effective, how fast and how costly the invasion was." The capture of Rome stimulated rumors that the group would move north, perhaps to an airfield in the vicinity of Rome itself.

Chapter 6: The War Continues

The virtues as well as limitations of air power were evident in the operations of the 450th by early spring 1944. The promise of high-altitude precision bombing could not live up to technical limitations, mechanical problems, and human fear. The inexperience of crews in this new form of warfare was evident in the difficulties in placing bombs on the designated targets.

What was not lacking was an ability among the flyers to regularly climb into the planes, to carry out the routine of individual roles, to face in-coming enemy fighters and flak, and to persist in completing bomb runs despite the evidence of immediate death in the air. Varying degrees of fear inhabited almost all flyers, but it was not an emotion that was regularly discussed or shared, except for after a mission and then in a jovial manner, where they could laugh at their own terror, but without fully admitting to it. For example, early in May, a mission was called off "at which time all cheered—you could observe the look of relief come over the boys' faces."

The reaction of pilots and crews to unexpected and horrendous events illustrates how tense conditions were. After witnessing a midair collision as the Group formed up, the remaining pilots and crews experienced severe anxiety. Replacement crews with relatively little experience added to the anxiety. Experienced pilots worried that another inexperienced pilot could make another mistake. New pilots and crews were freaked out by what they had seen and the image of what could happen to them. The skill acquired from months of diligent formation practice suddenly was not there. Planes began to spread further apart rather than closing in on one another. The formations scattered all over the sky. Discipline vanished. Fifty miles before reaching the target, the Group looked like it was on a big Easter-egg hunt, as one man described it. A bomb fell out of one of the lead planes. “Tension-filled toggliers [bombardiers who took the cue to release bombs from a lead bombardier] saw the bomb fall and began toggling their bombs. A chain reaction ensued. Bombs began falling all over the countryside and *they weren't anywhere near the target area*. The mission was a total disaster,” summarized one mission report.

This event and others in all Groups must have convinced the leadership to give new emphasis to flight discipline. Although the tools the crews had to work with were often less effective than the technical designers and manufacturers claimed, the human element in high-altitude bombing was the weak link in bombing effectiveness, if we are to judge by the official response. In May, the 450th Group gave new emphasis to bombing accuracy and

formation flying. "Non operational days were devoted to intensified training of all crews in order to improve the bombing pattern of the bombardiers and to achieve a tighter formation in flight," recounted a Group report. Group headquarters launched an instruction program on target identification for bombardiers. Details of the principal targets were described thoroughly. The purpose was to improve accuracy and to be able to identify actual placement of bombs. The Group also adopted the pattern where each of the five to seven planes in flight elements dropped their bombs as soon as they saw the lead plane release its bombs, creating—it was argued—a tighter pattern on the target. Thus, the lead bombardier was responsible for determining the moment of release; other bombardiers were essentially along for the ride.

Also, late April and early May was a transitional period. The first men to complete 50 missions were on their way home. New crews and crew members had to be quickly integrated into existing squadrons and function with more experienced members. New planes, the gleaming, unadorned aluminum skins contrasting with the painted planes that came over with the Group, were being added.

The practice flights were in the morning and afternoon, designed "to acquaint the new men with the tactics here and give them more practice in formation flying," noted a Group report.

After several days of intense training, the 450th completed its 60th mission on May 5, 1944. The Group was divided. The 722nd and 723rd took off at 8 a.m.; the 720th and 721st began takeoff at 10:15. The target for all squadrons was the oil refineries and marshalling yards at Ploesti. The planes carried 500-pound bombs. As usual at Ploesti, the Germans were ready. The refineries were obscured by clouds and smoke from the extensive ring of smoke-pot defenses used by the Germans. "The target was completely obscured by clouds over the aiming point, but breaks in the cover while on the run enabled the bombardiers to make sightings which gave a concentrated pattern calculated to cover the marshalling yards and the refinery. Photos taken show some strings falling in the right areas." As the group left the area "a column of smoke, extending about 12,000' into the air could be observed, indicating a large oil fire," reported the 721st Squadron summary of the mission.

Fighter attacks and flak met the 450th. "The squadron [720th] was subjected to enemy fighter attacks just as the left rally [turn after leaving bomb run] was made from an oil refinery at Ploesti.... The attacks were mostly from six o'clock, high, and out of the sun. Attacks were made singly and in pairs. Several attacks were also made from twelve o'clock,

level.... The 15/20 Me 109's and one (1) FW 190 were not aggressive in the air battle which lasted for approximately twenty (20) minutes," according to the 720th after-mission report. All 720th planes returned safely, as did the planes from all other squadrons. Also, several men in the 720th and 722nd completed their 50th mission on this day; their achievement was a strong encouragement to others, a sign that it was possible to get through the war.

Weather resulted in canceled missions between May 7th and 11th: "All these days without a mission! Maybe the war is over and they forgot to notify the 450th. That's the way they feel around the group," wrote the narrator in the Group's monthly report. Rumors were sweeping the base, including one that the war would not be over before Christmas. "A practice mission for today was canceled. The program was maximum maintenance," reported the 450th Group and 720th Squadron war diaries for those days.

On May 11th everyone was busy preparing for what appeared to be a major mission the next day. The order was that every available ship would fly, an order that was heard in every group throughout the 15th Army Air Force. Double sorties were planned in support of Allied forces that would be seeking to break out of the Anzio region of southern Italy. The 450th target was Porto San Stephano, the principal unloading point for supplies shipped down the west coast of Italy by small boats. The port "has provided forward rail lines with nearly twenty-five (25) per cent of the total supplies required by the enemy troops in the line. The shore installations and roads were principal objectives." During the morning mission "the formations were routed to fly to just behind our lines, then over the lines to the coast on the route out so as to give the boys in the trenches a chance to see what `Jerry' was getting for breakfast this morning," recorded the war diary of the 721st Squadron. The results of the bombing were said to be excellent, but there was no reference to how the ground soldiers who may have looked up at the planes felt.

After a second day of effective bombing against German supply targets in Italy, the 450th experienced another poorly executed bombing mission on May 14, against the railroad yards at Vicenza, Italy. The 720th war diary reported that "Navigation was very poor, the mission was run poorly, and it is doubtful if anyone hit the target." The 721st reported that most of the incendiary bombs were strewn in the fields and some hit a marshalling yard. The 722nd report said it was doubtful if any of the bombs from that Squadron hit the target. However, all was not disappointment. "As the formation returned to the base, flares came from some of the ships indicating that someone had completed their fifty missions...." A story in the *Molto Buono* newspaper noted that two technical sergeants in the 723rd completed their 50th mission; both had flown on the Group's first mission.

May 24th was one of the most intense days for the 450th, up until that time. The punishment suffered by the flyers was known around the base before the planes arrived back and the airmen could relate their tales. "The group surgeon with his receiving set sat at one end of the runway. From this position he talked to the pilots coming in. Ambulances drove out hurriedly, flares shot out of the planes as they lowered themselves for the landing. Two of them crashed, one ran away and finally stopped against an olive grove at one end of the field. The pilots were trying to land their damaged craft sans brakes and landing gear. Men wounded and killed on board. What a mission! Eight planes did not return...," reported the Group's summary for May.

The mission had been to Wollensdorf Airdrome at Wiener Neustadt, Austria. The 721st sent up 10 planes at 6:10 a.m.; eight planes in the Squadron dropped 20 tons of 500-pound bombs on the target area four hours after takeoff. However, the bombing was considered ineffective against the planned target, as the bombs fell beyond the aiming point. The 720th war diary recorded that the Squadron did not hit the target. "Due to adverse weather conditions, the lead group of the Wing formation was forced to alter the course after reaching landfall, therefore missing the rendezvous with the fighter escort," recorded the Group report. German fighters were ready for the incoming bombers. The air battle with the 450th began at about 10:12 a.m. and lasted for 20-25 minutes along the route from Graz, before the initial point, to the target. "...two (2) of our bombers were shot down on the first pass [by fighters], which came from high at twelve (12) o'clock."

Fifty to sixty German fighters were in the air, Me 109s and FW 190s. The fighters attacked straight on into the bombers, in a tight arc from slightly above and in front of the B-24s, in formations of 8 to 15 planes each. After the initial passes, the fighters attacked from all directions, some firing rockets. Several Group planes claimed multiple hits or downings of German planes. Subsequent study generally showed that the number of claimed hits was exaggerated.

The report from the 723rd described "A shattering head-on assault with fighters [flying] through the first attack unit occurred and they [fighters] then concentrated on the second unit which was following in close formation." The 723rd Squadron lost 3 planes to the fighters even before reaching the Initial Point to line up for the bombing run. The fighters after their first diving head-on assault, "made aggressive attacks from all angles, high, low and level. Explosive 200 mm cannon projectiles were effectively used by the fighters and most of our aircraft were crippled." Accurate and intense flak over the target caused further damage to planes, but no planes were lost to flak. Three of the 723rd planes returned to

base without flaps or brakes. Pilots ordered their crew to the rear of the plane to counterbalance and cause the tail to drag, as a brake.

Reports from witnesses provide further details on the fate of crews on planes that went down. At 10:25 in the morning a German fighter hit the 722nd plane piloted by August Chrestia, apparently from the side or rear of the plane. The crew was on their eighth mission. The tail gunner was killed instantly when a blast blew him from the tail section into the waist section of the plane; he was calling out the enemy planes when he was hit. One of the waist gunners was seriously wounded; he would be unable to bail out. Witnesses in other planes counted four parachutes leave the plane, over St. Poltan, Austria. Crestina said "I lost consciousness in the bomb bay and apparently fell out." Three others bailed out, also through the bomb bay.

The plane, according to another witness, was under control even after the first people bailed out. The radio operator-gunner also was wounded and unable to bail out. The co-pilot, James Hendricks, held the plane sufficiently steady so others could bail out. He was reported to be making for the bomb bay, but apparently was knocked out and failed to leave the plane.

The navigator bailed. Upon landing, he went to the site of the plane crash and said he thought the Germans had taken the dog tags. Four crew, including the pilot, were taken to a hospital in St. Polten. A French POW doctor gave the pilot medical treatment for a bullet wound in his right arm. The next day they were taken to a German airfield at Markersdorf, Austria. A compound at the airfield held at least 15 US POWs awaiting transport to the interrogation center at Frankfurt, Germany. The four crew members who survived were interned in Stalag Luft IV.

The situation on the 723rd plane flown by Bert Baker was equally frantic and tragic. The plane was in the number 7 position of the low left element of the second attack unit—not an enviable position and somewhat surprising for this plane, given that the crew were not among the newest, having completed eight prior missions. A number of fighters attacked the unit—one report said 40, but it may have only felt that way. The co-pilot was killed instantly by a 20mm shell through his neck. The bombardier, the nose turret gunner, and the navigator—who had reported about five minutes before the fighters arrived that the escort was some five minutes late—were killed or seriously wounded. The tail gunner, hit in the chest and stomach, was able to pull himself out of his turret, but fell mortally wounded before reaching the rear hatch. Two engines were on fire, and the plane turned steeply

toward the earth four miles below. Five crew members bailed out. All were captured and interned, although one died—apparently of injuries—the following month.

Five more missions followed before the end of May, including two to the Marseille area in southern France and a Memorial Day return to Wiener Neustadt, against an aircraft components factory. Again, German fighters met the U.S. bombers above the Austrian city. Up to twenty Me 109s attacked "very suddenly" and were "extremely aggressive" from both level and high from the back, then broke apart to come in from the sides of the bombers. "The attacks were mostly single passes, but some came in two (2) abreast with one breaking down and one upward. The attacks were very aggressive; closing to fifty (50) yards…." The battle was cut short when P-51s put in a welcome, belated appearance, summarized the 720th Squadron's war diary for May. Bombing accuracy was poor, in part because of clouds over the target area and too many bombers trying to fit into too small an airspace. But the fatigue of ten days of missions, with the memory of six losses on the previous trip to Wiener Neustadt, must have combined to encourage crews to drop their bombs and head for home, without a strong regard for accuracy. "The bombing run saw flak from Vienna and Wiener-Neustadt with little towns in between tossing up their two `marks' worth. From all reports the mission was `SNAFU' (Situation Normal, All Fucked Up) because there were too many groups trying to get over the little target at the same time."

Bombing accuracy and impact on the enemy military capacity became a subject of substantial debate in the post-war period. The Army's own Strategic Bombing Survey raised questions about the effectiveness of strategic bombing on disrupting German production. During the war itself, the 450th's bombing accuracy was of regular concern to leaders in the first half of 1944. The Group's records suggest why. Between January and March, fewer than one-tenth of bombs dropped fell on the intended target; in the following three-month period, just over one in five bombs hit the target.

Bombing accuracy was determined as percent of bombs dropped on or within 1,000 feet of the aiming point. "Each Group had several planes equipped with aerial cameras that took sequential photos of bomb impacts. Post-mission appraisers identified and counted each bomb impact inside a 2,000-foot circle superimposed on the impact photos. Fifty percent was considered a very good score. A score of 70 percent was outstanding, considering the physical size and shape of a Group formation." On only two occasions did the 450th achieve 100 percent accuracy—a perfect pattern of bombs on target by all the planes. The first was two days after Christmas 1944 on supply lines in the Brenner Pass of the Alps; the second on the Legnago Railroad Bridge over the Adige River in Italy on April 16, 1945.

The Group's record closely correlates with the presence of German fighter aircraft. After June 1944, the Germans were only occasionally able to mount a serious offensive against incoming bomber formations. Constraints caused by lack of experienced pilots, aircraft parts, and fuel all forced the Germans to fight the final months of the air war primarily from the ground. The removal of the psychological pressure of enemy air attacks—along with improved summer weather and growing high-altitude bombing experience—resulted in much improved bombing accuracy in the latter half of 1944. In July, a third of the Group's bombs fell within the target zone; in August the Group led the 15th AAF in bombing accuracy when nearly 60 percent of its bombs were on target. In three subsequent months—November and December 1944 and February 1945—the Group had the highest accuracy rating in the 15th AAF.

The bombs that did not fall within the target zone fell many different places. Contemporaneous bomb-strike photographs provide some indication of what was happening on the ground as the 450th, and other groups, carried out their missions. A very accurate mission occurred against the Kraljevo railroad bridge in Yugoslavia on September 19, 1944. The 450th dropped 203 bombs. Eighty-five percent of the bombs could be plotted on the photo and of these over 90 percent fell within the 1,000-foot radius target zone. Bombs beyond the 2,000-foot target fell mostly on cultivated farmland, 3,000-3,500 feet before the bridge.

Leroy Newby offers one example of the some of the factors that went into failures in strategic bombing. Newby was with the 460th Bomb Group. During the Anzio breakout, he was ordered to bomb the Italian village of Valmontone, his first non-industrial target. The village was said to be used by the Germans as a command post and several roads ran through town. After the bombs dropped, Newby wrote, "I hoped the people had left town, as I felt badly about purposely hitting a city. `But,' I rationalized, `if we mess up the German ground forces, our guys can escape from Anzio and we can take Rome.'" As it turned out, however, the city bombed was not the intended target—the lead bombardier had missed by 12 miles as the lead navigator had turned too soon on ETA. The two towns looked alike. "We were all told there would be no criticism for anyone involved. It was an honest, unavoidable mistake under the circumstances of the minimal briefing and target information available...." "Officially, we had not done anything wrong, but I had a difficult time sleeping that night, thinking about the people in that town who had no reason to believe anyone would drop nearly one hundred tons of bombs on them that day." Newby also recorded that on a June 9, 1944 mission to Munich, clouds covered the target. "Who knows where the bombs

landed. They could have been five miles from the target. The factory we were gunning for was probably the safest place in town."

Much has been written about the abstractness of warfare carried on at a distance where the enemy is unseen and unheard. Even the term "enemy" is an abstraction in the case of strategic bombing, since many flyers could not readily differentiate between sites of military production and distribution and targets of troop installations and placements, on the one hand, and residential, commercial and social areas of civilian use, on the other hand.

Later, Newby wrote,

> We didn't talk much about the morality of our killing people. We all thought about it once in a while, but the advice of our friend, the chaplain, helped us keep our sanity. He pointed out one night over a couple of beers at the club that the smartest thing we could do as individuals was to put what happened on the ground below us out of our minds. Keep it impersonal. We were primarily there to drop bombs on military targets. We didn't start the war. Our efforts would have a direct positive effect on shortening the war and, in the long run, save more lives than we might take in the performance of our duty. If any of us would falter and let it get us down, there would be someone to take our place the next day.
> They were comforting words. I did manage to keep the personal aspect out of my mind, but the unidentified target episode nagged at me occasionally.

June 1944 brought the liberation of Rome and the invasion of France at Normandy. The 450th, like other groups in the 15th AAF, continued to concentrate on enemy oil supply and distribution centers and on transportation systems. Polesti was visited yet again early in the month. The oil and distilled products from the refineries around this Romanian city were important to the German war effort. After several attacks on the refineries, the Germans developed defenses which included extensive smoke pots to generate smoke to cover the refinery area, heavy flak emplacements, artificial facades to mislead the bombers, and extensive earth works to control explosion and fire damage. Also, the Germans had become efficient at switching production and storage from one refinery to another with little effort.

Of the 40 planes that reached the area of Ploesti for an attack on an oil refinery on June 24, 1944, six were lost. Enemy aircraft picked up the group about ten minutes before the target. Between 30 and 35 ME 109s and 10 to 15 FW 190s struck the 720th. A report from that

Squadron notes that "The attacks were coordinated and for the most part were made by units of three or four from twelve o'clock level. After going through the formation the enemy would reform to attack again on the same pattern. Sporadic passes were also made from other angles. The first consisted of 20 mm cannon and rockets." The 720th gunners had corroborated claims for five enemy aircraft destroyed.

While the 720th was able to escape with no losses, the Group lost six planes, including three from the 722nd, one from the 721st, and two from the 723rd. Both the enemy aircraft and flak inflicted the damage. Richard Hefner was a pilot on one of the 723rd planes. Hefner knew Polesti and was scared. But he was also a casual flyer when conditions permitted. For example, on outward and homebound legs of bombing missions he would read his hometown newspaper, sent by his father in Hickory, North Carolina. In an interview, Hefner describes how his plane was lost: “as I was turning off the target, fighters came in and they hit the number one engine and set it afire and they shot up the wings. When I feathered the number one engine, the fire went out.”

Hefner was hit by shrapnel in the neck and cheek during the attack. "Then I got vertigo, it seemed like that plane was going everywhere. The engineer came out of the top turret and went to the fuel transfer. He transferred what fuel was in that left wing over to the right wing so we wouldn't lose it. He came back up on the flight deck and his face was just as white as death. He said, 'Hef, we've got ten minutes of fuel left.'

> I had a replacement navigator, and this kid got so scared—he was just a young kid—I had to call Johnny Miller, a friend of mine, who was leading the Group that time to plot me a course to Yugoslavia. When we got hit I fell below the formation and saw another formation coming off the target down there and knew they could give us some protection, so I dived down and got under them because I knew they'd already dropped their bombs, knowing they could give us some protection to get out. I then called Johnny Miller to get his navigator to plot us a course to Yugoslavia. I did make it as far back as Albania and ran out of petrol and had to get out and walk.
>
> I called the crew and said, 'Look, we're going to go as far as we can. Take those fire axes and chop up anything that has weight, throw out your guns, throw out your ammunition, throw out everything except your parachutes. If we're jumped, don't wait for me to hit the alarm, just go ahead and bail out you'll not have any protection. I may not see them, so if we are jumped [by fighters] you [pause].'

> We kept flying and of course I had it on auto lean. I had it just so as the temperature was way the hell up there on those three engines. But I did keep going, as the engines were going to be ruined anyhow. So, I made it back and I thought I'd gotten to Yugoslavia. It must have been about an hour and fifteen minutes.

Over Yugoslavia, Hefner began calling on the Big Fence, a radio beacon in Italy that provided a homing signal. "I was talking to Big Fence when I ran out of fuel and so I told the boys to jump. I thought we had made Yugoslavia." "I landed quite a distance from the rest of the crew. The first two to bail out hit way up on the hill, and the partisans took them into Yugoslavia and got them back [to the Group], one of them was two months and the other was four months."

> When I went down... I saw this women down there hoeing in the middle of a field. She didn't pay any attention to me, here I was coming down. She didn't look up or anything. I saw this truck down there, I thought they were farmers, going along the road. The closer I got to her, I thought I was going to land on top of her head. She hadn't quit hoeing. I hit in front of her and rolled up my chute and went running back and I said, 'Tito,' because I thought I was in Yugoslavia. Then I said, 'Amerikanish,' and she repeated it. I knew she didn't know. I went flying through the woods and hid my chute over there. I'd gone about another 20 yards in the woods and heard, 'Halt! Hands up!' They were Germans and had been in that truck. They were following me as I drifted along. She knew the Germans were there, it couldn't have been more than a quarter of a mile to the German outpost, no town or anything. I was on the ground for about two minutes before they caught me.

Hefner was taken to a small police outpost, where he was searched and questioned. He carried a prized gift, knitted by an aunt of his wife, who had pinned it to her negligee for the wedding night. His wife had given it to him before he left home. The penis warmer was his wife's assurance of safe return and Hefner carried it on every flight. His crew considered it their good luck charm. The Germans had no idea what it was. When he explained with gestures, they enjoyed a big laugh, but did not return his security blanket.

Hefner's subsequent experiences were shared by several thousand other flyers from the 15th AAF. That night he was moved into the city and put in a regular jail. "I think I spent the night in every jail in Europe!" In Budapest, Hungary, he was placed in solitary confinement

for thirteen days. There a Luftwaffe officer threatened to treat him like a spy because Hefner had lost his dog tag identification. From Budapest, Hefner and others were moved to Stalag Luft 3 in Sagan, Germany.

For the next ten months, until April 28, 1945, Hefner and 8,000 U.S. and 2,000 British flyers were held. Some of the other POWs had been there for years.

> We kept ourselves occupied as much as we could. Under the Geneva Convention officers don't work. We'd rather be out working or doing something…. We learned to play bridge and other things like that. We watched the Germans as close as they watched us. We kept a log on everything they did, who'd come in and whatever they needed for information. We had an escape committee, I worked with the escape committee copying maps. We had this one boy who was a pilot who was born in Germany and lived there until he was 12 years old. He came back to the States and went to MIT and could speak German fluently. He was the only one in our south compound authorized to talk with the Germans. Somehow he would bribe one of the Germans to bring in a map and I would have to make a real quick copy of whatever it was.

Hefner used a set of pens and other drawing tools which had been sent as a part of a YMCA care package. "For ink I'd use indelible pencils and melt them down and I would take the map and copy whatever, whoever wanted something."

> If you had an idea to escape, a plan, present it to the Ex [escape] Committee. They would approve or disapprove. If they approved it, if it was good, thought you could use it, they helped that person escape. Some of the documents would be forged and all that stuff. They'd take lead out of the top of a corned beef can and make buttons like the Germans and use the British uniform to make it look just like a German. We had a good escape committee. If you had a plan, we'd help them. Some of us would make food for them, and get wire cutters if you needed them.

The chances of a successful escape were minimal. Less than one percent of British POWs in German camps made successful escapes between 1939 and 1945. But for some, it was a hope that kept them going.

Chapter 7: Summer into Fall 1944

Life within the 450th was set into a routine by the summer of 1944. Rotating crew members found housing, service facilities, clubs, and mission preparation—all were well established. For ground crew members, length of service began to stretch into an indefinite future. The invasions at Normandy and then of southern France were greeted with enthusiasm. Rumors resurfaced that the war would soon end. However, the rumors would have to be replayed several more times before the reality of war's end occurred. The slow pace of the land war in Italy and France persisted and cast doubt on morale. Men began to openly despair that the war would end soon. An indication of the feelings of the men is that the weekly war news summaries provided on the base lapsed in mid-1944 for lack of interest. Movies, sports, and other activities commanded greater interest. Rumors abounded of a shifting of the base further north in Italy or of the transfer of the group to the Pacific. The national elections in the fall of 1944 were greeted with little enthusiasm. The Group report notes: "Although most of the men had exercised their right of suffrage, there was very little interest voiced in the election. We never heard what the Republicans said to the Democrats."

Despite the vast improvements to the infrastructure of the base, some of the rotation crew members were sorely disappointed when they arrived. Fagan, for example, arrived in July 1944 and subsequently wrote that the base was a "miserable set-up. Dusty, scraggly, carved out of a huge olive grove and surrounded by a decrepit rock wall; the runway was oiled dirt with large chuck holes and the few buildings had been unpainted for years...." "You simply couldn't sleep in the barracks," he wrote. "Some idiot would come stumbling through every half hour, kicking over various cigarette cans, waste baskets, etc. You could hope for only a few good hours sleep...." Fagan's derision for life on the base of the 450th carried over into his approach to flying—self-interest above all else. While survival was on the minds of all flyers, it usually did not come across in such critical form as Fagan's. Also, by mid-1944 the base had been substantially improved from six months earlier. It was dusty, but the buildings were, in fact, in pretty good shape. Living with a group of other men would always produce tensions, but Fagan seems to have allowed it to bother him more than did other men.

To deal with his dissatisfaction, Fagan did what others had done. He hired Italian masons to build a stone house. Two skilled workers were paid $1.25 a day and two unskilled workers received $0.75 per day to construct the dwelling. Eventually, for $135, Fagan and two

others had a house with a fireplace, furniture, rugs, and electricity. They hired Gregorio, a fifteen-year-old boy, to take care of the place.

Films were a regular feature of base life, often shown four or five times a week. The entertainment provided a glimpse of Hollywood's women who became at once further removed and more accessible as men out-did one another in offering appreciations of the women's bodies and acting. Some films, however, were not well received. For example, "Government Girl" with Olivia DeHaviland drew 1,500 men, the biggest crowd the outdoor theater had yet hosted. The film was a "cruel disappointment. Even the loveliness of the leading lady could not drown the stench of some sequences in that picture. Those home front heroics and inconveniences hand most men a laugh. Many men thought `Sonny Tufts' would look pretty good in a uniform and not as a `Hollywood commando'." "Bombers Moon" gave an image of false heroism "and was not too greatly received by combat men," noted the 720th and 722nd war diaries for June 1944.

The Red Cross Club in Manduria—"five miles distant as the crow flies or twice the distance if you were bumping along in a jeep"—continued to offer regular informal gatherings. The club was open in late morning, mid and late afternoons for coffee, cake, ice cream, and cold drinks. "Combat crews patronize the hot doughnuts, excellent cookies and other nick knacks quite regularly. Occasional music by the local Italian orchestras and a dance now and then serve to take your mind away from the flak alleys...," wrote the *Molto Buono* on September 16, 1944. In the summer, the Red Cross staff organized beach and other parties, said to be good morale builders for the enlisted men.

The Red Cross operations were impressive. Clubs were operated in many of the towns near military bases. Mobile facilities met the crews returning from combat missions with coffee and donuts. In the Clubmobile report for 1944 of that section's activities in southern Italy, the writer recorded over 37 million donuts produced in the year. The report noted: "In case you can't visualize 37 1/2 million donuts, think of a solid line of donuts end to end that extends 1776 miles."

The young women who served with the Red Cross in the war zones organized and ran a variety of recreation activities, including sports and cultural-historical tours, lectures, concerts, and music and language lessons. It seems that by training and commitment to their jobs, few of them sought romantic or sexual involvement with the men around them. However, although they had their own living quarters and shared work with other women, from the perspective of the thousands of men, the American women were a link with home

and a challenge to their masculinity. The 450th war report for June 1944 noted of one group of Red Cross women: "The `I'm highly desirable but inaccessible,' look is not apparent in these new additions to the Red Cross staff." In the neighboring 449th Group "the few nurses and Red Cross girls in the neighborhood are hopelessly outnumbered by the soldiers desirous of being with them." The discrepancy between the styles of the men and women had a lot to doing with timing. When the men met the women, they sought relaxation. Often, they were accompanied by buddies, which contributed to bravado and showing off. The women, however, were usually working when they met the men. Their jobs involved friendliness and efficiency, thus a smile and a joke might encourage some of the men into a false expectation of closer intimacy.

For the Red Cross women the challenges were more mundane: maintaining an ample supply of food and drink; providing new forms of entertainment; and arranging separate weekly dances for officers and enlisted men. It was not a problem finding servicemen and Italian groups to provide music (although in the spring of 1944 some men were complaining about the lack of contemporary American music, which the Italians were not familiar with), but it was more difficult to assure an adequate number of Italian women to turn out for the enlisted men's dances. The staff at the Red Cross club in Manduria, the town closest to the 450th's base, provided tea for "members of the town's leading families. Besides the social aspects considered, our object was to invite these families to the new series of dances." Apparently, the cordiality worked and more women (often escorted by other family members) turned out for subsequent dances.

On Halloween 1944, a party was held by the 722nd. The Monthly Report of the 450th tells the story:

> In lieu of corn stalks a few bamboo stalks did the job at the municipal ball-room in Manduria. And as for the girls, well, the committee had seen to that. A bevvy of Italian pulchritude was due to arrive from Lecce via government vehicle. The Romeos and Casanovas cast anxious glances at the ball-room entrance, but the girls who were to arrive at seven bells did not get in till nine. There was a bit of commotion in the hallway. 'They've arrived!' some shouted. There was a rush for the door where the first romeo was greeted by an [sic] signora who was wildly gesticulating and asking for something. The interpreter was summoned. The lady was looking for the ladies' rest room: shortly thereafter the 'girls' accompanied by their mothers, sisters, grandmothers and boy friends, entered. After a few cocktails the party warmed up and everybody had a good time.

The next night the Red Cross in Manduria sponsored a Halloween dance, using some of the decorations prepared by the 722nd. Preceding the dance, a riot broke out, apparently a protest by some townspeople at "the girls who had been either associating or working with the Americans." The dance went on, but was cut short when the lights were turned off in the hall. "We kept a battery of flashlights going at the party but felt that they did not begin to provide enough light to prevent difficult situations from arising." Thus, the party was discontinued at 9:30, "in order to protect the Italian girls."

Separate church services and dances were organized for African-American soldiers by the Red Cross. Most of these men served in Service Groups, providing guards for munitions dumps. However, the 99th Pursuit Squadron, the Tuskegee airmen, provided escort to Allied bombers operating in Italy. The Squadron never lost a bomber while on escort duty. Also the "Buffaloes" of the 92nd Infantry Division were a part of the 5th Army, which moved north in Italy during 1944 and 1945.[*] Over 7,000 soldiers in this division were decorated for their service. One report from the Red Cross described its services to 4,000 African-American soldiers working in the area occupied by the four bomb groups of the 47th Wing. However, most troops assigned to the airbases had little or no contact with the African-American soldiers or airmen. Late in 1944 the Red Cross assigned two African-American women to the area, and the Red Cross Clubmobile report for January 1945 noted, "Arrival of these girls caused the greatest sensation in this region for many months."

Red Cross Clubmobile serving soldiers

In September the "Voice of the Cottontails"—the base radio station—came on the air. Informal stories suggest that many of the parts for the transformer were acquired from an

[*] See the novel by James McBride, *Miracle at St. Anna*, 2003.

Italian station in the nearby city of Taranto. During a tour of the Italian station, some of the men lagged behind and picked up equipment that they then smuggled out. The official version does not mention the tour. Two sergeants put together the 75-watt-sending set. Initially the station broadcast from 11 a.m. to 1 p.m. and 5 and 9 in the evening daily. Programming included "big band, hillbilly and cowboy music," news several times a day, and interviews of men on the base. Sunday brought "Chapel of the Air," with talks by chaplains from the area bomb groups. The 1944 World Series was aired in a rebroadcast format as were football games. Eventually, groups from the base provided live entertainment on the air. Among these was a barbershop quartet and a group calling themselves “The Ramblers” who sang "mountain music and ballad songs." By early 1945, the radio station was broadcasting from late morning to 10 p.m., with frequent news, lots of music, sitcoms, and other shows.

Also in September 1944, the surrender of Romania permitted U.S. POWs held there to return. Most of these men had been shot down during raids against the oil fields around Ploesti. There was no knowledge of how many men were in captivity from planes shot down, as the local authorities were not as official as the Germans in keeping records and informing international organizations. The experiences of some of the returned POWs were remarkable, including surviving bombing raids on Bucharest by 450th and other bomb groups. "The most unusual experience of all," according to a contemporary report from the 450th, "was that of Lt. Col. Snaith [Group Operations Officer] whom everyone had given up for lost. His plane had exploded within sight of several crews. Fortunately the nonchalant Col. Snaith was blown clear and came to while floating through the air. Suddenly he saw pieces of his former craft floating above him on fire. He realized his predicament and pulled the cord when a couple of thousand feet from the ground. After a safe landing he was taken prisoner and later made commander of the prison camp."

September was the beginning of harvest season for Italian farmers. Oxen and horses were the primary form of transportation, as farmers brought in their crops. Two-wheel carts were used to bring in grapes. "Through the streets of nearby Manduria … carts laden with open barrels of plucked grapes on the way to the wine presses plied daily. And along the highways long caravans of trains creaked under the weight of heavy wine-casks filled with the grape juice that eventually would provide vino, the indispensable staple of the peasant's [sic] daily fare," observed the 450th monthly report. Other than these short notes in the monthly record from the 450th, there is little mention of the lives or livelihood of the people who lived in the area.

From the perspective of the local Italians, the American presence offered employment, entertainment, envy, and anger at the wealth and arrogance of most of the U.S. servicemen. However, most were trying to maintain their lives or re-establish families fractured by the war.

For the men of the 450th, late summer offered relief from the heat of mid-year. Planes continued to be serviced for the war, air crews who had completed their 50 missions moved out, new members moved in. Ground crews were doing their best to alleviate the anxiety that the war would continue to drag on for many more months.

Chapter 8: Rau Joins the War

As Hefner was being processed through the German bureaucracy as a POW, my father was completing the processing to get final flight and navigation training. Jack Rau was 25 years old when inducted into the AAF. As a private in the 69th Cadet Training Division, he did his initial training in Florida. Pre-flight training was conducted at Ellington Field, Texas. He was there in January 1944, but the record does not provide enough details to be more precise. By March 1944 he had qualified as a navigator, had been promoted to 2nd Lieutenant, Air Cadet, and had put in 140 hours of flying time. He began active service on 10 June 1944, reporting again to Ellington Field, having left his civilian job a short time earlier.

Navigator Training at Ellington Field

Jack Rau was a fairly typical flyer, although when he turned 26 in May he was older than most flight crew members. He was nearly six feet tall, weighed 167 pounds, of medium build, with normal eye-sight and blood pressure. Considering that his three brothers would all eventually die of or be affected by heart-related ailments, my father's blood pressure at 116/58 is noteworthy. The only distinct physical condition was dental. He had had several cavities and several more would be filled during training. The record of his time in the dentist chair would be significant only in the years after his death.

Jack, a middle son, was modest, not imposing, and generally willing to go along. My mother has said he wanted to go to medical school, but there is no indication of that in his academic record or in the anecdotes I later heard from other relatives. I expect he grew up expressing his identity through studies. He was a religious man, having been raised in the Episcopal church of his hometown of Fanwood, New Jersey. He brought with him two prayer books, a

copy of the New Testament, and four other books, including the *Officer's Guide*, one entitled *Dear Sir*, and Bob Hope's *I Never Left Home*. Once with the Group in Italy, he went to church every Sunday, he wrote in a letter to his parents.

When my father was notified by the Army to report for active service, my parents were living in an apartment in Westfield, New Jersey. My father put his car up on blocks and disconnected the battery, to await his return. Years later my mother remarked that she felt he was selfish to deny her the use of the car. My mother and I moved in with her parents, who also lived in Westfield. Her father worked for Singer Sewing Machine Company in New York City. While I don't remember my grandparents from this period, at a later date, when I was six to eight, I did spend periods of summers with them in a house in Swanzey, New Hampshire, where they had an apartment in their son's house. I remember from that time that my grandfather could be gruff and demanding. He was not very tolerant of noise and the wild play that young children loved. Thus, it is not surprising that he found my presence in his house during the war to be very stressful. My night-time crying would wake him. Having just turned 18 months, I was too young to fit into his patterns of expected behavior, and I guess he was too old to be stuck with a small child once again. My mother remembers that it was a difficult period for her, trying to raise me, worrying about her father's feelings and reactions, and feeling isolated. Without a car she was limited to the distance she could travel with a stroller or by public transport. Her social life must have been limited, even though she was back in the neighborhood where she had grown up.

The end of September brought the orders for Rau and the nine other men of his crew to transfer overseas. Departing phone calls, and perhaps last minute off-base visits, were made. There is no record of what any of the men were thinking or feeling at this time. I can imagine my father feeling lonely, apprehensive at the unknown, perhaps guilty at leaving my mother and me. There probably was joking, as men tried to relieve stress without exposing their underlying feelings. I can imagine my father readily taking part. Perhaps he was somewhat more circumspect about the future than others, because he was the oldest on the plane. The pace of the war in Europe had picked up somewhat in late summer 1944, so perhaps there was a sense that their service would not be too long or too rough. By the fall, German fighters were rarely able to attack the bombers of the 15th AAF, so that potential threat to life was largely gone. Or perhaps he wondered why he was needed at all.

On October 4th, the crew prepared for the long legs of the flight. The four officers on the B-24J were Robert Hogan (pilot), Alva Smith (bombadier), Mark "Rick" Lapolla (co-pilot) and John Rau (navigator). The enlisted crew included Chester Zukowski (radio operator and

gunner), Charles MacElroy (gunner), Hadley Walker (aerial engineer), Armando D'Uva (gunner), Elmer Sidney (gunner), and Robert Doyle (assistant gunner). Hogan was from Alabama and returned there after the war to become a physician. Walker was from Texas; all the others were from the northeast. Rau, Smith, and Doyle were married.

Chet Zukowski kept a diary. The entries are short, usually no more than a few sentences, sometimes a couple of words. It is the only record of the day-to-day activities of the crew during the fall and winter of 1944/45.

On October 5th the crew flew to Gander Bay, Newfoundland. The base there was a major stopping point for planes flying to England and beyond. Stormy, cold weather stranded the crew in Newfoundland for three days. Late on the 8th or early on the 9th of October the weather cleared and the plane flew south, to Lagens Field on Terceira Island in the Azores. Like other navigators who flew the Atlantic during the war, my father must have had some anxiety about setting the right course and reading the stars and sun in order to make the necessary changes in direction. Other crew members probably were wondering about his ability at this time, too, for their lives depended upon his skill and the accuracy of his readings. There are stories of planes being way off course during the Atlantic crossing. Subsequently, Zukowski said that they arrived in the Azores as scheduled, without difficulty. My father's skills had been tested and confirmed.

From the Azores, the crew flew to Marrakesh, Morocco, on to Tunis, and then Gioia, Italy, over a period of three days. Total flight time was 29 hours, 45 minutes. From the 13th through the 17th of October, the crew waited in Gioia for orders on where to proceed. On the 17th, Zukowski's diary reads: "Assigned to Bomb Grp. in Manduria, Italy." Upon arriving at the 450th base, the crew was assigned to a Squadron and to living quarters within the 723rd area.

The front gate of the base was not used by newly arriving crews. Rather, they flew over the low, rolling hills south of Taranto, skimmed the olive trees surrounding the base, and touched down on the tarmac airfield. Thus arrived Hogan’s crew, their plane, and my father. A jeep met them at the end of the runway and escorted them to the pad for the plane. As the engines wound down, was the silence palpable? Was my father thinking: closer to the war; from here we fly against the Germans; what’s ahead?

I can imagine his state of mind:

> Once the plane was parked Rau began packing away his navigation tools and maps. He was feeling more confident in his abilities to guide the plane to its destination. The training he had received was good, more than adequate for the job he had had to do so far. Could he handle the job in combat, he wondered, answering, yes. His confidence was closer to the surface now than when they had left the U.S. Doubts were always there, for the rationality he sought to impose with compass and straight lines fought against the unknown elements that lay beyond his fingertips, outside the skin of the plane, in the air they moved through, in the fingers of the enemy. His religious faith aided and worsened the conflicting emotions of confidence and doubt. Faith provided an ultimate guide and security, as did the navigators' maps, but it didn't override the minute-to-minute doubts, the unknown next steps, and the worry about directing his fellow flyers toward their targets and subsequently back to base. His navigation skills and faith soothed his mind, but still left his soul tormented.

Based on the stories of men who came through the war, incoming crews were not warmly greeted—by late 1944 they were just another replacement crew. No doubt Hogan's crew received the official welcome from the Squadron CO. They were directed to their Squadron living quarters. Perhaps another officer provided a basic orientation to the base and the routine. The men were assigned tents, or perhaps barracks, in which to live. By mid-October 1944 there were no original crews remaining on base. There may have been some men who had re-enlisted, but the crews on the base at that time were all rotation crews, some further along in flying their missions than others. Most ground personnel, however, had been there for the duration. These dynamics meant that ground staff did not make an effort to get to know new air crews. For some, their networks were already established. In other cases, too many men had come and gone to invest further emotional energy in establishing friendships. In retrospect, one former flyer apologized to me, saying that it was too hard to create new friendships with the high turnover in personnel, either through lost planes or rotation.

I imagine that once all their equipment was stowed away Rau and Smith exited the plane through the hatch in the nose and walked back to the waist to collect their duffle bags. The officers climbed into the jeep, to be driven across the field to the two-story white building that housed the administrative offices. Chalky dust filled the air and though they didn't

appreciate that the heat of summer had dissipated, the mid-afternoon temperature was warm. In their flight jackets the men were sweating.

Around them the base was active. Rau and the others took in the jeeps and trucks crisscrossing roads, saw the maintenance crews perched on ladders and scaffolds working on engines and patching shrapnel holes, and wondered about the trucks laying down rows of stones and gravel around the buildings. Italian laborers, noticeable by their small size and shabby clothing, raked the grounds. Within the jeep, Hogan's crew was quiet, each man trying to absorb the surroundings, fitting the reality into what he had imagined would be his home for the next months. Hogan asked the driver a question, but only got a shrug in response. It didn't feel like a welcoming gesture to any of the officers.

The CO was more cordial, but a mood of indifference pervaded the offices in the administrative building. "We've seen it all before," was the unspoken message that Hogan and his officers felt as they moved down the hallway. Within minutes they were shown out again, to be taken to the offices of the 723rd Squadron.

"Not much of a greeting," I imagine Hogan saying as they were all back in the jeep. "I'd expected some interest in us, in what's going on in the States." "Maybe he's busy, Bob." "Yeah, but you could feel it from all of them, as if they didn't want to acknowledge who we are, that we're here, that we're a part of the Group."

The officers and enlisted men of Hogan's plane must have found their relationships largely with one another, although even here the divisions between officers and enlisted men determined where acquaintances and friendships would occur. Separate living, dining, and recreation quarters existed for officers and enlisted men. Only on the plane did the group of ten work together. Rau and other officers were able to get a "house," as they called it, with a gasoline stove for heat. Rau and the others must have set out their personal articles in the boxes and cabinets that were available. Most men did not arrive with an elaborate wardrobe. Based on what was collected following his death, Rau, for example, had 16 pairs of socks, four pair of underpants, and 8 undershirts. He carried five shirts, but twelve pair of pants. A pair of wool underwear, a wool muffler, overshoes, swim trucks, towels, and neckties rounded out his collection of clothes. Toilet articles were limited to a shaving kit, tooth brushes, a razor, and nail clippers. A pipe smoker, he had brought along pipe filters and cleaners. Finally, there were photos of people at home—including, I presume, one of me at about twenty months of age.

The introductions at Squadron headquarters were somewhat more cordial. The CO and his adjunct spent an hour with the officers, asking about places in the U.S. and outlining procedures and schedules. Nothing was said about what the men could expect in the air. They were told that the next several days, perhaps a week or more, would be spent in training—flight formation, gunnery practice, navigational matters and group and Squadron communication. They could expect their first mission after about twenty hours of flight preparation.

The adjunct described the Squadron layout, regular and required meetings, dining and washing facilities, and some of the sports and recreation activities on the base.

By late afternoon the men were situated in their accommodations—canvas tent with wooden sides and floor, four bunks, a table, and a stove. “Welcome home,” Rau mused to himself, feeling the comfort of settling into one place. However, they were told that the lodging was likely to be temporary, as the Group was building a new site for the 723rd, across the road from the base, in order to lengthen the runway. No one wanted to move, but the orders were in, they were told.

The day after the crew arrived at Manduria they were assigned their first flight—to Rome. Presumably, this was a logistics flight, but it did offer a chance for the crew to get some experience in southern Italy. The next day they flew over the region occupied by the 15th AAF—northeast to Bari on the Adriatic coast, then turning north to Foggia, and back south to the port city of Taranto, about twenty miles north of Manduria. On the third day, their itinerary was confined to the Manduria area. Then wet and stormy weather settled over the base and for three days there was no flying. On October 24th, they flew a practice gunnery mission and the following day a practice instrument mission. The pattern continued into early November. The first combat mission for Hogan’s crew was on October 30th, but the group was recalled before reaching the target.

Hogan’s crew began combat flying a full ten months after the 450th had begun its missions. In that time, the Group had sustained 130 lost aircraft, a third more than the next closest Group in the Wing. All total, the 47th Wing had experienced 136 losses to anti-aircraft fire and 119 to enemy fighters. At ten men to a plane, over 2,500 men did not return to their bases after their missions. Those men were either killed or captured and interned by the Germans.

Although Zukowski's diary is the most reliable source for the missions my father flew, it was common for specific crew members to be shifted to other planes, as needed. Group records, as far as I discovered, did not list individuals on specific missions. I rely on Zukowski but realize that my father may not have flown all the same missions with him or in the same plane.

It wasn't until November 6th that Zukowski had his first combat mission (the 169th mission for the 450th), to gas-storage dumps and oil refineries at Moosbierbaum, northwest of Vienna, Austria. He flew in a plane nicknamed "Radar Jammer," one of twenty-eight planes from the Group on the mission. The mission included planes from the other groups in the 47th Wing. After takeoff, Rau began plotting positions at regular intervals. This being his first mission, he gave special attention to completing all the details on the navigator's flight forms. The details helped keep his mind from wondering about the war that lay ahead. The group assembled at 15,000 feet over Andrija at 9:50 a.m. and then set a course to the north. After crossing the Alps, the planes approached the target, but found it well covered by clouds. The two attack units of the 450th used an early form of radar to identify the target. Flak was intense, accurate, and heavy for three to five minutes over the target, but no planes were seriously hit. At noon, both attack groups dropped their 500-pound bombs, missing the target by 2,000-3,000 feet. The second attack group, made up of two units of seven planes each in a diamond formation, produced "extended bomb bursts into a small village 2,500 feet South of the target." Flak in the area was, by Zukowski's account, "moderate but inaccurate." The planes returned to base seven and a half hours after leaving. This first mission, according to Zukowski, was "uneventful."

Indeed, with a fighter escort, resistance limited to inaccurate flak, and a routine flight, the mission must have seemed "uneventful." Such was the reaction of others who did not experience heavy resistance on early missions. Perhaps it was anti-climactic after weeks of mounting anxiety to simply do what they had been trained to do. Other than the ten minutes over the target area, any threat from the Germans remained an abstract emotion that each person lived with in their own way. I wish I knew if my father, too, thought the mission uneventful.

The Red Cross Mobile Unit was waiting when the Group returned to the field. Donuts and coffee were handed out to the flight crews. Debriefing followed during which individual crews provided to Intelligence officers details of the mission, reported on resistance, described the bomb patterns as best as possible, and noted sightings of enemy equipment and transportation. Navigators turned in their flight logs and explained any discrepancies. In

mild weather, the debriefings might take place around tables situated under trees. As the weather turned cooler, the briefing and other rooms were used. As a crew completing its first mission, Hogan's men were prepared to go into great detail, but the debriefing officers had heard it all before. They wanted the barest details in order to complete the forms and reports due later in the day. The excitement and sense of accomplishment were washed away in the mundaneness of bureaucracy.

Within a couple hours of landing after that first mission for Hogan's crew, the men were back in their living quarters. Some men went to sleep immediately; others washed, changed and went out for dinner or a drink. A few men kept careful records, so they added to their diaries or wrote home. It was a time to decompress, to let the stress fall away, to be thankful to be back at base, to reflect on the number of missions remaining, and begin thinking, again, about the next mission. Rau is likely to have written a letter to his wife and his parents. If there were informal evening prayer services he may have attended.

By the fall of 1944 the 15th AAF was gradually reducing its level of operations. B-24 production had slowed and fewer replacement aircraft arrived to fill out the squadrons. It was assumed that a German defeat was assured. However, wet and cold weather stalled the Allied ground advance in Italy, south of Bologna. Likewise, the initial success of the December 1944 offensive by the Germans in the Ardennes forest of France brought into question that the war would end quickly. Men in southern Italy had come to believe that the European war would be over by Christmas, or at least early 1945. Rumors had circulated for several months that the 450th would be pulled out of Italy and re-deployed to the Pacific theater, including retraining for flight on B-29s. Neither the order to move out of Italy nor an end to the war occurred in 1944.

Unfortunately, my father's letters to his wife and family were later destroyed. Yet he must have been moved by the rumors, by the chance that the war would end within weeks of his arrival. At the same time, he seems to have been respectful of "his duty," the commitment to serve for the required number of missions or until the 450th was no longer needed.

Zukowski's diary is valuable for its chronology, but it only offers two points of coincidence with my father's known activities: the initial trip to Manduria in October and the last mission. He did not note the other crew members on individual flights. There is no record of missions undertaken by individual crew members. Also, it was common at this point in the war for individual crew members to be moved between planes to fill slots, on an as-needed basis. It seems that this was not a preferred choice for pilots, other crew members, and

administrative officers, as there was value in having crews in which the men knew one another and how they functioned together. Further, because of illness Zukowski missed several missions that were flown by others in Hogan's plane. Thus, my father may not have flown the same missions as Zukowski, but it can be assumed that they shared a number of missions in common and probably on the same plane.

The second mission for Zukowski (and presumably the Hogan crew) was November 7th. The 450th attacked railway lines in the Brenner Pass between Italy and Austria. Takeoff was between 7:15 and 7:35 a.m., meaning that the men had been awakened at least two hours earlier, for breakfast and briefing. Clouds obscured the target and the 723rd Squadron box leader, a Lt. Campbell, flew over the target area twice, but was unable to see well enough to drop the bombs. The third run over the target offered enough visibility. Bombs hit the rail line in three places. Again, fighter escorts accompanied the bombers north, flak was slight and inaccurate, and all planes returned to base seven hours after takeoff.

The Brenner Pass was a regular target for the U.S. flyers, for it was the main route used by the Germans to move men and supplies into and out of Italy. Despite repeated and heavy bombing by the Allies, the Germans gave the highest priority to repair of the rail lines within and leading to the Brenner Pass. Without this supply line, the German army in Italy would have been quickly depleted of supplies and troops.

The 15th AAF intensified operations against the Brenner Pass, beginning in November 1944, under the code name "Operation Bingo." The Pass held several advantages for the Germans that would make this portion of the war prolonged and intense. The double-tracked line followed two narrow river valleys (the Sill in the north, into Innsbruck and the Adige in the south, into Trento) which made low-level attacks difficult. The line was electrified, thus coal did not have to be transported and stored along the route. Repair crews totaling at least 11,500 men were concentrated in the area, providing a quick response as needed. These crews became very efficient. They were able to repair cut rail lines within six hours and bridges in about four days. Temporary bridges could be put in place at night and dismantled before daylight, with sufficient time for several trains to move in each direction.

Several tunnels, many bridges, and numerous reinforced sidings and fills were the primary targets along the route. While the heavy bombers provided occasional support in a six-month Allied effort to slow and prevent use of the route, most of the bombing was carried out by B-25s of the 57th Bomb Wing. The Germans maintained between 350 and 450 anti-aircraft guns along the Brenner Pass at various times. Some 70 percent of each gun crew

were comprised of Italians. German intelligence was remarkably good. A post-war analysis found that the German “defenses were alerted shortly after aircraft took off from their bases. The flights were tracked to two centers, Parma and Venice, where each group of planes were followed very closely. The only thing the defending batteries did not know was the actual target to be attacked,” concluded a post-war survey of strategic bombing.

Zukowski did not fly again until November 12th, missing two missions flown by the Group. The target that day was Casarsa railway bridge, near Ora in the northern Italy section of the Brenner Pass. The 450th put up 41 planes, and rendezvoused with the 449th Group over San Vito. Zukowski was expecting another easy mission, a "milk run" as such missions were called. As his plane neared the target, however, “all four manifold pressure gauges dropped to 0 and we started losing speed, (probably due to gas vapor lock). We were given order to `prepare to abandon ship.' Somehow the M.P. came up and we regained control of the plane to find ourselves all alone and all the flak gunners ficking on us.” The plane was hit by flak, including the plexiglass top turret where Zukowski was standing. He received a cut on his nose. "Believe me—I really got scared," he wrote. He continued:

> After I came to my senses, I crawled out of the turret to see how bad we were hit. The f’wd left bomb bay was ripped wide open by flak—the rear bomb bay doors were ripped open by kicking a 1,000 lb bomb thru the doors because it hung up. The gas tanks were hit but they were self-sealing, no. 3 engine cowling was hit and the hydraulic system must have received a hit as all the hydro fluid leaked out. The bombardier tried to go out to fix bomb bay doors and only froze his feet. After we got down to 9,000 ft. the bombardier and I went into the bomb bays and wired them shut with arming wire.

He concluded with a feeling that must have been shared by others on the plane: "Thank God—we pulled through that one alive."

Zukowski completed three additional missions in November, and there were several days with formation and related practice flying. Most of his time in the air was with Hogan, the pilot with whom he had come to Italy. Presumably, other crew, too, remained with Hogan.

Thanksgiving 1944 was celebrated across the base. A number of people hosted open houses and a full turkey dinner was served. "Some of the squadrons began feeding early in the afternoon, thus making it possible for some to accept other invitations that would net them

a second try at the bird. Group Headquarters waited until evening for their fashionable repast," recorded the Group's monthly report for November.

The 723rd Squadron was undergoing several physical changes. A new officers club was finished, the most elaborate on the base. Frosted windows, "modernistic rounded corners and cantilever effects gave the illusion of a modern night-club." At the same time, however, plans to lengthen the runway envisioned cutting into the area occupied by the 723rd. A new Squadron area was selected, across the main road from the base, and during the winter of 1944/45 new quarters were built.

Plans for Christmas were underway even before Thanksgiving. The men "combed Bari, Lecce and the surrounding towns for souvenirs and suitable presents to send home. There was an increased traffic in such items as Cameos, jewelry and ready to wear." A month before Christmas, packages from home began to arrive. A special Christmas report by the Group described the various preparations. The 721st Squadron offered a $100 prize for the best-trimmed tree "and that sent every G.I. hurrying to `downtown Manduria' to look for tinsel, artificial snow and Christmas decorations. The Italian merchants already accustomed to demands for stores they never heard of, simply shrugged their shoulders, grinned, and answered in a gradual crescendo of `Non ce, non ce,' meaning `We aint got it.'" Trees were brought in from the surrounding hills. "Squadrons vied with each other in an effort to create the real Christmas atmosphere, and despite the lack of snow just then to make it a white Xmas, they succeeded in creating the illusion of a homey Christmas." Eventually hundreds of decorated Christmas trees filled the base.

On Christmas Eve the orphanage at Oria gave a concert at camp with a choir of 100 boys and a 20-piece orchestra. They sang Christmas carols for two hours in the theater and the program was broadcast over the radio station. I imagine my father, being a religious man, listening to the entire concert, humming the songs even though he did not know the Italian lyrics. In a post-Christmas letter to his parents, my father said that members of his crew had a small party. Zukowski and no doubt many others spent much of Christmas Eve in the bar. He records getting thoroughly drunk and sleeping most of the next day. On Christmas, church services were held for Protestants in the theater at 10 a.m. and midnight. Catholic churches in Manduria welcomed Catholic members of the 450th. My father wrote to his parents that they were served turkey, mashed potatoes, cranberries, pie, and dates. “It was a darned good dinner and I had all I could possibly eat.”

Some men would not have spent either a restful or celebratory Christmas day, as a mission was scheduled for the 26th. On four successive days, the 450th again attacked targets along the Brenner Pass. The mission on December 27th was the most successful, with three of the squadrons receiving "superior" results and the fourth squadron believed to also do so, but its results were obscured by smoke. On the 29th, things fell apart. The 723rd led the Group on this mission. The group bombardier reported: "Faulty navigation by the lead ship from the 723rd Squadron placed the formation far left of course enroute to the I.P. As a result all ships in his box were badly hit by flak and they never reached their target. The majority of ships were forced to salvo their bombs and return to base." Only the 722nd experienced a normal bomb run.

Rau had been to the Brenner Pass once before. From the air, the Italian Alps offered a dramatic contrast with the rolling hills of New Jersey with which he was familiar. His plane was in the number 4 position in the 723rd box. His responsibility was to know where they were in the event the plane had to return to base without the others. Getting the Group to the target was the job of a more experienced navigator. However, shortly after the Group's planes had turned inland from the Italian east coast, Rau's readings indicated that the group was too far west and they would miss the Initial Point by several miles. I imagine a short dialogue:

> "Skipper," he called to the pilot. "I think we're off course." "You sure?" asked the pilot. "My numbers don't match our orders and I've checked twice." There was silence for several seconds. The pilot didn't want to break radio silence nor did he want to accuse the lead of being off course. "We'll give it a few minutes and see if he corrects," said the pilot finally.

When the flak started, it was more accurate than usual. Several bursts directly in front of the Squadron caused the planes to bounce and move away from one another. By then radio silence had been broken, and each Squadron leader was trying to find out where they were and how they could get lined up for the bomb run.

The rattle of flak fragments against the plane's skin was audible to everyone in the front portion of the plane. Another burst sent the plane skidding to its left and up. The co-pilot called to the pilot to pull up further, as another plane was turning in their direction. Within moments, the box formation had fully broken apart, the planes dispersed over a mile-wide section of sky. Without turning around, re-grouping, and finding their way back to the IP, there was no chance for the 723rd to drop its bombs. There were no gung-ho pilots in the

Squadron that day to order or encourage lining up for a proper run. The lead pilot of the 723rd ordered the planes in that Squadron to salvo their bombs in the ocean and return to base.

It wasn't until the 8th of January that Zukowski flew in 1945. It was his eleventh mission, this one to the north marshalling yard at Linz, Austria. Zukowski had flown in several different planes up to that point. On this day, he was in ship number 404, the "Daisy Mae[*]." The first of twenty-seven planes took off at 8:33 in the morning. The rest followed during the next twenty minutes. Four hours later they approached the target. They had climbed to over 25,000 feet, near the limit for the B-24 and higher than during most bombing missions. The temperature was -52 degrees Celsius. At that altitude, the cold penetrated even the warmest clothing and electrically heated suits. The 500-pound bombs were dropped at just after 1 p.m. during moderate and inaccurate flak coming from the ground. All the planes completed the mission eight hours after takeoff. It was the last mission that Zukowski would receive credit for.

[*] Several B-24s were named “Daisy Mae” or “Daisy May” during the war and served in England, Italy, and in the Pacific campaign. Daisy Mae was a cartoon character from the 1940s in a strip created by Al Capp. “Daisy May” is probably a play on the name, suggesting an accommodating woman. Various photos show the nose art of “Daisy May,” as a naked-bosom blond, but it is unclear whether it is the plane my father flew in. One source says that nose art was dropped after the spring of 1944. Thus, it is hard, if not impossible, to match a photo of “Daisy May” nose art with the plane my father was in.

Chapter 9: January 19, 1945

Unlike the previous winter, the 450th was well settled in at their base as the cold and wet weather of 1944/45 arrived. Low-lying areas had been filled in and gravel had been spread to reduce the mud. Despite the preparation, the irony of "sunny Italy" in the depth of winter continued to surprise and depress the men. Snow had fallen on a couple of occasions already that winter, no more than to slightly cover the ground and planes, but definitely not what the men had expected of a Mediterranean climate.

The crew members who had arrived with Hogan in October had each completed twelve to fifteen missions by mid-January. My father had 15 missions completed by Christmas Day. Twenty more to go, he wrote home to his parents.[*] The crew had experienced the terror of flak tearing into their planes and had had several close calls.

The mission planned for January 19, 1945 involved the entire 15th AAF, but would be a short one, across the Adriatic into northern Yugoslavia. Brod, on the Sava River, was the junction of rail lines from Zagreb, Belgrade, and Sarajevo—names perhaps more familiar to Americans in the mid-1990s than to the soldiers flying in the area in the mid-1940s, although the region had been a regular target for the 450th for a year. Railroad marshalling yards were situated both north and south of the river. On the north side of the river were "the station, a wagon and loco factory and a loco depot. The M/Y runs along a generally E-W axis and consists of 16 tracks covering an area of 290' x 2,650'," reported the 47th Wing history. The Germans used the rail lines to transport men and equipment north, as they moved out of Yugoslavia. Aerial photos taken on January 5, 1945 showed about 600 wagons on the tracks in the north yard—unlikely to be there two weeks later, but indicative of the level of traffic through Brod.

Brod had been bombed 27 times between April 1944 and April 1945. Numerous people were killed or injured during those raids and over 25 percent of the town's buildings had been destroyed or severely damaged. According to the International Jewish Cemetery Project the bombings on January 19th, 1945 lasted much of the day and 250 local people were killed, not including the crew members of the one plane that was shot down.

German defenses in and around Brod were known to consist of 74 heavy anti-aircraft flak

[*] At some point in 1944 the 15 AAF lowered the number of missions of required missions, although the number varied by one's role in a plane.

guns, placed to protect the town as planes came in. The bombers could expect to encounter the first flak about six miles from the marshalling yards and be within range of the cannons during the bombing run. The AAF had mapped the location of these guns around Brod, as they had around other targets the bombers attacked. However, knowing the location of the German guns was not sufficient protection from the anti-aircraft fire. During an earlier raid on Brod, the 47th Wing of the 15 AAF encountered intense, accurate, and heavy flak.

During the evening of January 18th, Field Order 18 Baker for the 47th Wing came in from the 15th Army Airforce HQs in Bari. Staff of the Intelligence Unit (S-2) in each of the four Bomb Groups of the Wing began putting together photographs, maps, and related materials for each of the crews that would fly the next day. Word went out to each Squadron in the groups that a mission was scheduled for the following day, with briefing at 7 a.m. In turn, the crews that would fly were notified. With each Squadron having to put up seven planes, the rotation permitted several crews to remain on the ground that day.

That evening, ground crews prepared the planes' electrical, hydraulic, and mechanical systems. Planes were regularly serviced, so it is doubtful whether any of the planes being readied to fly demonstrated obvious mechanical faults. Armament crews brought out the ammunition for the machine guns. The bomb crews wheeled out and put the ten 500-pound bombs into each plane and set the fuses and the arming pins. By 6 a.m. the planes were ready to be fueled.

The plan called for the 450th and 449th Bomb Groups to attack Brod North M/Y just after 11 in the morning; the 98th and 376th Bomb Groups were to attack Brod South M/Y at the same time. The Bomb Groups of the 47th Wing would be preceded by those of the 304th Wing whose targets included road and rail bridges at Brod. The briefing proceeded with a description of the defenses around the target. The recall word [used if the mission was canceled while the planes were in the air] for the day was assigned and each Bomb Group also was given its identifying call word (the 450th's was "Betty Three"). As was customary at this stage in the war, several "pathfinder" planes within each group would aid in navigation. The pathfinders were equipped with radar to provide greater accuracy in the bombing, especially during cloudy conditions. Finally, all crews were "reminded of the importance of accurate bombing in Yugoslavia. Only visual bombing of assigned targets identified beyond all shadow of doubt will be executed." "No targets of opportunity in Yugoslavia will be bombed," added the briefing officer, in deference to the Yugoslavian partisans.

Hogan and his crew were at their plane shortly after 8 a.m. The flak jackets, parachutes, and other equipment had been picked up from the supply room. Rau had his navigation kit, consisting of maps, compass, and rulers. However, their plane did not carry the radar and, for the most part, it would be a matter of following the leader. A photographer joined the crew as an eleventh member.

The 450th and 449th rendezvoused over Manduria at 12,000 and 13,000 feet at 10:19 and 10:21 a.m., respectively. "The local rendezvous was skillfully accomplished this morning despite a complete overcast over both rendezvous points." The 98th and 376th had met over San Pan. The four Bomb Groups set course to the northwest. The Initial Point (I.P.), the point at which the formation lined up to intersect the target, was Batrina. It was reached at 11:33 a.m. The 450th flew at 23,000 feet. The 723rd Squadron made up the third box of the Group's formation.

Here some confusion began. The lead box from the 722nd Squadron dropped out of the lead, apparently for mechanical reasons. The Squadron stayed with the formation, but fell in behind the Group and would bomb last. The written record is not specific about the sequencing of Squadrons once the 722nd gave up the lead. It appears the following sequencing occurred. "The first box [720th] of the 450th hit the I.P. for a normal run at 1213 on the briefed axis of 96 degrees at 24,000. The second [723rd] and fourth [722nd] boxes, close in trail, also squared over the I.P. for good runs at 1213 and 1214 at 24,500 and 22,500 feet respectively. The third box [721st] lost the group when the box lead changed at the keypoint. Its first run was abortive as a result of a collision course and an erratic autopilot. Coming around for a second pass it again failed, this time because of cloud interference. Finally, the box managed to effect an adequate run at 1319, although it missed the I.P. by 10 miles," noted the summary history of the 47th Wing.

An after-mission report by the 450th set out the fundamentals:

> The 450th bombing the Brod North M/Y, experienced considerable difficulties, bombs being liberally distributed in and around Brod. Bombardier Hudson leading the group with the 722nd Squadron was the exception on this mission. Although this box was forced to drop out and bomb last, [it managed] to score superior results. The next box, the 720th, had a variety of troubles, including frosted optics and extended vision trouble. The bombs were dropped 6,300 feet from the target, needless to say, scoring unsatisfactory results. The 723rd Squadron led by Bombardier Campbell bombed with unrecorded results, due to

> camera troubles, but visual observations report a good concentration of bombs on the M/Y. The 721st, next over the target, had spacing and synchronizing trouble. By not being properly spaced they were forced off the run and made a 360°, but did not come in the second time on the briefed axis. The synchronization was evidently not too good as the bombs landed 5,300 feet from M/Y with unsatisfactory results. One plane lost."

Summarizing the mission, the Group found that the speed of the planes during the bombing run was 160 mph and the run lasted four minutes. The report continued,

> Reviewing the results of the bombing on this mission, with due consideration to the type of target attacked, it is believed that bombing could have been at least twice as effective had all groups made some attempt to stick to the Fundamentals of good bombing. Although all groups hit the I.P., not one of them attained briefed altitude one half hour before the target. Three groups encountered collision courses on the bomb run, because they failed to get properly spaced on the bomb run. Some units suffered from gross errors in bombardier procedure, another had a very definite lack of team coordination, but last, and most ridiculous of all, one unit missed the target completely, merely because a command pilot failed to heed the bombardier's advice."

The mission and the subsequent reporting was probably fairly typical, with some things working right and others not. Although there were mechanical problems on several key planes, most of the confusion that happened near and over the target was due to human error as squadrons came too close to one another, flew under or over others while on their bomb run, or bombardiers did not release their bombs in sync with the lead plane in each box.

Of course, the military's routine reporting ignores the experiences of my father's crew, the two who managed to bail out and were picked up by the Germans, and the nine others who died when the plane crashed.

Thirty-six years later, Bob Hogan and Chet Zukowski, the two crew survivors, re-established contact. In February 1981 Zukowski wrote a long letter to Hogan describing his experiences after bailing out of the plane.

> I hit a tall tree in parachuting down and hurt my lower back. I remember you singing "Danny Boy" when we were captured [and] put in our first prison area. I understand the only thing the Germans found when our plane hit the ground was the ball gunners [sic] (Armando D'Uva) dog tags.
>
> From our point of capture, I was taken to Belgrade, then to Vienna and finally arrive in the Oberursel Interrogation Center, at Frankfurt am Mainz. I was in solitary confinement for 21 Days. I was interrogated continously [sic], kicked, beaten and a few teeth knocked out, but I only gave them my name rank & serial no. On the 20th day I was told I had nothing to worry about, because I was to be shot the next day. The following day, I was wakened up early and taken to interrogation again. It was at this point I was told by a German captain, that I was stupid for resisting. He told me they knew all about us…. Then he offered me a Camel cigarette and told me I would be taken to a prison camp that had good food, library and all the comforts of home. What a joke that turned out to be.
>
> From there, I was sent to Nurnberg, Langwasser IIID, and from there to Dachau, as we heard Hitler wanted to get rid of all the airmen. From there, I was sent out to Moosberg Prison Camp near Munich. It was at this camp that I was liberated in the last days of April by the American Army.

In mid-1945, Zukowski eventually arrived back in the U.S. where he entered a rehabilitation facility in Atlantic City, New Jersey. While there he was told he would be re-assigned to fly B-29s in the Pacific. "That sure as hell made me sicker…," he wrote to Hogan.

Postscript

The war never ended for some. Most of the air and ground crews that survived until May 1945 came back to the United States, re-starting their civilian lives. However, my mother could hardly face the death of my father. She said later in life that without me to care and look out for, she could never have managed. As far as I can tell, she was allowed a minimal time for grieving. Her father, especially, an unemotional man as I remember, would have had little patience with her not getting on with life after a couple or three months.

I remember her sitting on the sofa in the small apartment we lived in at the close and after the end of the war. She was crying while on the telephone. It is the only occasion from that time when I remember her crying, but I'm sure there were many other times, perhaps after I had gone to bed and she sat alone.

Her remembrances carried on. In one of those "To be sent to my Wife ONLY IN CASE OF MY Death" letters written on American Red Cross stationery, my father had written

> Darling, I want you to know that you have always been the finest wife a man could ever have. You have always been kind and unselfish; understanding, and devoted; sincere and loving. Honestly, Darling you have been the brightest and most valuable thing in my life. You also have been a wonderful mother to our son.
> Why our life together must be broken up is something only God can answer.

A year after Jack's plane had been shot down and he had been declared missing in action, a letter signed by Carl Spaatz was received. It was official notification that Jack had died on January 19, 1945. "I hope your grief will be lightened by the knowledge of the esteem and regard in which your husband was held."

In all the many letters that Spaatz signed, I wonder if he actually knew of the "esteem and regard" given Jack. Although signed, the letter has the ring of a form, typed by someone down the hall from the general's office.

After the plane crashed, the Germans removed and buried the nine bodies close by. After the war, the bodies were removed from that site by U.S. investigators and interned in a military grave in Yugoslavia. The U.S. official notification of the death of the men was given after the bodies were examined by forensic medical staff. The forensic evidence was used to

identify individuals. In my father's case, one minor discrepancy appeared in the report. His teeth showed two more cavities than did the induction physical examination made in 1944. Could there have been a mistake in identity? I never mentioned this to my mother, who would have claimed it was proof of her feeling that my father was still alive.

My mother eventually re-married in 1947 and she and her husband had three sons, my brothers. She said that she tossed out the letters my father had written in deference to her new life with Jim Ferguson. We moved from New Jersey to a Los Angeles suburb, another break with what might have been. I think she was not deeply happy with her new husband, perhaps comparing Jim to Jack, playing it over and over in her mind. She imagined Jack becoming a doctor; Jim had been a sailor and continued his career, oriented toward the merchant marine, first on land in California, but later back at sea. But when Jim died in 1960 the unresolved grief and the fantasy she had carried of what might have been came back in psychotic waves over a period of twenty years.

I remember getting a phone call when in college from my mother. She told me that my father was still alive; she had glimpsed him while shopping. I was stunned. I told her, no he was dead, killed in the war. She said that she could understand that maybe he didn't want to come back to her, but she was sure he'd want to see me, his son. I didn't know what was going on with her and had no experience or background in offering support or knowing where to turn.

In subsequent years she would send flowers to Veterans Administration hospitals where she was convinced my father was. Or she would leave home and drive for hours to such a facility to ask about him. She felt that others in both her and his family knew he was alive. She could not understand why they were keeping the truth from her. At my suggestion, she talked to the minister at the church she attended. She saw a psychiatrist. What was said on both sides I don't know, but she was prescribed anti-depressants and other drugs. She didn't like the side effects, she said, and stopped taking them. She continued to insist that she wanted the truth.

She wrote letters to the Department of Defense asking for details of my father's death, saying she didn't believe he was dead. The responses always affirmed that forensic evidence had confirmed his identify. She even wrote to President Truman, before we became aware of her beliefs, asking him to check about Jack. Later, she wrote to President Ford, asking him to look into Jack's status.

Research has shown that in many cases where relatives do not view a body, the imagination can fill in. In my mother's case, even though my father's remains were eventually returned to the U.S. and a burial service was held at his neighborhood church, it was, obviously, a closed casket. When the remains were returned to the U.S. in 1949, extensive decomposition would have occurred. Personal recognition would have been impossible. But, not seeing meant, over time, not believing. My mother's imagination turned to fantasy and she acted on the fantasy. Her war continued long after Germany had surrendered and the 450th had ceased operations.

There is another, broader outcome of World War II (and most wars). Men who die are often referred to as "heroes" and their "bravery" is commemorated. To me, my father was not a hero nor did he seem a particularly brave man. He and others in his crew did what they were told to do by planners and policy makers. My father would not have been on that plane on January 19, 1945, if policies had not forced him to be. He had no choice, nor did the other flyers. The only agency he had—the only real choice he made—was to become a flying officer because it brought a higher salary.

Men in war, for the most part, do what they are told to do. They are also motivated by peer pressure. No one wanted to appear scared or weak to other crew members. To avoid humiliation, you went along. I do expect most flyers were scared, but managed to internalize it, to hide it in most cases, most of the time. In talking with other men, flyers and ground crew members who had served in the 450th, the word "hero" was rarely mentioned nor applied to those who died. Some voiced a pride in having served to help defeat the Germans, but they, too, knew that the military imposed no choice but to fly, whatever the consequences.

When we refer to my father and his crew members as "heroes," we perpetuate the myth of war as honorable or glorious. Of course, to dead men, it was none of those things—it was the end. For them, nothing followed.

From the Sky

Was he burning
as he fell down the sky?
He flew four miles above the earth,
one engine, one plane, exploding
into sunny morning.

How to imagine the anti-aircraft gun
tripoded onto earth so far below,
its missile fired that high,
its target so tiny, so swift?

The boy in the courtyard skipped school that day.
Soldiers had installed the gun
between his low house
and the small barn.

Everyone heard the Allied planes,
their dangerous drone.
The boy saw the Nazi gunner fire, heard
the shout, exultant: I got one!

In four months, the war would be over.
Fifty years later, a son arrives in that courtyard.
He meets the boy, grown old,
who still lives on the farm.

"My father was a navigator," confesses the son.
"My father told the bombardiers where to aim."
"Oh," shrugs the man who had been the boy,
"it was long ago and so many wars since then."

The visiting son sits on the ground where
the gun had stood, on the ground where
the plane had been shot from the sky,
trailing sparks unseen against the light.

Nearby, he tramps the green hill
the plane smashed into,
his father trapped, his father's body
spun from the sky.

On that war day, the son was two years old. He remembers nothing of his dad.
After his visit, he finds another son,
the son of the pilot of that plane
shot from the sky.

Captured, imprisoned, liberated,
repatriated, the pilot lived. After
the war, he stayed alive for a long time.

But every day, his inside eye
spotted his spiraling plane,
the tangled bodies,
their flames,
the falling down through broken air,
air that the pilot,
by lucky chance,
parachuted through, safe,
until, his son says,
after too much remembering,
he chose another sunny morning
to die.

~Susan Roche

Sources of Information

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Richard Hefner
Dale.F. Robertson, "Summary of Missions"
Donald Nyreen
Doid Raab
Paul Farina diary
Alex Esposito
Tony Santomango
Vernon Halsey
James Inhof
Gene Remmell
James Rodgers
Al Sardini, credit for photo of jeep in water, from 450th Bomb Group website

Website

The website of the 450th Bomb Group Memorial Association is very useful. It contains a number of documents, photos, and personal memories. http://www.450thbg.com/real

Several archives were used:

Air Force Historical Research Agency, which also provided me with a small scholarship to conduct research there.
National Archives and Records Administration in College Park, MD, and in DC
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The cover photo of several 450th planes is taken from the collection of this museum

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The Clubmobile photo in the text

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