



Joseph Capossela Story

Part Seven of Ten

My Combat Tour

by Joseph T. Capossela

When I got overseas I received my fifth promotion, this time to Technical Sergeant.

The airfields in England at that period were multitudinous. When you flew off your runway and could see out over the landscape, it was pocked with airfields of other groups - RAF, fighter planes, intermediate bombers ↻ it was just one vast airfield.

We slept on cots in Nissen huts, two enlisted men crews (twelve men) to a hut. The crew of a B-24 was ten men - four officers, six enlisted men.

Our group was comprised of about seventy-five brand new B-24 Liberator bombers. I flew my first mission over German occupied Europe on May 12th.

Bombing runs were made over oil depots, railroad marshalling yards, and industrial sites in the Ruhr Valley, Ludwigshafen, Hamburg, Munich, and Berlin, to name a few of the targets. These flights were made just before D-Day and after D-Day.

The 492nd, one of the last group in the 8th Air Force, suffered heavy losses, in fact, by August the group was so depleted despite heavy replacements that the 8th Air Force decided to eliminate the group. I don't know how I came back. Just lucky.

In August I had twenty-six missions completed and four more to go. Later it was raised to five.

A typical mission consisted of a notice the night before we were scheduled to fly the next day. We flew daylight missions so our alert was usually early in the morning. The crews alerted to fly were awakened, and after mess reported for briefing. The pilots had their briefing, navigators theirs, bombardiers theirs, radiomen theirs, etc. Then all the crews met at the general briefing where the target of the day was revealed. The commanding officer would uncover the map, point to the target and describe all the information available to the minute on that day's bomb run - how many planes from our group, how many planes from the rest of the 2nd division, how many B-17s would be joining us, and what our fighter escort was going to be in and out of the target.

At the briefing Command would answer any question you asked about the target - its defenses, what to expect in attack from enemy planes, etc.

From our first alert - then mess - then briefing - would be at least two hours, then we would be driven in trucks to our planes. We would check our equipment, get into the planes, and wait for take-off orders. This could take from a half hour to an hour, or more, depending on weather here and over the target.

We took off on a pre-arranged schedule to assemble at a certain altitude, about 18,000 feet. We then assembled in formation and took off for the point where we would meet other Eighth Air Force groups assigned to that day's mission.

By June, 1944, when we acquired air superiority, we could assemble 1200 and 1500 heavy bombers for a deep penetration into Germany. Taking off group after group it would take an hour before they all passed one point.

Usually on the bomb run the target area was fortified with many heavy German guns and the sky was black with flak. Flak was fired to explode at the altitude we were flying and once on the bomb run, the bombers had to maintain steady altitude. Sometimes in a near burst flak would flutter the plane and you were lucky if it didn't hit a vital part and disable the plane.

Once a piece of flak landed near my feet. I tried to pick it up with my gloves, but it was so hot I had to drop it.

It was my job to listen to the radio if the lead ship had any special instructions, but usually it was visual - we could see it.

While flying we wore an electrically heated suit, boots and gloves, parachute harness, and over that a flak suit which was like a suit of armor - front and back - which was very heavy. Over our faces above 10,000 feet we wore oxygen masks. Wearing the mask for several hours it became moist and uncomfortable inside.

Over the target I opened and closed the bomb bay doors. When they were open I could see right down to where the bombs hit. Over the bomb bay door was a catwalk so you could walk from the front of the plane to the back of the plane. When the bombardier pressed a button the bombs released. The bomb bay contained four compartments. On one mission we were carrying eight 200 pound bombs - two in each compartment, one bomb above the other bomb. When the bombardier pressed the button, six bombs cleared and two hung up and failed to release. The top one was lying on the bottom one.

With the bomb bay doors open and 20,000 feet below me I had to take off my flak suit and go out on the catwalk to manually trip the hung up bombs. This I did by carrying with me a small hatchet from my radio compartment so I could reach the bomb release. They cleared and I came back on the catwalk, signaled the pilot that they were out, and closed the bomb bay doors.

It happened another time with smaller bombs and I had no trouble tripping those from my compartment.

As soon as the bombs were dropped the planes followed the target leader and headed for home. Enemy planes hovered out of range to attack planes disabled by flak, having engine trouble, or somehow drifting away from the main formation.

When anyone in the plane became disabled or had other duties I filled in as gunner, but I never fired at anyone, I just tracked. I flew at least one mission in every gun position - front turret, rear turret, top turret, ball turret (below), and side gun position. The two guns were 50 calibers, about a three or four inch shell.

Despite electrically heated suits and all our gear, it got cold up there. The temperature outside at 20,000 feet could be as low as 30 below. So despite the frigid climate, when you were under attack or over the bomb run you found yourself sweating.

Coming back from target, you had to be alert for enemy plane attack. When we landed at home base each crew was trucked to intelligence for debriefing, anything that happened on the mission, like something unusual. Each crew got a bottle of Scotch which we sipped while debriefing and the Red Cross always had coffee and doughnuts. And a good meal was always served. When the crews came back we ate royally.

A typical mission into Germany and back, from awakening 'til landing, could take as much as eight to ten hours. A short mission was never less than five hours.

On one mission we limped back to England on two engines and one wheel was not intact. We crash-landed next to the runway and totaled the plane, but fortunately nobody got hurt but me. During the crash I was seated on my radio table with my feet clamped under my stool which was crash position. However, on impact my right foot slipped from under the seat and my knee hit me flush in the teeth, loosening the front four. (I had them replaced with a bridge later in the year at Truax Field, Madison, Wisconsin.)

When the 492nd was disbanded in August, 1944, our crew did our last five mission with the 467th. That was a total of thirty-one missions for me. For flying my tour of duty I received the Air Medal with three oak leaf clusters and the Distinguished Flying Cross.

The flying personnel, after five or six missions, always got time off for a holiday. Mostly we went to London, which was about fifty miles away, where we drank, danced, socialized, and watched the buzz bombs come over. Sometimes we had to go into the air raid shelters during air raids. On one holiday, we took a long train ride to Edinburgh, Scotland.

I returned to the U.S. in September '44, and after furlough was assigned to radio school at Truax Field in Madison, Wisconsin. At Truax I worked for the War Information Office and helped put out the camp newspaper. I also gave panel discussion on pertinent events of the day.



South Dakota - winter of '42.

Story Continues in Part Eight: [Another Side of War](#)

Source:

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