

Russian Rumba

8th Air Force Dances to Wrong Tune

By Frank Cassidy

3/19/08

*Hamp - look this
over + let me know
if any corrections are
needed right. In 64
years my memory
plays tricks! Regards
Frank*

Like a lot of men of my age, 1941 brought about a complete change in our dance style. From high school proms, to college jitterbugging — to the two-step march in Army Air Corp basic training — many of us went from being very unrestricted college boys to a very restricted privates in the service.

For me, it all started when I noticed the constant drag on male attendance in my freshman classes at the University of Kentucky. Quite aware of the Army's draft requirements, I made the timely decision to apply for the Army Air Corp, and — without my mother's best wishes — I became a member in January 1943. After completing a number of Air Corp schools, including a "wash out" at piloting, I found myself positioned as far as possible from the pilot's cockpit — as a tail gunner on a B-17. Little did I know that my services in the 8th Air Force would include bombing major German factories, oil fields and the beaches of France during the invasion forces of D Day.

None of the aforementioned targets will ever remain in my mind as much as our shuttle bombing raids over Germany, including our landing at Poltava and Mirograd in the Ukraine section of Russia. Very little news of these missions reached the American public at that time.

While the initial missions flown from 8th Air Force bases in England in early 1943 had been somewhat successful, our intelligence believed that bases in Russia would

95th Bombardment Group • 336 Squadron

extend our coverage of targets in eastern Germany. As our number of missions increased, it became much more evident that these Russian bases were sorely needed, not only for tactical purposes but also for political reasons — to ameliorate the wishes of Joseph Stalin for a “second front.” Perhaps these missions could even cement our relationship with the U.S.S.R.

From the get-go our proposal on this endeavor had fallen on the deaf ears of Stalin. His demands for cooperation were subject to constant confrontation. This political boondoggling by our communist ally should have served as a warning of further plans of WWII.

Whatever the case, it was not until 1944, when I was a tail gunner on a B-17 with the 95th bomb group, 8th Air Force, that my small part of this well discussed operation began. Noble but naïve, our crew was awakened June 21st for our usual breakfast and briefing. From our side of the briefing room the large map that was covered by a curtain was pulled back to reveal a tape that pinpointed our target, Ruhland, but extended our mission into Russia, terminating in Poltova. Bases had also been established in Mirograd and Piyatin. In addition to the usual briefing about our target, flight plan, I.P. (initial point), flack expected and Luftwaffe dangers, we were told what our personal conduct was expected to be and the relations with our ally Russia. We were also given identity cards in both English and Russian to be used in case we were shot down and were over Russian territory.

As a small town kid who had traveled little from Kentucky, I was amazed. This mission would be the longest and perhaps one of the most dangerous in which I had

participated. I learned that it would take eleven hours to fly from England to Mirograd. For comparison, it took nine hours to fly to Berlin and back.

Our mission to Russian was to bomb a refinery at Ruhland, just south of Berlin, which we did with good accuracy. Thanks to our P-51 (little friends) fighter escort, which shot down 14 enemy planes en route, we made the trip in good condition with little gas left in the tank. It was puzzling to me that we were greeted by Russian Yak fighter planes, which flew a little too close to us for comfort.

Landing in Mirograd as opposed to landing in Poltova chanced to be a lucky decision. After the usual hand shaking and back pounding by the U.S. ground forces, we were fed and went to sleep in one of the few existing structures in Mirograd. Sucking on oxygen for nearly 11 hours, we were exhausted. While we were sacked out the German Luftwaffe was not. Their reconnaissance revealed a pack of B-17s parked in Poltova and Mirograd. That night they bombed both bases destroying approximately 60 B-17s at Poltova. Mirograd was lucky; they only used anti-personnel bombs on us with a minimum of damage. It seems impossible that the Commie Ruskis did little to prevent this attack or to allow our fighter planes to ward off this uncontested bombing. You don't have to have a Ph.D. in foreign affairs from Harvard to see the outrageous deception of our Russian allies.

Since Poltova got plastered so bad, the bases at Mirograd decided that we should move a little farther east to be out of a range of Luftwaffe bombers. Kharkov was the best choice so off we flew into the further reaches of the USSR. This time we spent several days enjoying the hospitality of our suspicious ally. The first days we had no limitations on moving about the bombed out city. However, in the subsequent days our mobility was

95th Bombardment Group • 336 Squadron

restricted. So much for hospitality afforded by the K.G.B. While there we managed to bomb a couple of targets in Drohebycz, Poland and Arad, Romania.

In Kharkov we escaped further attacks, and found the Russian military in the lower ranks to be quite hospitable. On one memorable occasion, we attended a large banquet and attempted to rumba with Russian female soldiers. Perhaps we would have had better luck with the waltz. The Soviet uniforms offered little freedom of movement.

The attached pictures will confirm our fraternization policy while in Russia. Oh yes, that accordion player wouldn't play "Ochi Chromye" ("Dark Eyes"). "It's bourgeois," he spat when I requested the song.

Like us, the Russian soldiers wanted souvenirs of our encounter. In fact, one wanted to swap firearms with me. I was wearing a GI 45 and he was wearing a Russian issue. Needless to say, I had to say "nyet" to this proposal. We resolved our bargaining efforts by swapping insignia on our uniforms. I still have the insignia of this soldier in my possession. Among other souvenirs of this mission is a small ceramic salt container that I requisitioned from our big banquet. Rumor had it that other proposals were made but romantic intrigue was never proven, despite the fact that several female soldiers caught our eye. G.I.'s will be G.I.'s.

To complete the balance of shuttle bombing we flew across Yugoslavia and landed in Foggio, Italy. After delousing our bodies of the lice we picked up in Russia, we flew back to dear old England, stopping off to unload a few bombs on Beziers, France.

This shuttle bombing raid took about two weeks and proved to be a complete and unadulterated flop. There was a second shuttle mission later in WWII.

This story did not end until June 21, 1995, when I, along with all other 8th Air Force crew members who participated in this mission, received from Yuli M. Vorontsov, Russian ambassador to the U.S., a letter of thanks and the commemorative medal, "The 50th Anniversary of the victory in the Great Patriotic War" (WW II).

So, my dear reader, remember, "All good things come to those who wait" — except rumba lessons!