

A GRAND ADVENTURE DECEMBER 1943

After training day and night at Langley Field, Virginia since late September, our unit the 455th Bomb Group (H), composed of Four Squadrons- 740th, 741st, 742nd, and 743rd, was about ready to move over seas. We had been flying B-24 Bombers –Models D and E. These were the older planes with the transparent noses, a couple of .50 cal guns stuck out of sockets in the nose. Most of these planes had been used as submarine patrol ships, flying out of England, Bermuda, and North Africa. To say the least, they were pretty worn and weary. Each crew had gotten around 100 hours flying time in these old birds, and we thought we were pretty darn hot. We did a lot of over water flying, formation flying, practice bombing, and a great amount of VERY LOW buzzing!

During the night of November 26th, 1943, we heard a lot of planes coming into Langley Field. As we went down to the flight line the next morning, the whole ramp was covered with NEW B-24 H MODELS! These babies had been flown down from the huge B-24 factory run by Ford Motors at Willow Run, Michigan. This was the largest airplane factory in the whole world! The H model had a new nose turret, power operated, with 2 .50 Cal Guns to discourage head on passes by enemy fighters! The other guns were, A Top Turret with twin .50s, a Ball Turret in the belly, with twin .50s, a tail turret with twin .50s, and two waist guns with flexible hand pointed .50s. The plane looked like a porcupine bristling with machine guns!

Each squadron was to be assigned 16 of these new planes, as there were 16 crews to a squadron. Our crew was assigned Plane # 476. This number was the last three digets of the plane's serial number.

We were in the 741st Squadron commanded by Maj. Horace W. Lanford. Our crew was composed of the following men:

2 nd Lt. Eugene L. Hudson, Pilot, Cal.	22
2 nd Lt. James H. Smith, Co Pilot Tex	22
2 nd Lt Humphrey M. Hosmer, Navigator, Mass.	25
2 nd Lt. Sam Bakanauskas, Bombardier, Mass.	23
Tech Sgt. Francis E. Beeler, Engineer, Tex.	27
Tech Sgt. Karl J. Muse, Radio Operator, Mass.	23
Staff Sgt. Melvin Wolfe, Tail Gunner, Kan.	24
Staff Sgt. Marvin Wolfe, Ball Gunner, Kan.	25
Staff Sgt. Wayne Elliot, Waist Gunner, Kan.	20
Staff Sgt. Harold R. Hamilton, Waist Gunner, Ark.	18

We were a very closely-knit crew, and we worked together like a well oiled- machine. Our future was certain-we were going to war and SOON! We spent the next few days drawing overseas equipment, mess kits, pistols, sheath knives, field equipment of all types. The load we had to carry was unbelievable, parachute bags, duffel bags, B-4 bags, barracks bags, shelter halves, and a blanket!

LEAVING LANGLEY

Things started getting serious! We were told to get ready for overseas shipment. Any person with dependents living near the base was told to kiss them goodbye, and get them packing. Gene Hudson was the only fellow with a wife near by. The whole crew had helped him get set in a converted chicken house in nearby Phoebus, Virginia. This room was about 150 square feet, including bath and kitchenette. We had borrowed army cots, chairs, mattresses for the Hudson's to set up LIGHT housekeeping! Gene put his wife on the train for a long ride back to Los Angeles, Cal. Most of the groups dependents had gone by November 29th. All personnel were restricted to Base.

Several days were spent in classes, training day and night on the new model B-24H s. No flying was done; we just studied, going over the plane. On the 29th, the planes were loaded. Large luggage racks were put in the four bomb bays of each ship, and most of our gear was stowed in these racks. In addition to our 10-crew members, we were to carry with us Tech Sgt Gilone, and 3 of his mechanics. 1st Lt John Van Lent, squadron S-2 Officer, and his Sgt section chief were to ride with us, giving us a net passenger list of 16 officers and men. It was a real load, some quite bulky, tool boxes etc. The luggage racks were arranged with soft baggage on top. This gave us room for eight people to take turns stretching out in the racks. This was a very noisy dark location, but the most comfortable seats in the plane!! No view at all, but soft. Beat an aluminum floor hands down.

The night of November 30, we had a briefing for the next day; the whole group was to fly up the coast to Mitchell Field, Long Island NY. Since we had not practiced with 64 planes in one formation, we were to fly in squadron boxes "Vs" of six ships in line. The group got off about ten AM in good shape, carrying the aircrews and critical ground crews. The people in the ground compliment were not so lucky! They were trucked to Norfolk, Va., put on slow ships in convoy. They were on the ships about 25 days.

We flew up the coast, sight seeing like a bunch of hicks. We could see Washington in the haze to our left, Philadelphia came a bit closer, and Atlantic City, and Lakehurst, NJ were directly under us. Our course took us out into the Atlantic, and New York City was just a smear in the haze. The whole east coast in November was hazy, and Smokey. We made low altitude approaches in formation, peeling up to traffic altitude landing at Mitchell after a 2:20 flight from Langley.

Mitchell Field was another fine old Air Corps Field, on Long Island, close to New York City! Our people were assigned to wood temporary barracks. These were not as nice as the ones we had at Langley, but we were comfortable, and the plumbing worked. The whole group had dinner in a large mess hall, officers on one side, and enlisted men on another. We were told that we had a few busy days ahead -Processing for Overseas Shipment. Also, we were restricted to the base, and not allowed to use the telephone! Our mail address was an Army Post Office number, but we should expect no incoming mail at Mitchell. We were escorted to the barracks, after a long day the sack sounded pretty good.

Up well before daylight, all were lined up for roll call, and we jogged a few blocks before breakfast. This brought out a lot of bitching, and groaning from us all, but it called for a good breakfast, then back to the barracks before a 7:30 meeting.

After the meeting, we spent the day filling out forms for insurance, pay data, and each of us had to have a will made out. We spent the whole day doing paper work. They turned us loose about 5 PM, and on the way to our quarters, some good observer noticed that there was a big hole in the wire fence along side our building. This hole entered onto a narrow street, and just down the street was a station on the Long Island Railroad line.

It did not take us very long to check out the guard situation, finding none, most of our squadron officers got out of our OD uniforms, and into our green blouses and pink pants. This was a very fine uniform combination, it was said that the gals really liked them!! Through the hole in the fence we went, sneaking through the shadows, the station was ours! Off TO NEW YORK CITY we went. After about a thirty- minute ride to the center of New York, we were there! Due to the dim out restrictions along the whole east coast, Manhattan was not as bright as we had been expecting, but it was a sight for an old guy from San Antonio! Our first stop was to be the Stork Club, most of us had heard or read about the place. Four of us hailed a cab at the station, and we were there. As all were in uniform wearing wings of some sort, the cab driver would not let us pay him. We were amazed, as cabbies in NYC were a hard bunch.

The Head Waiter at The Stork, took us in. got us a great table. He would not take a tip, but he did ask us to try and finish dinner by nine PM. Since it was not seven, we told him that would not be a problem, as we would be in the Junior Officers Club by then!

The menu was breath taking, as I was used to the Night Hawk, and the Tower at home. I settled for steak sandwich and beer. This was around three dollars. We were getting a super amount of pay! The base pay for a 2nd Lt. Was \$150.00 a month plus flying pay of \$75.00. This was a fortune, as a lot of people were working for much less. A dollar an hour was REAL PAY. Before we left, people insisted upon picking up our checks. We felt like royalty!

Leaving, the Stork we went to the Commodore Hotel, and The Junior Officers Club. Here were beautiful (but well chaperoned) girls by the dozens. There was a live band playing in the ballroom, punch, sandwiches, cookies, and cake loaded the tables. The girls were around 19 to 21, they were students, career girls, budding actresses, and models. Very well dressed, and all charming. The ladies of New York society had gone all out to entertain the Officers. We danced, visited with the girls, got some telephone numbers, consumed a great amount of the refreshments. As we had to be up for roll call early in the morning, we left the club around mid-night. We were all floating on clouds, but none of us were tight. A beautiful evening, a free cab ride to the station, back through the hole and bed. Six AM came around too soon, it was a wonderful evening!

Our days at Mitchell Field were very boring. There was still a lot of paper work for us to go through. Lectures on every imaginable subject, and some un-imaginable filled our days. The men had to draw new clothing, the Officers clothing had to be checked out. We had our good dress clothes, but we had to buy a great number of items. High top GI shoes, OD wool shirts and pants. Three sets of new khakis, and of all things, complete sets of OD shorts, T shirts OD long underwear tops and bottoms, and above all good wool OD socks. These items were supplied to the Officers through supply for a very nominal cost. It appeared to be overkill, but we were really thankful later on!!

The main problem we had facing us was, how were we going to carry all of this stuff? Each Officer had been issued, a B-4 Bag this was a neat folding bag that could be hung up. When carrying the thing, it was zipped up. Fully loaded, the weight was around 75 pounds, and was pretty clumsy to lug. Each member of a flying crew had a parachute and flight gear bag. This bag was about 3 feet long, 2 feet high, and 2 feet wide. In it was carried our parachute, heavy sheepskin and leather pants and jacket, oxygen mask flying helmet and goggles, Mae West life jacket, and spare summer clothes. I think that this bag weighed in at around 80 pounds. Each man had a small bag called a "musette" bag. This was part of an Army Field Pack, but we used it as a light travel bag, toilet items, clean underwear, socks, maybe a shirt, reading and writing materials were carried in this bag. In flying from one stop to the other, we would not have to lug the B-4 bag. Overnight essentials were carried in one hand or with the shoulder strap on this bag.

Late that afternoon, we made another trip into the city, via the hole in the fence. This, time we decided to make a tour of the joints. We could always go back to the Junior Officers Club, but we thought that we would make a run on cigarettes, whiskey, and wild, wild women! None of us had any idea as where to start, so we went to the Commodore Hotel, and started checking out bars around there. There were plenty of stops, and plenty of drinks, and gals of all types. We latched on to three girls they were not exactly the type found at the Jr. Officers Club, as the booze flowed, they got better looking! There were four of us officers, and only three gals. One old gal said she would call a friend, and even up the party. We told her to go ahead, and call. Pretty soon, our addition arrived. She was a real sharp looking tall dark headed girl, as I was the tallest of our group, she became my Date! My main problem with these girls was I could not understand much they said. The Brooklyn accent was very pronounced, some one suggested we all go to Greenwich Village, and my date told the girls in her raspy voice. "Rosalie! They Vant To Go To The Villich" To the Village we went, and the evening started getting a bit fuzzy. Around one in the morning Gene Hudson declared we had better get back to base, so we took leave of our Wild, Wild Women. A kindly cabbie poured us into his cab, gave us a free ride to the station, and we got back to Mitchell in pretty sorry shape.

A notice on the bulletin board told us to get the planes loaded on Dec.7, as we would depart on the morning of the 8th. This was early morning of the 7th. We had a pretty good Hang-over to celebrate Pearl Harbor Day!

Gone-Mitchell Field to Palm Beach

We got all of our gear aboard #476 after lunch on Dec 7th 1943. The whole group went to a briefing that afternoon. Departure would start at 8AM on the 8th; our flight route was straight down the Atlantic Coast to, Morrison Field, West Palm Beach, Florida. The Group CO, Lt Col Cool, told us not get excited about visiting Palm Beach, as we were to be restricted to certain areas of the base, under tight security! We would be lucky to get to a PX!

I would like to present a few words about Ltc. Kenneth Cool, our group commander. Around 40 years of age, from Cleveland, Ohio, Tall, slender, an EX Eastern Airlines Pilot, smoked a pipe, was very soft spoken, a great pilot. Even at this early stage of our unit he, was respected, and admired by all of us, Officers and Enlisted!

Our last evening at Mitchell was spent in the barracks, all our baggage was aboard the planes, we had our OD uniforms shirt pants, with tie, and the great A-3 leather flying jacket, and our hot pilot garrison caps. The "musette" bag came in handy.

The area was covered with discarded stuff, as most of us had to throw some surplus away. In the hall downstairs, I found a small portable radio. The case was broken, there were no batteries, but the tubes were in place. Since I had fooled with radios for years, I found a cigar box, and carried the works with me. This radio turned out to be real handy later on.

We were called out about 6 AM for breakfast and roll call, and quick stop by the barracks.

Air Crew Members had long ago developed a good habit of using the john early in the morning, as the opportunity may not present itself during a long day!

On the flight line, pre flighting of the planes was carried out. This was an extensive check out of the plane. The engines were pulled through by hand, gas and oil was checked, Flight controls, electrical and hydraulics checked, crew and passengers were checked for parachute and life jackets, as we were not going to altitude, oxygen and masks were not checked for this flight. This whole process, took nearly an hour, as our squadron was slated to takeoff at 8:30, we just got all on the plane for the start engines signal.

At take off things were pretty hazy, with a light drizzle, so we could not see very much. Visual flight rules required 3 miles of visibility, and a ceiling of 1000 feet. We were right at this minimum, but things should clear as we went south down the shoreline.

As usual, with forecasts, our visibility did not improve for over 2 hours, near Charleston, S. Carolina we could see for several miles. Along this coast line were several ships that been torpedoed and run aground, near the North Line of Florida, there was a tanker still burning near the shore. These were results of the German U Boat war off the coast!

The weather was clear, and quite warm. We were looking forward to landing so we could get our khakis out and enjoy the tropical weather.

Touch down at Morrison was around 3:30 in the afternoon we logged 7 hours in the air today.

All crews and passengers were picked up by trucks and taken to transient quarters. These trucks took officers one way. Men went another. This was the beginning of the Air Transport Command or ATC treatment of combat crews over the world- wide system. It was efficient, but very irritating to the crews.

All of us were set up with temporary quarters, we officers had small rooms in a barracks, and the rooms were hot and stuffy. Open bays would have been cooler, as the john rooms and showers were all in a common end of the building. Mess halls were about the same, two lines, one for officers and one for the men.

Each officer of the crew was assigned a duty with the crew for our trip overseas. Being a Co-Pilot, I was Finance Officer, and Medical Officer. The finance office issued me \$500.00 in gold seal \$10.00 bills. These were put into a cloth money belt, and I was supposed to guard this belt under my shirt, and around my waist. The money was to be used only under extreme circumstances, if we were forced down in some out of the way place, expenses could be covered. I had never seen so much money in my life!

The Medics issued me a kit of medicines aspirin, apc, laxatives, nose drops, eye drops and such. The big box was something again, there were four cartons in white cardboard each about 6 inches square. Each carton had 144 condoms, or 578 condoms for the 16 people aboard the plane. I looked like we were slated to have a good time somewhere! Actually, the condoms came in handy. We used them to put our wallets, and other valuables in. We would be flying through the tropics, and rain showers were pretty heavy. B-24s were put together quite fast and had a lot of leaking joints.

The crews were scheduled for departures; most of these were to be at night. As our first stop was to be Trinidad, planned arrival was around noon or bit after, as ATC wanted us on the ground before the heavy rain showers built up over the islands. Flying time from Florida to Trinidad via Puerto Rico and the Virgin Islands was around 9 hours and 30 minutes. There were hundreds of planes to leave Morrison, scheduling departures was a real art. All planes were to depart as individuals at five- minute intervals. This timing depended upon the speeds of the various planes. B-24 cruised at around 160 MPH.

Our crew was told to be at operations at 12:30 am Dec. 11, here we would be briefed and given sealed orders as to our destination. We loafed a lot went to a couple of movies, had a big supper around 10 pm the 10th. The 12:30 briefing was very well done, we were given a complete weather profile covering the entire route, aerial photographs of all the checkpoints and airports en route. A detailed layout of the airport on the east side of

Trinidad, with all the terrain features, completed the plan. Our pilot Gene was given a sealed envelope. This was not to be opened till we were out an hour en route.

Morrison Field to Trinidad December 11,1943

After briefing, there was no way any of us could sleep! We all went out to the plane and really checked it over very well, we did assign positions in the plane .The crew was to be in their assigned positions, but not in the turrets. The passengers were to stay on the flight deck, and in the waist for take off. They could then get into the luggage rack bunks after take off. Being dark, there was not a thing to see so they may as well get some sleep.

Take off time was to be at 4:00 am, so we had a couple of hours to kill. Some went back to the mess hall to get a snack, Hudson I snoozed a bit in the pilot seats; they were the only good seats on the plane! Hosmer the navigator, and Backanauskas, the bombardier had a little room in the nose for a nap. Hosmer knew that he would have to be awake all during the coming flight.

At 3:30 AM, an operations jeep came by telling us to start engines. As preflight had been done earlier, we got all four running promptly. The tower told us to taxi to the runway and get in line for takeoff. We had three ships ahead of us, and several more coming up behind. Each plane took off at 5- minute intervals, and the tower gave us the go ahead at exactly 4:00 AM. This field was really organized! Taking off to the east all lights on the ground disappeared, and we had a black climb over the ocean after breaking ground. I think we climbed to 6000 feet on a heading of 120 degrees.

After about 30 to 40 minutes flying, we could not wait any more to open our sealed orders! Hudson pulled the envelope out and read the destination over the intercom for all to hear." You will proceed without delay, via the South Atlantic Route, to Château dun Du Ruhmel, Algeria". Hosmer, the navigator, scrambled through his map case, none of his charts went as far east as Algeria! At least we knew that we were not going to India, China, or the South Pacific!

I was to stay awake while Gene took a nap; I think that Hosmer and I were the only ones aboard not catching a bit of shut- eye. After a few minutes, Sgt. Julius Gilone our ground crew chief came up to my seat and, in a soft voice, suggested that we transfer some fuel from our outboard "Tokio" tanks to the 4 main engine tanks. I told him to go ahead and transfer the fuel He moved some switches on the panels, while I gazed out the window of a dawn sky in the east. All of a sudden, all hell broke loose! All four engines started to surge back and forth making a terrible noise and then they all stopped. The wind of the descending plane and the whine of the instruments was all to be heard. I hollered as loud as I could" SGT GILONE PUT EVERYTHING BACK LIKE IT WAS" He did and the four engines roared back to life. I can assure you that there was not a man of the 16

aboard that was not wide and wild eyed awake. Gene Hudson, I, Sgt Beeler, and Sgt Gilone decided to wait till BRIGHT DAYLIGHT and get the book out and do some serious studying on the fuel system on the B-24 H!

After good daylight, we had a great trip through the Antilles.

Our course took us just to the south of Puerto Rico, over the Virgin Islands, down the other small islands owned by England and Holland. The weather was wonderful, visibility was unlimited. Green islands, beaches with coconut trees, beautiful blue and green waters. We all wished that we could land on one of these islands, and get lost for a few years! The islands that belonged to France, Martinique, Guadalupe and other smaller ones, we were instructed to stay ten miles away from them. As Vichy France controlled these islands, and Hitler controlled Vichy, they did not enjoy the base building frenzy. As a result they missed out on all of the jobs going on in the Caribbean building bases for The Yankee Dollar!

We had eaten all of our cold Spam sandwiches from Florida some of us went as far as to break open some "K" rations. These rations were about the size of an old Cracker Jack box. There were a great variety of snacks in them. My favorite was a can of cheese, and a round can of crackers. Fruit and nut bars were ok, the tropical chocolate bars were terrible, they would not melt in your mouth. There was instant coffee, chocolate, tea, and lemon powder packets. As we had several gallon thermos jugs with water, cold tea was not too bad. Tea and lemonade mixed with water was pretty good.

Navigator Hosmer came on the interphone announcing that Trinidad was dead ahead, and we all were glad to get on the ground and stretch a bit. As forecasted, there was a giant thunderstorm over most of the Island of Trinidad, luckily the field was on the eastern tip, and was clear. Gene Hudson made a slick landing as we shut old 476 down, I logged 9 hours and thirty minutes from Morrison. It had been a long day!

Trucks were brought out to the ship, and we loaded up. Officers were to go in one truck, and men in another. None of us carried big bags off the plane, as we were to be here just over-night. This is where the little "musette" bag came in handy, as they carried a change of socks, and shorts, as well as a towel and toilet articles. Our shorts were baggy cotton boxer shorts, served as sleeping shorts as well. I don't think I ever saw any one with pajamas anywhere overseas.

The trucks dropped us off at a "Transient Officers BOQ", and we were assigned a cot . The BOQ was next door to the Officers Mess and Club, and all of the officers from about 15 crews of our group bellied up to the bar for a couple of quick "Cuba Libres." At 15 cents each.

What a deal! The most popular song on the Juke Box was The Andrews Sisters singing "Drinking Rum and Coca Cola". This song was about Trinidad where "Ever One Was Working For The Yankee Dollar"

As we were all pretty tired, and the "Cuba's" were strong, an early dinner was called for. We had a great Tropical Dinner, GI Canned Hash and canned Fruit Salad, with lemonade. We were all so tired after a twenty-hour day, the bunk was the only thing we could think of. A shower in tepid water and to bed felt wonderful. Our wake up time was 5 AM and departure briefing was at 6 AM. The beds were hot and muggy, we could have slept on the roof or the runway, as it had been a long day. I did not hear the heavy thunderstorm overhead a few minutes after lying down!

TRINIDAD TO BELEM, BRAZIL

December 12, 1943

Briefing, was to be after breakfast, we were out of bed around 4:30, a quick shower and shave, button up the muesette bag, check in sheets and pillow cases as we left the transient BOQ. We were introduced to the old standard military breakfast, powdered eggs hard scrambled, hot cakes and syrup. This was to be almost a standard menu from now on! It was filling, but not like Mother used to make!

At the base operations briefing room we were given a wonderful and very thorough check of the route to Belem, near the mouth of the Amazon River just south of the Equator.

From the island of Trinidad it was just a short distance to British Guiana on the South American Mainland. Our route took over Dutch and British Guiana, and we had to go deep inland to avoid French Guiana (home of the penal colony Devils Island).

The weather was forecast to be quite wet with rain and thundershowers all the way to Belem. Once in a while we had a break in the clouds, and we could get a glimpse of the solid jungle canopy of trees 100 feet tall. The fellows at briefing told us, if we went down or bailed out it was just TOUGH. They had no way to find anyone downed. The few people lucky enough to get out had been brought out by Indians.

The rain came down in sheets. Visibility was non-existent. There was a radio beacon at Atkinson Field, British Guiana. We held an outbound heading from this beacon, and it was in range less than two hours. This did give Navigator Hosmer and the pilots a chance to get a rough check on wind drift, allowing us to be near the desired heading.

The B 24 was not too well sealed around the joints, rain poured in at every crack. The pilots, and Navigator were soaked, as rain leaked in all around the nose and cockpit Plexiglas. I went back in the bomb bay to the luggage racks, and dug out raincoats for us up front. We were getting soaked! The rain was so hard the engine head temperatures were low, and I had to close the intercoolers and allow a bit warmer air to the engines.

We were quite lucky, as the air turbulence was not bad. At any rate we had 16 fellows aboard all wide eyed and white knuckled. The noise of the plane plowing through the heavy rain was deafening. We were a wet cold and scared bunch after about 6 hours of

the rain, Hosmer announced that we were about to cross the equator, and we should have a crossing celebration as done on ships. He volunteered to act as King Neptune, but Hudson told him to keep busy on the maps and navigation. Soon the clouds started to break a bit, and some rays of very welcome sun appeared. The next thrill was the Amazon River. There was no main channel we could see, just many branch rivers some of them a mile or so wide. I had no idea that there was so much water in the world! As we were picking up the radio beacon at Belem, we started to relax a bit. That flight over the jungle with the heavy rain was hard on all aboard. No one wanted any thing but some food, a shower, and bed! The view of Belem from the air, was just a big town on a big river, with rusty tin roofs on everything.

The landing at Belem was smooth, flight time from Trinidad was 7:15, the air was hot and muggy, and the smell was one I always remembered. It was a smell of swamp water and rotten vegetation, mixed up with a bit of wood smoke. After we got parked, the trucks picked us up and hauled us to the transient BOQ. These were individual small cottages, with six cots per room. The rooms were screened in on all sides, and had thatch roofs made of banana leaves. The latrines and showers were in back of each row of cottages. There were young Indian girls there to clean up the rooms and baths. Their dresses were thin cotton shift like ones, and I think that there was nothing under the dresses. These girls were small, less than 5 feet tall. They were constantly chattering away in some Indian language, sounded like monkeys.

We got a shower, and shave, had these little girls working around, but they seemed to pay no attention to these naked Americans. Guess in the villages they were from, no one wore any clothes, so nothing was new. Went to the mess hall, skipped the club-too tired, had a typical GI meal, canned hash, canned green beans, and fruit cocktail.

As we were leaving the mess hall, I ran into a fellow named Tom Bunn. He has been a neighbor some years back on Craig Street. Tom was a Captain in the Signal Corps. His job was with Airways Communication, and he had been at Belem for almost two years. Tom said it was a very boring job, and they all suffered from various types of jungle rot! He said that he sure wished he had been a pilot, and he could get out of Belem.

We got to bed just at dark, the various noises from around the jungle sure did not keep me awake, but some of the fellows had sleeping problem

BELEM TO NATAL, BRAZIL

DECEMBER 13, 1943

5:40 FLIGHT TIME

Up an hour before dawn, a quick powdered egg breakfast, and another great briefing for Natal followed. As we were out of the rain forest, the country became more open and dry.

.The flight to Natal was to be a “piece of cake”, and we could do some sight seeing! There was not much to see on this leg, as we were inland over country that looked a lot like South Texas. There were a few water holes or lakes and quite a few cattle. There was only one town AMAPA, the rest of the flight was pretty dull.

As we approached the field at Natal, the South Atlantic was just a short distance away from the field. The water was blue, and the beach was beautiful. The City of Natal looked pretty squalid, but there were a few trees and plazas. The tower cleared us to enter the traffic pattern from the ocean side, and there was a LOT of Air Traffic. Natal was the major departure and arrival point for flights to and from the USA, and to and from Africa.

The field had many runways, and the parking areas were covered with hundreds of planes. There were B-24s B-17s B-25s B-26s C-87s C-54s C-46s and C-47s all over the field. We were led to an area covered with B-24s, all new planes headed overseas.

It took about two hours for a truck to pick us up, and take us to the barracks for transient crews. Old Rank Has Its Privileges reared it's ugly head . The Officers trucks had a canvas cover over the bed, and the enlisted trucks were open topped. We, members of aircrews did not care for this treatment of our crews at all. There was nothing that could be done as the OLD ARMY RULED. Our Officers took about two hours for transportation, whereas the men took about five hours.

All Air Crews were squeezed into very crowded one story barracks, with the bath and and toilets in detached buildings. Bunks were double decked; this was unusual for OFFICERS! The men were jammed up much more than we were.

The mess halls and PXs were huge affairs. They were open 24 hours a day, and were jammed at all times. We were issued meal books for three meals a day. You could have 3 dinners a day if you wished, but I can't imagine why. If you wanted breakfast at 2 PM you got in the breakfast line. The whole base was nothing but a bunch of lines. Air Transport Command people had special passes and did not have to spend as much time in lines as Transient Crews!

I ran into many people that I had known in school, at home, or in flying school. A great number of my Cadet Classmates were there-Co Pilots headed for war! Ran into Lawrence Wood from Refugio, Texas. He was a pilot with Braniff on duty flying a C-47 for the ATC. He had a pass!

The Officers Club Bars were something again! Usually 6 men deep, smoking Lucky Strikes, hollering for a drink that cost 25 cents. The jukebox was wide open with the Andrews Sisters. One evening Hudson and I were on the porch at one of the bars, sipping rum and coca cola, and a tall fellow sat down with us. He was Jimmy Stewart the Movie Star. A pilot of a B-24 headed for England. He was a very nice quiet fellow, and we enjoyed his company on a couple of evenings, He and Hudson knew a lot of spots around Los Angeles.

We kept checking with operations, trying to find out when we would be leaving this mad house of Natal. We were told that our plane was grounded, as it had an inverter inoperative. It was grounded waiting for a new inverter. The next day, we scouted around the B-24 area. Near our ship was an identical model as ours. This ship had two engines needing changing. That night, we got Sgt Gilone and Sgt. Beeler with tools and flashlights, went over to the 24 needing engines. We took off the inverter and put our bad one in its place. The next morning, we got engineering to check off our ship as Ok Both inverters worked fine. Engineering told operations that our ship was ready for the hop to Africa!

In the morning we were posted for departure on the 18th December at 03:30 in the morning! We made one last PX run, we all bought a pair of Mosquito Boots at the PX. These boots looked pretty good, and cost around \$15.00 a pair

NATAL TO DAKAR DECEMBER 18,1943 10:10 FLIGHT

We went to a very thorough briefing the evening of the 17th covering the flight from Natal, Brazil to Dakar, French West Africa, departing at 3:30 AM Dec.18th. This was by far the most complete detailed briefing of the trip. We were looking at a flight of 10 to 11 hours duration, all over water. Needless to say, the whole crew was very alert and concerned about this flight! The pilots, navigators, and radio operators were the ones most concerned and involved with this information. I was very impressed with quality of the information presented. We were given a complete route profile with the FORCAST winds and weather. This covered cloud make up, for the entire route. The weathermen kept bringing up "The Inter Tropical Front". This is a front that moves back and forth over the Equator. At this time of year there was not much turbulence involved, just a lot of clouds and rain. We were told to be on the lookout for any ships sighted, particularly any ships with submarines along side. The Germans were still using "Mother Ships" to service subs in the South Atlantic. We had no ammunition or bombs aboard, but if we saw any thing, we were to report by long range radio using Morse code.

We should expect to be past the worst of the Inter Tropical Front two or three hours past daylight. We were assigned altitudes and each plane would depart Natal 10 minutes apart.

One other note was very interesting to us, as we neared the African Coast, we should make landfall South of Dakar. Upon hitting land, turn left up the coast to the field. If we

flew to the left or North of Dakar, we would run out of gas south of Gibraltar, never seeing land!

About 3:00, an operations jeep came by, and told us to get engines started. They would come back and get us into the take off line at the runway. All was running and everything checked out, and we were led to the take off line. There was a jeep at the runway with a spot lamp checking plane numbers and moving the line. A flashing green light told us to run the pre take off check, and a steady green meant to roll out onto the runway and take off. At our steady green light, we rolled onto the runway and applied TO power. As we started to roll, our clock showed 3:30! That place was really organized!

Leaving the runway, out over the ocean, was like flying into a black hole. The procedure was for the pilot keep a lookout for planes, and the co-pilot would hold the plane on instruments at a steady climb and heading. We did this till we got our eyes accustomed to the darkness, and cockpit lights (such as they were) adjusted. There was an overcast, no stars or moon were visible, it was DARK. Navigator Hosmer gave us a heading and we were off to AFRICA!

About an hour and a half after leaving Natal, we ran into moderate rain. Still black as a pit, Hosmer came up on the flight deck, and told Hudson and me that he really needed a celestial (star fix). Could we climb up on top of the overcast so he could see the stars? Hudson said yes, but we had no idea of the tops. I applied climb power to the engines, this woke all aboard up, any change of power or speed was pretty scary to the men aboard. We got to 12,000 feet, and still no break in the clouds. We were not supposed to climb above 10,000 feet without oxygen, at 12000 feet it started to get pretty cold. Hudson decided to go back down, and I sure did agree with him! Our assigned altitude was 7 or 8 thousand feet, and we were still in the clouds with rain. Hosmer came up on the flight deck, telling us that he really need to make a wind drift check, and could we let down to where he could see the water, as it was daylight by now. I set the engines to cruise descending. Down we came at 300 feet a minute as the altimeter unwound past 2000 feet, we all started looking out the windows for the surface. At 500 feet indicated, Hudson decided not go below 300 feet. Since we had not gotten an altimeter check since take off at Natal the real altitude could be off by a hundred feet or so! At 300 feet we applied climb power back and up we went still in the clouds and light rain. Navigator Hosmer was concerned, as we had been in the air over eight hours and did not have a good fix.

Our radio operator, Sgt Muse had been checking in each hour on the longrange Morse code networks, and was getting a good signal from Dakar. We decided that Muse should try for a QDM (Position Fix) from a couple of the stations in Africa. With two ground stations copying our signals, they could determine a rough position fix for us. Sgt. Muse got us a fix and Hosmer was more comfortable with his navigation, and gave us a heading for the shore about 100 miles south of Dakar.

A little over 9 hours into the flight we descended to 2000 feet, still in light rain but seeing the surface of the ocean white caps. We all had a great feeling of joy, knowing that we were so close to landing. The radio beacon from Dakar started to come in on our radio

compass, this always makes the pilots happy! Sam Backanauskas the Bombardier woke up from his 9-hour sleep, and spotted the shore line ahead. With a new heading we followed to shore almost due north. Still in light rain we landed at Dakar after a 10:10 flight.

The tower instructed us to taxi to a parking spot, and a parking jeep led us in. Shutting down the engines we started climbing out and got under the wing out of the light rain.

Standing at attention in the rain was a Black French Colonial soldier guard. When he saw that several of us were officers, he snapped a rifle salute to us. We returned his salute and his face was all smiles with white teeth showing. His uniform was great, on his head was a red Fez, his jacket was water soaked cotton khaki, his pants were ballooned out like riding britches, wrap leggings on his calves and BAREFOOTED! He was at least six foot six in his bare feet! Africa HERE WE ARE.

Open trucks picked us up in the light rain, took us to quarters. The base at Dakar was a pretty sorry sight. It was all red mud, no grass or trees. We were not allowed to get off the base to see the town. All the local troops told us there was nothing to see, and NO one was allowed off base. The town of Dakar was off limits for all. Every disease known and some unknown were there! We had a couple of drinks at the club bar as we waited for the mess hall to open for an early dinner. Dinner was all GI canned stuff, but it tasted pretty good. Sure did beat the K Rations we had on the plane.

We were roused out about 6 AM, checked our bedding in, and had a hearty breakfast. Fried Spam with powdered eggs and GI French toast. Very filling, we would have 7 plus flight day ahead of us so we filled up.

At briefing we were checked out on the next leg, Dakar to Marrakech, Morocco a seven to eight hour flight. Leaving Dakar, we headed north and had to stay east of Spanish Morocco as Spain was Neutral! Most of the flight would be over the sub Sahara and then the Sahara. As we approached the Atlas Mountains we were to spot a big black rock sticking up in the desert. From this rock we were to fly a heading directly into the mountains below the peaks. If we were on the right heading, and the wind was as forecasted, our course would take us through a pass in the Atlas Mountains, Marrakech was just on the other side! The briefer told us that they DID LOSE a plane now and then going through this pass! Think that they got a kick out of this. Poor fellows, stationed at Dakar. Had to have some entertainment!

DAKAR TO MARRAKECH DECEMBER 20, 1943

We got off the ground about 8:30, the light rain stopped about 20 minutes North, and the route was CAVU (ceiling and visibility unlimited) we could see for miles, but there was

the old city walls; the gates into the casbah had large signs posted. They were written in English "OFF LIMITS TO ALL ALLIED PERSONNEL" "DO NOT ENTER" "VERY DANGEROUS TO ALL" "EVERY KNOWN AND SOME UNKNOWN DISEASES"

"VIOLATORS WILL BE JAILED" "SIGNED THE PROVOST MARSHALL"

This information was very appealing to we five drunken American Officers. Humph Hosmer had use of a little French. The driver spoke French; so here we went, back around to the south- east gate of the casbah. Only caravans of camels coming to town from the Sahara used this gate. Also no military police were stationed at these gates.

Our driver had some old rugs; using them he covered us up as we hunkered down in the carriage seats. Away we went, in the long tunnel of the gate with the camels, sheep, donkeys, and people. I think we all started sobering up as we realized just what damn fools we were, but were at the mercy of our driver. He told Hosmer that he was taking us to "The House Of The Seven Veils". Here we would have coffee and see a strip show, from there we would go back out to the French City. We thought this to be a great idea; so on into the casbah we went. Sights, peeking from under the rugs, sounds, weird music, singing, and above all smells, cooking food, smoke, open sewers, and no one knows what else. There were no electric lights, just torches and flickering oil lamps. We were back in time a thousand years. This was a long way from Houston Street in San Antonio!

We pulled up to the gate of "The Veils" got out and huddled against the gate to the house. The driver announced that he would collect his fare NOW and he would come back and get us later. This went over like a lead balloon! We told him to wait and we would pay him extra fare when he got us out of the casbah. He squalled but we held firm, told him we would get back in the carriage and go back to the hotel. I think that he was going to get a kick back from the Veil House, so he agreed to put his carriage in the big door of the Veil House. We all walked into the place through a smaller door, through a parking courtyard, and up some stairs to the performing hall. In this hall there were flickering oil lamps in niches in the walls for a little light. Around the room along the walls were cushions and hassocks; a couple of flimsily dressed girls seated us. Over in the corner four of five fellows started the music, flutes, whistles, drums, and cymbals, just like the movies. The two girls brought out trays with brass coffee pots, and small brass cups. Each of us had a cup of this coffee; All the while the musicians kept up the squeaky clanky tunes. There was curtain over a wide door at one of the room, the music got louder and the curtain opened, and out came five girls with a lot of filmy veils covering them from head to toe. The girls wiggled and slithered around the room, the music got louder and faster, the veils started coming off, the room got warmer. All the wine we had seemed to take hold of us! Looking back, we are pretty sure that the thick sweet coffee we had been drinking had keef or hash heesh in the mix.

The veils were swirling, the girls were whirling, the room was turning, and all of a sudden the veils were gone, and these nude girls were putting the make on us all. What a show. The girls were not too thrilling, they had varying shade of skin from light brown to jet-black. The most amazing sight was that girls were clean- shaven around the pubic areas. We all played a little grabbo, and the girls did the same. But none of us had any

intercourse with them. We were all in the same room together, and I think that Van Lent was a stabilizing factor. Also, all of those condoms were still in the airplane. We bid the veil girls goodbye, leaving a good contribution for them and the musicians.

Downstairs, our non- paid driver was waiting. We crawled into his old carriage, he covered us up and went back out the gate we had come in by. We were all sound asleep is soon as he started off. We had too much wine and too much of that funny coffee, the driver took us all the way out to the air base gate, and the gate guards had to wake us up.

Some night, but it was not over! The night was clear as a bell, the stars were shining brightly, and our breath was frosting as we exhaled. It was cold, near freezing. This was a typical desert condition-warm balmy days and freezing nights. We staggered out to the olive grove where our tents were, took our shoes off and fell in bed. The canvas cot and one blanket made it feel colder, we put the GI blanket on the floor as it was a bit warmer that way, than the air circulating under a canvass cot.

At about 3 in the morning we could not sleep at all, the wine and coffee was wearing off, and we were miserable. Gene Hudson got up, went to a vacant tent behind us. These tents had wood plank floors, and Gene proceeded to tear up the planks. He told me to get the front of our tent rolled up as he piled the floor- boards up in front of our tent like a good boy scout. With the help of an old newspaper, he got a good fire started just in front of our tent. We crawled back on the cots, pulled up the blanket and were almost comfortable and asleep, when up drove a fire truck with a bunch of MPs. They put the fire out, and took us to the guard- house. The guard- house was in a building, and we rolled up in our blanket and dozed off for the rest of the night. We almost thanked the MPs for the accommodations.

The next morning (Dec 21), the MP captain gave us a real royal ass chewing, he was old army and was good at his trade. He did not care at all for smart assed Air Corps Officers. He got some coffee for us, took us to the mess hall, had a guard watching us while we ate breakfast,(powdered eggs and French toast)

As we waited around the mess hall, the MP captain came back with an Lt Col. and we had another good eating out. Since our various crews were scattered all over North Africa there was no way that we could be written up without our Headquarters unit. The Col made us chip in \$5.00 each to pay for the burned boards, and then took us to a real nice house that belonged to the French. There were beds and a big bathroom with a bidet yet.(none of us knew what a bidet was) Hosmer came through with an explanation.

Since we were pretty tired, we just hung around the base and the house. We got the officers from Miles Walters crew to share the luxury of the house. The base PX had little to sell, we did get a couple cartons of Lucky Strikes, and some Beech Nut chewing tobacco. The Wolfe brothers, gunners on our crew, were never without a chew of Beech Nut, any time we saw it available we got them some. How they wore Oxygen Masks sitting in a turret having to spit, I will never know. We all got well rested from our night in Marrakech.

The next morning DECEMBER 23, as there were about eight 455th crews with planes at Marrakech, we got together with Base Operations. Here they told us that the field we had orders for, CHATEAU DUN DU RHUMEL, was closing down. The Air Transport Command promised that they were trying to find some one in the Air Corps knowing where we should go. Marrakech was crowded with new bombers, but most of them spent just one night before going on to England and the 8th Air Force.

The 455th bunch decided to hell with it, and we went back to town to see some more sights.

The French town was a very nice place; we had lunch, with a lot more wine in a neat sidewalk café. A piece of chicken, potatoes and one slice of bread was all they could serve us, but there was plenty of wine.

A nice looking Frenchman, with good English, a licensed guide, asked if he could take us on tour of the on limits part of the Casbah. We said that sounded like a good deal, just as long as he did not take us back to the Veil House!

Our first stop, was a palace in the walls of the old city. This was a beautiful place, gardens in patios, lots of fountains. Screens of carved wood, and stone between areas, delicate arches with marble columns. The whole place was breathtaking. The building was now a national treasure, the BEY or king no longer lived in this 1000 year- old building.

Next we went to the Open Air Market! This area was about size of four football fields. The old city wall enclosed one side of the area; this wall was about 50 feet high, 30 feet deep, and red-brown in color. The story is that in building this wall around the city, water was a very scarce item, so the BEY or king ordered the workers to use blood in mixing the mortar! Animals, and many humans furnished this blood. Life was cheap and water was scarce, and the kings' word was law. Buildings and narrow streets were on the other side of the market. A large mosque, and the palace we visited were at the other end. .

The open area was swarming with people, vendors, fortune- tellers, sword swallowers, flame eaters, snake charmers, letter readers and writers. I could go on and on describing these characters. I was quite taken by the water vendors. These fellows had a goat -skin made into a bag, with water in the skin. The front legs had a colorful rope tying them together; this rope had a strap on the vendors shoulder. One rear leg had a plug that was removed to fill the skin. The other leg had a small brass nipple with a plug. This plug was pulled, water was squirted into a brass cup tied to the belt, and the customer drank from the cup. One cup per coin! Most of the folks in the market were dressed in a great variety of clothing. The people from out in the desert or mountains wore a vertically striped heavy wool robe complete with a head cowl. The cowl was worn behind the neck, and a belt or rope was around the waist. This robe was called a "Burnoose" I bought one from a shop off the square, paying about \$25.00 US. Came in handy later on cold nights, even if it barely reached my knees.

The merchants and business men wore a robe similar to a burnoose but of lighter material, and were white. Some did not have the head cowl; I think these were called dejabellas, or something like that. Most of the town women, wore gray robes with a head and face shawl. The mountain women were not veiled, and wore very colorful skirts and blouses. In all, the market was a sea of sound, sights, and color, with many smells thrown in!

We all bought leather slippers, wallets, hassock covers, brass letter openers and other tourist stuff. I brought some of this stuff home, but it has been lost in time. The burnoose was around till about 1960, wore it to a costume party once or twice. The carpet beetles got into the wool and ate it up!

The next day Christmas Eve, so we visited the shops and bars in French Town, there was not much to buy, but the shops were nice.

Back to the base that evening for supper, we saw the mess cooks preparing turkeys for Christmas Day! We went back to our house to clean up, and get dressed for midnight mass at the base chapel. Some one had a radio, in one of the houses, and we listened to Armed Forces Radio. Programs were transmitted from all over the world with Christmas Greetings. President Roosevelt was on the air with a talk. In which he announced a reorganization of the army in Africa and England. General Eisenhower would leave Africa; go to England to take command of the forces in England. The 9th Air Force would transfer from Africa to England. A new Air Force would be organized, based in Italy. This was to be the 15th Air Force, a heavy bomber force. This was great news to us as we thought we were headed for the 9th AF.

About 10 crews from the 741st went to the base chapel for midnight services. Getting there, we saw several hundred airmen standing around. There was no room for any one in the chapel. About ten of us officers went to our house, got out some wine to toast Merry Christmas. As our party got to rolling, a jeep rolled up to the house. A major and a Capitan with two sergeants, carrying orders walked up. They declined our offer of a drink, and announced that ALL 455th crews and planes were to take off at 8:00 AM. Destination was Chateau Dun Au Rumel, Algeria. What a Christmas Present! No Turkey, No Dressing, No Cranberry Sauce, No Mince Meat Pie.

We had one last drink, and climbed into our beds. I dreamed of Mince Meat Pie the rest of the short night.

DECEMBER 25, 1943

MARRAKECH TO CHATEAU DUN DU RUMEL, ALGERIA 7.5 HOURS

We got up, cleaned up the house, took a shower, and went to briefing.

The trip was to be almost direct via Algiers, to Chateau Dun, about 100 miles west of the Tunisian Border. The weather would be so so with some clouds, and restricted visibility. We were to fly over the cloud cover to the City of Algiers, and descend to a lower altitude, follow a railroad to Chateau Dun Airport. There was a paved runway about 5000 feet long there.

After briefing, we went to the mess hall for breakfast, and it was a bedlam. All personnel were busy cooking Christmas Lunch. We had lukewarm Spam, and powdered eggs, with cold bread and bad coffee.

The trucks taking us out to the planes, off loaded 4 cases of K Rations, and a big sack of oranges at each plane. Our water jugs had been filled, not with coffee, but plain nasty tasting water.

Our flight leader was to be 1st Lt. Lawrence Liberty, the assistant operations officer of the 741st squadron; our crew was to be on his right wing as next in command. I think that Lt. Liberty knew that we had the best navigator, and he wanted Hosmer to keep us in line! The planes were mostly from the 741st, and I think there were about 12 in all. We got all the ships started, taxied out together. The tower gave us permission to come back over the field in formation for a fly by. We got into formation east of the field, flying in 4 VEES. Liberty took us right down on the deck, with takeoff power, and we roared across the field at a bit over 250 MPH. The tower was screaming bloody murder, as we turned back from west to east and gave Marrakech a Real Christmas Farewell.

The planes stayed in a very loose formation order, but not too close to each other. This was at cruise power around 160 mph indicated, it was a cool day and I suspected we were doing 180 to 190 mph over the ground. We approached the city of Algiers from the south-west, and Masion Blanche Tower told us to stay well south of the harbor. The ships in the harbor were very jumpy, and they shot at almost any over flying planes. The navy was good at this. They were poor shots, but liked to throw lots of shells up! We could not see much of Algiers, but it was a very large city covering hills around the harbor

As we flew east, the clouds above us started lowering, and visibility got poorer, and poorer. At about 7 hours from Marrakesch, we all became concerned as to just where we were! Our navigator, Humph Hosmer, told us that we had flown over a railroad a few miles back, and he was pretty sure that our destination was along that railroad. Hudson called the leader Liberty, and told what Hosmer had said. We saw some rough hills looming ahead, and we knew that Chateau Dun Field was in a level area. Liberty agreed and asked Hosmer to get us back to the railroad, and be quick about it. Visibility was dropping, the sun was low in the west, and we had better get on the ground. We turned back on a western heading, started calling the tower at Chateau Dun; its code name was OVERCOAT. In a few minutes we saw the railroad, and saw green flares coming up dead ahead. A very weak and scratchy voice from OVERCOAT started coming in. We were told to land to the east with the sun to our backs; these words were good news to all of us. We found the asphalt field between a road and the rail- road just as Hosmer had

said. There was very little to see, just a few tents, and a small tower, but it was a field, and we were very glad to be on the ground. The tower told us to park around the field on hard-pan parking spots, an officer would come out in a jeep to lead us. Each parking spot was several hundred yards away from the other. We could care less, because we were parked and it was getting dark, and cold.

Lt. Liberty called on the radio, telling each pilot to walk to his plane, but the rest of the crew to stay in or around the planes, till he could find what was what!

After about a half an hour Hudson came back to the ship, we all huddled around him for instructions. There were no tents for us on this field, and any mess hall or tent, for us to get supper! The killer was that for tonight we were to sleep in the planes, or on the ground under. The field was closed down; the few fellows still here were to tear what little there was down. They were to move to another airport about 30 miles to the east tomorrow! The only good thing was that they were to bring us a water tank truck, and load of army "C" rations. We could build gasoline and dirt fires away from the ships, and warm up the "C" rations. We all had mess kits and canteens, so we would not starve tonight! Also, there were straddle latrines around the parking pans, and we did not have to dig latrines!

As the water truck and the rations arrived, we all got some fresh water in our canteens, and filled the gallon thermos jugs with the better than Marrakech water.

As we were all hungry, we got some fires going, and warmed the meat and vegetable hash up, opened some cans of fruit salad, got some crackers and coffee out of our "K" rations, and tore into chow. After the meal we scrounged through the "K" packages, got some cookies and fruit bars, and were quite comfortable.

Now came the big deal-Where To Sleep? Each of us had one GI blanket, along with fleece lined leather flying suits, and a raincoat. Several of us elected to sleep on the ground under the plane, with the raincoat on the ground, the clothes we had on plus the fleece suits, and boots. The blanket went over the top. We scratched the dirt a bit so our bones fit the ground better. It was not a real good sleep, but I think it was better than the cold metal of the B-24. During the night, it got colder, and a slight drizzle started. All during the night I could hear fellow ground sleepers, and particularly those in the plane tossing and rattling about. I do think we on the ground were warmer. A ground pad would be a great help as a cushion, I thought about the canvass nose and engine covers, but I was not sure just where they were. It was as dark as a pit; the overcast prevented me from seeing the Star in The East!

The next morning, it was cold and drizzling, a bit of ice had formed on the B-24 we were a hungry, cold bunch. The gas on the ground fires helped warm us, and we could heat water in our canteens for coffee. We had no idea that burning gasoline could be so sooty, but we saw a lot of that soot in the next few months.

About 8 AM the few troops with a truck showed up with some GI pyramidal tents. They showed us all how to set them up, the main center pole held up the center, and six shorter

stove got too much gasoline, it started roaring usually followed with an explosive WHUMP. This told us that the stove had exploded, and the fuel had to be turned off at once! We had no sort of lighting in the tents, but we all had issue flashlights, and Zippo lighters. The Zippos were a great substitute for a flashlight. We all had Zippos and kept them loaded with aviation gas, whether we smoked or not.

At mid morning, Lt. Liberty came dragging into camp, looking quite bedraggled. He had no news for us at all, as to where we belonged. He had left word at every field or camp he had seen. Also we heard that he had left word in several joints in the city of Constantine. Every bar and cat house in eastern Algeria was aware of the "Lost Squadron"

The Warrant Officer in charge of our field came by in a 6X6 truck. Told us he was going into the town of Chateau Du Rumel to buy oranges and eggs. He let several of the officers climb aboard, and we went to town. The town was not much, a couple of paved streets, a movie house, some shops with no merchandise, and a market much like Mexico. We all bought a few eggs, and some sacks of delicious oranges, and some almonds in the shell. We were going to divide the loot up with our crews; the North African Oranges were a real treat, our crew ate the whole sack in a few minutes. The almonds were not as popular, as we were all used to toasted and salted almonds.

After supper, the five officers from our tent gathered at Miles Walters' tent close by. Walters' navigator, Bill Stroman, had bought a carton of wax candles when we went into the town. Bill was an avid reader, and read in the tent by these candles. We put Stroman's bed in the corner of the tent, spread a blanket on the floor and got a blackjack game going. We all had a pocket full of French Francs, and the game was on a cash basis. After about half an hour, we heard a funny roaring noise. Some one raised the door flap. OUR TENT WAS ON FIRE. The five of us almost knocked Walters' tent down getting out to our tent! The fire was really blazing; the hay and gasoline had set the tent walls on fire, and down came the center pole. The five of us put gloves on, and started grabbing bags and clothes out of the flames. Some of us got well scorched tossing our stuff out of the fire. It was a hell of a mess, as everything we owned except for the clothes on our backs was in that tent. One side of my B-4 bag was burned, I lost my class "A" summer blouse, and some of my summer clothes in the B-4 bag. The worst loss for me was my prized A-2 leather jacket, my .45 auto pistol was badly burned, as well as a blanket and GI rain coat, and a pair of low quarter shoes, also the mess kit, canteen, and cover was ruined.

We went back to the game next door, as there was nothing we could do. The tent was just a mound of smoldering ashes. Some of us lost more and some less. We were thankful that we had put our parachute bags, containing a lot of stuff, back in the plane after we got the tent. We split up, crowding in with the fellows in other tents, and slept fairly well that night. As usual, I lost about \$5.00 in the game.

In the morning, after breakfast, the Warrant Officer got a driver and a 6X6 truck and took us to Telegrama. This being a depot, we got most of our losses replaced. The canteen and mess kit was a very necessary item. The pistol was not available, and the summer clothes were not at all necessary. I bought another pair of GI shoes, as they were

the most practical shoes. Also some more long underwear, wool shirts and heavy socks. Africa was colder than we had expected it to be.

On the way back to Chateau Dun, we stopped by a natural hot spring, in the side of a mountain beside the highway. We had no towels or soap, but we decided to get in. There were some tables run by natives, and they rented a type of towel, also a basket to put our clothes in. As shoes and clothes were a hot item to steal, we had half of our group guarding the baskets, as the other half got into the water. It was wonderful, first time we had been really warm in some days. As we got out, we put on our new heavy long johns and socks, and it was great to be warm and clean!

Back at the base, after lunch, a B-24 from our group landed, and we all gathered around to get the word from group! The Group Executive Officer, Lt.Col. Phil Johns-from San Antonio, a Lebanese, and fluent in Arabic, gave us the word! The group, after being scattered all over Algeria, was to gather at a field west of the city of Tunis, in Tunisia. The German and Italian armies had been defeated in April and we were to be based at a rebuilt German field at Dejedia. This was west of Tunis about 15 miles, and was very near the ruins of Carthage.

Gas trucks were on the way, and we were to take off in the morning, December 30th, for Dejedia !! We had a pretty good supper prepared by the Service Squadron, some of them had gotten some local wine for us. We all had half of a canteen cup of this wine, tasting a bit like gasoline. But we toasted and thanked the guys from the service squadron, they had been wonderful to us of the Lost Squadron. They went out of the way to help; the Warrant Officer from Cuero was one nice man. I have been sorry for years that I did not write his name down.

CHATEAU DUN ALGERIA TO DEJEDIA TUNISIA

DECEMBER 30,1943

A 2 HOUR FLIGHT

We spent an hour or so putting our stuff in the planes, after a good breakfast with the Service fellows. We all gathered near the runway, and Lt. Liberty told us he would be leading the squadron again; we were to form in 3 ship flights in line. He was to bring us back over the field in formation at METO POWER (max except for take off) as we headed east for Tunisia. We were a real sharp flight the planes were around ten feet apart, and really making noise at 2400 RPM. We came right over the mess tent, and all were out waving at us. Into the morning sun we went, eager beavers all!

There was not a lot to see en route, the country was rolling, and quite green. As we neared Tunisia there a lot of wrecked airplanes on the ground, also some areas with bomb or shell holes. The closer we got to Tunis; there was more wreckage on the ground. The area around Dejedia was covered with wrecks and piles of ammunition, crates and boxes were thick.

Approaching the field there was very good communication from the tower. They gave a clearance to come in low and peel up to the landing pattern. The runway was nice asphalt one about 6000 feet long; there were taxi ways on both sides of the runway, paved hard parking stands were all over the field. Neat rows of tents were already put up for us, and there was a stovepipe in each one, what a deal!

As we landed, a jeep led us to our parking areas, the tower told us to shut down, and all personnel to go to a big tent nearby, leaving all our bags in the plane. We were told in no uncertain terms to stay ON THE PAVEMENT on the way to the tent. All of the land mines and booby traps had not been fully cleared from the grassy areas!

In the tent we were greeted by all of our squadron officers and the group staff. We were the last of the wandering group. Planes that arrived at Marrkesch after Christmas were sent directly to Dejedia.

Our group Commander Col.Cool spoke a few minutes, telling us that our field in Italy was not ready. He said that we were lucky to have some time in Tunisia. We were to practice formation flying every day that was flyable, keeping a good tight formation would save a lot of us when we got to flying combat. The German Air Force loved sloppy formations, and would shoot them to pieces, and he wanted us not to be a target. Col Cool had flown a combat tour out of England, and he knew the bloody facts. We all were a bit less eager and loud when we got out of that meeting.

After a long wait, trucks took us to tents. Each crew of four officers had a tent to themselves. These tents were standard 12X12 or 144 Square Feet. The stove, made out of a 55- gallon drum took a good amount of space out of the center. These stoves were built a little better than our stove at Chateau Dun, and we all appreciated that. Lt. John Van Lent moved into a tent with squadron non flying officers, he still spent a lot of time with the four of us; he said that we kept him young!

The living tents with latrines- (no running water) were on the west side of the runway. The mess and briefing tent was on the other side of the field. It was a long walk around, but we were not to cut across. A couple of trucks were always coming and going so rides were available.

There was no running water; we kept a Jerry Can full of water near our stove, and another one outside. There were plenty of Jerry Cans (German Water Cans) available. In our tent areas there were water trailers that we could fill up from. To shave or do a spit bath, we got warm water from the stove Jerry Can, put into a small tin can, heated this water on the stove. We were all clean- shaven (regulations), but our hair was getting a bit shaggy after a month on the road. The food was strictly GI, but I enjoyed most of it. For

breakfast, once in a while, we had French toast. This was made with water dissolved powdered eggs. Good syrup and salty bacon made a good meal. We still ate all of our meals out of the mess kit, once in a while there was room at the officers' table to sit down. Usually we just squatted down like cowboys to eat out in the open. We were getting accustomed to eating in the open. If it was raining, we could take our food back to our tents and eat inside with the stove for warmth.

The morning of December 31, word got out that we would not fly on New Years Day. We all started thinking of a big party. Since a great many of our people had been at Dejeida several days, the word got out that there was a monastery near by, and they had a good supply of red wine! The various crews got together with the motor pool guys, chipped in some cash. The truck men would take our money, and bring in a lot of wine for New Years Eve. As the truck got back loaded with Jerry cans with wine. There must have been over a hundred gallons for our squadron alone! The orders were, no one was to drink till after supper!

We made an arrangement to have open house at several of our tents. The tents had taken the name of the crew's pilot. Our tent, men and officers, was Hudson's. Near us was: Walters, Condra, Wurtz, Nangeroni, Locatelli, Jordan, Slater, and Callen, all from Chateau Dun. With 4 officers per crew, there were 36 lieutenants in 9 tents. The enlisted men had the same tent names, and were near by, with 6 men to a tent. Each squadron was in an area to itself. In all there were a lot of people, and a lot of tents.

The cook and mess men did not fix much for dinner, as they too, wanted to party. We had spam sandwiches and coffee! Hudson and I brought a bunch of sliced spam from the mess tent, we liked to fry it on our stove. This was a lucky break, as we had more in our stomach than most other people. At about 7 PM the order was to Tap The Kegs, or Open The Jerry Cans. Red wine poured into an aluminum canteen cup, was not too good. The wine was very strong and acidic. It also put your teeth on edge! After the first cup, it seemed to go down better. By the third cup, we were getting DRUNK, soon we were all staggering drunk! I am sure that the noise of singing and yelling could be heard in Tunis, some 15 miles away.

We visited several of the crew tents, with cup in hand, wishing each and all Happy New Year. I have no idea as to how much wine I drank, but I had enough sense to stop about 10 PM. I got my shoes off and climbed into my bed fully clothed, dead to the world. I think it was at midnight, I heard a lot of shooting! The aircrews were shooting their .45s to usher in the new- year. My pistol was burned- up; my body was out, so I did no shooting. I guess I missed a lot of action. In the morning I felt pretty bad, the wine had a terrible effect. I was lucky, as many of the fellows had been sick all night. I walked to the mess tent, ate some bacon, oatmeal, and coffee. This helped my headache a lot. Walking back to the tent, it was a common sight to see the men outside the tents throwing up. That was some party.

Here it was January 1, 1944 in a strange country, looking at unknown future, flying a death -dealing plane. The trip of the past month was exciting, and very interesting. It was

amazing to be with a group of fellows with so little flying time, bringing 64 huge bombers, all this way without one lost or damaged plane. We had to be DAMN GOOD!

Now we had to really practice to be THE BEST! I guess that 1944 would be the greatest challenge of our lives, and for some of us OUR LAST.

DEJEDA, TUNISIA
JANUARY 1, 1944

New Years Day- Start of a NEW YEAR.

Most of the Group men were sick and hung over. We had a big celebration last night. Drinking like pigs, a great amount of the local red wine was consumed, and most of us were paying the Fiddler, as we had a Ball. Thanks to generosity of the Group, we had no duties for today! The cooks were on duty, and the medics were busy dispensing APC Pills.

The weather was cool and damp, matched our physical conditions perfectly. There was a lot of SACK TIME putting in today. We were busy organizing our tents, making them as comfortable as we could. Our cots were of the standard issue, a folding wood frame, with a canvass surface. These things were very cold, as we had no pads or mattresses . We got out, our heavy fleece lined flying clothes, and any spare clothes, piled these on the cots as some protection from the cold air. I was very thankful for the burnoose robe bought in Marrakech, as this and my army blanket made things more bearable. I got out the little battery -operated radio I picked up at Mitchell, and carried it to the Radio Repair Tent. The fellows helped finding some batteries of the correct voltages. I got the thing working! The batteries were much bigger than the radio, but with an ammunition box and some wire, I had nice stand for my radio, candle and flashlight at the head of my cot. I was able to tune several stations, all talking French or Arabic. At night, we got a good signal from the German Radio "AXIS SALLY". Her theme song was "LILI MARLENE", a favorite of all. I think this station was in Rome, as there was poor, or no reception during the day.

The weather stayed cold and drizzly, very similar to a winter day in San Antonio. We were unable to do any flying with these conditions. We had quite a few training lectures, but there was a lot of spare time on our hands. They say that "Idle hands makes work for the devil", and that was right. There was a lot of army traffic going by our field, Hudson and I hitched a ride down the road a mile or so to a huge depot of damaged vehicles. In scrounging around, we found a running Dodge 4X4 Command Car. This was a huge car, the only problem was with the choke. Hudson and I figured that out promptly.

Hudson could talk his way in or out of any situation, and he conned the M.Sgt. in charge to check the Dodge out to us. He filled out an authorized trip ticket in our names. We had to bring the car back once a week, and renew the trip ticket, as well as service it! We had wheels!!!

It was not serviceable for reissue, as the canvas top and frame were missing. We had good warm clothes, so why let a little drizzle bother us?

In riding around the area close by, we found a supply base that would let us check out mattress covers. A dry haystack provided plenty of dry straw to stuff the mattress cover,

and here we had a mattress to keep the cold off our bottoms. We made many runs in the Dodge helping all of the 741st get a mattress.

In talking to some Army AA fellows, we found that the hills and valleys around had a game bird, it looked like our Bob White Quail, but was about three times bigger. You could not get close to these birds and shoot a shotgun (which we did not have) at them. The only way to get them was to shoot at them with rifles! The army guys told us where to go and find plenty of American M 1 Rifles and ammunition, also gave us a map showing where it was safe to drive off the pavement and hunt these birds! He suggested that we find a local native for a guide, a package of Lucky Strikes was a fortune to these natives.

Off we went to the supply depot for our rifles, with no trouble, another M. Sgt. issued us four M 1's and eight bandoliers of ammunition, we told him that we were setting up perimeter guards around our planes, which was not a bad idea.

Our field was located at the intersection of the main highway running roughly east and west from Tunis with a branch turning north. This north road went to Mateur and then to Bizerte on the Mediterranean Coast To the west and east was a range of hills, and the Bizerte road ran along these hills. The reason I am boring you with these details is in a way very interesting. The German Air Force had a landing ground on the same level as our paved runway. The Germans did not require a runway, so the planes would take off and land on the big landing ground. The paved road along the hills was a perfect taxiway for the German Fighters. Revetments were dug out of the hill for parking spots, and camouflage nets were put over the dug out areas. From the air, the fact that the landing ground was even there was not evident, as all the planes were parked in dug out revetments, and covered with netting.

This road and the hills were great sight seeing and junk collecting areas for us. On the west side of the hills were dug out gun sites with 88mm guns looking to the west. As we looked along the barrels of these guns, you could see victims of their shooting. These were American made Grant Tanks about ½ mile away, with British markings. Each of six tanks were cleanly punctured by the 88's, and consequently burned out. As we said "Those Krauts were good shots." The whole area was covered with junk, cars, trucks, jeeps, planes, cannons, all burned out. There had been quite a battle around here over eight months ago, as the German Afrika Korps was captured, or wiped out in Tunisia.

The weather at this time was cold and drizzly, quite like S. Texas in January. We had not flown in about ten days, and we were eager to get in the air and practice formation flying. Since the weather was stinking, we made a few trips into Tunis, as it was about 15 miles away. Our liberated Dodge command car made a few runs. As there was no top for the thing, the best seats were in the front. Here you could hunker down behind the windshield, with a little protection from the wet cold wind. Four of five fellows would pile into the back seat and floor. With enough clothes, and jammed in tight, the 30 minutes into town were not too bad.

As none of the military vehicles had keys, stealing one was quite a favorite past time among the local, and military people. There were two ways you could keep your vehicle from being stolen. 1. Chain and lock it to a lamp- post. 2. Take the rotor or the whole distributor off the engine and carry it with you! Most thieving types had a pocket full of rotors, so the lock and chain was the best idea-if you had a lock! Gene Hudson had found a chain and lock, where I do not know, and I never asked. So we had to find a good strong lamp- post when leaving the Dodge.

Tunis, the European part of town, was a very attractive city with wide Esplanaded Tree Shaded Streets. A trolley track ran in the Esplanades, but I never saw a moving trolley. There were a few 1930's automobiles on the streets, but they all had charcoal burners on the back, producing some type of fuel. These cars just chugged along emitting smoke and fumes. Most of the traffic was made up of military vehicles, and there was a lot of that.

Humph Hosmer, our European Authority said that Tunis was laid out to look like Paris, as it was a French Territory. In the esplanaded streets there were Pissouirs, urinals to us. They were very handy to all the men. I think Hosmer said that these urinals were all over France.

There were no bars or public restaurants, but the military had set up many Clubs and Messes. Some were for transient troops, but mostly officers, enlisted men got the short end of the stick, as usual.

There was one nice, but very crowded Jr. Officers' Club we frequented. The food was the same as we had at the field, but we did get to sit down at tables and be waited on by Tunisian Waiters. Hard drinks were not much to brag about, some local gin, and lemonade mix was a favorite. There was some local wine, but after News Year Eve we could not get it down!

As with any group of soldiers, it would get pretty loud after several gin sours. No one in our group was guilty, but some of the Air Corps types were carrying the Issue 45 Colt Auto in the shoulder holsters under the A-2 leather Jacket This made us feel very uneasy when these jokers would wave these big pistols around! All Air Crews were issued these pistols. I don't think one in twenty crew- members could hit a wash- tub at ten yards with these pistols. The concussion was terrible, you had to be a cool steady pistol shooter to score well with this gun. When we were training at Langley Field, very few of us even qualified on the range with the .45. I practiced a lot, but never felt competent with the thing! I, and most of us did much better with the rifle, and Tommy Gun.

After an afternoon and early evening of boozing in Tunis, girls became subject # one. The full time men stationed in Tunis had all the loose gals staked out. For transient flight crews, the Kasbah was the only answer. Our bunch had been exposed to conditions in the native Kasbah of Marrakech. We opted to not venture into these off limit places with or without our pistols! Back to the field we went, Hudson was the soberest of the bunch, so he did the driving. Night on the highway was pretty scary, as we had blackout lights on the Dodge. Many of the natives traveled the roads at night, and the main transport was

donkeys! The women walked in front and the men rode the donkeys. Sometimes these donkeys were piled high with tree trimmings. Trimmings from olive and citrus trees were the main source of firewood for these people. It was a thrill to come upon a pile of trimmings walking down the road, of course, no one had any type of lantern or light, and it made for interesting travel! Some of the men stationed here a long time told us that the reason the men had the women walking ahead of them was, the women found the land mines first!!

As the weather was still not flyable, one morning we decided to go hunting for these big quail. We went to a village, made a deal with a couple of men to hang on to the Dodge, and show us some of these birds. Two packs of Camels and a couple of candy bars were settled upon as the guide fee. Our map showed the country behind this village and in the hills was mine free! Off we went. The birds were found in the brushy draws and bottoms, but as soon as we got near a covey, they would flush up to the hills in the open country. As they landed they tended to bunch up and mill around, calling the covey. Usually, they were one or two hundred yards away. That was no range for our M-1 rifles, so we started shooting at them as fast as we could. There may be one or two birds hit at each fusillade, our guides would run up the hill and retrieve for us. The guides kept telling us to wait, and they would tell us when to start shooting. We got to a covey of birds on a hill- side that was covered with medium sized rocks, and the men told us to start shooting! We got about six birds down at this place. The rifles were loaded with jacketed bullets, as the bullets hit the rocks around the birds splinters would fly, and we got more birds on rocky ground! After this, we always tried to flush birds into rocky ground.

We had about 12 birds in the car, gave 4 to the guides. They graciously cleaned ours for us. These birds were built just like Bob Whites, and were all white meat. Back at the tents, we got some tropical butter, melted in a mess kit. Salt and pepper on the cut up birds fried in the butter resulted in some good eating. Like quail, some were tougher than others, but it was a great change from our canned hash!

Hunts were put on, but Hudson and I always went, as the Dodge was signed out to us. So we got a couple of birds now and then. Had a lot of fun shooting up the country with the M-1s. The country had seen a lot of that, so no one paid much attention to the gun- fire.

One day, as we were checking into the motor pool, we found a German BMW Motorcycle with a sidecar. There were two seats on the bike and two seats in the sidecar, The Sergeant told us it was inoperative, as the throttle linkage was not working, the cable was broken! We looked the problem over, got some safety wire, ran it to the throttle on the carburetor, and up to the handle bar. The wire was loosely safetyid to the frame, and was terminated with a ring at the handle bar. Put your finger and pull the wire to give gas, it was spring loaded to the off position. Instead of twisting the handle bar, we just pulled on the ring to go faster! Every thing else worked perfectly, the wheel on the sidecar could be engaged to drive position, just like a jeep in 4 -wheel- drive. This cycle would climb a 45- degree hill like it was on level ground. What a great hunting vehicle, we could run up and down the hills, with ease! No need to hire the guides to run up the hills, but they came along on foot!

We had a great vacation due to weather for about ten days, and it started to improve around the tenth of January. I noticed in my log that I rode along as an observer for 2.5 hours. I think the Squadron Commander sat in my seat, while I looked out the window or snoozed on the flight deck. I had 2.5 hours non-pilot in my Form 5 (LOG) I am sure that we practiced formation flying at low level. With haze or clouds it was safer to practice formation at low level, as the pilots had a reference to ground, and would not suffer from vertigo. Without a true horizon to look at it was very easy to get vertigo and become de-oriented.

On the 13th we flew, and I was along as an observer again on this 2.5 flight. My pilot Gene Hudson, was being groomed as a flight leader. This was an honor for Gene, as he was a 2nd Lt., and we had one captain and three 1st Lt. pilots in the squadron! I think that a squadron was supposed to have 4 flight leaders. A flight leader led 6 to 9 planes in formation. Back in the tent area all the pilots were congratulating Hudson, no formal announcement had been made, but it looked like he would be a flight leader! He was a fine fellow, and I felt he and I had made a good team. Gene was always considerate of our crewmen, making sure that they were well taken care of. Some of our pilots were pretty stand offish, but not Gene. The men loved him, and he made good landings! This was VERY important to the crew.

Around January 14, we were scheduled for the whole group to get together in formation. This was a regular combat formation. There were two sections in the group. Each section was made up of three flights. A flight was composed six to nine planes in 3 vees. The section had 18 to 27 planes abreast, a high flight, a lead flight and a low flight. We were to get the engines running, and taxi on the perimeter taxiway, and take off, one plane at a time each 30 seconds apart. The group leader of the first section was the first ship off, and the various wing men would form up on the flight they were assigned to. As the leader slowly climbed in a race track formation over the field. It was a real sight to see, as well as a very noisy thing on the ground. With 60 planes circling, each with 4 engines running at climb power, the noise on the ground was almost deafening!

On this mission, the weather was clear, and we were to climb to 20,000 feet. At this altitude, we had to put our oxygen masks at 10000 feet. We had been issued the new type masks at Langley, with the microphone built in. This was a great improvement over the old type masks, and the throat mike! The temperature dropped to a pretty cold level, around minus 15 F. The B-24 had little or no heat aboard. There were two south wind automobile gasoline heaters at the pilots' feet, one under the radio operators' desk on the flight deck. There was NO heat in the nose or tail section. The south wind heaters were not supercharged, so they did not work above 12000 feet. We had our fleece-lined pants, jackets, and boots on but it was very cold. The fellows in the back had a hard time, the waist gun windows were kept open while we were in formation. In case of a collision, the waist gunners had a chance to get out! IF they had parachutes on! It was REALLY cold back there! Guess it was the chill factor!

Returning to base, was another spectacle. The whole group came over the field at minimum altitude, the lower left flight right down on the deck. At mid way down the

runway the plane to the left would pull up into a climbing turn drop the wheels, turning to the down wind leg, still in a turn he would come around base leg and on the final approach and land. Again we were about 30 seconds apart, on past the field this pull up and drop wheels, in the turn to down wind. This stretched the first section past the end of the runway, the second section was circling above the traffic altitude, and when the tower cleared the section the same show was repeated. We could land the group in around 30 minutes.

That afternoon, I had a bad experience, remember the money belt issued to me in Florida? Well as I was going to the slit trench latrine the bills fell out of the belt, dropping down into mess below! I was really shaken up by this accident. I went back to the tent thinking of suicide. Humph Hosmer said. " Lets go and take a look at the problem". We picked up a length of $\frac{1}{4}$ " tubing, sharpened the end, and started gigging \$10 Bills. An onlooker brought us a paper sack for the bills, and we stuffed the nasty things in the sack. A day or two later we made a special trip to the finance office in Tunis. A young finance officer met me at a counter, I showed him my charge as a class "B" finance officer, and I asked him to sign me off on the money. He said "Glad to, just count it out and I will give you a receipt" I told him that it was really DIRTY MONEY, and I was not about to open the sack and count it. As I told him the circumstances, he agreed to sign it off and burn the sack. I got my receipt and left, a greatly relieved person, As, \$500.00 was a LOT of money. I often wondered if the sack was really burned?

I am going to bore you with some information about the B-24, so bear with me. At this time the 24 was the largest bomber in the Air Corps, in spite of the claims of the B-17! The ailerons and elevator had to be locked when the plane was on the ground, as any wind would bang these controls around badly. There were two solutions to this, the co-pilot could hold on to the wheel, or the controls could be locked, by pulling a red handle on the center pedestal. A red web strap came out of a spring loaded housing on the overhead, then the red lever was hooked to the strap, locking the controls. This strap came from the overhead panel down to the floor- mounted lever, and the strap was always in the way of the pilot moving the throttles. Most of the pilots got a small board, cut a notch in it, and hooked it under the handle, this locked the controls without having the bright red strap in the way. Before take -off, the co-pilot read, out loud, a very detailed check- list. One of the last items on the list was "Controls Checked Free "At this time, the co-pilot took the red strap off the lever and the strap retracted to the overhead, or if the board was in place, take it off and move the controls full travel with the wheel and rudders. Every crew was supposed read this check- list at each stage of operation.

The crew had positions to take for take off. In the rear, the tail-gunner, ball-gunner, and the two waist gunners were supposed to sit on the floor with their backs against the bomb bay bulk- head. Actually, these four stood at the two waist windows, holding on to the gun mounts. In the front, the two pilots were in seats, the engineer, kneeled on the floor between the two pilots. The radio operator-nose gunner sat at the radio desk, the bombardier and navigator sat or stood on the flight desk behind the pilots. No one rode in the nose at take off. On top of the flight deck was the top gun turret protruding down into the flight deck. The engineer sat in this turret after we were well in route. This turret was

pretty heavy, and in a crash landing usually broke loose, dropping to the flight deck. Take off time was always a time of tension for all aboard. The B 24 wing has mounted on top of the fuselage, and in a crash landing the wing, being above, did not absorb much damage. The fuselage tended to crumple first!

One morning, as we were getting ready for a formation take off, a visiting B-24 started a take off. Our parking spot was close to the departure end of the runway, and we watched this plane coming down the runway with full power. Normally, at about half way down the runway, the nose wheel should be off the ground, but it was not as it roared by us. Suddenly, the pilot cut the throttles, and stood on the brakes, trying to abort the take off. The controls were locked!! The plane slid off the end of the runway, as it hit the dirt, the nose wheel folded up. The whole plane reared up on its nose grinding along crushing the nose section. It stopped, with the tail in the air, and the men in back were jumping out of the waist windows. The co-pilot crawled out of his window, and two men came out of the top hatch. There was a small flicker of flame under the nose. (The aux electric gas powered generator had caught fire.) The engineer was pinned under the turret, and the pilot was jammed in his seat. We ran over there to try and help. Just as we got there, the ambulance drove up. (They were waiting off the end of the runway), Capt. Schutneck, our squadron flight surgeon was in the ambulance. We got the pilot almost out thru the window, and WHUMP the leaking main gas tanks caught fire. We jumped back away from the fire, Capt Schutneck grabbed a piece of pipe, pried the window out, and pulled the pilot into the clear. The poor engineer was trapped! For years I used to wake up from my sleep hearing his screams!

The pilots right leg was badly burned, we heard that he lived. The plane burned completely down to a black pile, the smell of the engineer burning up stayed with us a long time.

The group took off on schedule, and flew a three- hour practice formation. As we returned, the burned ship was smoldering. The skull of the burned engineer was still in the ashes. We NEVER used the board to hold the control lock again!

The weather turned bad, and we could not fly. Our squadron commander, Major Lanford gave a stand down (no flying) for the next day, and we decided to get an early start the next day. We decided to take a tour of the area north of Tunis. Between our field and the Bay of Tunis lay the site of the City of Carthage, and to the north west was the big port city of Bizerte, and the town of Mateur. About six of us, including Major Lanford, went by the mess hall after breakfast, and bummed some spam and bread. With our canteen belts on, we were ready for an all day outing.

Our first stop was Carthage, just a few miles away. We knew from our history books, that Rome had destroyed Carthage, after winning the Punic Wars. That was an understatement, there were just a few pieces of marble scattered around in a swampy area near the silted up Bay Of Tunis. John Van Lent, told us that as Rome got through tearing the city down they spread rock salt all over the site. The Romans were pretty vindictive about those Phoenicians!

It did not take us very long to get bored with Carthage, even had guides soliciting our business. Hosmer was the only man in our group speaking French, and he said that the local guides had very poor French! I have not mentioned our Bombardier, Sam Backanuskas. His parents were Lithuanian, and Sam said it did not sound at all like Arabic! Sam was the character in our crew. He was very droll, and tended to sleep when he had a chance. Like most Bombardiers, he was a frustrated pilot. His droll sense of humor often cracked us up. Sam persisted in tying a Windsor knot in his neck- tie. GI ties were very short, and did not have any material to spare for a Windsor. So Sams' ties were usually out of his shirt. (We were supposed to put the tie in our shirts at the second button hole) We seldom wore a tie, but Sam was quite a dresser and always had his tie on, even when flying. He said, "The Army had made An Officer and Gentleman out of him, and intended to dress like one "

The road North led by the Town of Mateur, there had been several days of very hard fighting around here. The papers in February and March had a lot to say about Mateur, as the American Army was involved here. Needless to say, there was nothing here but a lot of destroyed buildings. Sam wanted us to look for the Officers Club, and have a drink .He was kidding, there was not a roof in town!

Leaving Mateur, we went on north to the port city of Bizerte. Here we encountered, for the first time, a Base Section! A Base Section was a rear area supply center, controlled by Quartermaster people. As we drove up the city entrance, we were stopped by MPs. These MPs asked to see our orders, and of course we had none! The Bizerte Base Section was Off Limits for all without orders. Here we were right by the docks, and the main part of town, and we were not allowed into the area. What a sorry situation this was. The town and dock had been under very heavy bomber attacks for years, and the place was a mess, to say the least! We heard later that the Base Section people had a pretty good set up there, a couple of very nice Officer's Clubs were away from all the bombed areas. But they kept them for themselves! They did not want a bunch of Air Corps types messing up the playground.

We turned around and went back by the field to Tunis. We had dinner and got drunk and disorderly in a nice Air Corps club. On the way back to the field, it was touch and go keeping the Dodge on the road, and we were all glad to get to bed.

The next morning, we saw that the streets between the tent rows had been neatly graveled. This was great, as the areas were normally very muddy. Signs had been put up Saying."NO VEHICLES ON STREETS". After breakfast, Hudson and I started up our BMW Motorcycle, as it was beside our tent in an off limits area, now that we had gravel. We planned to take the machine to the hard stand where our plane was parked. Gene, with me in the side-car putted out into the street. He decided to give it the gun down the new street. As he pulled on full throttle, the throttle stuck. We roared down the street, and ran into the squadron headquarters tent. Before Gene got the bike shut down, we had torn a hole in the side of the tent, roared inside, knocking over a field desk with a typewriter on top. Luckily, there was no one at work yet, so we hurt nobody! We took the bike to our hardstand, and walked to breakfast. In walked Maj. Lanford. He wasted no time

telling us that we had to go to supply, get big needles and thread, and sew up the rip in the wall of the HQ tent. Hudson and I spent the morning patching up that tent. We had lots of company and onlookers stop by to needle us, while we worked the needles!

Around the 18th of January, the weather improved greatly, we started getting some flying in. We were all glad to get back to work, as we were very serious about improving our formation flying. On the 18th, 19th, 20th and 24th we put in almost 3 hours a day flying high altitude formation flying in 18 plane sections. The improvement of the crews was really amazing! The last day, the 24th we ran out of oxygen, and had a critical shortage of gasoline this put a crimp in training. The engineering officer told us that, we may have to fly without oxygen, but the gas trucks would be coming out soon. We all ridiculed the engineering fellow (behind his back) as he did not seem to know that oxygen was a necessity at high altitudes.

About this time, in a group briefing, we were told two bits of great news. First we were to fly up to our new base in Italy on the first day of February. This was greeted by cheers, and whoops and hollers. We were an eager bunch and were looking forward to combat. Next good news was, the army is setting up a portable shower unit, and we could get a bath! Most of us had not showered in around a month. Thank goodness the weather was cool, and we all smelled alike! We had kept our hands and faces fairly clean with the little water we had available. The backs of our necks and ears were pretty black from the smoke soot on our jacket collars.

Crews and work sections were given bath dates and times. The army bath unit was to be open about 15 hours a day. We all would get a shower before we left for Italy! When we went to the bath unit, about 25 nude men at a time were lined up with our soap and towels. A gate was opened, and we went in under the dripping shower- heads. A whistle was blown, and we had five minutes of warm shower water. If a person did not get all the soap off, it was just tough. No reruns were allowed. We dried off in the next tent, and then got dressed. We had taken clean under wear, socks, and long johns to the bath area. Clean bodies and clothes made a real difference, look out Italy-here we come.

Around breakfast time on the 23rd, we heard a loud explosion in the direction of the runway. As we rode down to the mess tent, we saw a crowd of people with the ambulance to one side of the runway. At the mess tent, we were told a crew from another group landed just before dark last night. They were sleeping in their plane as our field had no visitor's accommodations. This morning, two of the crew started walking across the field, stepped on an old land mine, and they both were killed! The mine clearing crew had missed a left over mine from The Afrika Korps.

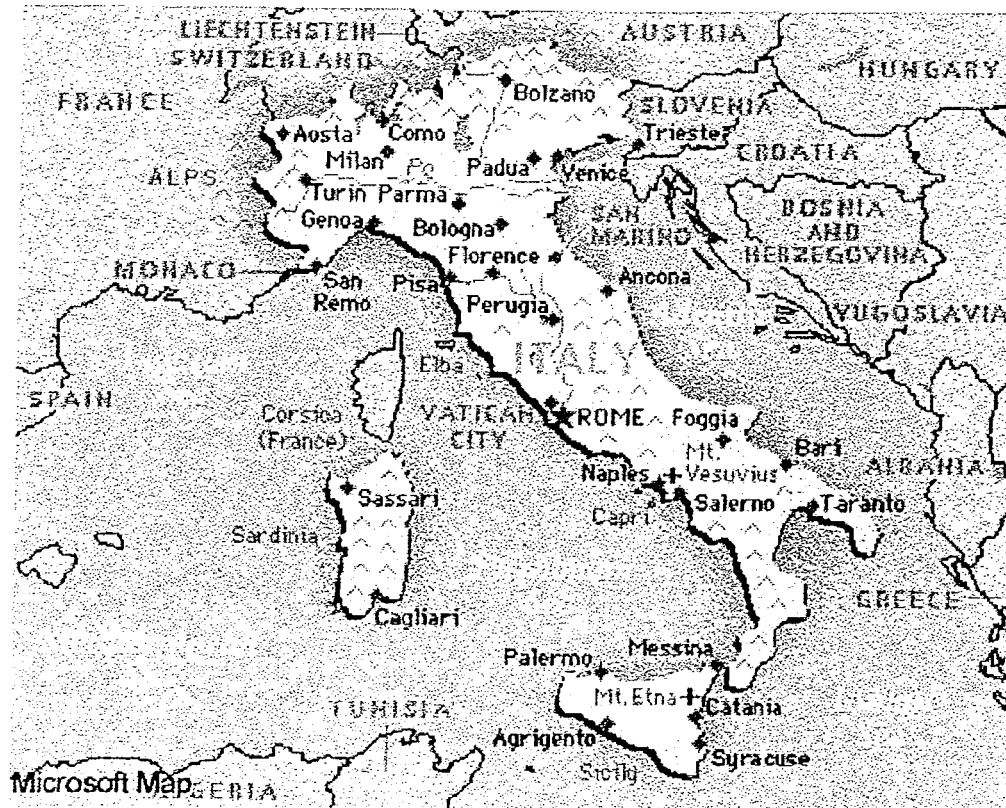
We got to fly again on the 24th and 30th for a total of 4hours 15 minutes. This was formation work below 10000 feet, the oxygen had not arrived! These formations went quite well and Col. Cool was pleased. We crew members were happy, confident, and a bit cocky. On the 30th, we started loading the planes for the trip to Italy. The new base was on the east coast near a town called Cerignola, between Foggia and Barletta. The province was Apulia on the Adriatic. We were to be one of four groups in the 304th Bomb

Wing. Our field, San Giovanni had two runways side by side, our 455th Group had one side, and the 454th had the other side. We were to pack up and depart on February 1, 1944.

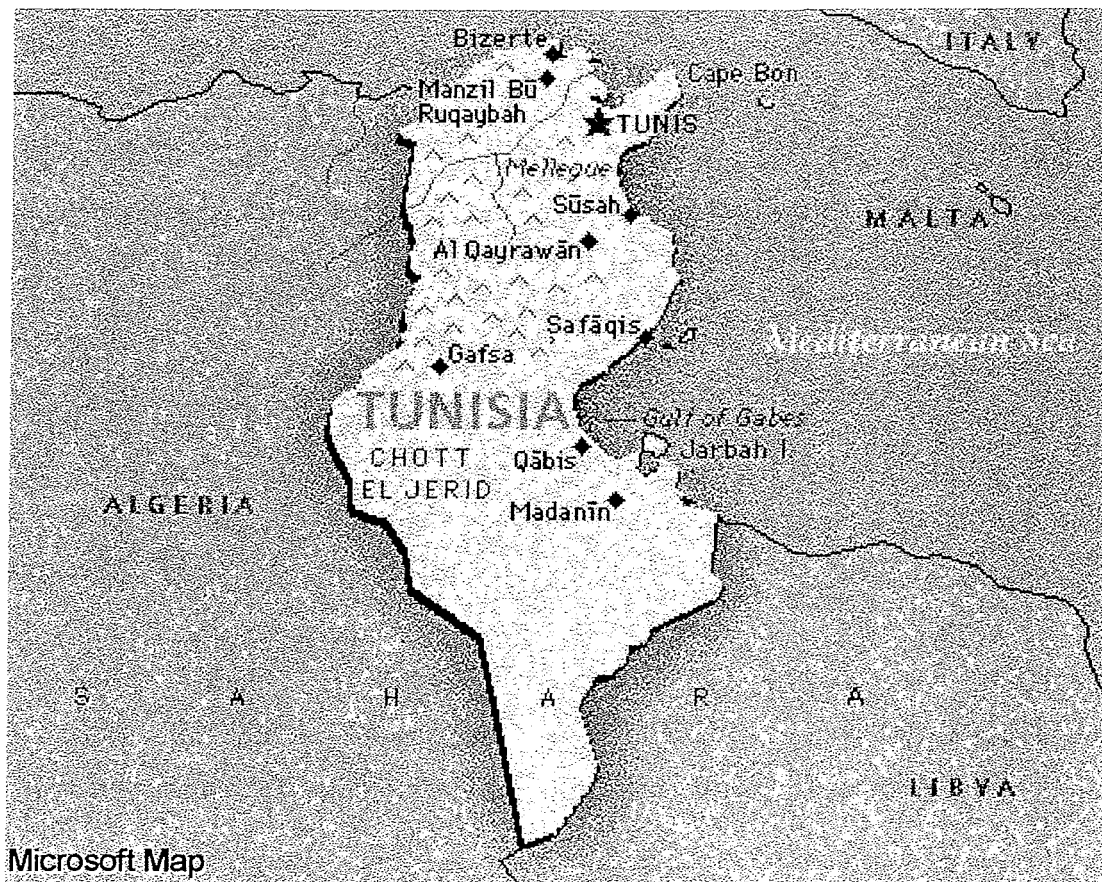
Packing was a real job, the same people we brought from the states were to be in our plane. Gene Hudson and I had the bright idea of taking out one of the bomb bay luggage racks out, and cranking our BMW motorcycle into the bomb bay! We heard that there was a real shortage of wheels in Italy, and we would be heroes there!

Working all afternoon on the 30th, and all morning on the 31st we got 90% of the loading done. The last load to put aboard were the stove pipes from our tents. These were steel pipe- line pipes, and there were none available in Italy! The pipes were to come aboard on the morning of Feb. 1st. They had to go into the waist section through a waist window, As they were too long, two feet of pipe had to stick out of a waist window! Each plane had to have four of these pipes to be used in Italy. We were to have an inspection at 9 AM on the first, and depart Dejedia at 11:00. All crews and passengers were standing by the planes, with all loads aboard. We made a mistake taking out the left front bomb bay luggage rack! As soon as the engineering inspector looked into our bomb bay and saw the BMW with the side -car off in the bomb rack, he blew a fuse! He was an old line Army Major, and he opened up on Hudson and Smith, you never heard such string of profanity! He told us in no uncertain terms to get that &^%#(()) bike out of the plane, you two & %\$\$\$#@#\$ Lieutenants do all the work. We had to drag the rack back from the side where a tarp was hiding it, and set it in again as he went down the line inspecting the other planes. The other officers and men of our crew enjoyed watching Hudson and Smith labor alone. The inspector came back just a few minutes before start engine time, really checking out our work. He did manage to get a good burst of his old army profanity on us before we climbed aboard. As we taxied away, we noticed that he had his men put our BMW in the back of his truck!

Italy



Tunisia



**DEJEIDA TUNISIA
TO
CERIGNOLA ITALY
FEBURARY 1,1944
FLIGHT TIME, 4:45**

All aboard were excited about getting to Italy. The intercom was cluttered with talk about Italy, and mainly its women. We had some of the ground crew aboard from Italian backgrounds. We were amazed at the Italian these fellows were able to speak. Most of the words that I could make out were slang referring to girls, wine, and food. Sounded as if we were on a vacation to "BELLA ITALIA"

Most of the flight was over water, but our first landfall was Sicily. Humph Hosmer our navigator, and Tour Guide filled us in on the sights. At the southeastern tip of Sicily, we flew by Messina. Old Mount Etna with the plume of smoke put on a good show for us. Most of us had not seen a volcano, and it was very interesting to look at as we passed by. At Messina, we started a gentle cruising descent. The southern boot of Italy was just one mountain top town after another. As we approached the plain of Apulia, we saw a few towns, all very drab and old looking. Looming ahead was the church at Cerignola. This was a very large church, and it became a very friendly landmark with its black dome.

Col. Cool brought the whole group around San Giovanna Field with its two runways, we went to near ground level, and peeled up into the landing pattern. All of us were running very high RPM on the engines. The fellows on the ground said it was a very great sound and sight to see. The flight section was home!

San Giovanni airport consisted of two runways each about 6000 feet long. Long taxiways circled both runways, with turn off for individual parking spots. These spots were two or three hundred yards from each other, some closer to the runway, and some back away. The 455th Group had the west runway, and the 454th had the east. There were parking spots for about 60 planes of each group. From our parking spot it was about ½ mile across both runways and taxiways to the nearest 454th plane. There was a control tower between the two runways. The layout was very impressive, none of the planes were in a straight line with another. Scattered around the whole field were British 40mm Bofors AA guns, with ground-mounted machine guns. British 8th Army crews manned these guns 24 hours a day. It looked like we were really in a war! A beat up old Jeep led the 741st planes to the individual parking spots or hard-stands, the ground people waved us in. This was nice, but most of the parking spots were pretty soft and we got stuck – up to the hubs!

The day was nice and clear as we landed but time flew, the sun started sinking in the west! The men were told to spend the night in and around the planes, the officers lined up with a blanket and our heavy flying clothes, and started walking to our squadron headquarters area. This was about a mile away, on the edge of an olive grove. Most of the trucks, and other vehicles belonging to the group, had been lost in a very successful

German Air strike on Bari harbor over a month ago. The 455th group had lost almost all of the heavy equipment, San Giovanni field was desperately short of transportation, so we were walking as the sun went down. As we left our baggage at the plane we were told to be sure and bring our canteens, belt, and mess kits.

The officers were taken to a group of very ancient stone, tile roofed buildings. There was an electrical generator running, and a bare light bulb shone in the various rooms. These rooms were jammed with canvass cots. The squadron Sgt. Major informed us that we were in the "Officers Quarters". The cook tent was another block away, and we had better hustle over and get coffee and supper! There were straddle latrines between our quarters and the mess tent, use your flash light if you have them, don't step in the latrines!

We all straggled over to the mess tent, got in line, and supper was slapped down into our mess kits. This was slightly warmed spam, and a thick slice of bread, and a spoon of marmalade. There was plenty of coffee, but no sugar and cream. We squatted down on our heels like cowboys, near the mess tent in a grove of olive trees. It got dark as a pit, and it started to rain. We tried to kneel over our food and keep it dry, but with not much luck. The mess team had garbage cans for our scraps (Hungry looking Italians with tin cans took all our scraps) we washed our kits in the boiling soapy water, and then in the boiling clean water. Supper was over, where was the spaghetti and meat- balls? And we headed for our cots. We were a tired bunch.

The cots were jammed together, head to toe with a little space at the sides. The only thing we took off was our very muddy GI-shoes. The room was not very cold, as we were really jammed in and our body heat and no windows kept us warm. There was not much talk as we dozed off right after the generator quit. In a few minutes there was an outbreak of loud profanity, and flash- lights started to come on. We were swarming with RATS, big ones, little ones. Some of our city boys became almost hysterical, they were so afraid of the rats. It was not a very restful night, the fleas started biting us, and this was a lot worse than the scurrying of the rats .As we all had .45 cal automatic pistols with us, some of the fellows wanted to shoot the rats. This idea was quickly vetoed, as it is hard to hit anything with a .45 Auto, and ricocheting bullets were not a pleasant thought.

Here we were, officers and gentlemen of the Army Air Corps, sleeping in a damned stable full of rats and fleas on our first night in Italy. It could not get much worse!! HA!

The generator was turned on around 6:30. We were not too sure of the time, as our watches were still set on Tunisian time. Staggering out into a steady rain, we went to the straddle latrines for our morning call. There was no washing water, we all had canteens full, so we wet a handkerchief or a towel with cold water and washed our hands and faces. Back outside, the rain was coming down at a steady rate, and the gray, slimy, mud got deeper. This mud was to be with us a long time. The temperature was in the low 40's, and it was very uncomfortable. The wool long johns and wool- uniform with a heavy fleece lined flying jacket, a sock cap, and gloves felt pretty good. We picked up our canteens and mess kits and headed for the cook tent, a good hot breakfast would be

appreciated. There was a large group of fellows in two lines. The army reared it ugly head, as one line was for officers, and the other for the men. There was no difference in the food or the service, and we all looked like a bunch of wet dogs. Our meal was a glob of cold scrambled powdered eggs, a thick slice of bread and more marmalade. The only good deal was a canteen cup of steaming hot black coffee. Alongside the chow line was the edge of a large grove of olive trees. We all gathered under the trees, squatted down and had breakfast. Olive trees are just like mesquite trees, very little shade and no shedding of the rain! Our Squadron commander slid by in a jeep, and told us that a load of tents was on the way. We were to stand by in our bunk- rooms and wait for orders. He said that an army sergeant would be on hand to show us how to put up the 12X12 tents, but we officers had to do all the work!

Some men came by, and started staking out tent sites, walkways, and stringing electric wires through the olive trees. Soon 6X6 trucks, loaded with tent bundles arrived, the men with the trucks would drop off the tent and tent poles. Each drop was a big plop, as the mud around the trees was really soft and sloppy. Each of these tents was to accommodate four officers or six men, with folding cots.

Several of the officer groups of four had become very close to each other over the past few months. Our crew was really close to Miles Walters', Nelson Wurtz's, Paul Condra's crew. Miles Walters was a farm boy from S.Dakota, and he knew a lot about digging and other manual labor fields. We decided to let him do the layout work for the three tents we had, and his first idea was to put the three tents end to end. The center area was to be dug out, giving us more head- room in the center section. The stove (from Tunisia) would be in the center, and the twelve cots would be arranged around the end unit walls, in a foot - to foot manner. We pitched in, and started digging out the center room. Miles and his Navigator, C.W. Stroman, went looking for an extension to our center tent pole. This was necessary as the floor would be lowered 18" or so. Miles came back with a whole pole and a saw. He said that it was just laying around, and he borrowed it! Before dark, we had the three tents up and we had banked mud up around the walls. This kept the cold wind out, and some of the water. Tomorrow the 55gallon drums, and our stove- pipe would be installed. Maybe we could move in tomorrow evening, and get out of the rats and fleas!

At sun up-still cloudy, but the rain had stopped. This was on February 3rd our crew was taken to the flight briefing room. WE WERE GOING ON A COMBAT MISSION! The group was to bomb behind the Anzio Beach Head, as the American landings there were bogged down. Our planes had been pulled out of the mud, and they were gassed up, with 250# bombs loaded. The racks had 12 of these bombs aboard. The group was to approach the target area from the Naples vicinity, cross the lines between Cassino and the beach-head. Our target was some 25 miles inland where the Germans had a great build up of troops, and the 455th was going to give them Hell.

When we took off, the clouds were broken with bases around 4000 feet. The Group managed to get in formation and head for Naples. The 451st Group based south of us was to meet us over our field, but did not show up. Since there were no enemy fighters south

of Rome, our group elected to forge ahead, and get those Krauts! The weather started to get worse as we neared Naples, we turned north and the clouds really got lower and lower. Some of the mountains around Cassino had become cloud covered. Just short of Cassino our leaders got smart, and we turned around for Cerignola and home. We were very fortunate not to lose any planes in the mountains, and we were all very glad to get back to base. Since we dropped no bombs, and no one shot at us this trip was NOT A COMBAT MISSION. We got home around noon, had hot lunch with meat and vegetable stew out of cans, bread and marmalade with coffee or powdered lemon Kool Aid. It was pretty filling. Also, it was not raining!

We had time to work on our tents, and we really got on the job. The rats and fleas in the stable were getting us all on edge. The cots and baggage was lugged to the tent, and the stove was hooked up. With the three light bulbs in our tent apartment we were pleased with our new home. The enlisted men had set their tents a couple of rows away, and they, too, were getting settled.

The weather really turned bad for almost two weeks, we had rain, sleet and some snow. The tents and cots were very comfortable. We had scrounged some bomb fin cases. These were four legged metal racks about 2X 2 feet, and they made nice small tables, and stools. We sat around the stove on these stools, had a couple at head of our beds where we kept a candle, Flash light, water canteen, reading material, ash- trays (these ash trays were empty peanut cans as almost all of us smoked) Humph Hosmer, was an exception. I had the little battery radio I picked up as we left New York, at head of my bed. We listened to Axis Sally almost every night in her broadcasts from Rome. The music was very good, but the news was a bit slanted . We stretched heavy wire from the corner poles of the tents. From this wire we hung our B-4 and parachute bags. It kept our clothes off the mud floors. We gradually picked up plywood or aluminum sheets to put our cots on. This kept the cot legs from sinking into the mud. Each tent had a couple of Jerry Cans for drinking water. These were filled from a canvass bag (called a Lister Bag). One of the Jerry Cans was next to the stove, so we always had warm water regular GI- steel helmets had been issued to us all, and these helmets with the liner out made good wash basins. One or two of the metal stools had been cut out to fit a helmet. This made a neat wash-stand. We never had a full bath, but with a towel and some warm water we scraped off. Also we all were clean- shaven, a beard and an oxygen mask did not go well together. Regulations required us to be clean- shaven. I was lucky, as I had very few whiskers!

All air -crew members were issued fleece lined flying boots. These boots were never worn in the mud, In fact we took a fairly new, but broken in pair of hi-top GI shoes, and kept these shoes in our flying boots. When flying, we would wear our muddy shoes to the plane. Once in the plane, we took off our muddy shoes and socks, and put on clean socks the good GI shoes and then the fur lined boots. A wet sock at 40 below can loose a foot to frostbite. While on the subject of clothes for cold weather flying, this was very important. We wore a pair of GI boxer shorts and "T" shirt, over these we put a suit of GI wool Long Johns, Next came our regular wool OD shirt and pants. Over this we wore a pair of flying cover alls, when the electrical heated suit came available, this heated suit was

under the coveralls. Over the coveralls was a leather fleece lined jacket and pants. Then came the fleece lined boots. Before take off we put on a Mae West Life Jacket, and then our parachute, Later when flak suits became available they were the last layer, with the steel helmet, Goggles, oxygen mask and ear phones completed our attire. We must have weighed 250 pounds!

On the 17th of February, even though the weather was very poor, the entire 15th Air Force was to bomb behind the lines of the Anzio beach- head. The situation on Anzio was very critical, as the Germans were about to push our forces back into the sea! Heavy bombers, at high altitude were not suited for ground force targets, as the targets were very hard to find.

Our crew was briefed, and we all were aboard and ready to start engines. Our squadron commander, Maj. Lanford, drove up to my side of the plane, and shouted "Smith, get out of your seat! I am flying with Hudson today" I was shocked, but when a Major tells a 2nd Lt. To do something we hopped to it. I stood near the radio table as Lanford got into my seat, and I asked him "What could I do?" He replied in no uncertain terms that he did not give a damn what I did." Sgt Karl Muse, the radio operator normally rode in the nose turret after take off, offered to let me ride in the nose. Hudson said to go ahead, as he may need Muse at the radio desk today. I thought that was a great idea, as the view from the nose turret was wonderful, and I had fired the nose guns during training several times.

The group had a total of 23 planes flying today. The 454th had about the same number in the air. Some of the planes were still stuck in the mud, the usual group strength was around 36.

Our route to Anzio was to fly just to the north of Naples, go out to sea about 30 miles, and then come back north- east over Anzio. The fight was very scenic as we climbed to 20000 feet at Naples, then to Anzio. Some ten or fifteen miles away from Anzio, the US Navy had some large ships shelling around the beach- head. Among them was the old Battleship "TEXAS" The air corps had about 200 bombers on the mission, all were 4 engine bombers. The navy started shooting at us. They were pretty poor shots, as well as poor aircraft identifiers, the navy shells went off way below us. From the nose I had a great view of Anzio, LST ships were nosed up to the beach, other landing craft were shuttling back and forth. Shells from the Germans were coming down in the water and on the beaches. The perimeter of the line had shells from our side hitting in the enemy areas.

Looking inland from the beach there appeared to be a snow covered mountain in the distance, it looked as if it was covered with black pine trees. Suddenly, I realized that there was no white mountain, and no pine trees. What I was seeing was a cloud and the black trees were GERMAN FLAK BURSTS standing in front of us. We were in the tail end of the bomber stream, so there was a lot of FLAK still in the air, and more coming up. Our bombardiers leading the group failed to find the targets, so they dropped along the highway to Rome. There were so many Germans in the area, I am sure we hit some of them. As we turned back to the south, a flight of three radial engine fighters came on a head on course for us. Most of the nose- gunners, and top- turret gunners fired at these

planes. As they saw our tracer bullets coming by, the fighters turned into a steep turn away from us. We recognized the wing shape! They were Republic P-47s. They should never point at a bomber formation, as we thought they were Focke Wolfe 190s. I am sure that the Jug pilots were as surprised as we were.

All went well as we headed for home, back toward Naples, not back over the US NAVY. One of our planes forgot to open his bomb bay doors, and dropped his load on his doors! The doors are made to break away if dropped on, so this crew had to come home with bomb bay doors open, this was noisy and quite breezy.

After landing we were treated to coffee and donuts by the Red Cross. A trailer had been set at the entrance of the briefing room, and two girls were passing out the coffee and donuts as we went into the room. These girls were assigned to our group, and they were always there waiting for our return.

At our debriefing, I was told that I could not be credited with a mission, as I did not perform duties of a pilot on this flight. An entry was made in my FORM 5 (log) "Passenger on combat mission"

After debriefing, we were introduced to a great custom! The medics were standing by at a table and each crew-member was poured 2 ounces of 100 Proof whisky. This was either bourbon or rye we had to throw it down with no chaser. On an empty stomach this was not easy to do, sometimes it bounced. Quite often we turned it down, I guess that the medics enjoyed what we did not drink. If you got the shot down it sure made one light headed.

On February 22 the group flew another mission, but our crew had a stand down. We enjoyed the loafing, and sleeping. This mission was against the harbor of Zaro, Yugoslavia. It was a type we called a "Milk Run", no severe opposition.

The weather in Italy improved a bit, and the radio told us that the 8th Air Force in England, had flown into Germany on the 23rd.

The evening of the 24th the crew list was posted for the next morning, and Hudson's crew was listed. We were to have an early briefing and no drinking tonight. After supper we got to bed early, but sleeping was hard to come by. Most of us in the tent were up as soon as the lights came on, it was way before daylight as we went to the mess tent. We came back to our tent to eat, as it was pretty cold outside. After cleaning our mess kits, we got our mission clothes on. And were trucked to the briefing room.

Our briefing room was an old wine cellar, The buildings were hundreds of years old, with vaulted ceilings and very thick walls. The room could seat around two hundred men on benches. The four officers and the radio operator had to be at most briefings.

Up front, was an elevated stage of a sort, and on the wall behind was a large map board. This board had a roll up curtain over the map. As all crewmen were seated, a call to

attention was made. The group commander and staff came to the front stage and sat down, At Ease was called and the crew- men sat down. There was no prohibition against smoking, and the whole room was a haze of smoke.

The briefing officer rolled up the curtain exposing the target and routes in and out, this was matched by a gasp or groan from the men. The target was Graz, Austria. Over a 6 hour mission! The 8th and 15th Air Forces were to start a drive against the German Aircraft Industry today. Graz was an airport that had a manufacturing plant for fighters. A bit to the west was Regensburg another aircraft center. The 8th and part of the 15th were to hit Regensburg, the rest of the 15th would hit plants in the Graz area. Col. Cool told us that he would be flying the lead, and he wanted to see some real tight formation flying.

We were well briefed to expect heavy fighter opposition, and the Flak was thick. It looks like this is getting serious! When we got to the plane, the Squadron Commander was not around. It looked as if no one wanted my seat today, to see the German Fighters in action. At this time the 15th AF had 4 fighter groups. Two groups flew P-38s, and 2 groups flew P-47s. The target area today was out of range of our fighters, they had to leave us just north of the Adriatic coast and get back to Italy! We would be without cover about an hour going in and out of Austria! As we flew over land, just north of the coast near Udine, we could see condensation trails coming from the north, and much higher than we were. These trails were German Fighters coming to greet us. We were approaching 22,000 feet, and it was COLD. Our outside air temperature was at MINUS 40 DEGREES F, We all were stomping our feet trying to get some circulation going. The poor gunners in the back were much worse off than we in the front were, as the waist gun doors were open, and the wind chill factor was terrible.

Our group formation was beautiful. Col. Cool's teachings had really been taken seriously. As we reached the Initial Point on our bomb run, we saw the flak coming up around the target area. Ahead of us was almost solid black shell bursts. How we could fly through this appeared to be impossible. Before we reached the Flak, about a dozen ME-109s flew through the 454th Group, and flew along side of us. The 454th lost 5 B-24s to this group of fighters. We could see the bombers going down, some in pieces, some burning. The fighters wheeled around and started a pass at our group. They shot one of our group planes down, as he was straggling, but our formation was so tight, and our machine gun fire was so concentrated, the fighters broke away from us. One of our crews claimed a kill, but I did not see it, as it was in the other section of our group.

Our bomb run was to last about five minutes, and it felt like 5 hours! At times we could hear the thump of the bursting shells around us, and we could smell the powder smoke, a few times we heard the sleet like sound of small flak pieces hitting the plane. It was a pretty terrifying experience to fly through for the whole crew. The Flak lasted in and out of the target area around 10 to 15 minutes. As we came off the target and out of the Flak, we saw several groups of Fighters both single and twin engine in the area. Some made feeble passes at us, but none flew through us!

We were glad to see the church of Cerignola in the haze, landing was no problem after 6 hour 30 minutes in the air, the mud at San Giovanni Field with the coffee and whisky shot was really welcomed.

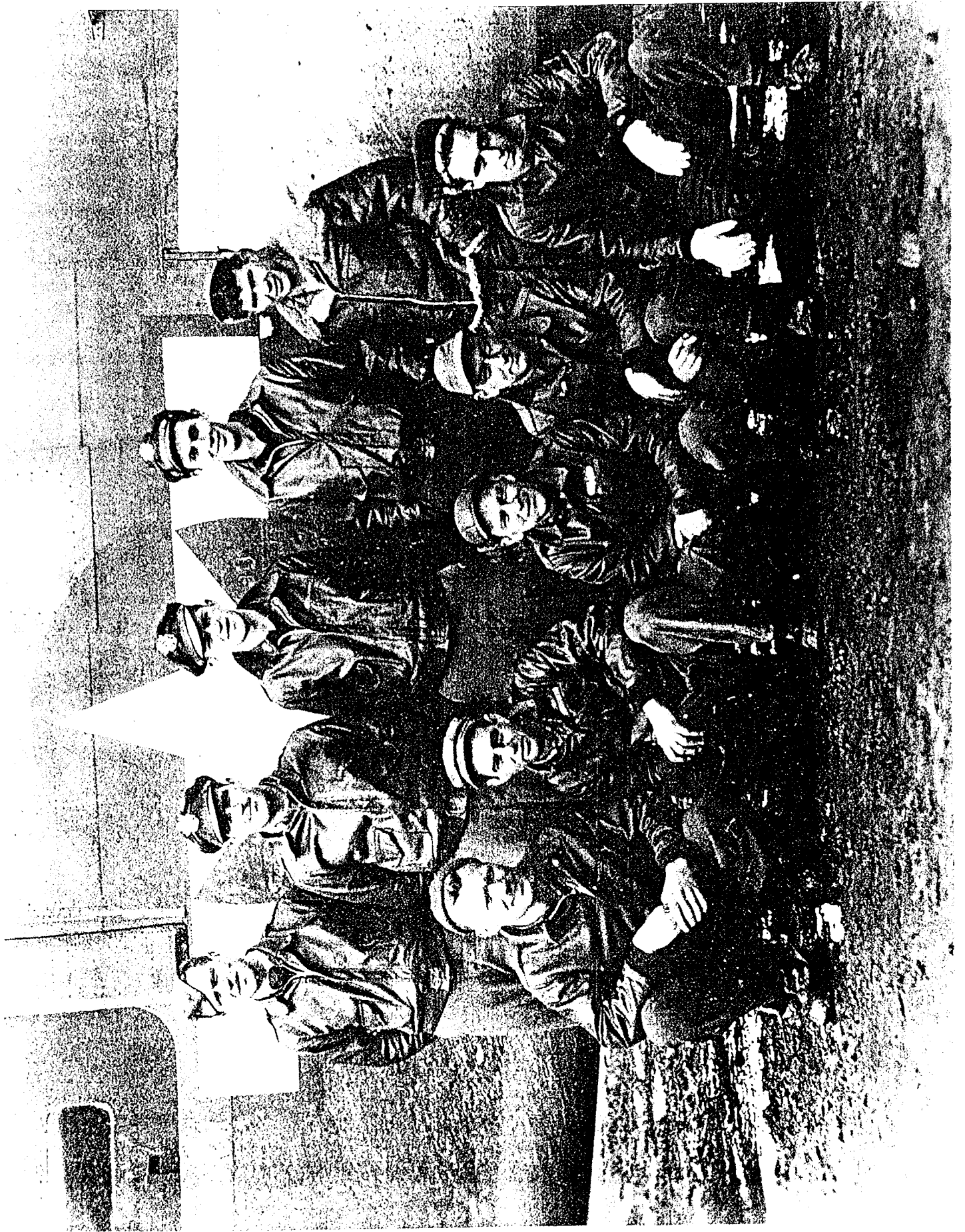
As we landed around 3:30 PM, the mess crew cooked up a hot meal for the Air Crews, and we really tore into the chow. At this time, the carrying of in-flight sandwiches had not begun so we were a hungry bunch. By the time we finished lunch-dinner, it was to the tents for some sack time.

This trip to Graz was the group's fourth mission, and the last mission in February. The weather was awful for several days, we rested, and worked on our tents. A wooden door was made up out of crating material, this was a great addition to the tent, as we had tied the flaps for the door to close it. This was a pain in the neck coming and going!

A directive from 15th Air Force was posted on our bulletin board, and the air crews were very pleased to read this." Mission Credits will be doubled for any trips above the Alps, and east of the Danube River" The 8th Air Force flying out of England had a requirement of 25 missions for rotation to the States. The 15th required 50 missions, so if we went into Austria, Germany, or east of the Danube from Vienna we would get credits for TWO missions. As our fighters could not reach into these areas, our risks were greater.

I ended February with credit for three missions, one to Anzio and the Graz-Regensburg trip on the 25th was a double! At this rate, of 3 a month I would get home in 1945!

A very important project had been completed during the last few days of February! Latrines or out houses had been built around our squadron areas. These were nice 4-holders, wood enclosed sides with a tent top. Real luxury was appreciated, the straddle trenches were cleaned out, and enlarged, to be used as air raid trenches. We were getting civilized!



MARCH 1944
SAN GIOVONNI FIELD
CERIGNOLA, APULIA
ITALY

The weather was nothing to brag about, but it was a bit better than it was in February, the Group flew a mission on March 2, our crew was not on this flight. The target was Cisterno in the Anzio area. The flak was heavy, and fairly accurate, and four of the group planes were damaged by flak. One damaged ship was from our squadron- the 741st. Looking at the damage gave us a greater respect for flak. The group got off on another mission on March 3rd. Again our crew was not scheduled on this trip. The target was, Fabrica di Roma, an airstrip in the Rome area.

On March 7, we were set up for a mission, this target was Fabrica Di Roma again. We were loaded with 500# bombs, and we were trying to tear up the airport to keep the Germans from using the place. This time the flak was light and inaccurate, so credit for another mission on a Milk Run!

March 15th, after a week of stand- downs and aborted missions, we were briefed to bomb the town of Cassino with 1000# bombs. Our target was the town, not the monastery on top of the mountain. The 5th army refused to put up colored flak, or to put out ground panels as they said it would give the army's position away! The German Army was on top of every mountain in the area, and they could SEE all of the 5th army positions.

The fighter- bombers went in first, raising a smoke and a dust cloud. Next came the medium bombers B-25 and B-26's. By the time the heavy bombers got over target, the whole area was a pall of smoke and dust! We could just make out the ground. 35 of our B-24s bombed the target, but 5 bombed the town of Vallarotonda by mistake! This is where all the brass from the 5th army was observing the action, about 5 miles from Cassino. Our group caught hell for this mistake, but we hurt none of our troops. Some of us wished that we could have seen all those senior officers jumping off roofs as those 20 tons of 1000# bombs came screeching down! Many years later, Reagan Houston, was on Gen. Mark Clark's staff, he told me that he was one of the first jumpees!

Our crew missed flying three missions after the Cassino fiasco. The group lost two B-24s on March 19th, this was a mid-air collision between our own planes, coming back from a hot target- at Graz Austria!

March 22nd

We were to bomb the railroad yards at Verona, but it was cloud covered, so we hit the railroad yards at Bologna, with good results. Flak was intense but very inaccurate. Chalk up another Milk-Run. Nothing to this, just don't run into each other in formation! This mission took over 6 Hours. This was a lot of milling around in bad weather. Also quite tiring to the crews, so we were ready for supper and the sack. As a bit of side information- we had not had a shower since Tunisia. Our stand up scrubs were better than

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that the water heating system was not working! As they say in Italy.” Es Finito!” We all had been looking forward to a good hot bath, but we had to opt for a quick cold water splash, not much different from the tents at San Giovanni!

Bari was a very interesting city. The Adriatic side of Italy was run by the British 8th Army. The American Navy, Army, and Air Corps answered to the British Army. This system was much more traditional, and rank controlled than the US forces, and it was fun to get snappy salutes from the English enlisted men. The Officers of His Majesties Forces expected the same salutes from the Yanks! The partisan forces from Yugoslavia were very prominent in Bari, as they were brought here for equipping and training. There were troops from all around the Mediterranean here. All wore British Uniforms, but they may be from Greece, Africa, India, Yugoslavia, Palestine, and no telling where else, walking the streets of Bari. There were also a lot of Italian Uniforms, but most of them were worn out, as that is all these poor fellows had to wear after Italy collapsed.

Our first night in Bari, after a good dinner, we decided to explore the night- life of the city. Being blacked out, it was really dark. We all had flash- lights or zippo lighters, and managed to find a “Nite- Club”. This was in a cellar of a large building, and was crowded with soldiers. There were some Yugoslavian girls, in British Battle Dress, a few looked pretty good! We actually danced and bought a few cups of very raw wine for these girls. Things warmed up quite well. Nelson Wurtz, from our tent was a very handsome fellow. One of the girls was about to eat him up, so Nelson sneaked her out, and went in the back door of our hotel. He and this girl got to thrashing around in his room, and all of a sudden his dream girl pulled a pistol out of her belt. She took his wallet, got the money out and left the wallet, and Wurtz in his long johns. He came back to the club looking for this girl. She was most likely in some other joint warming up another GI. We stayed around playing and dancing with the Partisans Girls, but none of us tried to get them to our rooms! Oh well! Some of the local fellows told us that these girls did not shave at all and were pretty musky! All we got out of Bari was a couple of hang -overs and some fair food. Nelson was the only fellow to come close!

We were taken back to San Giovanni in the evening of March 26th, and we spent the day of the 27th resting up from our rest in Bari. The crew order was posted for the next day, we were on it for the morning of the 28th.

March 28, 1944

A maximum wing effort (4 Groups) was ordered to destroy the railroad yards at Verona, Italy. 40 B-24s from the group took off but 17 returned early as they lost the formation in weather. 21 planes from the 455th dropped 52.5 tons on the target. Flak was intense and accurate (and noisy as well as terrifying) 20 to 30 fighters were observed in the target area. They did not press their attacks, as our P38 escort drove them off. The P-38s claimed eight of the Luftwaffe Planes shot down. Our planes returned after a 5.25 hour flight. We had some holes from the flak, but no one was injured.

March 29, 1944

The wing was to strike the railroad marshalling yards at Milan, Italy. The group got 40 planes off the ground, and two returned early. 38 of us dropped 97 tons on the target with very good results. NO FLAK OR FIGHTERS were encountered (Authors Note: When there is no flak, bombing accuracy improves!) On this trip, I got out of my seat to watch the bombs fall, with a portable oxygen bottle hooked to my mask. I stretched out on the flight deck, I could see out the open bomb bay doors. The bombs stayed together, and then seemed to scoot along the target before hitting. Quite a sight, but Hudson was pretty upset with me leaving my seat!

March 30, 1944

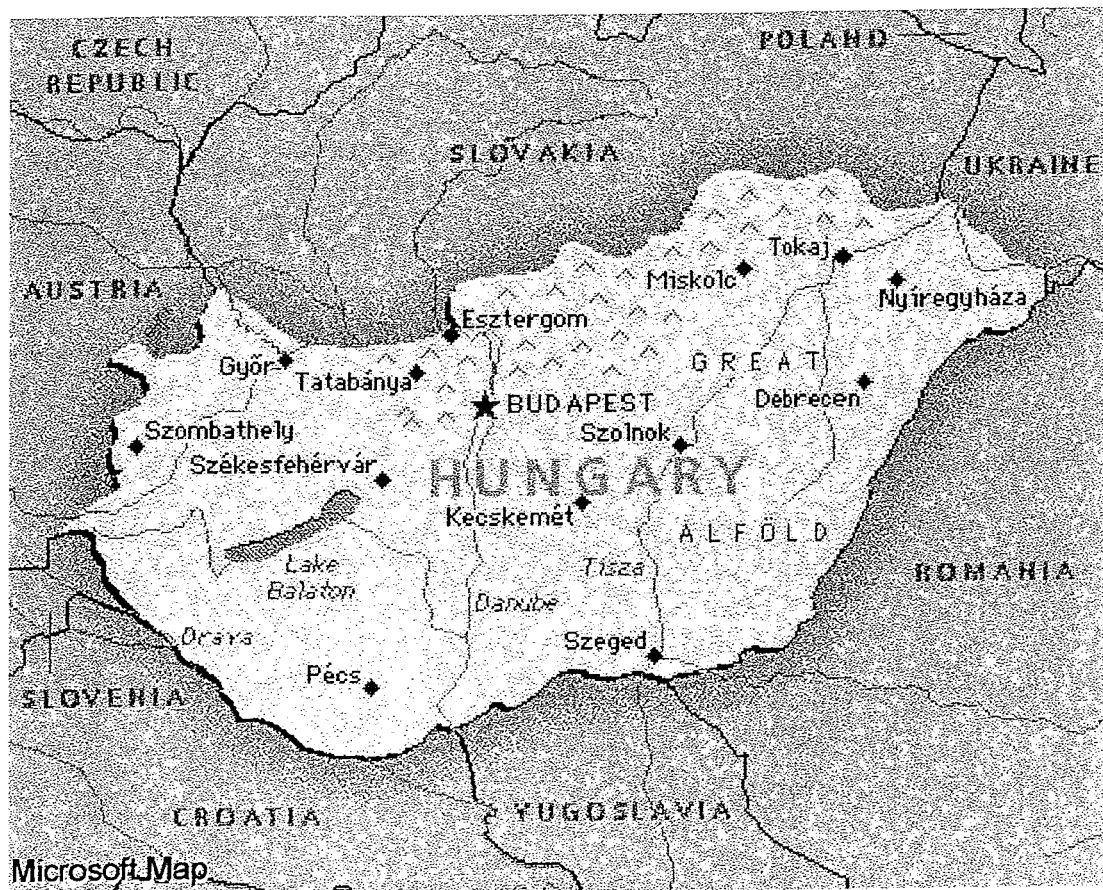
We were not on the trip, but the group bombed Sofia, Bulgaria. While over Sofia at 19000 feet, a JU-87 dive-bomber dived from above the formation. All of our guns were shooting at him. The poor fellow never varied from his course, and crashed to the ground for all to see. ! Cloud cover was bad, and 13 planes out of 38 brought the 500# incendiary bombs back home!

March came to an end and we were getting in some good practice as the group had flown 13 missions putting 447 planes over the targets with 877 tons of bombs dropped. Three of our planes had repairable flak damage. Two of our planes were lost in a mid air collision with 20 men KIA, One ship was lost on the first Graz mission with 10 men MIA.
Note: KIA= Killed In Action MIA= Missing In Action

The weather at our base was getting much better and the mud was about under control. We had a mess tent with stand up tables for our mess kit meals, it was a bit crowded, but since the garbage cans, and kit washing cans were at hand, we seldom went to our tents to eat.

At the end of March, I had EIGHT Missions to my credit. It had not been TOO bad!

Hungary



APRIL, 1944
SAN GIOVANNI FIELD
CERIGNOLA, ITALY

April was the beginning of "Operation Pointblank" designed to break the back of German fighter manufacturing. Germany had moved many of the biggest assembly and production complexes to the south and east, out of the range of the 8th Air Force in England.

The first mission by the group was on April 2nd, and was against the Steyr, Austria. Aircraft assembly plant. Our squadron was able to put up only four planes for this mission. We had a lot of maintenance problems at this time. Luckily, our crew was not on this trip, as our plane #476 was out for a 2 engine change! The group was attacked by several hundred enemy fighters going into and away from the target. Losses for the group were the highest to date. Four B-24s with 40 men were shot down.

This mission was a very tough one, but our bombing was very good. As a result of this mission, the group was awarded a Presidential Unit Citation! This award is represented by a blue badge with a brass frame, and is worn by EVERY member of the group, Cooks Bakers, Mechanics, Clerks, and Air Crews. I believe this was the first Citation awarded to any group of the 15th Air Force.

Budapest, Hungary was attacked by the group on 3rd April. Again, our crew did not fly, as our ship was still down. They ran into intense, accurate, and very heavy flak. Paul Condra's Bombardier, Earnest Ackermann, riding in the nose turret was killed by flak to his head, Condra had a leg wound. "Prince" Gorski the Co-Pilot took over and did a great job bringing the damaged plane home. Poor Ackerman was a mess, covered with blood, and frozen stiff, it was a problem getting him out of the shattered turret.

April 4, 1944

Our first trip to Rumania and the railroad yards at Bucharest was exciting. As we approached the target, 15 to 20 ME-109 and FW-190s made half hearted passes, our tight formation, and gunners discouraged the fighters. We think that the pilots were Rumanian, and their hearts were not in it. Flak was moderate but accurate, we had a few small holes, but nothing serious. At any rate, Bucharest was a double credit target! We flew 6:45 on this mission today, and we were ready for some mission whisky!

April 12, 1944

Today, we were to attack the airport at Bad Vaslau, Austria. This was near Vienna, so we could expect a hot reception. Between the Initial Point and the Target, we were attacked by 50 to 60 fighters. They tried to break up our formation, but we held in there. Our gunners were putting out a lot of 50 Cal fire, in fact the group gunners claimed seven fighters destroyed! These claims were usually exaggerated, in the heat of the machine

gun fire, three gunners or more may claim one kill. I still am amazed at those German pilots! It took a lot of guts to fly into those curtains of tracer bullets. Again our good formation flying saved us.

It was good to see the Church at Cerignola in the clear air ahead. The flying time today was 6:05 and we were dog- tired! Chalk up another double mission.

April 15, 1944

Here we go on another trip to Bucharest, Rumania. The group got 36 planes loaded with 500# bombs to the target, this time we had two groups of P-38s at maximum range keep the fighters off of us. As we dropped on the rail yards and oil storage, the P-38s headed for home.

We were the last group in the wing today, the first three groups could not see the target, but we caught sight of it as the clouds moved. Our group dropped on the target area, and the other three groups headed for a secondary target- Belgrade, Yugoslavia. The wing leader started a slight descent on the way to Belgrade. As our group was the lowest group at the rear of the wing, the wing descent was putting us lower and lower. Our group lead called the wing leader asking if we could deviate away from Belgrade, as we had dropped our bombs at Bucharest. Wing told our group to STAY IN FORMATION, we did. The target at Belgrade was railroad yards and a dock area on the river. There were no fighters in the area, but there was a lot of flak, as we approached the target our altitude had dropped to below 18000 feet. The wing lead was still around 20000, as our formation stepped down to the rear.

I have to back track a bit, as I forgot to reveal a very important fact about the B-24. On the whole airplane there were 3 relief tubes. One in the nose, one under the co-pilots seat, and one in the waist compartment. These relief tubes had a funnel like attachment, connected to a rubber hose. The hoses went to the underside of the plane to a tube called "Ventura" that supplied negative pressure when airborne. These tubes were the only place a crew - member could urinate, in combat conditions the urine would spray back along the underside of the ship. This spray would get on the ball turret, and the floor-mounted cameras, and freeze on the glass. In view of this problem, we were not to use the relief tubes under any condition when on a mission! As we drank a great amount of coffee, before and during a mission, this was a problem.

Around the plane parking spots were a stack of empty gallon cans that had contained hydraulic fluid. These rectangular cans had a screw cap, and were perfect pee cans! We placed these cans in the turrets, and other places. The pilots shared one between the seats. Using one of these urinals was quite a problem, with our many layers of clothes and very cold temperatures, but it surely beat wetting your pants!

Approaching Belgrade, I was looking out the blister window on my side, and I saw the muzzle flash from a flak battery on the riverside, I announced this over the intercom. The last thing I saw was Navigator Hosmer with his head in the plastic astrodome on the nose in front of the pilots. There was a terrific blast, and I blacked out completely. Concussion from a flak shell knocked all of us senseless.

Hudson and I came to about the same time. The plane was headed back to the east, and losing altitude. As Italy was to the west we were completely confused. Our whole cockpit was drenched, with freezing urine. There was a lot of smoke also. My right leg was hurting badly, reaching down to feel the leg, I felt pulsing warm fluid on my hand! Damnn I thought, I must have a severed artery! As I got a bit more organized in the head, it came to me that this pulsing fluid was hydraulic fluid coming from a hand pump mounted on the wall beside my right leg. A piece of flak had cut the pump off, and it's handle had hit my leg with a real blow! Looking out the windshield, I saw that the astrodome was shot away, as that was the last place I saw Hosmer! I called "co-pilot to navigator", and Hosmer answered me. I asked him to look at his astrodome, and all he said was "DAMNN, I dropped my pencil and reached to the floor just as the shell hit us"

Hudson and I checked in with the whole crew, and there was not a scratch on any of us, this was a miracle. The plane was full of holes, we had fuel leaks, hydraulic leaks, and more than the regular number of air leaks. By this time, we had gotten down to 15000 feet altitude, and this was a very dangerous altitude for us. The German 88mm flak gun was much more effective at this altitude than 20000 feet and above! Hosmer set up a course for us to get back to Italy, as none of the planes in our bomber stream were visible. We flew a varying course working our way back to Italy, as we did not want to stray into any of the heavy flak batteries. There were a lot of them in Yugoslavia guarding mines, bridges, and tunnels. In addition we were afraid to use our radios to report our status, as there was a lot of fuel still dripping around Old 476.

The field was a wonderful sight to see in the distance, but we still had problems. All of our hydraulic systems were out. Consequently we had no brakes, no flaps, and the gear had to be cranked down by hand. We were not real sure of our fuel supply remaining, as the sight gauges on the flight deck were broken. In short we had to be very careful getting down on the ground. A few miles out, Sgt Beeler cranked the wheels down, and they appeared to be locked in place. Hudson and I ordered all men aboard to get into the rear section behind the waist windows. We told them to wait till the wheels touched down, and then sit down as far back as they could, Hudson made a beautiful approach and a very smooth landing. As we slowed down Gene and I held back- pressure on the wheel, and the flaps came to full down. There was no hydraulic pressure on either side of the actuating cylinders on the flaps. Those big fowler flaps, gave us a lot of drag, and slowed us down to safe speed around 50 miles an hour. As we got to the end of the runway we rolled down a slight incline and up the other side. Then, rolling backwards about ten feet we came to a stop. The engines had been cut off late in the landing roll. The quiet was so great. I think we all whispered a short prayer of thanks.

Our squadron commander Maj. Lanford pulled up on my side of the plane, looked up at me a yelled "Hello Lucky" He was very right, but I stuck my hand out the hole by my leg and shot him the finger. He never mentioned my signal, he was so pleased to see us home I think that we could have gotten by with almost anything. Our plane #476 had been reported going down over Belgrade and was MIA.

We were in the air for 6 hours and 45 minutes, I think that we were so exhausted we were numb. I took the big shot of whiskey, and promptly threw it up on the ground. They took us to the mess tent, but we went to our tents, fell in bed and woke up the next morning with our clothes on.

After a late breakfast we four officers of the crew went down to look at our bird, 476 or PEEL OFF. Sgt. Gilone, the crew chief took us around the plane and showed us all the holes and other damages. The hand hydraulic pump and most of the lines had to be replaced, my seat was completely torn loose of the mountings, and they had it out on the ground. Gilone gave it to me and said he would take it up to our tent! It was a real conversation piece around camp. He gave me a piece of flak recovered from the brake accumulators; this was about 3 inches long and 1 ½ inches wide. This one piece had knocked the pump out at my side, bounced off the Armour plate I had put under my seat, cut the seat mountings loose, hit the pee can on the floor between Hudson and me, angled down through the floor, and ruptured the hydraulic accumulators where the mechanics found it. I treasured this chunk of iron, but it walked off out of our tent a few days later. The plane had over 250 REPAIABLE HOLES in the skin. This did not include the little pin -sized holes that were not repaired.

APRIL 17,1944

We were briefed to go to Sofia, Bulgaria with 500# bombs. After an uneventful take off, we started across the Adriatic climbing about 300 feet per minute. Near the coast, we could see the weather was building up inland. The 15th Air force had developed a plan to allow us to penetrate weather. It was called "Frontal Penetration In Formation" I don't know what individual or group of desk jockeys developed this plan, but here is a short version of this plan. As you approach weather, the formations should open up spacing between planes. Wingmen should try and keep 500 feet off the flight leaders, vertically the flights should open up the same amount. At penetration, the flight leaders should hold the magnetic headings of the route and continue the climb. Wingmen continuing the climb but turn off heading by 5 degrees, for two minutes then resume headings. Right wingmen turn right, left wingmen turn left. As the weather is climbed through, regular formation spacing is resumed. Sounds great, but I knew that most of us could not hold headings very well in instrument conditions most surely not fully loaded, and at altitude.

About the shoreline, we entered the clouds and went into frontal penetration procedure. Hudson had me holding the plane on climb and heading by instruments, as I had full panel instrument training in advanced flying school. He being a few months before me in school had not had full panel instrument training. We thought that we were doing real

well as I had the gauges well in hand. Hudson, looking outside, saw the rudders of a B-24 just ahead of our nose. Instinct took over, and he pulled up on the controls very suddenly. A fully loaded B-24 at 18000 feet with an abrupt pull up, goes into a speed stall at once. We both were on the controls. Gene said, "What is the matter with these controls"?

Stalling on instruments is almost always fatal, especially fully loaded. We both looked at the instruments, airspeed was under 100MPH, rate of climb was at full descent, the altimeter was unwinding, the gyro horizon had tumbled. The needle was full to the left and the ball was full to the right. I know that this means nothing to a non-pilot, but it told us that we were spinning to earth! Pull back throttles, center the needle and center the ball. Get some airspeed showing. Our airspeed built up very quickly to around 300MPH, as we eased back on the wheel the airspeed slowed to 160 MPH. Applying power again just as we popped out from under the clouds at 5000 Feet over a bay on the Adriatic!

Had we been ten more miles on our course east, we would have crashed into one of the tall mountains of the Dolomite Range. Some of these mountains are around 10000 feet high! Another silent prayer was in order. As we headed west over the bay, we saw a B-24 splash into the water. We were unable to tell whether he had tried ditching, or just crashed, the results were the same. We circled around the spot several times. All we saw was one of the life rafts, partially inflated bobbing in the waves.

The group was scattered all over Yugoslavia and Bulgaria, most of the planes brought the bombs back home, as we did. We were afraid that this fiasco would not count as a mission, but Wing gave credit to us all. There must have been some Wing officers along for a Milk Run! This mission? Took 5 hours and 30 minutes. It was one of the most terrifying trips I have ever flown!

The mission whisky was choked down, with a coffee and donut chaser it stayed down. I do think that we could have poured down a pint of that 100 proof bourbon. One of our slang terms at these days was "All Shook Up". Gene and I were really all shook up! After this trip, my mission count was 15. It is a long way to 50!

I am not sure of the exact date, but our twin brothers, tail and ball gunners, Melvin and Marvin Wolfe met with Hudson and me. We had noticed that they spent too much time on the intercom when we were under fire. Gene had told them to quit talking so much. The intercom was there to call firing directions to the gunners. Melvin and Marvin were always asking each other if they were OK, in flak, they were almost hysterical. These fellows held down our most critical gun positions, and also the most dangerous ones.

To bail out of the ball turret, the gunner had to point his twin guns to the rear, and if he had a parachute on, he could pull an emergency handle, and literally fall out of the turret. With no chute on, he had to crank the turret up into the stowed position, Get out and put his chute on. The tail gunner had to straighten his guns to the rear, open clam-shell doors, and go to the waist window to bail out. We had more cases of combat stress from these two gun positions than of all of the others!

The Wolfe brothers told us that they HAD TO QUIT FLYING ! We sat with them for a long time trying to talk them out of the idea. Any air crew member, officer or enlisted could quit flying status. They would be assigned to a non- flying job, lose the flight pay, and not be subject to rotation to the states. These people would be with the group till the war was over. Marvin and Melvin were assigned as armourers in another squadron, and we seldom saw them.

APRIL 20, 1944
Manfalcon, Italy

We carried a full load of 500 # bombs to drop on this port on the North end of the Adriatic. What should have been an easy mission turned out to be a real rough one, as we were jumped by 30 to 40 single engine fighters. The first German fighter belt was just north of Manfalcon. As we had no escort on this trip, the "Wiley Huns" poured it on us. Our group lost one B-24 with ten men. Other groups on this mission with us lost several more crews. This trip, all over water, took us just 4 hours and 40 minutes, we got back to Cerignola in time for a late lunch.

Late that afternoon, the mission list came out, and there we were, scheduled for another one tomorrow. We had never flown two missions on two successive days. We were in bed shortly after sun down. I drank a big shot of Italian Anisette, (tastes like licorice) in bed and sleep followed quickly.

April 21, 1944
4:30 AM

We were rolled out of bed about an hour earlier than usual, fed a pretty good breakfast of hotcakes and sausage, and we were in the briefing room before 6 AM.

The target map was uncovered and there were our old friends, Bucharest and Polesti. The route was a bit different from our past trips, as we approached Bucharest from the south, I don't think this confused the Germans at all! About 40 fighters jumped us, and I am sure that they were not Rumanian pilots. These fellows made head on level attacks. This was VERY disconcerting to our pilots. The shells from 20mm canons in the fighter noses had a self destruct fuses going off about 500 meters after leaving the gun. As these pilots came head on to us, the white puffs of the exploding shells came closer, and then no puffs were visible. This meant that the hot shells were coming at and by us, as we could still see the muzzle blasts. It made a fellow want to duck his head behind his steel helmet. These 20mm shells would blow a hole bigger than a washtub in anything they hit. These pilots were great flyers, as they got almost to our noses, they would roll on their backs, and split S away!

We watched a flight to our lower left led by a 741st crew. The fighters set them on fire with the head on passes, luckily the crew bailed out before the plane exploded. This crew with Capt Nogard, and CP Lt. Steiner (A classmate of mine) were in prison, but were rescued later on in the year. The gunners of our group claimed 5 fighters shot down, there was a lot of shooting on the part of our gunners. Actually, the machinegun fire was pretty dangerous to us. A gunner would be tracking a fighter, and if a B-24 was in the way, he may get shot up. We all had times that we came back with 50cal holes in our planes!

Our bombing was pretty good, and we set a lot of fires in oil storage tanks. The fighters shot down 4 of our B-24s with 40 men MIA. This was one of the longest missions we had flown, 7 hours 40 minutes. Upon landing and de-briefing and a cold cut lunch, we had put in a hard day.

The weather had turned great, the days were beautiful in Southern Italy. As far as one could see the fields and olive groves were covered with red poppies. No one had a color camera, in fact no one HAD a camera! The red fields were unbelievable; the Italians told us that the poppies were spirits of dead soldiers. This could be a fact, one of the greatest slaughters in history took place just across the river nearby, the site of the battle of Cannae between Romans and Carthaginians, where thousands were hacked to death in one afternoon.

The weather was so mild, we rolled up the sides of our tents. The fresh air was wonderful; the tents were a dark and smelly place. The coming of spring had one disadvantage! We were in one of the areas of the world where malaria was rampant! Most of the locals had malaria, or TB. This part of Italy was one of the poorest in the country.

Our medics started a campaign against malaria; we had to take Atabrin tablets at every breakfast. This was supposed to prevent malaria, but it gave some of us the trots, and also turned your skin yellow! Frames with mosquito nets were issued. These frames bolted to our folding cots. And we slept inside the netting, and as the mosquitoes grew in number, we were glad to have the nets.

About this time, the Army Engineers brought a water purifying plant, and shower installation, and set it up about a mile from our camp! What a great luxury this was. This had to accommodate all the group personnel as well as our service squadron. In my memory this was near 3000 men! We had 4 Squadrons, group Headquarters, and the service Squadron. Each unit was assigned one day a week for showers. The combat crews of each unit had first choice on the unit's day of the week. The shower handled about 50 men at a time, this gave us ten minutes of wonderful warm water ONE day a week. The advent of getting real clean was a great boost in morale, and the crowded briefing room had a better smell!

The MP's started a pass issue program to the locals. The units could hire kitchen help. The trash and garbage was handled promptly. Each tent could hire a tent boy to keep the

tents clean. We chipped in about a dollar apiece for this, or 100 lira in Italian money per tent occupant. The barbers were given passes to work, squadron areas. Our squadron had two of these barbers. The customer would sit on a fin crate, the barber would tie the cloth on the customers' neck, and they gave great hair cuts! This cost 50 lira or 50 Cents. Men with heavy beards could also have a great shave from these barbers, cups of hot water were brought by the tent boys. Some fellows had a shave every day! The best deal we had was a laundry man! We all had small cotton barracks bags with our names on them, we kept our dirty clothes in these bags. Once a week our laundry man would come by, and pick up ten or twelve of these bags. Our man had an old bicycle on which he would tie the bags on. He would take the laundry home, sometimes five or six trips a day. The women in his family would wash and iron our clothes. And he would bring them back to us. He would charge us around a dollar for this wonderful service. Enough of this local color, better get back to the war!

APRIL 23, 1944

Bad Vaslau, Austria

Our group was getting low on planes capable of combat operations. Damage and losses were cutting us down. Today we could get off only 26 B-24s for a mission to the old hot spot of Bad Vaslau.

Something was wrong with the Germans, no fighters greeted us, and the flak was not as heavy as our last trip. We did a good job bombing, we dropped the new RDX 500# bombs. RDX was stronger than the old TNT and the strike pictures showed a good pattern of hits and destruction. No problems going or coming, and the weather was quite good. This flight was 6 hours and 20 minutes and another double credit!

APRIL 28, 1944

Porto San Stefano, Italy

When the map was uncovered at briefing, there was flutter of laughter, the target was a little coastal town up the west coast of Italy. The intelligence info on Porto San Stefano was, the Germans were using a fleet of small boats to run supplies down the coast at night. These boats were hidden during the day under a causeway. The photo showed a FLAK battery of only 3 guns, this was a classic MILK RUN! We were to bomb the causeway and blast the boats!

The group came up the coast, turned out to sea to the causeway. Our plane was leading the upper right flight of 6 planes. On our right wing was Jerome Slater and Doug Rezin a copilot and classmate of mine. Under us, was a three plane flight led by Michael Callen. (His wife was Dolly Kuntz of San Antonio) We were in an extremely tight formation, as we wanted a good pattern of bombs on the causeway. I was looking out my side window and had given Slater and Rezin a "Thumbs Up" as they were really tucked in close to us. At this moment, a flak shell hit Slater's plane between his #2 Engine and the body of the plane, the left wing collapsed, and they turned sharply at us. I knew that he was going to hit us, but by some stroke of luck, he missed us by inches. As they started to roll to the left and slightly under us, he turned upside down and smashed into Callen's plane. Both planes fell burning into the sea. Our gunners reported seeing two chutes, but none of the crew- members were heard of again.

The flak battery at Porto San Stefano set a record for Flak Gunners, the three guns fired one shot apiece and knocked down 2 B-24s. I bet they got a medal.

Our navigator Hosmer had a bad ear and did not fly, but Callen's, navigator, Guy Kuntz flew with us as we were leading a flight. Slaters' co-pilot was sick, and Doug Rezin, who was Locatelli's co-pilot flew with Slater.

We were a sad bunch on the way home, and we swore never to laugh about a milk run again!

This Mission took only 4 hours and 45 minutes, fully an hour of this time was used in getting the groups together.

We had a late lunch, and went to the tents it was a real trying day for us all.

APRIL 29, 1944
Toulon, France

Here we are, for the second time flying two days in a row. This is the group's 33rd mission, and my 24th. If this good weather holds out, as well a GREAT AMOUNT of luck, I may get through this tour!!

We had never been to France before, and we got to see at 21,000 feet. The water was blue and beautiful, but the flak over Toulon was black and terrifying. We were leading a high right flight in the first section. In this position, I had no duty at the controls, as all of the flight was to our left. I had nothing to do, except watch the engine instruments, and look out the windshield and side windows. The flack was thick and of heavy caliber the bursts

were big and black. We were wearing our new flak vests, and our GI steel helmets. We had put a slab of Armour under our seats, and had the big built in plate of Armour at the back of our seats. I guess that we pilots were better protected than any of the other crew members. Suddenly, I broke out in a cold sweat, with the shakes. All I could do was to duck down under my helmet and shake! I had never had such an awful feeling in my life. As we turned away from Toulon and the flak, I calmed down, but I felt that I could never fly through a flak barrage again. The reason that I confess this feeling leads to a long story. When I got back home in August, my mother and I were sitting in the back yard, and I was very relaxed. Mother asked me if I felt like I had talked to her in my dreams. I did not have any idea what she was talking about. She asked what I was doing last April on the 29th. I asked her why did she want to know. She told me that before day that morning I called to her for help as she was asleep. She thought it was around 4 or 5 in the morning. With the difference in time, that would have been around noon in France. She told me that she said that everything was going to be all right, and for me not to worry! Our time over Toulon was around 12 noon!

This one of those things that we will never be able to explain!

There were a few German fighters around the target, but they did not choose to make a pass at our formation. We had a few flak holes, but nothing out of the ordinary.\

Our route home took us near Corsica, and Sardinia, then inland at Naples. This was a nice sight seeing trip. Most of our flights were up the Adriatic, so this was a pleasant change for us.

We were glad to get back on the base, as this flight was 7 hours and 15 minutes duration. The mission whisky seems to go down much smoother now. The mess had a pretty good late lunch for us. Today was a shower day for us, so things were doing quite well.

On the way to our tents after a shower, looking at the assignment board, we were shocked, our crew was schedule for another mission in the morning. Three missions in three days made the time zip by. Our crew was in bed before dark, I had a double shot of anisette, and slept pretty good.

APRIL 30, 1944

MILAN, ITALY

The weather was clear all the way to Milan. Thirty of our B24s dropped 500# bombs on the freight yards of Milan. The flak was very heavy but inaccurate, our bombing was very accurate. The Germans will not be getting any trains through to Austria for a few weeks. Our accuracy improves when the flak is inaccurate! No fighters were seen, guess you could call this 6 hour and 15 min trip a milk run!

This trip to Milan was mission # 34 for the group. April was our busiest month to date as we flew 17 missions with 648 planes over the targets. It was also our costliest as we lost 15 bombers, our gunners claimed 53 enemy fighters shot down. We did inflict some damage on the enemy fighters but in our eyes, not enough to compensate for our losses.

Serbia and Montenegro



Bulgaria

