

# MISS KAY AND ME

*The True Story of a B-24 Waist Gunner in World War II*

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*This book was originally written  
in the form of letters  
to my brother John,  
a veteran of the War in Europe,  
to whom this book is dedicated*

I want to thank my wife Arlene for her patience, during those hours I traveled into the past and who has helped me to check my recollections for accuracy and completeness.

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## INTRODUCTION

This was my 30th sortie. I was by now a seasoned veteran of the business of war but that did nothing to calm my nerves. We were over the target and from the action around me it was certain that we were not welcome. I could see enemy fighters in the distance, too many to count with a quick glance, but surely more than a dozen.

As I looked back at our formation, one B-24 took a hit in a wing and tilted sharply in the direction of the broken wing. The broken wing and one engine moved up and away from the plane as it sideslipped downwards, beginning to spin with its remaining wing pointed away from the earth. As it fell it began to smoke and then to blaze. Flames streaked upwards, away from the spiraling plane. I dared not watch any longer because of the danger of attack. I searched the sky frantically for an enemy. It seemed to me that I could not move my eyes and body fast enough to cover my sector of defense. I glanced once more at the falling bomber. There were no 'chutes.

I could picture the chaos inside the plane—frantic men, some injured, all trying to exit but pinned to their positions by centrifugal force, held tight in a vise and unable to bail out. Their primitive fear, knowing this was it. Their superhuman efforts to get out, because without that extra something they would be lost, and sometimes they achieved it, as I knew from men who had bailed out of disabled aircraft.

I was a gunner with more than half of my missions behind me. I couldn't die now. Adrenalin poured through my body and I could see with astonishing clarity. I was totally concentrated on the action around me yet just as frightened as I had ever been. I had been terrified often before but each experience was different. You do not become accustomed to fear.

Now the flak began—out of nowhere, a bright white flash turning yellow, then orange, and fading to a dull red. Next a black ball of smoke uncurling across the sky. If the explosion was very close, I would hear it, but usually I saw only the flash and smoke because the racket of the four engines drowned out all other sound. Black fighters wearing the German cross flashed overhead much too swiftly for me to fire at them. More bombers went down, their shiny aluminum bits and pieces spinning as they plunged. Somewhere deep in my mind I was thinking, "How did I ever get into this?"

The story of my war began in 1943 when I joined the Army Air Force before graduating from high school. I was going to be drafted and I didn't want to be an infantryman. I wanted to be a fighter pilot. As it turned out, I was trained as a B-24 gunner. Now, at the age of 19, here I was shooting at Germans, and they were shooting at me.

Chapter One

## ATTACK ON PEARL HARBOR

This is the true story of my experiences as a B-24 gunner in World War II. It is accurate to the best of my knowledge and ability to recall. Since these events took place fifty years ago, I no longer remember the names of people I knew only for a short time, so some of the names are fictitious. The people themselves were very real. My memory of people and events is clear; indeed, it seems like much less than fifty years have passed since it all happened.

Flying had always been my great dream. Only a fellow flyer can know how it feels to soar freely in space. I believe that only man can appreciate flight. How can a bird enjoy the wings with which it is born? To a bird, flying is a way to get around to gather food. Flying to a bird must be like walking to a human. To a human, walking is routine, but flying—flying is out of this world!

How well I remember the excitement of the attack on Pearl Harbor. It was Sunday, December 7, 1941, and we heard the news on the radio. Pearl Harbor had been bombed and the United States had declared war on the Axis powers: Germany, Italy and Japan. Where was Pearl Harbor? We didn't know—somewhere out in the Pacific Ocean—but in the great excitement, we didn't really care. My home was in a quiet Vermont town and I was sixteen years old, very impressionable and patriotic. In all my sixteen years I had never experienced anything like it.

After the initial excitement, I began to realize that one power or the other would win the war and that, if the others won, my people could be slaves and lucky to live. It was well known that the Germany of 1941 was cruel and brutal. In the newspaper we read about atrocities almost daily. Only later did we learn that the atrocities were much more terrible than we had known.

We Americans never doubted that we would win the war. Our history books had taught us that we never lost a war. I thought about losing and ending our way of life. To lose was unthinkable; it could not happen. Later on in combat, the outlook was somewhat different. As any veteran knows, you do lose some of the time.

When Pearl Harbor was bombed, I was a high school sophomore. During the next three months my priorities changed completely and many of the things that were important to me before now became secondary. Our school let us leave early each day to work in a defense-related factory. I began to work in the American Woolen Mill where my mother had been working for six years.

My mother was the sole support for my brother, my sister and me. Our father had left us some seven years earlier and now lived in Canada. Unfortunately for the family, he had become an alcoholic. I never held any animosity towards him but I disliked the unhappiness his drinking had caused. I am happy to say that after a while I began to

understand the problems he faced. He had really tried to stop drinking but it was too much for him. Even at the age of nine years I could understand what he was going through. He was never abusive to me, and since I was the youngest of three children he seemed to have more compassion for me than for the others. My brother John was the subject of much more abuse, and yet it was not really what my father intended. In his inebriated state he simply made mistakes, and I know he was very sorry later.

My mother was without doubt the most wonderful person I have ever known. She was tireless and totally unselfish. At a time when there was little understanding for the struggling single parent, she worked very long hours each day to support us. She also washed our clothes, cooked, and advised us. There is nothing I could have said or done that would have repaid her. I could go on and on about her, but I digress.

I managed to graduate from high school because after three years I already had the points required for graduation. During my third year I had taken courses that would help to qualify me for pilot training. The best was called *Pre-Flight*. It covered the theory, the mathematics and the physics of flight very thoroughly. I learned the basics of flying in that course, and the understanding it gave me helped me in my future flying experiences.

I had been in school for only two months of my senior year when I learned that I was about to be drafted. If I waited for even a few days, I would lose my opportunity to choose the Air Corps. Some of my friends were leaving for the various services and two of the male teachers had also joined up. The school principal kept us all informed about their progress. They were proving their worth. Although I was anxious to do my part, it seemed to me that they were much better prepared for the military than I was. I knew very well that I was young and inexperienced.

But nothing ventured, nothing gained. I went straight to the Superintendent of Schools and told him that I wanted to join the Army Air Corps. I requested his assurance that, having earned my points, I would receive my high school diploma without completing my senior year. Our Superintendent of Schools happened to be an astute, friendly gentleman who believed that peacetime regulations must bend to the imperatives of war. He listened attentively and sat for a few moments in thought.

I had not really expected his reaction to be favorable, but it wasn't my fault that my country was about to draft me. I hadn't expected my education to be interrupted by a war either. Why shouldn't I be allowed to complete my last year of high school, especially since my chances of becoming a pilot would be greatly diminished if I entered the Air Corps without a high school diploma?

I was young and impatient, so I expected the Superintendent to make a decision on the spot. I was afraid I would be drafted before I could enlist. The Superintendent seemed to understand. He said to me, "I know you would like to have my answer as soon as possible but I cannot give you one at this time." He continued with, "I will do everything possible to help you." With that slight encouragement I thanked him and left.

Two days later I was summoned to his office. I entered feeling extremely uneasy due to the importance of his decision to my future. He told me that he had considered my record and that he could assure me that my diploma would be forthcoming if I was accepted into the Army Air Corps.

Assured that I would get my diploma, I promptly volunteered for the Army Air Corps, was accepted, and by September 1943 had been sworn in with the time-honored pledge. Like thousands before me, I was a soldier in the Army Air Corps, but the motto of the military is "Hurry up and wait." I was sent home to await the papers activating my enlistment.

While in Italy I did receive my diploma as promised, though I later learned that there had been considerable controversy about it. It seems that the principal of my school felt that I should not graduate without completing a fourth year of English. I am happy to say that I was blissfully unaware of the disagreement. No problems ever arose due to the Superintendent's decision, and I will always remember him as a very fine and patriotic American.

A good friend of mine called Rod for short was also waiting for his Army orders. We had been together during induction and hoped to be in the Army together but his final papers did not come through for several months after I had left. Once I settled down in the Army, I began to correspond with my mother, who told me that Rod was dejected because he had not been called up with me. Having a good friend nearby would have been very comforting. However, like many other things in life, it was not to be. My guess is that, since my last name was at the beginning of the alphabet and his was at the end, alphabetical order determined which of us would be called into service first. I am happy to say that after the war we renewed our friendship and often compared notes on the war in England vs. the war in Italy. I will tell you about one of his experiences later in this book.

My papers came through in October of 1943. The month seemed like a long one, but when the time actually came, it was a bit of a surprise and a shock. I remember that I was flushed with excitement and found it hard to settle down. I had no appetite for my supper that night, but knowing I would need nourishment the next day, I ate with little or no enthusiasm.

My mother awoke me at five o'clock in the morning. It was pitch dark outside. Somehow, eighteen didn't feel very old—perhaps I wasn't as mature as some at that age. I do recall that it was a very difficult moment. My mother came with me on the local bus to the Greyhound bus station. Then I was on my own and on my way. I had never been away from home before. That bothered me more than the thought that I might be killed.

What do I remember about the trip? I remember that the Greyhound bus was not equipped with a lavatory. Today most long distance buses have a lavatory, but in 1943 most did not. This omission became a problem. All of the passengers suffered. My situation became so critical that I decided to ask the driver to stop. He refused, and so I

waited. It is comical now to remember that incident, but I will never forget how it felt at the time, and I will always sympathize with anyone in that dilemma.

On that day I formed the opinion that bus drivers were the nastiest persons on earth. Today, I find them friendly and cordial, at least most of the time.



## Chapter Two

# BASIC TRAINING

The destination of the Greyhound bus was Fort Devens, Massachusetts, where I started my life in the Army. We fresh faces were a rag-tag group from all walks of life. Most of us were between the ages of 18 and 21 years, though a few seemed to be quite worldly-wise at the advanced old age of 24. Several of these hardened veterans of civilian life were ready with somewhat exaggerated advice. Anxious to grasp at any straw for support, we newcomers believed whatever we heard from them. Soon enough we found out that these older men were just as inexperienced as we were. Age can be relative.

After several days at Fort Devens, where we learned how to make a bunk so snug and tight that a quarter dropped on it would bounce, we were shipped out to various bases for basic training. The lucky ones were shipped to Florida. According to the bulletin board, I was not one of the lucky ones. My group would be going to Greensboro, North Carolina.

### *Greensboro, North Carolina*

You should know that troop trains in those days made haste slowly. It seemed like forever, but finally we did get to Greensboro. Just as we were arriving, the train stopped, probably out of habit, in a heavily wooded area. We looked out of the windows and saw signs announcing that we were in a gunnery range. Gunfire was heard. Big signs warned civilians to Keep Out of the Danger Area! I realized that I was no longer a civilian. This was for real.

We debarked at the training camp and were marched in an out-of-step, disorderly group to quarters, where we were told to report to our assigned barracks. I was amazed to see a general rush. By the time I got to my barracks about one minute after the others, I found myself the proud owner of an upper bunk. I did not make that mistake again.

GI clothing wasn't issued to us for at least a week. We moved about in a boisterous mob wearing our civilian clothes. I was surprised and quite disappointed to hear the bugle played over the intercom. I had expected it to be played by a real, live bugler. Can't you imagine a live bugler opening the barracks door every morning and waking up sleeping soldiers? The picture that comes to mind is a bit messy.

After a week we were issued our uniforms, by which I mean fatigues or coveralls. Fatigues had pockets everywhere, but you were not supposed to use any of them. This was one of the strange contradictions of Army life. To say that my fatigues did not fit is an understatement. I was 5'6" tall and weighed 140 lbs. My fatigues were about 6'6" tall and seemed to weigh more than I did. There were no short, lightweight uniforms so I had to make do, turning up the cuffs, tightening the belt, and using every method I could think of to secure a better fit. I did this in the name of survival, for how can you survive if you can't see where you are going?

I looked about for sympathy but there was none to be had. I felt certain that the Army dress code would not allow such a sad-looking soldier to become a legal member of the Armed Forces. How wrong I was. I *was* a soldier, albeit a lowly one. I felt like a dwarf with the most of the troops stumbling over me. It was difficult to converse since anyone under five-feet-six was called by the same name: "Shorty." When someone hollered "Shorty!" we all answered. Later, to my relief, I met other men my size. We were even accepted, after a fashion. I must have been a survivor because after awhile everything but the fatigues began to fit a little better.

Happily, my dress uniform did fit. Each of us had to have a properly fitting dress uniform. It was the fatigues that did not matter. In fact, for the duration of basic training I never had a pair of fatigues that fit. The time came when I was told to execute an about-face, and when I did, the fatigues did not. The consequence of this anomaly was whiplash, as the fatigues caught up with my rotating body.

Once outfitted as GIs, we were divided into groups called Flights. It was nice to be reminded that we were destined to do something resembling flight. We had not seen anything with wings except birds since we had been inducted. Whether an airplane or a balloon no longer mattered; any flying object would have been welcome.

In the Flights we were taught that we boots were as low in rank as it was possible to be. We soon began to believe that we were even lower. We were also taught that a second lieutenant is very close in rank to God. The power and majesty of ranks above second lieutenant was simply not explained. We assumed that such ranks were on an even higher plane. A lieutenant even tried to walk on water one day on the obstacle course. He was trying to impress a higher-ranking officer but he failed miserably when he tried to jump over a mudhole and upended, to our great delight. We began to laugh out loud, making profound remarks about the hapless officer. Our sergeant was not amused, however, so we negotiated the obstacle course for the rest of the day.

### *Gas Attack*

One day as we were marching along we noticed a strange smell, very unpleasant and very strong, and felt a burning sensation in our nostrils. Soon we were coughing and sneezing. We were commanded to disperse but we had already dispersed, floundering through bushes and weeds to a hesitant stop. We had been marched into an area where tear gas was being dispensed with abandon. We learned from that experience that on designated days, gas warfare could be expected at any time. Thereafter, on those days we wore our gas masks without fail.

I had a very personal experience with gas at a lecture on gas warfare given by the lieutenant-in-charge. When he thought we looked fat, dumb and happy enough, he pulled the pin on a gas grenade the size of a beer can. The grenade rolled under my unsuspecting seat. My first awareness of this is not describable. Suffice it to say I left the Flight in record time and was cornered about 2000 feet away, traveling at a very high rate of speed.

I learned a lot about gas warfare that day. At first my eyes were blinded by tears and burning terribly, but that turned out to be the least of my problems. You would have to feel for yourself what followed to understand what I am trying to describe. The next day and the next my body burned all over its entire miserable surface. There was not one square inch of me that did not itch and burn in spite of all the showers I took. My clothes were washed and washed again, but it was a long time before all traces of the disaster were erased from my memory, not to mention my anatomy. Later I heard that the lieutenant who had perpetrated this disaster on me had been given the same treatment by a fellow officer. I wish I could say I was sorry.

After these experiences I was not happy to hear that we would soon be entering the gas chamber, an airtight building capable of being filled with chlorine gas. For the reader who is not familiar with chlorine gas, let me simply say that it is deadly poison. Human lungs were not meant to inhale that green, burning substance. I did not feel that I was ready for this particular phase of training; the Army thought that I was. Since it was clear that the sergeant would not be easily dissuaded, I complied with their request, but first I took every precaution.

Although I was only eighteen years old, my whiskers were at least forty. I needed to shave my beard very closely since our gas masks had the nasty habit of leaking if there was a beard underneath. I made sure that my face was extra clean-shaven that morning. When my time came to enter the gas chamber, some other GIs were already inside. Just before I went in, there was a casualty. A soldier who I had seen in our barracks was bundled into an ambulance and trundled away. His face was a very bright red that contrasted unbelievably with his very blonde hair. I thought he was dead. I never found out if he did die, and can only hope that he recovered.

Finally my turn came. My knees were not steady but I was determined. Inside the gas chamber were two soldiers, one on each side of me, to make certain that I did as I was told. I was instructed to take off my mask. To be honest, I became calm at that moment. Realizing that I had often practiced underwater distance swimming, I felt that I was in shape to oblige. I took off my mask. They motioned to me to replace it. I followed the correct procedure while holding my breath. I felt that I would get my revenge on the powers that ruled, so I deliberately and methodically took a lot of time executing the routine. After an overly long interval, I replaced the mask and blew into it to remove the poison gas. Much to my surprise and relief, it worked very well.

The two soldiers were quite agitated because I took so long, at least one minute, to put my mask back on. They were sure that they had a second accident on their hands. The delay was deliberate on my part, but in retrospect I realize it was rather foolish. They were, after all, concerned for me.

One morning I awoke with a fever. I did not know what the procedure for reporting sick was, but soon found out that notifying the sergeant was a must. This I did. He in turn sent me to the doctor, who took my temperature and confirmed that it was high. Instead of giving me the usual aspirin-and-back-to-duty, he sent me over to the sick barracks. It was a long way and I had to carry all of my equipment with me. I was

staggering under the weight and doubted that I would make it, but in the Army you do make it, and so I did.

### *Pink Potatoes*

I have heard the standard gripes from veterans and GIs all over the country about Army food. In World War II this joke was heard every day. The radio and the movie theaters constantly made humorous remarks about Army food. In spite of this, I found the food to be good or very good most of the time, although there were a few occasions when the food was almost as bad as the media depicted. On one occasion I consumed food that, although palatable, was rather binding. Well, Ex-Lax did the trick.

Bad food was so uncommon that the jokes and exaggeration were uncalled-for, but there was one time when I lost my appetite. It was the time that I was on KP duty and word came through that the mashed potatoes were pink. I thought nothing of it. Then the next word came through: the mashed potatoes were pink because a mouse had gotten trapped inside the potato-peeling machine. For a long time thereafter, mashed potatoes were no longer my favorite staple.

### *The Obstacle Course*

One day on the obstacle course the instructors decided to hurry us along. Why they did this, I don't know—as usual, they did not confide in me. One man, moving as fast as he could, was not able to negotiate a particular part of the obstacle course. He was sent back to the beginning to work his way back to the point where he was having trouble.

His problem was in looping over a bar ten feet up in the air. Through a series of very difficult steps, you had to work yourself up gradually, then grasp a bar, brace your chest against it, flip up your legs, and loop over feet first so that you landed on your feet. This was very difficult for him. Everyone stopped to watch him, and the instructors did not seem to notice that the rest of us had become spectators. We were all rooting for the unhappy boot, feeling that misery loves company. He continued his futile attempts to complete the maneuver. After he had tried about four times with the instructors berating him with increasing fury, he completed the loop. Unfortunately, he let go before his feet came around. With a sickening crash he landed on his neck, head and shoulders, a ten-foot drop from the bar above. He was taken to the hospital in an ambulance. We learned later that his neck had been broken, yet he lived, or so I heard. I am thankful it ended without the loss of another life. This was wartime.

### *Washout*

Time passed slowly, but at last basic training approached an end. By that time I had almost forgotten that I was in the Air Corps. It seemed to me that I was destined to be a full-fledged infantryman. Actually, I was in what they called the Army Air Corps Cadets. It was my fond hope that I would become a fighter pilot. I believe that about 95% of the cadets aspired to become fighter pilots, but on one fine day we were notified that we would be given psychomotive tests to determine whether we could qualify for further training as cadets. The joke was: they will find out whether you are “psycho” or “motivated.” These tests would decide our fate.

I actually enjoyed the tests. They were like arcade games in many ways but much more elaborate. I thought I had made a good showing but apparently not. On a fateful morning we were summoned to a tent where a major explained to each one of us what we had or had not accomplished. Some of us made it. How I envied them! For me, it was just not meant to be.

### *Brownie*

My best friend at that time was a shorty like me whose last name was Brown. We called him Brownie. He was a likable character, only nineteen but already married before leaving Bangor, Maine. Brownie was one of the lucky ones—he was to continue in the Cadets and go on to be a fighter pilot. I was actually happy for him. After all, he would be getting everything I had always wanted. At the same time I knew he would be leaving me, and that I would be losing a good friend and confidant.

A few days later, when we were expecting to leave basic training, our group was assigned to guard duty. It was New Year's Eve and the weather was depressing—it was raining hard. The night before going on guard duty, I felt quite ill. At about 11 p.m. I made it outside of the barracks just in time to be sick in the bushes. I was wretched and felt very sorry for myself, but returned to the barracks and went to sleep. I felt fine in the morning.

The wake-up call came at 5 a.m. as usual. I met Brownie after breakfast. He didn't look well at all and confessed to me that he felt very sick. We had to go on guard duty, so I told him to report to sick call right away. He was as ignorant of the procedure as I had been, so I explained what he must do. I did not see him again until later that evening after we had completed our round of guard duty. Brownie told me that he had reported to the sergeant in charge and explained that he felt very ill. The sergeant had replied, "No good soldier gets sick on Sunday." Brownie had tried again, to no avail. His face looked very white and his hair seemed to be standing on end. His face was covered with goose bumps. I feel now that I should have done something for him but it was Sunday and I did not believe there was anything that could be done. I was also so exhausted that I could not think.

We all went to bed. Brownie had the bunk directly under me. During the night he rolled out of his bunk and fell to the floor. Some of the boots took him to the hospital. I was so tired that I did not wake up in spite of the noise and excitement. The men told me about it in the morning.

After breakfast we learned that Brownie had died during the night. It was spinal meningitis and it was Sunday, so he died. He died because no good soldier gets sick on Sunday. It is difficult to put into words my feelings on that day. Somehow, I should have done more to help him. I moved to a new bunk. The men took a rope and tied it to his bunk, which was covered with vomit. They towed the bunk out into the field bordering the road and left it there.

### *Small Happenings*

Looking back at basic training, there were a number of small happenings that are worth mentioning.

On a march one day our sergeant called a halt, the reason being that tear gas was being dispersed nearby and he did not wish to interfere with the troops ahead of us. This was a gas warfare day and we were all wearing our gas masks belted to our waists.

While we were at ease and milling about, I obtained permission to visit one of the many strategically located latrines. The nearest was only a short distance away. There were perhaps ten men in the latrine, and after having used the facilities I glanced out the window. It was clouded with smoke. The men around me started yelling, "Gas! Gas!" Remembering the past, I had my gas mask on before I noticed that none of the others were wearing them.

Knowing that I was expected posthaste by the sergeant, I opened the door, intending to get out fast so the gas wouldn't get in. Instead, I was bowled over by six GIs who came rushing out with dripping wet toilet paper wrapped about their faces. Off they went, screaming like demons with the hounds of hell behind them. Another man ran past me with a bucket over his head and a towel tucked underneath, then two more with towels wrapped about their faces. I picked myself up, rejoined our group, and we were off.

I wish I could have learned whether the emergency gas masks had protected those unfortunate individuals, but I heard no more about it.

### *Discipline*

The Army had its own ways of disciplining the troops and presumably insuring their loyalty. I heard but cannot verify the following story:

A soldier had committed some dastardly offense like forgetting to button his shirt or another criminal act. Whatever the cause, he was told to report to his sergeant. The three-striper was irate, perhaps suffering from a bad hangover, but then, the basic training sergeants were always in a rage. I believe this was a prerequisite for obtaining that exalted position.

The irate sergeant took the miscreant to an open space behind the barracks and told him in four-letter words to dig a hole six feet long by three feet wide and six feet deep. Then he was to bury the cigarette that he was smoking at the bottom. The unhappy GI did as he was told. Upon completion of his assignment, he reported back to the sergeant. I understand that it was a very warm day, and the criminal was perspiring and out of breath.

The sergeant then asked which way the burned end of the cigarette was pointing. The unhappy GI replied, "I don't remember, Sarge; I didn't notice." The sergeant said,

“Dig it up and find out and bury it again.” The GI returned to the project and did this and then reported once more. “It was facing east,” he said. The sergeant said, “Now dig it up and face it west.”

### *Pranks*

Many pranks were played in the barracks, and one harmless one is well-known, at least to all GIs. It was called “short sheet.” The victim’s bed was undone and the sheet inside doubled over so that when he got in, his feet would strike the sheet and he could not slide inside. This always brought a howl of laughter from the troops. There would be a few curses and the lights would go on as the hapless GI remade his bed. This would wake the sergeant, who had a small bedroom at the end of the barracks. He would stamp in and fume. He was, however, quite tolerant of these pranks. I suppose he knew the troops must let off steam in some way. He merely let it be known that any pranks directed against *him* would be met with a terrible retaliation. No pranks were directed at his person while I was there.

I do believe a few of the pranks were a bit out of hand. In one, for instance, a GI attempted to pick up his shoes but one was nailed to the floor.

At breakfast one day I found myself sitting alone at a table. It was rare indeed to be the only person at a table. At the time I wasn’t overly familiar with Army humor so I suspected nothing, but I felt uneasy because of being alone and because two GIs at a nearby table were snickering about something. It was very quiet, and that should have alerted me, but again the expression “fat, dumb and happy” comes to mind.

I was fixing my coffee. When I tilted the sugar dispenser over my cup, sugar poured all over the table. The cap fell off into the cup. Soggy sugar filled the cup and coffee ran everywhere as I jumped away from the table. There was a wild roar as the GIs released their pent-up laughter. My table was a mess. I cleaned it up with a straight face, though I was the center of attention and did feel a bit uncomfortable. Soon enough there was a repeat performance across the room and I was able to leave without creating too much notice.

Other things happened that weren’t pranks but seemed pretty funny to us. There was the day that our instructor of calisthenics decided to have a tug of war. He brought out the biggest rope I had ever seen, maybe two inches in diameter. There were about thirty soldiers on each end of the rope with a large mudhole between them. I was about fifth from one end.

The instructor gave the order and the tug began. The battle raged for some time. Finally, one of the men on my end of the rope was forced into the mud. The mudhole was deep and the soldier was thrashing and gasping. He hung there in the mud for two minutes or longer while the teams struggled for the advantage. It must have seemed like hours to him. At last with a desperate effort we were able to pull him out. His frenzied efforts not to be dragged in again probably decided the issue. In any event, the war ended in short order as we dragged our opponents one by one through the mudhole.

On another occasion we were watching a tug of war when the huge rope broke at a mended section. Before or since, I've never seen so many men go in so many directions at once, end over end.

And then there was the time that we were given three injections at the same time, one in one arm and two in the other. We always seemed to be getting shots. I think that some of the shots were to protect us from the previous shots. The result of one shot was always a very sore arm, so with three shots we knew the results weren't going to be pleasant. After taking our medicine, we expected to be returned to barracks for the rest of the day. Not so—we were marched down to the field for more exercise and continued the day on a normal schedule.

That night, two of the GIs decided that exercise would be a good way to keep the pain away the next day. They began a series of pushups and bends. This went on for at least an hour. Within another hour the two were in their bunks, moaning and groaning. They did not sleep well. I could only commiserate because my arms really hurt that night. Apparently exercise does not help shots. So we learn from the misfortunes of others.

Let me mention one other practice in the not-quite-a-prank category. This rare event was called a GI shower. I only witnessed it once, and I must say that it was warranted.

One of the soldiers in our barracks was less than clean—I would wager that his body gave off steam on a cold day. To be more precise, he was foul. His undershirt was a dark brown color. I was quite content that he was on the other end of the barracks from me, but his neighbors didn't appreciate his lack of hygiene any more than I did.

As a consequence, a self-appointed delegation of GIs notified him very clearly that if he did not become acquainted with soap and water, they would introduce him to the business end of a scrub brush. He did not take them seriously, which was a mistake. Armed with stiff brushes, the GI party took place. From the uproar and screams I can assure you that it must have been a very painful way to take a bath. Six stout soldiers removed dirt and hide alike. He was a model of cleanliness thereafter.

### *Joe Bonatak*

During basic training I noticed that GIs tended to gather in clannish groups. At first they would circulate but soon they would coalesce into more or less stable social groups that would stay together until they were shipped out. Often they would meet again at another stage of training and continue with the same group.

A GI named Joe Bonatak became the leader of one of these social groups. It was evident that he would not be a follower, for Joe was the largest man I ever encountered. For a man of my height it was difficult even to speak to him because of the need to crane my neck. If he had stepped on me, I would have been given a medical discharge. He must have weighed in at three hundred pounds. His arms were the size of stovepipes and his



legs were like an elephant's. There was an Army limit for physical size, so he must have grown a lot after he was inducted or maybe he intimidated the doctor who signed his physical. It is possible that the good doctor had lost his glasses.

Since Joe was huge, he was respected, though certainly not for his intellect. He had many followers who fawned upon him like a Caesar in ancient Rome. When he entered the barracks, they swarmed about him like bees after a jar of honey. This entourage even traveled about with their imposing leader. I almost expected to hear trumpets blare.

When we marched, the tallest men were always put up front so that the group would have to travel fast. Joe marched in the front rank of the column while shorties like me marched far to the rear. Tall men have long legs, so we shorties had to take longer steps to maintain the cadence. If Joe had been an inch taller, I would have worn out the crotch of my pants.

I would like to be able to tell you that Joe was quiet and friendly but he was not. Unfortunately, all the attention had turned him arrogant. He was anything but a humble man. Now I know that we short people have a reputation for being cocky—we don't like to be considered less because we are small—but let's face it, things don't usually work out in our favor. We shorties must make the adjustments, and from 5'6" in height to 6'7" is quite an adjustment, not to mention a difference of perhaps 150 lbs. in weight. Therefore I am happy to say that I was not involved in the following event:

We had an egghead in our barracks. I know that the term "egghead" is not especially flattering, but if *I* qualified for that name, I would love it. Our egghead was quite unassuming and forever reading books of the intellectual variety. Sometimes he would become so absorbed in his reading that he would actually forget mess call. This was unheard-of in the Army. I do not remember his name, so let's call him Egbert.

One day Joe was passing Egbert's bunk and happened to nudge it. Now a nudge from Joe Bonatak was an earth-shaking event. Egbert's book tumbled to the floor, and since it was in frail condition its pages scattered about. Egbert became very agitated and cursed Joe soundly. That was not the brightest move that Egbert ever made. Joe stopped in his tracks and asked in a menacing tone: "What did you say?" To our astonishment Egbert repeated his expletives and added a few insults for good measure. We were awed. Joe, who probably had heard no rebukes since he reached a weight of 200 lbs. at the age of four, was dumbfounded. His face turned deep red and the veins on his forehead stood out like garden hoses. Mustering his complete vocabulary, he cursed Egbert, then grabbed his bunk and turned it upside down with Egbert under it, downside up.

Egbert crawled out from under and scrambled for the door. Everyone was quiet. Joe stood there, about to rearrange the bunk, when suddenly Egbert re-appeared with a shovel in his hands. He charged with a shriek, in such a state of rage that it was obvious nothing would stop him from retaliating. For once, Joe was thinking clearly and the last we saw of them was Egbert chasing Joe down the street with a shovel.

I am happy to say that the situation was resolved peaceably since Joe, though very large, could move very fast. This is proved by the formula  $E=mc^2$ , wherein  $E$ =Egbert's energy and  $m$ =Joe's mass times the square of Joe's speed. Inertia then takes over. This explains why we did not see Joe that evening until lights out. Nothing more was heard of the altercation and no one was willing to bring up the subject. Joe showed no signs of injury, so the matter was forgotten. Until now.

### *Close-Order Drill*

I think that all GIs and ex-GIs will remember the marching and singing that was an integral part of basic training. Looking back, I know that it was a great morale-builder. If a female of any logical proportions happened to be walking by, the order "Eyes Right" or "Eyes Left" was given, depending upon her geographical location relative to the troops. All eyes then fell upon the lady, and this in turn added a bit of interest to the day's work. The lady in question never seemed to mind and it was all in fun. The sergeant would almost smile at this time, and it made his day.

As the days wore on we became very proficient in the art of close-order drill. It became second nature, somewhat like driving and shifting a car—the operator no longer needs to think about the procedure; it has become automatic. We began to take pride in our marching ability and we were certain that no other group could outperform us. There is no doubt in my mind that most other groups felt the same way.

Reviews were held many times during our training. For a review we would dress carefully in our best uniforms, making certain that the brass buckles and buttons shone brilliantly. We would be inspected, and woe be it to the soldier whose polish did not meet the critical eye of our sergeant. If even the slightest amount of dirt or mud was camouflaged by shoeshine, that soldier was in deep trouble. The language alone was enough to make the unfortunate GI quake in his shoes, and the threat of the dreaded KP was ever present.

When the sergeant was satisfied, we would march to the parade ground. There we were drilled with pomp and ceremony before various dignitaries of the Armed Forces. The review would take about an hour. I was fortunate that this part of my training was completed in the cool weather of February because in the heat of a southern summer it must have been horrendous.

So many men were paraded during a review that it was impossible for the sergeants-in-charge to monitor all parts of the column. A number of brave ones would drop out of formation and jump off the road. Then, hidden by trees, they would go back to the PX or some such place until the review had ended.

I had never seen so many soldiers in one location and it was an awesome sight to a greenhorn like me. When we returned to our barracks, the games began. I am certain that most soldiers spend at least a quarter of their Army careers thinking about gambling, planning the strategy of gambling, or actually gambling. The bunks were used as a card table or for rolling the dice. I understand that rolling dice on a bunk is bad news because

an expert gambler can move the blanket ever so slightly, just enough to force a die into one more flip. If a cheater was detected, the end result was disaster. The money that changed hands was considerable relative to the amount of pay a boot earned in a month. There were some boots who spent all of their free time borrowing against their next month's pay. Most of us learned to avoid these unfortunate soldiers for they would promptly gamble away any money loaned to them.

### *Sergeant Duneasy*

While in basic training I became acquainted with a GI named Perry. Perry was a jolly character and given to playing practical jokes. He had an affinity for beer, and beer was a never-ending topic of conversation with him. He would refer to the weather and say how nice it would be to have a cool beer on such a warm day, or if it was cold, how nice it would be to have a beer to warm up one's bones. He lived by the theory that water is for external use only.

I was never sure that Perry actually drank beer while in basic training, but I do know that once, while slicing carrots, he cut his finger and put a bandaid on the carrot. He always wore a smile, though who knows, maybe it was a silly grin induced by a drink or two. Since he was always joking, it was difficult to know for certain whether he was normally unusual or unusually normal.

One day while our sergeant, Sergeant Duneasy, was holding roll call, Perry arrived late. As he rushed up Sgt. Duneasy spotted him and asked for his name. Perry, not wanting to get a demerit, said quickly, "I'm late because I have been looking for Rudy Schmenke, Sir." The sergeant took down Perry's name and told him to get into ranks. Then he studied his roster, scratched his head, and shrugged. The troops all knew that Rudy Schmenke didn't exist, and most of us cringed at the thought of what would happen when the sergeant discovered the farce.

Let me take a minute to explain that Sergeant Duneasy was really a corporal at this time—he'd lost one stripe because of some misdemeanor or another. No sooner did he become a sergeant than he was broken back to corporal again. It was a habit with him. At this point in time he was a corporal, but we continued to address him as Sarge. I never once saw him smile in all of the time I was with him in basic training. I believe that all sergeants in basic training were chosen for their lack of that characteristic.

Sergeant Duneasy began our daily drill. This consisted of all the normal and abnormal routines that we practiced. By abnormal I am recalling an order—"To the rear, march!"—which calls for a quick 180° reversal in the direction of travel. If one soldier continues in the same direction, the soldier in front will collide with him. Sometimes Perry decided to continue in the same direction, which always caused a commotion and made the troops laugh, infuriating the sergeant. The sergeant did not know the identity of the culprit who caused the uproar. None of us would betray Perry. He did, after all, provide a diversion from the normal dull routine.

On this occasion, when the troops collided with Perry and the laughing began, the sergeant rushed over to the tangle of arms and legs and lifted Perry to a standing position. Perry was at least as tall and every bit as powerful as the sergeant, and as he stood up, he managed to stumble, fall and take the sergeant down with him into the snarl of bodies. This was obvious to us but fortunately not to the sergeant.

I will again note that Sergeant Duneasy was not overly-endowed with grey matter. He was known for spending his passes in town in an inebriated state and his brain was well-pickled. He was, however, a master of the art of cursing. He mixed his orders with so many four-letter words that some of them were physically impossible to carry out. I leave the details of those four-letter orders to the imagination of the reader. Perhaps a contortionist could do what he called for, but again I digress.

After the sergeant had extricated himself from the heap, he decided to save what little dignity remained to him by calling attention to Perry. He barked, "Has Rudy Schmenke turned up yet?" Perry answered, "No, he hasn't." The sergeant roared, "Go find him and get him back here in ten minutes, understand!" With this, Perry left in search of the non-existent Rudy Schmenke. The rest of us continued to drill, suppressing our laughter.

Sergeant Duneasy was truly upset by this time. His language would have done justice to a lumberjack with a dull saw. He drilled and cursed us as we marched along. A rebellious mood grew among the troops. As we marched along in a column of four, a lieutenant came by. Sgt. Duneasy had to choose between saluting and giving the order for a "Column Left." Since he couldn't do both at the same time and the salute was critical, the salute came first. As a result the first group of four marched off the road into a ditch. It was impossible to negotiate the steep incline, so the troops deliberately piled up in a knot of human bodies. I suspect that most were very happy to make the sergeant a laughingstock in front of the officer. The pile-up continued until the enraged sergeant bellowed "HALT!" with all his considerable force. The officer said nothing and continued on his way, leaving our sergeant to sputter furiously, "You did that on purpose to make me look bad, and I'll get even!"

Perry had not returned, but luckily for him, the sergeant had forgotten about him. We were dismissed when we returned to barracks. The next week we spent more than the usual amount of time on KP.

There were certain special jobs dispensed to the soldiers, and one of these was the position of fireguard. The duty of the fireguard was to maintain room temperature by adding coal to the fire as needed. He could then spend his time reading or writing home. Many times I thought how nice it would be to relax on my bunk with no noise in the barracks. This was considered to be a very desirable assignment but I never was given the job in all of my time as a boot. I have always felt cheated, knowing that I could have spent one day at my ease. I guess I wasn't in the knowledgeable group. Later I learned that the prerequisite for the fireguard's job was to slip a fiver into Sergeant Duneasy's hand. Now they tell me!

During basic training Sergeant Duneasy would often have us run for about three miles. We would run until we were ready to drop. I seldom if ever made it all the way. The sergeant would stop and wait for the stragglers and as we passed him, standing by the side of the road, he would chide us. His remarks I will not bother to translate. As we continued on, he would trot past us to the head of the line with the macho troops. I was not the only straggler; there was always a group dragging along with me. Our group of slow runners grew larger each day. Sergeant Duneasy grew increasingly frustrated and finally enraged.

There came a day when he stopped us all with his usual "*HALT!!!*" For those not familiar with the military, this command is pronounced with the last letters silent: "Flight, HAAA!" or "To the left, HAAA!" The reason for this was said to be that, by eliminating unnecessary sounds, the instructor can give more commands without injuring his vocal cords. It was a kind of shorthand. I wonder why we never heard any shorthand cussing.

We halted, and Sergeant Duneasy began to censure us in his finest style. Since his vocabulary consisted only of four-letter words, we thought it was funny and laughed. That made him furious, and he used words none of us had ever heard before. Finally he shrieked, "And *no one* fools with Duneasy!" (This was his favorite expression; we had heard it many times. The word 'fools' was actually an obscenity.) And then he bellowed: "I want you all to repeat that, *now!*" We shouted back at him in unison: "Nobody fools with Duneasy!" He bellowed even louder: "Repeat that again!" and the group repeated. It must be remembered that we were all using his actual word. There came a short silence, and the sergeant seemed pleased. Then a small voice piped up: "Fool you, Sergeant!"

It hit the fan. Duneasy screamed: "*Who said that?*" but no one answered. He insisted that the culprit stand up like a man and admit the statement. No one dared do that, and no amount of threatening could force the issue. Finally he marched us back to the barracks for chow. All along the way we continued to chant, "Nobody fools with Duneasy, nobody fools with Duneasy!" A few officers standing around the barracks stared at us as we marched by, chanting, "Nobody fools with Duneasy!"

We knew there was going to be punishment of some kind—we had made our sergeant look bad before his superiors. We would pay the price. The sergeant raged and shouted for a long time. Whatever he said I no longer remember, but we policed the area for the remainder of the day. ("Police the area" means picking up and cleaning the grounds.) Strange to say, the next day we had a replacement sergeant. According to the scuttlebutt, Duneasy had laryngitis. The sergeant had lost his voice.

Duneasy taught me a few things that I found helpful for my stay in the Army. One is never to oversleep. In the Army no mother's gentle touch wakes you at 5:00 a.m. The Army expects immediate obedience; also instant wakefulness. The manner in which this was conveyed to me was as follows:

It was dark, it was cold; I was comfortable and warm beneath my Army blankets. Suddenly the lights flicked on and in with a roar marched Sergeant Duneasy. Feeling certain it was the enemy, I snapped upright, fully awake, slamming my head into the bunk

above me but prepared to do battle with whatever antagonist I might encounter. The upper bunk interfered with my effort to stand upright. Meanwhile our sergeant rushed about, screaming madly, "Wake up, wake up, you lazy unmentionables!" The actual wording is best imagined by the reader.

Some of the soldiers were very sound sleepers. They made loud objections to being waked. A few withering remarks from Duneasy cleared up any doubt in their minds. He rushed to each of the offenders and, grasping their ankles, hauled them bodily from their bunks. Audible thumps were heard as each individual met the barracks floor. Some of the soldiers were larger and a few even stronger than Duneasy, but Duneasy had a very powerful ally: the US Army. In this way I learned to wake up promptly.

Then one day a new recruit appeared in the barracks. I dislike making disparaging remarks about others, a very bad habit in extremely poor taste, but in all honesty I have to say that this man was the ugliest person I have ever seen. His nose had been pushed to one side of his face and he wore prominent scars as well as cauliflower ears. Without any doubt he was or had been a prize fighter. Our silent question was: What on earth had he been fighting to rearrange his face like that?

Mr. Ugly was very muscular and wore a permanent scowl on his face. That is, I think it was a scowl but maybe it was the only expression his poor battered face could make. I never did ask to be introduced and I never did learn his name.

The newcomer said not a word but looked around and chose one of the unoccupied bunks. After he had put his equipment in place, he lay back on his bunk and began to snore. It was Sunday. Some of the men were going to town but I wanted to stay in the barracks and read. Never before had I known the soldiers in our barracks to walk tippy-toe through the room. Everything was strangely quiet. The men were actually speaking in whispers.

The hours passed. After writing a letter or two and reading for some time I fell asleep despite the newcomer's resounding snores. I could probably sleep through the screams of dinosaurs fighting to the death.

The next morning was Monday morning. It started at usual with Duneasy's wild charge into the barracks. By now he could find only a few laggards to rout from their warm bunks. Unfortunately for him, one of the laggards was Mr. Ugly.

Since all of this happened at the other end of the barracks, I did not see the subtle nuances. Sergeant Duneasy seized the ankles of the snoring prizefighter. Mr. Ugly's body hit the floor with a solid thump. Time stopped. Sergeant Duneasy did the quickest "About Face" on record and rushed out of the barracks, holding a single sock in his hand. The men told me that his face had gone chalk-white. We didn't see Sgt. Duneasy again until roll call. Some day every devil finds a devil bigger than he is.

Our good sergeant had no shame. One day he walked through the barracks and in a friendly manner tapped each of us for two dollars till payday. Most of us, including me,

figured that his goodwill was worth two dollars (though not more), so we gave him his two dollars. The next week we learned that we would be shipping out to gunnery school. Sgt. Duneasy took down our names and said he would mail each of us the two dollars he owed. I have been waiting for the cash for fifty years. By my calculations Duneasy owes me, with interest, about \$35.

Basic training turned out to be the most physically demanding training we received. We thought all stages of our training would be a tough grind physically, but after basic most of the physical part was over. Basic was a tough system but it worked. We did win the war. In retrospect, some of the things that happened in basic training were comical, though at the time the humor evaded me. Our future training would be quite different, with emphasis on mental and physical coordination.

In our last week of basic training, I drew KP only once. This was the day after Brownie died of spinal meningitis. That day the entire barracks reported to sick call for a check-up. Brownie's death had been very sudden and many of us feared we had been infected. All of us were given an aspirin and told not to worry about contagion. A few hours later we learned from the scuttlebutt that all the medics had taken sulfa tablets. Many of us went back to the sickbay asking for sulfa tablets. This was denied. We were told to report for KP instead. But we did get even. We told everyone in the kitchen that we had been exposed to spinal meningitis. Shortly thereafter we were removed from KP and sent to a tenting area nearby. The next day we shipped out to gunnery school.

As I packed my clothing to leave North Carolina, I noticed a note on the bulletin board. It stated that Rudy Schmenke was AWOL and that anyone who knew where he was should report to Sergeant Duneasy *immediately*.

## *TAPS*

*When taps I hear, that one final call,  
I will have left this world and given my all.  
Then I will climb the stairs and see the opaque glass door—  
It will be of solid glass reaching to the floor.  
Etched on the glass will be a name like the marquee on a theater;  
I hope that the name will be good Saint Peter.  
Before I arrive my stomach will feel queasy—  
What if that name happens to be Duneasy???*



## Chapter Three

# GUNNERY SCHOOL

In late February we shipped out by rail to our new training camp in Florida. We were delighted that Florida would be our home for at least six weeks.

The troop train, like all military trains, took its own good time. We arrived in Panama City, Florida, after a grueling two-day trip during which we sat on sidings much of the time while awaiting other trains. These delays were hard to bear. We wanted to stretch our legs and to shower off the grime. Lack of exercise and fresh air made everyone tired and grouchy. Today, that same trip would take two hours in a jetliner. Still, it was not too irksome for me because Florida was our goal and we were about to start actual flight training. Right up to the end of basic training, we had been unsure of what would happen to us next. Many of us feared that we would be shipped directly into the Infantry.

We arrived at Tyndal Field, Panama City, on a bright, sunny day. It seems to me now that the weather was bright and sunny most of the time I spent in Florida. The palm trees were then, and will always be, a very beautiful sight to me. The barracks were much more picturesque than those in Greensboro, and the area was neat and clean. We had been warmed by coal heat in Greensboro, which made our living quarters sooty, uncomfortable and malodorous. This was paradise by comparison.

There was the usual rush to obtain the top or bottom bunks since we had learned that he who gets there first, chooses. Strangely, I could have cared less since I was undecided as to which bunk I preferred. In the bottom bunk, someone's foot could step on your butt. In the top bunk, someone's foot could connect with your butt if you stepped on his face. I got a bottom bunk, and that was quite OK by me.

Since the barracks buildings were assigned by the first letter of the last name, I was assigned to the "B" group. There was, however, one person in the "B" barracks whose last name began with "W"—his last name was Warren. He was assigned to us to fill up an empty cot. We called him Wizzy; why, I have no idea. Many of us had nicknames. Mine was always Shorty. In those days I measured all of five foot six. Today, age has subtracted an inch.

One of the more astute members of our group noted that most of us in "B" barracks were short. We pondered on it and finally concluded that short men could fit nicely into gun turrets. This brilliant deduction was followed by the uneasy realization that somewhere, somehow, decisions were being made based on our height. At this time the scuttlebutt was that several thousand men had been transferred directly into the Infantry. My guess is that they were on average taller than we were. I believe that to this day. Living with other short men, the nickname Shorty no longer applied and soon faded away into oblivion. That is not to say that there were no tall gunners in our group, but they were in the minority.

Shortly after our arrival at Tyndal Field, we heard a noise that was very welcome to our ears—the sound of a bomber flying overhead. We all rushed outside to observe. A B-17 Flying Fortress was going over, and a beautiful sight it was. Suddenly we realized that at this base there was a continual roar of bombers, some landing, some taking off. We did not mind at all—it was music to our ears. The air was fresh, the sun was shining, we were young and soon we would be flying. Everyone wore a smile. It was not until the next day that we settled down to the routine that was given to us.

The day after our arrival we went to a lecture. Lectures were very common in Army training but this lecture was one I never forgot. Even now after fifty years I can remember much of it verbatim. To me at least some of it was ominous. On that day most of us began to realize that we were, as the saying goes, expendable. This was not a picnic. The dangers of war would not wait until we were sent overseas. We were about to face considerable danger beginning the next day and until the war ended. We were told that a number of deaths suffered at this airbase had occurred because of errors committed by the aircrew. The nature of these errors was explained to us in detail, and as the lecture continued this generated a bit of uneasiness.

For one thing we were informed that we would be required to test our physical ability at high altitude. Within a few days we would be issued oxygen masks and enter a pressure chamber where the atmospheric pressure would be reduced to less than that at 40,000 feet.

The pressure chamber was a large cylinder that held approximately eight men at a time. We were warned that the lack of pressure could cause many different discomforts, including a buildup of gas in your stomach. We were told that this could be very painful and that you could get relief by expelling gas. Imagine that! At least we would all be wearing masks. Another painful possibility was that an air pocket inside a bad filling could expand and cause a severe toothache. Yet another problem might be pressure in the sinuses, causing excruciating headaches. We were advised to go to the doctor if we had a cold and not to go into the pressure chamber.

None of these prognoses were welcome to me. I had been afflicted with a sinus problem for years and wasn't eager to aggravate the condition. I awaited the day of the high altitude test with trepidation. In the days that followed we were given many lectures designed to bring out any fears we might have about our training. This was one of the ways by which the Air Corps removed some of the more timid men. I have never considered myself one of the brave ones, but I persevered.

During our first week to our surprise we were sent up in a B-17 to do some gunnery work. I was looking forward to the experience with excitement and pleasure. We were briefed before takeoff and told what to do in the event of an emergency. We were shown how to put on and adjust a parachute harness correctly and how to pull the ripcord. All of these things were new and exciting. The age of sky-diving had not yet arrived, and anyone brave enough to jump was an unusual character.

I was assigned to a bomber with a friend from the "C" barracks whom I had known for a short time. His first name was Gino. He was an easy-going person and we hit it off well. On the day of our flight the weather was quite rough and it was only the second plane ride I had ever taken. The first had been at home in Vermont at the Burlington Airport, financed by my brother John. That one flight had decided me to become a pilot. I felt destined to fly. Since I was very young, life was simple, and so was I.

At last we boarded the bomber and took off. I never experienced another ride quite like it. Later we were told that the co-pilot had become airsick. At first I felt fine although it was difficult to move around, which for a gunner is a fact of life. I was in the waist position, tracking a B-26 twin-engined plane towing a white canvas target on a cable. Each gunner was issued with belted rounds painted with an assigned removable color. If a bullet hit the target, it left its color in the white fabric. I know I did rather well because bullets with my color were found in the target.

There was a standing joke about a gunner who had fired quite a few rounds at a target being towed by a plane. He was asked if he could see the target. He answered: "I can see the target fine, but what's that white thing behind it?"

After practicing on the target for awhile, I was called to the nose of the plane. The instructor was having a problem with the 50-cal. machine gun. One of the rounds had hung up in the chamber and the gun was hot. The retractor lever had stuck halfway, only partly ejecting the bullet. He called me over and said, "You are wearing your leather gloves—take that retractor and lift it away."

I did as instructed. The result was very unpleasant. The retractor snapped the bullet back into the chamber and the gun fired into the ocean. The pilot berated us over the intercom because the tracer was seen arching towards Panama City. My leather jacket sleeve was slit for eight inches. My watch was smashed against the inside of the plane and completely demolished. I said not one word nor did anyone else.

That instructor, whoever he was, would remember the incident if he is still living. Should he read this, I would like him to know that if he had waited, that round might have come out of the chamber by itself. But maybe the incident was unavoidable. Who can tell what might happen when so many variables exist?

There was a red mark on my arm where the retractor had scraped it. I knew it could have been a crippling accident and I thanked God it was not. The shell was cooking at the time. That may have been the reason for the hurried and dangerous manner in which I was instructed, or perhaps I should say, volunteered.

I began to feel queasy and was told to go to the bomb bays. We were flying over the Atlantic at the time. I found my friend Gino miserably losing his breakfast down through the open bomb bay doors. I decided to join him. Several others decided to join us.

The flight finally ended. The good earth and terra firma felt good under our feet and made our stomachs feel much better. Soon we were laughing and joking about the flight. Later, upon returning to our barracks, I noticed that everything was unusually quiet. Wizzy was in his bunk, still very ill. He had been sick in a plane before but this time it was so bad that he had become an invalid. The powers that decided these things told him that he could no longer fly because his illness could jeopardize some important future mission. He washed out of gunnery that day.

Wizzy's last name was the only one that began with "W." We wondered if this was just a coincidence or something more. We were becoming superstitious.

### *The Pressure Chamber*

The day we would be tested in the pressure chamber eventually arrived. I was afraid of this because of the lectures I had heard. I felt sure that my sinuses, which were acting up, would cause me grief. I decided to check with the doctor, who was strategically stationed near the pressure chamber. The doctor just smiled and said that if I had a continuing pain to ask the instructor to let me out of the chamber via the airlock. So I went in with the group. We went up to 20,000 feet, then to 30,000, and finally to more than 40,000 feet. The whole time we were continually quizzed over the intercom by the instructor, asking about our health and pains in general. I had expected to experience some terrible agony, but it turned out that none of us experienced anything at all. So often our greatest fears are for naught.

The instructor in charge conducted an interesting experiment while we were at an altitude of 40,000 feet. He asked for volunteers who were willing to take off their oxygen masks and write their names on a pad of paper. Almost everyone volunteered except me. Two men were chosen and they proceeded to do as instructed.

We spectators saw two men writing their names while steadily losing control. Their pencils wandered about aimlessly. When the volunteers started to slip towards the floor, the instructors immediately replaced their oxygen masks. The two men recovered instantly, continuing to write as though nothing had happened. They were confused to see the scribbling on their pads of paper. They did not remember scribbling or passing out. With that thought-provoking demonstration the pressure test ended and we returned to our barracks.

Now we truly understood that more than three minutes without oxygen would cause unconsciousness and permanent brain damage. It dawned on me that perhaps this had happened to Sergeant Duneasy, since in his case brain damage was a distinct possibility. The lesson we learned was that flying at high altitude without oxygen could be fatal.

### *Gunnery Practice*

In gunnery school we did very little flying. Most of the training was completed on the ground. There was skeet shooting, which went on and on. I remember my face was

quite hot and uncomfortable most of the time due to a combination of sunburn and powder burns.

For skeet shooting, we would put on our helmet liners, then climb inside a metal ring mounted in the back of a truck which was driven through a winding course. At irregular intervals clay pigeons or "birds" were fired at us from all angles with the aid of a spring-loaded arm. On some days we fired at the birds; on others we operated the unit. Our shotguns had a special sight and pulverized the disks with an accuracy I would not have believed possible. We were young; our eyes were good; our bodies were in excellent condition.

For advanced skeet shooting we climbed tall towers equipped with turrets that had shotguns mounted in them. Clay pigeons were hurled in our direction and soon we were able to demolish them expertly.

### *Ball Turret*

In the next phase of gunnery training we used the actual turrets to which we had been assigned. The practice turrets were mounted on the rear of a truck, one turret per truck, and approximately six trucks. The trucks were backed into position for firing. Each gunner had his specialized turret. There was the Martin top turret, the Emerson nose turret, the waist guns free-mounted, the consolidated tail turret, and finally the Sperry ball turret.

Due to my size, I was first assigned to the Sperry ball turret, which was equipped with two small joysticks in front of the gunner that could be set so either one of them would operate the turret. This allowed the gunner to fire and to operate the turret with one hand. I was taught how to fine-tune the turret, the gunsights and the guns.

Once inside the turret, the gunner would turn on a switch which activated all of the functions except the gunsight and guns. These were operated with the flick of a switch. The twin 50-cal. machine guns were fired with a button on top of each joystick. The configuration was such that either button could be used to fire either one or both guns simultaneously. As with other gun turrets, mechanical and backup electrical stops prevented the gunner from accidentally firing into his own aircraft.

The gunner sat on a hardened steel plate about five-eighths of an inch thick. This plate was his only protection. It would have stopped a 50-cal. bullet and possibly a non-explosive 20-mm. projectile, but it was only the size of a dinner plate, barely large enough to cover a small man's seat. The theory behind the armor was sound, because the gunner would normally be lying on his back as he fired upon an enemy aircraft. The return fire would necessarily be directed at that plate. With his body horizontal to the approaching plane, the gunner would be protected fairly well except for his legs.

The gunsight was the latest and the best. The reticle inside the sight was a horizontal line with vertical lines that lit up. The line was lengthened or shortened by use of a foot pedal. The object was to have the enemy plane's wingspan fit between the two

vertical lines. If this was done correctly, the enemy was doomed. Due to the practice I had on the Army jeep, I knew this worked.

The ball turret was an ingenious device. It was a sphere that rotated in all directions with stops to keep it from overshooting in any direction of rotation. It could be rotated fast or slow. The sensation in flight was somewhat like a roller coaster due to the many different orientations to the ground.

On my first flight in the ball turret I was amazed by a sense that the turret was leaving the aircraft. As I swung it around, I became disoriented. With experience I got used to the feeling and the routine became second nature. I never did enjoy the position in which the turret guns faced forward into the slipstream. In that position the wind from the engines and the forward speed caused an air jet to enter the gun sleeves with enough force to move a loose pant leg up to your neck.

In a B-17 the ball turret was mounted solidly in the plane. In a B-24 the configuration was different because the belly of the plane was so close to the ground. In a B-24 the turret had to be raised and lowered through the floor of the plane using a hydraulic system.

When the plane was airborne, the gunner would enter his turret with the guns in a down position through a door shaped to fit the spherical design of the turret. Once the gunner was inside the turret with the guns horizontal, the door would be rotated outside of the plane. The turret was too small to accommodate a parachute so the gunner was at the mercy of its mechanics. If a failure occurred in the hydraulic power, the turret could be returned inside the bomber manually but other members of the crew would have to manage that in combat.

We were taught the danger of leaving the turret guns in the down position upon landing. That would demolish them by friction with the runway. Under such circumstances the plane might leave the runway. You might think that such things would never happen, but I believe that every mishap imaginable did take place at one time or another. Take, for example, what happened to Sergeant Seward.

Most of the soldiers in gunnery training were buck privates like me but one gunner was a first sergeant who had transferred from some other branch of the service. His name was Seward; I never did learn his first name. On one fateful day he flew in the ball turret and while he was horizontal a faulty doorlatch allowed the door to open in flight. Fortunately the safety belt was just behind his neck. Anyone would become agitated knowing that, if he were to slide under the belt, he would be swimming in air, so Sergeant Seward flailed desperately about. From eyewitness accounts, he very nearly fell out. Luck was with him, however, and he managed to push the joystick forward and roll the turret up into a gun-down position without decapitating himself, though he did bump his head along the way. Alas, the turret door sailed away like a modern day Frisbee.

On another fateful day, I was learning how to adjust the ball turret so that it would not drift. The instructor was a gunner who had completed his fifty missions and was now being let out to pasture. They often used returning gunners as instructors.

The turrets had a flaw in the left-right (azimuth) and up-down (elevation) movements. The instructor was explaining how a correction could be made to stop the turret from drifting. First you removed a panel in the turret and then reached in, carefully turning a one-inch diameter disk with finely notched edges.

Somehow the instructor turned the adjustment disk the wrong way. Swiftly the turret began to swing, catching his arm between the open panel and the frame of the machine. He screamed in agony. Some of us stood still, petrified at the loud screams; others with more presence of mind searched frantically for a tool or for anything that might act as a wedge to stop the turret from amputating his arm. I recall to this day that his screaming made my hair stand on end.

Someone finally found a bar and wedged it in the opening. The turret ground to a stop. The hapless instructor was removed. His last words to us were: "Remember what you learned from me today." He later had his arm removed above the elbow.

It was many days before I was able to forget the screams I heard that day. That was one lesson I never forgot. The slightest mistake can be of very serious consequence. After having flown fifty missions, that man was injured seriously; injured while trying to teach us how to survive. The reader will understand why, when later asked, I was willing to forgo the ball turret for a waist gun.

### *Gunnery Range*

One day on the gunnery range we were firing at a target that was mounted on a jeep. The jeep had no tires and its wheel rims were set on a circular track. Mounted on top of the jeep body was a target consisting of two poles with a sheet stretched between them. To protect the jeep from stray bullets, banks of sand hid it from sight so that only the target was visible. However, we gunners soon noticed that one of the sandbanks had been cut away by bullets, revealing the jeep as it rounded that part of the track. For some reason—mental telepathy?—we all concentrated on firing at the dip in the sandbank. Somehow, some way, the storm of bullets caused the jeep to leave the rails. It was last seen heading towards open country. Perhaps some local cowboy lassoed it and brought it home. I like to think of it as still sailing away, happy not to be a target for some wild gunner.

One of the tests we completed earlier in the program deserves mention. Each bomber carried ten 50-cal. machine guns. They were reasonably complicated and the possibility of a malfunction was always present, particularly at the cold high altitude of an overseas mission. We gunners were expected to be able to repair our weapons at any time, regardless of conditions prevailing when a gun broke down. To insure that we could repair our guns, we were required to disassemble and reassemble our guns completely while we were tightly blindfolded. During this ordeal, the instructor would remove a part

and replace it with a defective part. To pass the test, the defective part had to be returned to the instructor, who gave the gunner a new part. The gunner then completed assembling his gun and dry-fired it; that is, test-fired it without ammunition.

I remember that I worked very diligently on this particular part of my training, taking many hours of my own time to succeed in this effort. I was rewarded by having a perfect test score. Some of the others were not so lucky. They never completed this or subsequent tests and so they washed out. There were washouts all along the training course from beginning to end. The rumor was that, if you did wash out, you would end up as an infantryman. I want to say that the infantryman is assuredly a noble and important position in the armed forces. Infantrymen suffer much more from privation than we did. That is exactly why we wished to remain in the Army Air Corps. I will admit that it was an incentive that enabled me to complete my training successfully.

The gunnery range consisted of a line of mounted machine guns set up facing a large field about a half-mile on each side. At first we used 30-cal. weapons; later we practiced with the 50-cal. machine guns. The two weapons were similar but the 50-cal. machine gun, the one we would use in combat, was much larger.

As was usual in the Army, conditions were set up to make life more difficult. Many of the guns were deliberately made to malfunction. Defective parts were placed in them. The gunner was graded on the time it took him to repair and begin firing his gun, then on the accuracy of his shooting.

One day all was going well until we heard the order, "Hit the dirt!" I was a bit slow obeying this order because it was one I had never heard before. The gunners around me fell to the ground and were hugging Mother Earth for dear life. I did not hug the dirt until most of the others were down. I *will* say dirt in your face is not so bad when you hear bullets whining about you. I must be honest and admit that I did not hear any bullets whining, but one very excitable GI reported that he had heard them whistle by. Whining bullets or not, I was considering the possibility of digging a foxhole with my teeth.

This excitement was caused by a soldier who had completed the repair of his 30-cal. machine gun and then had begun to test fire it as per the book but with one inconsistency. He neglected to point the gun at the target. Afterwards he claimed his gun started firing without his physical assistance. I'm not sure to this day what sentence was rendered in his case.

It was a day of unusual happenings. As the training session progressed, a herd of cattle began to wander across the field of fire. Either accidentally or intentionally, one of the cows was hit. The wretched creature lay out in the field making feeble efforts to regain its footing. Unfortunately, it had been seriously wounded and was unable to stand. The rest of the cattle calmly began to graze. The herd must have been pastured nearby because they did not seem to mind the noise of the guns. I believe they had become inured to the sound of machine gun fire.



There is a Rambo in every group. One of the macho troops decided to put the poor creature out of its misery. He removed one of the machine guns from its mount and walked out into the field. Then, holding the gun—which was not meant to be fired in this manner—he managed to dispatch the cow. There was a great cheer from the trainees. This was not routine and the instructors had allowed it to take place. Under the circumstances, the action had been a charitable one. I am reasonably certain that the Army would have frowned upon the proceedings but no more was heard of it that day. The machine gun was very heavy for a firearm and would become very hot if used for any length of time. In summary, this was not a recommended procedure.

The next day and the next we did hear about that incident. I am afraid to say some heads did roll. Shooting cows is no way to get along with your neighbors. I am sure that the owners of the cattle received adequate recompense. We heard that some instructors were doing KP.

### *My Friend Gino*

I made many friends during my training in gunnery school. I could mention their names but from the reports I received while in combat, many of them are no longer with us. Coupled with the fact that more than fifty years have passed, it is just as well for me not to know exactly how many of them remain. I enjoy my memories of them the way they were, so I do not attempt to discover the fate of all those young men I knew so long ago.

Occasionally passes were available and we would go to town to see the sights. I did not go very often but when I did, I went with my good friend Gino. I think that one of the few times I ever had one drink too many was with Gino. If I recall correctly, we were singing all the way home to the barracks but sobered up very quickly when we checked in with the MPs at the gate.

Gino was a rough and ready individual and I have never known him to fear anything. He was about five years older than I and much more experienced in the ways of the world. Gino was built like an Army tank and was very strong for his size, about five feet ten inches in height. He and I were good friends for many years. He was a very powerful macho person and also very good-natured. Since we were both young, we would often fool around, poking each other in the upper arm. It is quite possible that I introduced this friendly horseplay because I had indulged in this peculiar frivolity with friends, including my brother, when we were quite young. I never learned my lesson, and usually ended up being battered. Gino could and did retaliate with vigor when I instigated friendly combat with him. The result was that I spent quite a few nights trying to sleep on the opposite side of my injured body. He never seemed to tire and nothing I could do caused him much pain. I would swing with all of my strength but to no avail. I am convinced that Gino was indestructible.

Much later, when Gino was stationed overseas, he wagered his fellow crew members that he could lift a 500 lb. bomb. They bet ten dollars each that he could not. Gino made a harness of rope, placed it over his shoulders, then bent his knees. When he straightened up, he did lift the bomb off the ground. He won ninety dollars, which was a

lot of money in those days. A staff sergeant's pay was about ninety-five dollars. We got flying pay and combat pay also. This made our pay much better than that of some of the other services. Still, I would not want to do that job again for any price. The money wouldn't really matter, but I still believe that the purpose would make the difference.

Many years after the war I moved my home from Vermont to Natick, Massachusetts. I lived there for about fourteen years; then I lived in Franklin, MA. It was there while looking in the phone book that I found Gino again. Gino was married, older and wiser. I was married and older also.

While in gunnery school I met another friend named George Lee Brock—he was a Cherokee Indian. Although his first name was George, we called him Lee. Lee was short like myself; unlike me, he was quiet and reserved. I was impressed by his dignity and easy-going manner. Lee and I shared our problems and helped each other in many ways. I remember one day I was in need of a neat pair of trousers, pressed for the next day's review. All my trousers were wrinkled, but one pair was clean though not pressed. Lee came to the rescue. He produced two boards, arranged my trousers between them, then lifted my mattress and stowed the two boards beneath. I was not too certain of the outcome of this, but I had no choice since there was no other way in the timeframe available. The next morning I took out the boards and to my surprise found a pair of perfectly pressed trousers. Good old Lee! I couldn't thank him enough.

Lee did have one failing that caused him a bit of trouble. One evening he left camp and went to town for a night off. He had a few drinks before he returned. That night I heard a muffled bang outside the barracks window, but thought nothing of it. The next morning Lee was up early, nursing an arm and fist that looked twice the size of the other. He later explained to me that he had been feeling very good after a few nightcaps and had delivered a one-two punch to a steel barrel filled with sand. The barrel was slightly dented and so was Lee.

I remember some of the names of good friends in the "B" barracks in Panama City: Bailey, Balch, Batten, Becker, Brock, Brill, and Brosky. I heard that many of them were killed in the following year.

One day we noticed that the flag was flying at half-mast. We knew that someone had died. This was not an uncommon occurrence in gunnery school, though I do not recall that all deaths were announced in this fashion. In this case the death had been caused by complete carelessness. One of the gunners was helping the ground crew to move a B-17 bomber back into its parking space. A number of GIs were pushing on each landing gear. The engines were still idling, and as they pushed the plane backwards one of the gunners stopped without thinking. He stood there wiping his face with his handkerchief as the plane moved backwards. The propeller moved backwards with the plane and the unfortunate gunner was decapitated. There were too many such accidents, and it did teach us to be very careful in this alien fighting world.

### *Silver Wings*

The day came when we were told that we would be presented with our silver gunner's wings. There was a ceremony and the Commandant passed out our wings. The training period was over, or so we thought. I was still a private at that time and during the lull in our training I found that I was scheduled for KP.

I have always looked upon KP as one of the most difficult jobs I have ever completed. In basic training it was quite normal to be working for sixteen hours non-stop when on KP duty. There was no rest while on that detail. I recall that during one of my many hours of KP, I made the mistake of sitting down for just one moment to rest. I was very tired and did not think that there would be a problem. With my usual luck the sergeant in charge happened to see me. He was in an absolute rage and gave me a tongue-lashing that cannot be repeated here. Finally he stopped and told me that I was to check in with the chief cook after KP was completed to whitewash the complete kitchen and dining area. That was another sixteen-hour shift.

After I had finished my duty that night, I reported to the chief cook. There was no way out, I knew. My back was broken and my fingers wouldn't work; even my hair hurt. I really expected the cook to give me a very tough time for my criminal action. God must have looked down at me with pity. The cook laughed and said, "Get out of here." I explained about the sergeant's orders but the cook said, "I'll take care of that so-and-so." The expression "so-and-so" was slightly different from the printed words.

When I found myself on KP again, I was quite dejected. I felt that while in basic training I had completed enough hours of KP to last throughout my military career. Not so—here I was again. Much to my surprise and relief, this KP duty turned out to be a snap. We were not overworked or treated like beasts of burden. Those in charge fed us, fattened us, and treated us very well. The duty was of short duration and the food was great. I had an affinity for ice cream, and I had my fill for once. Like many other happenings in the Army, it was not the detail but the personnel we dealt with that made the difference.

About a week later we were shipped off to our new airbase. The Army gave us a delay en route. The nice part was that the delay was a furlough. We were allowed a 30-day leave.

### *First Furlough: Tippy*

It was my first furlough. When I arrived at my home in Vermont, my dog Tippy was the first to notice my arrival. Tippy was a small Scotty, all black with a little grey in her coat. I have never owned a finer dog or one so devoted and loyal. I was very pleased to see her.

Tippy had been my dog since I was twelve years old. She was my close companion when I was a young boy. Later on, when I had begun working the night shift, I would walk home with a friend. We always took a certain shortcut. About a quarter-mile from home, my dog Tippy would unfailingly meet me and walk along with us. After I

left for the Army, this friend told my mother that the little dog had been frantic each night. He told her that Tippy darted back and forth along the path looking for me every night for many nights. Finally she had ceased coming to meet him.

Tippy would often accompany me for a walk in the woods. I had taught her some tricks and she loved to perform. I would reward her, and this made her day. A dog cookie was great, but I feel certain that she was particularly pleased to have successfully executed one of her tricks.

One night Tippy did not return from her outing and we were quite worried about her. I began to look for her but in the dark it was impossible to find her. The next morning I started my search early. About an hour later I spotted her lying in a field at a distance. I was pretty sure it was her and I feared the worst. I called but she did not move, so I called again and again. Still she did not move. I climbed a fence and rushed over to her.

As I approached, she gazed up at me with dull, pain-filled eyes. Her leg had been caught in a trap. I was enraged at whoever had done this, but I never did discover who that person was. I know now that trapping must be one of the cruelest of all methods used in hunting. Using a thick stick that happened to be nearby, I pried the jaws of the trap open. Then I lifted Tippy gently and carried her home. Her leg was useless and she could not stand. She never whimpered but stoically lay quiet on the rug once I had put her down. I was about to take her to the veterinarian when suddenly she staggered up and began to walk with very careful steps. My mother and I were overjoyed as Tippy began to walk about. It was obvious that she was trying to tell us that all was well, for her tail began to wag happily. She recovered completely, much to my surprise.

Afterwards, I totally demolished the trap and carried the remains to the spot where I had found it with my dog entrapped. I waited there for quite some time and later returned at different intervals, but no one ever appeared to claim that trap. Whoever was guilty of setting that trap could as easily have trapped a child. Surprisingly, the area was well traveled and someone or something would have ventured into that unhappy predicament sooner or later. As it was, my dog was the unfortunate victim.

Tippy was a kind little dog and very friendly to everyone. At some time or another she must have been frightened by fireworks or gunfire for she would cower and tremble whenever a gunshot was heard nearby. Often after hearing a gunshot she would leave me in the woods and rush as quickly as possible towards home. She would be waiting to greet me there when I arrived. She would trot up wagging her tail as if to say: "I'm sorry I left you."

So now I was happy to see Tippy after such a long time parted. She greeted me with a "Yip, Yip!" and then ran home before I could pat her on the head. There she stood in front of the door barking until my mother opened the door. Then she ran back to me. I patted her head and we entered the house, man and dog.

I greeted my mother and entered the house, dropping my B-4 bag on the floor. I opened it up right there to take out a present for her. Tippy jumped into the bag and would not get out. We laughed, but Tippy stayed in the bag. After we had talked for some time, she was still in the B-4 bag, so I laughingly picked her up and placed her on the floor nearby. I know that she pouted. In all of my years of experience with dogs, I have never seen more touching behavior. I am sure she was telling me that she wanted me to stay. My mother came to the same conclusion.

About ten months later, after I had returned from my tour of duty in Italy, I came home to find my little dog dying. I would like to think that she recognized me, though she was very sick. I was wishing that she would get well, but she never did. My mother had her put to sleep when I left for rest camp. It was a strange attachment that we had for each other, and I grieved for my little dog. It seems when you have something very dear, you do not appreciate it. When it has left you, there is a void that remains empty for all of your life. It is true that time diminishes the pain, yet it never completely erases it. Every so often, you remember.

## Chapter Four

# ADVANCED TRAINING

### *To Charleston*

When my furlough ended, I left my home in Vermont. I had been ordered to report to Westover Air Base in Massachusetts. The trip was uneventful and I arrived at Westover in the late afternoon. I was assigned to my barracks. Upon entering, I placed all of my equipment and sat down on my bunk. Soldiers were beginning to arrive and were taking their places all about the barracks. I must have dozed off because the next thing I knew there was a hand on my shoulder, shaking me awake. It was Gino, all spit and polish. He had taken the bunk next to me.

It seems to me now, after fifty years, that I should have been more aware of what would happen each time the Army moved me from one place to another. Strangely, my memory tells me that I had no idea what was going to happen as I arrived at each new location. So when we were told that we were going to meet the members of our new flight crew, I was quite unprepared.

The next day we met our fellow crew members. I had hoped that Gino would be assigned to our crew but sadly that choice was not left to the individual. We crew members became acquainted over the next few days. Then we left Westover for Charleston, South Carolina.

We arrived at Charleston in March, 1944. Charleston is a lovely city overlooking the Atlantic Ocean. I cannot recall for certain, but I believe we gunners were all buck privates at that point. It is strange to me that I had not even considered advancing in rank. I look back at that time and I'm puzzled at my lack of interest. The fact is that I was simply too busy to think about it. I believe that my outlook was just "get it over with." I knew that I had a job to do and fully intended to do it as soon as possible.

### *The Crew*

The officers in our crew were all second lieutenants, and I had been trained to look upon a second lieutenant as next to God. This had been carefully drilled into us in basic training. Any rank higher than lieutenant was beyond our understanding. This being the case, it was difficult to carry on any sort of meaningful conversation with any of the officers in our crew. I recall that it was unseemly in my mind that the other members of the crew would converse so freely with the officers. I learned that in an air crew there was supposed to be a camaraderie that surpassed military convention. In time I realized that this was so in our crew with one exception, the pilot. The pilot was an old man—he was all of twenty-six years of age.

The pilot's name was Jim. He preferred to be called Sir. I never did hit it off with him, not that we were ever enemies. We simply never got to what I would call a talking friendship. I think he preferred it that way with me. The reason will become apparent as the story unfolds. He was a strict officer with no time for frills.

The co-pilot was quite different, a young man of about twenty years of age. His name was Herbie. He was likeable, outgoing, blond and good-looking. I recall an incident that would have caused the pilot to blow his stack. To the best of my knowledge he never learned of the, shall we say, infraction.

Tony the engineer gunner and Dick the radio operator gunner were walking with Herbie one day. They began to horse around, and the upshot of the story was that they picked up the co-pilot and placed him feet down in a garbage pail. The co-pilot, as I have said, was one of the best. After removing himself from this degraded position, he brushed himself off and smiled. Then he said, "I don't mind, guys, but don't ever let anyone see that type of horseplay again." Considering what happened to George and myself later, I believe it could have been the stockade for life had they been observed by some officer.

Don the navigator was about twenty-four. He was one of the friendliest officers I ever met, very kind and understanding, always ready to help with any problem. I have always admired his good nature. Since my name was Don also, I remember wondering whether this would cause confusion on the intercom. I am happy to say it never did.

The bombardier's name was Howard, a friendly man of about twenty-four. He did not associate with the enlisted men very often. He was not aloof or unfriendly but very earnest. To see him going about his work was to realize how serious this whole affair was for all of us. His manner and actions brought out the fact that this was no picnic.

The engineer gunner's name was Tony. Tony had the responsibility for keeping the airplane in good condition. I was told that I would be the assistant engineer. My aptitude tests showed that I would be suitable for that position. I had no formal training in engineering but it did seem natural to me. I had always enjoyed mechanical work. Tony knew his job and proved it as time went by and we flew combat missions. He was a skillful teacher and I learned all that was needed from him. Later in life, I worked in engineering for many years.

Dick was the radio operator gunner. He was quite a big man and an easy-going person with a good sense of humor. He was not perfect but nearly so. His greatest failing, and I smile when I think of it, was that having a cup of coffee for breakfast was an absolute must. Dick was always in a surly mood before having his coffee. I might add that it was the *only* time he ever was out of sorts.

Ernie was the tail gunner. He was congenial and a good friend to all. He was about five feet ten or eleven inches tall, if I remember correctly. Ernie was a mild, good-mannered gentleman at all times.

Tom was the nose gunner, quite blond and a good-looking lad of about twenty-two. I do not recall exactly what the actual ages of the various crew members were, but the ages I am giving are very close.

George was the ball gunner. That position was supposed to be mine since I had trained in that turret until it seemed like a part of me. Due to my stature, I did fit the ball turret like a glove. As it happened, George, who started out as the waist gunner, asked me one day if I would consider letting him operate the ball turret on a permanent basis. I agreed readily. Although I had become very familiar with that turret, I did not particularly enjoy it. It was small and uncomfortable. I would have been the logical person for the ball turret since I was much shorter than George, who was about six feet tall. How he managed the turret remains his secret. I'm sure he must have regretted the trade but he never complained. I had expected him to renege.

After our exchange, I was the waist gunner. I was eighteen years old; George was nineteen. I never had a better friend than George. He and I were always together. Many times I would kid him about his home state of Texas. If I understood him correctly, the United States were a part of Texas. The loyalty he showed for his home state was second to none, so when I joked about Texas he showed what I now understand was considerable restraint. George always stood by me and was undoubtedly the best friend I had on the crew. I am sure that there must have been some trying times, but, as I said, he was a loyal friend.

It was in Charleston that I was promoted to private first class, and it was here that I almost lost my first chevron because I procrastinated too long in sewing it onto my sleeve. The pilot informed me that if I did not wear it, I would lose it. Needless to say, I had it sewed on shortly after this ultimatum.

Over the next three or four months, Ernie, George, Tom and I attained the rank of staff sergeant. I was quite pleased to become a staff sergeant—it meant no more KP for me, one of the most miserable duties I had ever had. Tony and Dick became tech sergeants at about the same time.

We were now beginning to train fulltime in bombers. This base was primarily used by B-24 Liberator bombers. The Liberator was about ten miles an hour faster than the B-17 in which we had flown in gunnery school. The B-24 was larger and had a slightly longer range.

In retrospect I see the two planes as contemporary aircraft. The B-17 was built with more strength and, as it turned out, was better able to withstand punishment than the B-24. It was common for a B-17 to come home with two engines out. This was rare indeed in a B-24. I have heard many stories of a B-17 flying on only *one* engine. I have never heard the same about a B-24.

Over 18,000 B-24s were built during World War II. Considering the size and raw material required for this project, the task seems like an impossible one, yet it was completed. Today there are still about three B-24s flying.



### *The B-24 Liberator*

The first view I had of a B-24 bomber left me perplexed. I wasn't sure what I was looking at. I was even less sure that I wanted to fly in one. I was accustomed to the B-17 Flying Fortress—to me, that was an airplane. This plane, on the other hand, squatted on the runway with its belly inches from the ground. The nose wheel seemed ungainly and out of place. The body was a huge square box. I did finally accept the B-24, but to me it was just an ingenious aluminum machine that performed a purpose, sheets, beams, and castings, all carefully designed and crafted. To others, it was a piece of ungainly junk. Still others actually viewed the bomber with something akin to affection.

The bomber was referred to as “she” by most air crews, though many ground crew chiefs referred to it by a different name when it taxied in much in need of repair. There was one occasion when a crew chief, after viewing the mess inside his charge, threw the only removable part left out the window. That part was an axe which had been used to chop out much of the interior of the plane. Leaving the axe was an oversight on the part of the returning crew. They had been lightening the aircraft to make it possible to return to base.

It was not unusual when returning from a mission to see crewmen emptying their plane as it slowly dropped downward, unable to maintain altitude due to engine problems. In one plane the crew had attempted to remove the ball turret but were unable to do so due to their lack of tools. Their efforts had made a mess of the turret and the crew chief was very unhappy. Often crew members would say, “The old gal got me through a very rough time, and I'm grateful to her.” I was usually impersonal in referring to our plane. To me it was an inanimate object. Still, the old gal got me through.

I believe that some bombers went down due to some imperfection in manufacture. In moments of mechanical stress some very small item could cause a failure in the aircraft. It is very difficult to build a machine as large and as complicated as a bomber and make it perfect each time. Structural failures must have occurred as well as unintentional mistakes in assembly, yet I heard of no such failure while I was overseas. Sabotage must have been a real problem in our factories, yet for every plane that crashed there was always an obvious reason for its demise, usually flak or fighter action. However, my part in the war was a very small segment of the whole picture. Perhaps others have seen a much different picture.

The B-24 was called a Flying Boxcar at times. That nickname was given to other planes later, but unless I'm mistaken the Liberator was the first to be given that name. I heard this statement a few times: “Like the bumblebee, the B-24 was not designed to fly, but not knowing this, she flies anyway.” In my opinion, if you are above the B-24 looking down, it is a graceful airplane. In any other view, it's anyone's guess as to what you are looking at.

While we had flown only a little at gunnery school, we made up for that at Charleston. We soon became air-worn from the constant flying and training. Where I had wished to fly more often, I was now looking for some respite from it.

We gunners were responsible for our guns and they were to be kept clean. On one very hot afternoon, I traveled down to the airfield and entered our plane. Then I began the job of cleaning both of the guns in the top turret. At that time I had not yet been assigned to the waist gun, which eventually became my normal duty position.

It was a very hot sunny day and the interior of the top turret was like an oven. Since it was a domed plexiglass housing, it retained the enormous amount of heat absorbed by the black plastic interior. I had never experienced any adverse reactions from working in a heated area so I commenced to clean the guns. I was perspiring at a very great rate but I thought if I hurried along, everything would be fine. I was quite stubborn about completing the job and I continued even though I was becoming slightly ill. I realized that I was pushing myself a bit too much and left the plane.

I sat in the shade of the wing for a bit. If there had been some shade from a tree, I might have received some relief, but there was nothing but the shade from the plane. Feeling somewhat better, I decided it was getting late and returned to the plane to continue with the cleaning. When I had nearly completed the work, I suddenly became violently ill. I rushed from the plane and began to upchuck my lunch. I was too inexperienced to recognize heat prostration. Both of my legs were shaking from the stress I had placed on my body. I decided to leave and return in the evening to complete the work. I do remember that I spent the rest of that day in a very weakened condition, and the next day I was quite run down and had a severe headache.

It is one of the wonders of youth that we can overcome some very serious physical abuse. I am happy to say that I recovered completely and was feeling somewhat foolish about the episode. I decided never to mention it to anyone. There are some things in life that we must learn for ourselves.

### *Night Flight*

One day the crew was scheduled for a night flight. This was something new to me so I looked forward to it. I had flown at night before but only for a short time. I knew that during a night flight the ground below me would look like a giant Christmas tree all lit up, and felt that this would be a rare treat. That evening the crew arrived at the field and we went through our pre-flight preparations and prepared for take-off. Just as we were about to leave the revetment (the plane's parking area), there was a malfunction in the hydraulic lines. Such a malfunction could cause a problem with the braking system and other systems operated by hydraulics. The pilot called the tower and explained. He was given instructions for all of us to leave the plane and take another.

We left as ordered and moved along to the next plane assigned to us. Again we went through our checklist and pre-flight preparations, but one engine would not turn over no matter what we did—perhaps a faulty fuse or something else. The pilot again called the tower and explained the situation. We were assigned to a third aircraft. We proceeded to that plane and went through the usual pre-flight. Unbelievably, there was another malfunction. Fortune would not allow us to make our night flight. I think that at

this point if I had been the pilot I would have flapped my arms and flown regardless of the law of physics.

The coincidence of these multiple malfunctions caused a considerable commotion at headquarters. The next thing we knew, a jeep with a major and an MP were driving out to our plane, traveling at a good clip. Upon arriving, the jeep drove straight into a mudhole and became immobile. The major, however, was not immobilized and he proceeded to the plane and confronted our pilot.

The major was irate, to put it mildly. Actually, he was in a towering rage. After conferring with our pilot, he radioed the tower, and a bus with two armed MPs arrived to take us to headquarters. The major and an MP were ushered with us into a large room. There the major began to rebuke us. Frankly, he gave us a hell of a bawling out. He accused us of shirking our duty, etc., etc. I remember one statement in particular. He said, "*This crew will never graduate from combat!*" He meant that we would die before we completed our missions. He was partially correct.

I know that fate and not the major decided our future for us. I feel that we behaved very well during our combat tour of duty and that the teamwork of our crew was the factor that brought most of us home. Unfortunately, due to our bad luck on the night flight exercise, it was assumed without further investigation that we were to blame. The situation was an unlikely one, but the major jumped to conclusions.

Our pilot and co-pilot were assigned to takeoffs and landings as punishment. I do not remember the number of flights they made, but it was considerable. We the crew members were not punished but I remember feeling somewhat guilty even though we were not at fault.

One day we were sent on a gunnery mission. The object of the flight was to strafe a target located on a raft anchored in the water. The pilot made some preliminary passes. On this flight I was assigned to the top turret. From the top turret it was not likely that I would be able to zero in on a target located below the nose, but on one pass, it looked like I might have a chance so I opened up on the target. To do this I had to lower my guns to their lowest trajectory; which brought the tracers as close as the stops would permit to the nose of the aircraft. The result was an angry command from the pilot to "Cease Firing!" It seems that the tracers were a terrifying sight as they arced over the cockpit and the pilot's head. I was severely dressed down for that incident, which left me confused as to what I was supposed to do during a frontal attack in combat.

Having taken my gunnery training very seriously, I was very much aware of the hazards of firing near the plane. I should explain that it was only possible to fire into the aircraft from the left or right waist gunner's station. The turrets were equipped with metal cams that blocked the guns from hitting the plane. They also had electric stops as backup. This made doubly sure that the plane could not be damaged by its own gunners.

Apparently the pilot did not know about the gunstops. He was very upset with me so I did not attempt to excuse my action. I knew full well that I was not at fault, but if you

are reprimanded in the Army, you simply say, "No excuse, sir." I find it amusing to look back and to realize that by some trick of fate I was finally assigned to the one position where I actually could shoot down the plane—the waist gun.

I had another unfortunate incident with the pilot. As I mentioned earlier, I was the assistant engineer. One of my duties was to transfer fuel during flight. We had been warned in training that this procedure had caused a fatal crash in more than one plane. When transferring fuel above 10,000 feet it was possible to cause a vapor lock in the fuel line, and if this happened, an engine could fail.

At the time of this particular incident I had transferred fuel many times and always below 10,000 feet as per our instructions. Then one day the chief engineer briefed me about the plane we were flying. He explained that it had a different fuel system and that on this plane it was OK to transfer fuel above 10,000 ft. Naturally I assumed that the pilot knew this so I did transfer fuel above 10,000 ft. When the pilot realized that a fuel transfer was taking place, he was furious and let me know about it in no uncertain terms. Unfortunately, he was again unaware of his plane's mechanics.

I did not argue with him, believing that the chief engineer would advise him of the facts, but as a result of these incidents my relationship with the pilot deteriorated. I automatically went on the excrement list. I was never quite able to fit in with the pilot afterwards. Thankfully, most of the crew knew I was not at fault and when things cooled down the engineer did explain to our pilot what had taken place. What the pilot thought I do not know, but I never heard more about it.

We made a number of practice missions to Myrtle Beach, North Carolina. These were called Blue Goose missions because we carried blue-painted practice bombs loaded with black powder. The black powder enabled the verification of our bomb hits.

On one such mission we were returning to base when the landing gear refused to descend. I remember thinking, "This is going to end in a 'chute jump." Fortunately, the gear finally came down, much to my relief, and we made an uneventful landing. There were some landings where pilots didn't lower their landing gear. Some lived through it; some did not. The ever-present danger of fire never left my mind.

As you can see, there were lots of trying incidents, but that was the way it was.

### *Long-Distance Flight*

We were about midway in the advanced training program when we were informed that we were to take an over-water flight covering about one thousand miles. We had never flown that distance before and knew that it would be a difficult first for us. When the day came, we were assigned to the oldest and most decrepit airplane on the base. It was painted in olive-drab camouflage, a practice that had been discontinued for some time since our missions would be flown in daylight. Its fuel gauges were leaking and the smell of gas was very strong, giving rise to fear of fire. The plane in general looked old—even the upholstery was worn out. We knew we had an aged aircraft on our hands. I

could not help thinking that the major may have decided that this old bucket would be an appropriate chariot for a handicapped crew.

My memory tells me that we took off in daylight on a warm day. The flight was made at a comparatively low altitude so it stayed warm. During the flight the officers debated whether the smokers among the crew would be allowed to smoke. I was not a smoker at the time and I hoped that the gas leak would mean no smoking, but the decision was to allow it. We kept the plane well ventilated to decrease the danger of fire. I don't remember exactly what area we covered—we may have flown towards Cuba in a triangular pattern—but we made the flight in our old and battered B-24 without any problems. She performed like the veteran she was and took us home. We landed in darkness and went straight to bed.

The next morning we were awakened for a briefing at headquarters. To our shock we learned that four aircraft had not returned to base that night. We were to take part in a search and rescue operation. After breakfast we took off and commenced a patterned search. Each rescue plane carried a full crew and every crew member continually searched the ocean for signs of survivors. There were many reports of debris and one sighting of a rubber raft, but not one of the missing men was ever found. The ocean is very large, and though we searched diligently, it was of no avail.

It seemed to us that training in the Air Corps must be almost as dangerous as combat. To lose four aircraft, each with four engines, was a puzzle. The United States mainland is a large target for any navigator to miss, and to lose more than one engine would be very unusual. The mystery will always be difficult for me to accept. To this day I think there must have been sabotage involved. We were not kept informed about reports of sabotage, perhaps to keep the enemy from gaining important information.

The loss of forty men in one practice flight made us all feel the great tragedy the world faced due to one country led astray by a madman. Forty American families would receive heart-breaking news. Their loss would not further our cause nor shorten the war. Such a total waste of human life was intolerable.

### *Accidents*

During our training in South Carolina we attended many lectures where various problems and solutions were discussed. We were given case histories of how and why accidents had occurred. One such accident involved a B-24 pilot who had attempted a maneuver used by fighter planes. The only witness to his experiment was a farmer, and with the farmer's help Intelligence pieced together what had happened. The pilot apparently had attempted a "split S," a maneuver which placed too much stress on the fabric-covered section of the elevator. Some of the fabric ripped off, leaving the plane without vertical control. The B-24 plunged to earth.

George and I went out to see the wreckage. There was nothing left but a large number of aluminum strips imbedded in the grass and sod. The official report stated that

the farmer saw one 'chute, later determined to be the engineer's, but due to the low altitude it didn't have time to open before they hit the ground.

One of my duties was to inspect the exterior of the plane before takeoff, giving certain areas specific attention. One day while checking the tires I noticed that one tire had rotated on its rim for about one-sixth of its circumference. I notified the engineer and the plane was held up until a new tire had been installed. I mention this because in a split second a tire is forced to rotate at landing speed, and the landing speed of the Liberator B-24 was in the neighborhood of 130 mph. It was a wonder to me that the impact of landing with tons of aircraft weight behind it had not completely ruptured the tire.

B-24 tires were huge—approximately five feet in diameter. When you consider the number of tires that were manufactured for this one type of plane alone, you realize the gigantic effort that was put forth in World War II. It is fortunate that our country had the capability to mobilize on such a vast scale. I understand why the war could have been lost without the industrial might of the United States. We will never know how the war might have ended without U.S. intervention.

### *Shark Attack*

During my stay in South Carolina I was able to swim at the beach during off-duty hours. On one very hot day the water was perfect and I swam until I felt I had just about had enough. There were many of us in the water and we all were having a great time.

Suddenly everyone was rushing from the water to the sand. I decided I'd better go along with the mad exodus. I certainly was not going to be left in the ocean by myself. Upon reaching shore I learned that a soldier had been attacked by either a shark or a barracuda. Later, back at the base, I heard that the unlucky GI's leg had been bitten so badly that it had to be amputated below the knee. Due to my duty schedule, my swimming was over for that year. Somehow I did not feel that I was missing anything.

### *Saluting an Officer*

One day George and I walked to PX to buy a few items. We were not in the habit of saluting officers, although that was required, because the Air Corps usually was not very strict about enforcing that regulation for flying crews. So, as we strolled along towards the PX, we did not salute the officers we met and no notice was taken.

We entered the PX, made our purchases, and left. As we were returning to our barracks, we saw a major and two soldiers having a discussion. As we walked by, the major called out to us. George and I were surprised, but we naturally returned. The major said, "You didn't salute me," and George, ever on the ball, answered, "But we were not near you, sir." The major thought for a moment and then responded, "But you are near me now, and you are not saluting."

We said nothing in response to this intellectual observation from an appointee of the President. Carried along by his own brilliance, the major launched upon a full-scale

harangue: "You have broken the rules and regulations," etc. etc. etc. He continued to berate us for some time.

He took down our names. It was a revelation to us that he could read and write, because, frankly, we didn't think he had passed diaper control. We did nothing to antagonize him although, if he could have read my mind, he would have had us both drawn and quartered. At last he removed his cap, wiped the sweat from his pointed head, replaced his cap and said with finality, "You are dismissed but you will hear more about this!"

We did hear about it—we were scheduled to sign the Fourth Article of War. We didn't know what that meant, but we knew it wasn't nice. As we were learning, failure to salute an officer could be grounds for a court martial if an officer wanted to make an example of us. We had done nothing more to aggravate the little bastard, but he was feeling pretty powerful. George and I were restricted to base and not given passes for the duration of our stay in Charleston. Luckily for us, one of our officers must have gotten us out of that mess because we were told that the blemish would be wiped from our records after we left the base. I guess they had spent enough money on us and they didn't want to lose two targets for the war effort.

I don't know what would have happened if the threat of a court martial had not been withdrawn. It certainly would have cost the government two airmen. The threatened punishment was very drastic, considering the offense. I wonder sometimes how we managed to win the war with the occasional idiot on our side. When I say idiot, I am speaking of that major.

### *Weekend Pass*

It was a week until payday. All veterans of military training will remember the many pitfalls of Army life. My good friend Gino asked me for a loan until payday. I saw no reason not to oblige and asked him, "Is there anything going on this weekend?" "Nothing worth mentioning," he replied; "I'm broke and I need some small items at the PX." With that he hurried out of the barracks.

A few short minutes later another soldier asked me for a loan. I explained that I had emptied my pockets for my good old buddy. After he left I began to wonder if this had been a great week for cards or dice. People were rushing about and a feeling grew that something was up. Finally my curiosity got the best of me. I asked a passing GI, "What's going on?" He answered, "Haven't you heard? Weekend passes are being issued, and it's going to be a four-day pass because of the weekend."

Sometimes I am not overly quick but I began to realize I had been taken. Gino needed a long weekend pass to get to his home in Massachusetts. Here I was, stuck and broke, having loaned my last money to him. You learn from experience and I became more wary in the future. Once was enough.

There being no other choice, I spent the long weekend on base wishing I could have gone home. I felt very left out because just about everyone had gone away. Today with a little thought I realize that Gino could not have had a very nice time. Traveling from South Carolina to Massachusetts is a long way by train. For me it would have been a good deal further to Burlington, Vermont. In those days all trains were filled to capacity and travel was hectic. The most difficult part of the trip was through the Washington, D.C. area. The trains there were so crowded that walking would have been more practical.

There was one time when Gino, a couple friends, and I were traveling through that area as we were going home on furlough. I stood up for most of that trip. Finally I found a seat on some soldier's suitcase. Where the soldier was, I did not know. I was so tired from standing that I had to sit down. Any port in a storm.

The suitcase was not very sturdy and as the trip wore on the suitcase began to bulge and sag towards the floor. Since I had fallen asleep, I was unaware that this was happening. When I awoke, I realized with a twinge of guilt that the unknown soldier's goods had been bent out of shape. Hastily I got back on my feet and attempted to restore the suitcase to its original configuration, to no avail. What more could I do? At the next stop an officer came elbowing his way through the mob and picked up the suitcase. He didn't seem to notice anything unusual about his suitcase and I decided not to enlighten him. I was glad to see the last of him and his sway back suitcase.

But fate got even with me for that unintended injury to an officer's suitcase. At the next stop Gino yelled, "We get off here!" We were taking turns staying awake, and Gino was in charge of our stops at this moment. The four of us rushed to the door of the train and jumped off with our bags as the train stopped. As the train left, we realized that we had gotten off at the wrong stop. Gino's ears must still be ringing from the dressing down he took from the rest of us.

Remembering that fiasco lightened my time on base when I found myself financially outmaneuvered. There were few soldiers around and I had the place to myself. When Gino returned I let him know I didn't appreciate his underhanded manipulation of an inferior intellect. My exact words were: "What a rotten trick to play on a dumb buddy!" Damned if he didn't agree with me, so I couldn't stay angry with him. Okay, he got away with something that time, but they do say that all is fair in love and war. I just hadn't realized that the saying also applies to going home on pass.

### *Across the Atlantic*

Everything comes to an end, and the day came when we had completed our advanced training and were given orders to leave Charleston. We were considered to be ready for combat. After a short furlough we reported for duty at Westover Air Base in Massachusetts and from there were sent on to Grenier Field near Manchester, New Hampshire.

At Grenier Field we were assigned to a shiny new B-24 which we would ferry across the Atlantic. The plane smelled new, like the smell of a new car, and I was pleased



to be flying in such a fine plane. The ten 50 cal. machine guns were still wrapped in paper tape to protect them from corrosion. An extra gas tank had been installed by the ground crew so we could carry enough fuel to cross the Atlantic. It nearly filled the bomb bays. We were instructed to guard the plane at all times to prevent sabotage. When guarding the plane we carried sidearms.

George and I decided to visit the PX to stock up on personal supplies for our overseas stay. Rationing was in force at that time and there were limits on the amount of certain necessities that you could buy. My sweet tooth suffered because chocolate bars were in short supply. It was a very pleasant surprise when I discovered that personnel leaving for overseas were allowed more than the usual ration. We each bought two cases of twenty-four chocolate bars. Had I known what my craving for candy would become overseas, I would have purchased many more. Danger and the craving for sugar must go hand in hand for I know that I was always craving candy bars over there.

We were to depart the following day. George and I were assigned to guard duty, so we gathered our equipment and spent the night in the plane. It was a long night and I slept very poorly, tossing and turning restlessly and keeping George awake in our cramped quarters. After breakfast the next morning we were off to Italy via Newfoundland, the Azores and North Africa.

On the first leg of our flight it seemed we flew for quite a long time but it was not so long as some flights that we would be taking later. That afternoon we landed in Gander, Newfoundland. The temperature was much colder than it had been in the States.

At dinner that night I walked through the line and sampled about everything on the menu. Dinners in the Army were epicurean delights to me. They were buffets where you could pick whatever you wanted or where the KP personnel dumped food on your tray. After making my selection I sat down and began eating a beautiful salad. I added some salad dressing and was about to take a huge mouthful when the lettuce began to move. I sat there befuddled, considering explanations for a mobile salad. In short order the explanation presented itself. The largest, greenest, shiniest caterpillar that I had ever seen was stealing my salad. We had a tug of war over a lettuce leaf. I won the battle but lost my appetite. The salad and the caterpillar both ended up in the garbage.

The next leg of our journey took us to the Azores Islands, mere specks far out in the Atlantic. I had been invited to the pilot's compartment and I could see the navigator's bubble from where I stood behind the co-pilot. The bubble was a domed plexiglass hemisphere in front of the pilot's compartment. The navigator was using his sextant and looking puzzled. He waved his hands and shook his head. Then he mimicked pulling out his hair. It dawned on me that he was having trouble locating our position. I knew that the Azores were a very small target in the vastness of the Atlantic but I assumed that the navigator was joking.

But he continued to act as if he was completely lost. The pilot and co-pilot wore stony expressions. I began to think that we had a real problem. Perhaps the sextant was giving incorrect readings or the radio was out of order? Worry was beginning to steal into

my mind. At that point the navigator began to laugh and said that he was joking. I laughed too, but it was out of relief that our situation was not serious. After all, our bomber carried only a limited amount of fuel. Today, after flying for many years and as a pilot myself, the jest seems rather simple but at the time I was not amused. I might add that navigation today is much superior to navigation at the time of World War II.

At long last I spotted a cloud, a lonely cloud out in the middle of nowhere. We headed toward the cloud, and after we had flown closer I saw an island beneath it. Since then I have often seen a cloud over an island, no doubt created by the temperature difference between the water and the land.

We landed at the Azores and proceeded to our overnight lodgings. While there, a GI asked me for some of my K-rations. I was surprised and was about to say yes, then suddenly thought better of it. I said I would think about it. Later I learned that K-rations were being sold on the black market and that I should not give them away.

### *North Africa*

The next morning we were off again. We flew from the Azores to North Africa and continued along the northern coastline for a good many miles before landing for the night. We were trucked to a camp area where we were lodged in a cement building. Before we ate dinner I asked for some water and was directed to a Lister bag, where water for drinking purposes was stored. The Lister bag was constructed of canvas and was suspended from a metal tripod. It had a small faucet at the bottom. I filled my canteen but found the water to be tepid and almost undrinkable. I was very thirsty because of the extreme heat so I did manage to drink.

We slept that night in our sleeping bags directly on the cement floor. I was quite comfortable and the cement did not bother me in the least. Today I could never sleep that way, but we were young then and very tired from our long journey. I dropped off to sleep immediately.

During our brief stay in Africa we were entertained by outdoor movies, the most common form of entertainment for the troops overseas. We would sit under the open sky on makeshift benches and watch a movie while an electric generator churned away nearby. Whenever a movie was shown, there were natives present, many of them dressed in peculiar clothing that looked like bedsheets or mattress covers, tailored a bit. Some of the costumes were voluminous—I was reminded of the baggy robes and pants in the *Arabian Nights*. Upon closer inspection I realized the strange clothes were makeshift wardrobes and that the materials actually *were* bedsheets and mattress covers. I felt sorry for these people until I learned that they were the lucky ones because they worked at the Army post. Their clothing may have been handmade but it was adequate.

On one occasion, after being assigned to guard our plane, I was given instructions on how to get back to the airfield. I left our bivouac in late afternoon. It wasn't supposed to be far, so I walked. Otherwise, I would have thumbed a ride. In the Army GIs got rides

very easily because almost any Army vehicle would pick us up. However, on this trip I walked and enjoyed it.

After about fifteen minutes had passed, I realized that something was not right. According to my instructions, I should have reached my destination by now. Had I made a wrong turn? I decided to go as far as the next bend in the dirt road and then, if the airfield was not in sight, I would retrace my steps. I got to the bend, walked around it, and there in front of me was a group of natives. I had walked up almost silently and they had not heard me coming. There was not a sound to be heard when they discovered me approaching. There must have been at least twenty of them, all wearing very light clothing. They seemed to be rather primitive people. They were building some kind of a hut, which was beautifully crafted. The skeleton was almost complete. Small poles of perhaps one inch in diameter were interwoven throughout the structure. We stood there staring silently at each other for at least two minutes. What they thought of me I will never know, but all activity stopped. It was very quiet. Somehow I knew that they did not speak English. They did not seem to be unfriendly and I was armed, but still it was strange territory for me. I had heard stories of ambushes and I was not certain what to expect. The silent impasse stretched on and on until I heard a truck engine behind me.

The truck stopped next to me. In it was an English captain who called out, "Where're you going, mate?" "I'm trying to find my plane at the airfield," I replied. He laughed and said, "Good thing I came along! Hop in the lorry and I'll take you there." He was a jovial gentleman and took me close to the airfield. I was feeling sheepish about having been lost, and so said little. He must have sensed this and did not bring up the subject. This was one of the few times that I had been in contact with our allies the English, and if he was representative of their normal friendliness, I was impressed and grateful. I thanked him and he went off about his duties.

I walked on toward the airfield. On the perimeter stood some huge black guards. They wore round red caps with no brims and a black tassel on the top center. As I passed near one of these enormous guards, I heard him speaking to another in French. I tried to understand what they were saying but was able to catch only a few words.

I have spoken Canadian French for much of my life because my parents were originally from Canada. Although I never was very fluent in the French language, my older brother John, who later went to Europe as a soldier in half-track tanks, served as an interpreter during the U.S. Army advance into Germany.

These black guards were an imposing group of men and I did not wish to clash with them in any way. To my relief I was not questioned by them as I crossed the perimeter of the airfield, although I was soon stopped by an American MP who did question me and then allowed me to continue. I saw an old friend named Eddie speaking with one of the guards. He called me over and we decided to walk to our bombers together.

It was then that two P-51 Mustangs began to buzz the field in a spectacular display of daring. It looked as though the two planes were playing *Follow the Leader*.

They were moving very fast and only a few feet off the ground. As they approached a 60-foot-high steel tower, the lead ship zoomed upward, closely followed by the other, both tracing the contour of the tower as nearly as possible. It was an exciting exhibition, and I was amazed that they could take such a busman's holiday from combat.

As Eddie and I walked on, we noticed numerous patches on the older bombers parked there and asked the American guard about them. The guard laughed and said, "Those patches are bullet holes." With this bit of knowledge firmly assimilated, Eddie asked the guard for directions to our planes. After the guard pointed out the route to us, we were joined by a third gunner and we all walked on together.

It was now quite dark and difficult to see the way but we were making good progress. Suddenly we heard the challenge, "Halt! Who goes there?" There was a long silence. None of us had expected this and we found ourselves tongue-tied at a very bad time. We heard the unmistakable click of a rifle bolt. Eddie yelled, "Ffffrinds! Fffffrinds!" The guard approached and scolded us for coming through to the planes on this route. We said we had been instructed to follow this route. The guard replied, "I will be talking to Jack about this; he should know better." At last we arrived at our respective planes and separated to get on with our guard work.

I was very careful not to repeat this fiasco on future guard details. Simple routines like getting to your plane could be very dangerous when rules were circumvented. Henry had drawn his .45 when we had been challenged. I don't know to this day what would have happened had the situation deteriorated from a challenge to a battle. There seemed to me to be too much confusion around here. I would have preferred a little more organization.

### *Guard Duty*

My instructions were not to allow any unauthorized personnel in the plane. I had a full canteen of coffee to keep me awake, but I was very young and did not realize how tired I was. I sat down on the black leather bunk on the flight deck where we treated the wounded in flight. We also used it for sack time as needed. The bunk was upholstered and quite comfortable. We had been in transit for a long time, and the wear and tear on the human body from change and excitement can easily be underestimated.

The next thing I remember was an arm on mine, shaking me awake. What a guard I had been! Although I had closed the bomb bay doors and all other entrances before dozing off, here was an aircraft technician shaking me awake. He had been able to open the bomb bay doors, which make a noise like rolling thunder, while I slept. He had proceeded to install some unit I no longer recall and only then had awakened me. I had been sleeping the sleep of the dead. I cannot imagine what he must have thought. In some other time and place I could have been shot for dereliction of duty.

The next morning we took off across the Mediterranean Sea. It was not a very long flight. Years later I read a newspaper article about a B-24 that took this trip the other way. Its crew was returning from a mission in bad weather and its navigator did not

realize that they had crossed Italy and were headed out over the Mediterranean on their way to Africa. About thirty years later the plane was found in the Sahara Desert, having landed by itself without crew or pilot. The men had parachuted, and their bodies were found. One man had traveled more than 75 miles on foot before he died. The plane and its equipment were still in very good condition due to the dry desert air.

It makes you wonder how the plane got so far off course. Perhaps their navigator was injured or dead. The article I read made no mention of this possibility. Or his instruments or radio might have been out of order. The cause of the tragedy will never be known.

I knew nothing about this story as we flew toward Italy. Our trip was uneventful, although at my suggestion we took the precaution of uncovering our guns and putting them in operating order. This turned out not to have been necessary, but it made us feel better since every mile we flew was carrying us closer to the enemy. Our navigator was on the ball, and we arrived exactly on schedule.

#### *Italy, June 1944*

We arrived in southern Italy in the middle of June, 1944. We touched down at an airbase where we stayed overnight. While we were having lunch, some of the local personnel were removing our equipment from the bomber. Some of the removals were authorized but some were not. Luckily we returned to our plane in time to catch and confront the people involved in this little theft. There was an exchange of words and the upshot was that they returned our equipment, although reluctantly. If they had not, I think there would have been much unpleasantness. We were in an angry mood due to having been detained by red tape and other seemingly unnecessary delays. The fact that we had our sidearms with us may have decided the issue, although I'm sure they would not have been used. I never discovered who the disreputable group was, but I know that they were not representative of our troops overseas. The black market must have been rampant in our armed forces in the Italy of 1944.

On the first night in our new quarters in Cerignola I found myself in the mess hall where quite a few of the air crews and ground crews spent time. It was a nice place to have a cup of coffee and chat. Aware that some of us had recently arrived from the States, one of the men began to talk about combat. He began to tell stories of very harrowing experiences. I listened intently, for the stories were told with such candor and sincerity that I was impressed, as were the other new arrivals at this airbase.

The storyteller had undoubtedly been through some dangerous action. Here was a man with the courage of ten. I could not understand how anyone could possibly survive combat if they were to endure such experiences. The stories went on for the better part of two hours. Finally we left due to the lateness of the hour. Our minds were troubled. If combat was this bad, we had little chance of making it through fifty missions. Fifty was the number of missions required before we could be sent back to the States for a rest, after which we might be rotated to another theater of operations. That would be a long way off in the future, many months at least. We did not dwell on the possibility of future

fighting; to complete our present missions would be quite enough. We also knew that the war might end and in that case we would not need to return to combat.

To those of us who heard those frightening stories, it was quite a surprise to learn that the veteran was a cook who had never flown in a plane. In fact, he was about the only source of exciting combat stories since most of the combat crews, when asked, merely said, "Wait until tomorrow; then you will see for yourself."

## Chapter Five COMBAT

### *First Mission*

We had arrived in Cerignola on or about June 18th, 1944. We had been on base for only a single day when we were scheduled to fly our first mission. Perhaps the officers thought that we would lose our cool if kept waiting around, but the main reason was a shortage of flying personnel. Still, I was set to fly—hyped up, as they say—somewhat worried, but not as frightened as I had expected to be. Ahhh, ignorance is bliss, and that made me a jolly chap.

Then the word came down that neither I nor our co-pilot Herbie would fly that mission. This was because it was customary for a new pilot and engineer to fly with a combat-experienced co-pilot or engineer for the first two missions. Our replacements had flown some real missions. This supposedly would be of great advantage in an emergency. So my crew took off without me.

The next day I moped about, trying to organize our tent area. We noncoms did not live in the same area as the officers. We had put up a six-man tent the day before in a very heavy wind and it had promptly blown down. We laboriously replaced it and it was now secure. My bunk was partially in the sun since we had the sides of the tent rolled up for air circulation. I had nothing much to do and Herbie the co-pilot came over to see me. We talked for a while. His words stayed with me. He said, "Don, we are sitting back here today while our crew members are facing the challenge of combat. They will prove themselves today but we have yet to do the same." I remember little more of the conversation but those words linger in my mind after more than fifty years.

The weather that day was very warm and after Herbie left I wandered about, looking at the debris that was lying around. It was obvious that German troops had been here. There was an old dented German helmet lying on the ground, and just outside our tent there was a full case of 20-mm. shells. The shells were a work of art; the heat treatment of the metal made them look like burnished rainbows. There was a swastika insignia on a piece of aluminum, presumably from a downed aircraft.

We had hired an Italian boy of about seventeen years of age to make our beds each day and clean our tent. He also took our clothing away for washing—his mother did that part of the chore. This turned out to be a very nice arrangement and we all profited. The young man's name was Paulo. Now that I think about it, I realize that I was only one year older than he was, yet I thought of him as a boy. Perhaps by that time I had matured somewhat and that made him appear young to me.

I asked Paulo if the German soldiers he had known had treated him well. He said in his broken English, "The sarge OK; the official no good." There were so many sergeants flying here that he confused us with German private soldiers and referred to

them as “sarge.” Paulo was a fine young man and I have often wondered how he fared after the war. He would be an old man like me today.

As the day ended, I was anxious to see the planes returning to the field but was unable to get there to welcome them in. The field was about a mile away and we took trucks to get there. On this day transportation was not available so I stayed in the tent area. The crew came home safely—it had been what we called a milk run. They had a few interesting things to say about the mission but it was somewhat discouraging to know that Herbie and I were already one mission behind the rest of the crew and that we very likely wouldn't get to fly a milk run on our make-up mission.

A list of crews that were to fly missions the next day was posted in headquarters. We never knew where we would be going beforehand. We learned what our destination would be at a pre-flight briefing on the morning of the mission. The Officer of the Day would walk around to the various tents and wake us. We would dress quickly and go to breakfast. After breakfast we would report to a room that we learned to dread. The moment we entered, every eye focused on the big map on the far wall. On the map was a long black line showing the course we would fly that day. At the end of the line was a triangle showing us the way the planes would turn away from the target and return to home base in southern Italy.

Little was said as we entered that room, but sighs of relief or groans of despair were easily discernible once the information on the wall was recorded in each individual's brain cells.

The gunners' briefing was held separately from the officers' briefing since the information for the two groups was of a different nature. The gunners were briefed on the expected number of fighter planes, the direction that they would be coming from, and the number of flak guns that would be bearing in on us. All pertinent information was given us to make the mission a successful one.

As I entered the room for my first briefing, I could tell by the looks on the faces around me that this was not expected to be a bad mission. Later on, one of the gunners with a few missions under his belt told me, “You can never tell how a mission is going to be; sometimes the easiest targets turn out to be deadly.”

We were transported in trucks to the supply section on the field where we withdrew parachutes. I had a fixation about parachutes. It seemed to me that a parachute could get hit by flak or gunfire and that a 'chute with a hole in it would be useless. Feeling as I did, whenever I had the chance I brought an extra 'chute along. Psychologically, this made me feel much better.

Dick the right waist gunner had his own special habit. He would pick up an empty case of 50-cal. machine gun bullets, and we would sit one on each end of it when we got tired of standing. I think Dick developed a fixation about extra ammunition because he often carried a spare box of ammunition into the plane. Empty or full, we used the box to sit on.



On the morning of my first mission my first duty was to safety-wire the gas caps on our tanks, which would be filled with 100 octane gas by the ground crew just before our arrival. There were four gas caps, and I had to safety-wire each one. I must have safety-wired at least two hundred gas caps before my missions ended. My second duty was to stand by with a fire extinguisher in case an engine caught fire upon startup. I had been told by a ground crew chief engineer that if an engine caught fire, using the fire extinguisher would ruin it. It took me all of two seconds to figure out that if an engine caught fire, I would ruin it. The engine was expendable and the crew was not.

At last we climbed aboard and the plane taxied out to the main runway as soon as the tower fired the colors of the day. The colors were flares fired off to tell us either to go or to stand down, the mission having been canceled. We received plenty of stand down signals before our tour was completed, usually because the weather had gone from marginal to bad.

My third duty at takeoff was to start the "putt putt." This endearing term described a small motor-driven generator located in the front of the bomb bays on the lower level under the pilot and co-pilot. The purpose of this generator was to furnish enough juice for the aircraft until airborne, at which time the generator in the No.3 engine took over.

Once in the air, the first thing we had to do was to rendezvous, which often took a lot of time and fuel but had to be done. When all the planes had taken their places in formation, we would fly off together. On this particular mission we were headed for a target in Sjenicia, Yugoslavia. We settled down for our flight and soon were traversing the Adriatic Sea and approaching the target, all too soon for me. Much to my surprise there was little flak and we had seen no fighter opposition. I was pleased at the ease of the mission thus far. Our bomber went into its final approach for the bomb run. At this time the plane does not waver from its course until the bombs have been dropped. We heard the order "Bombs away!" and looking down saw the target, a small town, as it was hit. It looked as if the whole town had been obliterated. Everyone cheered. That was the last time I ever cheered a hit on any target.

In our briefing we had been told that the purpose of this mission was to kill German troops occupying the town. Upon thinking about it, I began to realize that many men and maybe women had been killed in this raid. This gruesome fact brought home the deadly reality of war. The little town was completely covered with smoke. Perhaps to allay any feeling of guilt, I reasoned that the people must have had time to evacuate when they knew we were coming. In total honesty, we had cheered for the accuracy of the bombing. Wasn't it better to bomb them than to allow them the opportunity of bombing my family? I realize now that our final run was meant to fool them into thinking that we were going for a different target nearby and that they probably did not realize our intentions.

One of the memories I have of flying missions is of the great weariness that would build up in my body. Much of the time we were sitting, and yet, due to the changing gravity, we would become severely fatigued. The up-and-down motion of the aircraft

could be likened to an elevator, causing the body to adjust involuntarily. The constant bracing was like shoveling sand for a day. When the mission was over and I had retreated to my bunk in the tent, I would be overcome with exhaustion. I would lie down and usually fall asleep immediately. The sleep unfortunately was seldom without dreams, and the dreams were not always pleasant.

### *Red Cross Lemonade*

Perhaps the nicest thing I remember about flying missions was the Red Cross lemonade afterwards. Once we had deplaned, we would walk down the line and get coffee, donuts or lemonade. My favorite was the lemonade. The Red Cross, though often maligned by indignant GIs, always came through for me. Their refreshing lemonade in the heat of summer in southern Italy was ambrosia straight from the gods. I was always parched, and the relief that drink gave me still lingers in my memory. I know that the other air crew members shared that feeling with me.

Once I stood in the Red Cross line in front of a pilot. Unfortunately, the lemonade had almost run out and the bowl was nearly empty. I looked longingly at what was left of the lemonade and saw a fly in it, swimming for dear life. As I watched, he succumbed from exposure to the lemonade ocean. Unfortunately, his ocean equaled just one drink, which I declined due to the drowned critter floating there. The pilot was not as squeamish as I was, and he downed the drink in one draught. As he left, he remarked, "Boy, that was a good fly!"

After this first mission I felt like a veteran combat airman and was eager to compare notes with George the ball gunner. We were in great spirits, talking about the mission. After supper we felt more subdued as we began to realize that we were not through flying missions and that there were quite a few more missions to come. In fact, we were just beginning. This was a sobering thought and it dampened our enthusiasm. We decided to check the board at headquarters. Sure enough, we were scheduled to fly again the next day. It was then that I thought of Howard the bombardier. He was right to be serious. This was no picnic.

At headquarters there was a large chart with the name of each member of our squadron's flying personnel. Under each name was a column of small squares. As a mission was flown, a square was filled in with a red marker. In this way we knew exactly how many missions we had flown and how many were left to fly. I looked at that chart many times over the next seven months and I was not the only one to do so. Everyone was wishing that the chart would fill up with red marks to the fifty mission mark, allowing us to return to the good old USA. It would have been serious indeed if someone had forgotten to enter a red mark.

### *Herbie*

We were scheduled to fly another mission the next day. The map on the briefing hut wall was not encouraging—it was a mission to Linz, Austria. Our ship had its full complement of crew except for Herbie, our co-pilot. He would be flying with an experienced crew and we would be taking an experienced co-pilot. I caught a glimpse of

Herbie as we gunners were entering our briefing session and he was entering his. I know this will sound theatrical, but Herbie was white as a sheet and looked very uncertain of himself. I know very well how it feels to fly with a strange crew and Herbie was flying with a strange crew on his first mission.

We took off and after the usual preliminaries headed north for the target. We were over the northern part of the Adriatic Sea when I noticed that the propeller on one engine had been feathered. Our plane left the formation and turned home. We salvoed the bombs into the Adriatic. They were not armed so they merely made a ripple in the water far below. We returned to base as our group continued on to the target. In an aborted mission like this, we crew members would not receive credit for a mission; it was all lost effort. No red marks for us. We would have to go through the same procedure and danger again.

As it was explained to us later, the experienced co-pilot we were carrying had noticed a problem in one of the engines. He feathered it and decided to return to base on three engines. Our bombs were of the unpredictable type called RDX and we had to drop them into the ocean to make it possible for us to land safely.

RDX bombs were unstable as well as powerful. We used both GP (general purpose) and RDX bombs. In the event of an aborted mission, we would land with GP bombs aboard, but seldom if ever did we land with RDX bombs. Even when disarmed, they could explode in an accident.

Upon landing, as luck would have it, the ground crew found little or no problem with the engine, which started immediately. We were in the soup again. It seems that our pilot was the one who should have made the decision to turn back since he was in command, even though the co-pilot was sent along because of his experience. Recriminations and accusations from group headquarters followed. We were accused of shirking our duty. Was our past catching up with us? There were some punishments ordered, and the pilot bore the brunt of these.

As it turned out, the Lord must have ordained that our crew was spared that particular mission. When the planes were due back that night, only one—one single plane—landed at our squadron. That one was badly damaged with a large dent in its side. Many other planes in our group were missing. Herbie's plane, it was reported, had gone down in flames, and no one saw any parachutes leaving it. Our plane was the only one in our squadron that had returned unscathed. The attack had been a massacre and our squadron was nearly wiped out.

We were given another chewing out; that is, the pilot was given another chewing out, but as the hours went by, Air Command began to realize that there was no way our crew could have known that this was to be a disastrous mission. Still, Headquarters was in turmoil because of our losses, so in the morning they felt we needed a pep talk. The pep talk was given by Major Jaboris. His speech was all Hollywood bravado and I have forgotten most of it. To sum it up, we Americans would even the score etc. etc. *ad infinitum*. Major Jaboris was not one of the flying personnel. He did the talking; we did the fighting.

We felt extremely sad, to say the least, and we walked with heavy hearts for some time thereafter. Herbie must have felt so terribly alone on that mission, and when he learned that we had turned back, he must have felt even more alone. I remembered how he had spoken to me about proving ourselves and that made me feel even worse. Herbie was gone, that was the fact, and we had to carry on. It wasn't easy but we had no other choice. So often the question is asked: "How *could* you carry on?" The answer is simple: there was no alternative.

Many years later I learned that Hitler was born in Linz, Austria. Perhaps that was why it was so well protected. In our briefing it had been explained that Linz was a large marshalling yard, a rail center with much military transport. Needless to say, we were wary of Linz after this mission, but Air Command did not fear Linz. They were impersonal with our orders. It is unfortunate that they didn't get a chance to fly with us.

As fate will decree, our crew did not return to Linz but the navigator and I did later on. It was near the end of our tour and we were making up missions for reasons that will become apparent as the story goes on. We anticipated a very rough mission but happily it did not turn out that way. We did get hit by flak, and I remember one or two holes about the size of a nickel some ten feet away from where the oxygen bottles were stored.

Flak was something that was almost always present and we usually suffered some hits. There were a few missions when the enemy did not put any holes in our plane, but not many. A bomber is a big target and usually the hits were not in a vital area. I remember that we would go around looking for hits in the early missions and comment with pride at our good fortune. Later on we stopped looking. We had been lucky, and after luck had been with us for awhile, we began to believe that our luck would run out. We believed that the odds in our favor were decreasing each day.

A new co-pilot was assigned to our crew. His name was Alan Anderson. Alan was a very likeable chap and I became friendly with him. Though his manner was unassuming, he told me that he was a frustrated fighter pilot. I could understand that because I too, like so many others, had wished to become a fighter pilot. Alan was a large man, maybe 200 lbs. I think that the cockpit of a fighter plane would have been a tight fit.

Sometimes in a free moment Alan and I would take our .45s and try some target practice. He was a good shot with an automatic. I never did master it but still I managed to hit the target by aiming beneath it. When my .45 was fired, it would climb to the right. I had to compensate by aiming low.

One day over the target our pilot allowed Alan to take the controls. Normally the pilot trusted only himself for this duty. Alan must have been overcome with elan, for he banked so sharply over the target that we left the squadron. We also missed all of the flak thrown in our direction. For this I was grateful, although I was amazed at the number of G's (gravities) we pulled. I was barely able to stand. I'm not certain, but I think that was

the last time that Alan was permitted to fly over the target. Whatever transpired between the pilot and Alan, I do not know. I believe there was a stern reprimand.

### *The Mission Routine*

Let me tell you about the routine we followed on each mission. There was some variation but the procedure was quite similar each time. First we would be awakened at a very early hour, sometimes as early as 3:00 AM. Everything was timed to get us off the runway at about daylight.

The careful timing allowed us to wash up, shave and have breakfast. We gunners were usually very quiet and subdued at this hour. I doubt that many of us ate a hearty breakfast. It was usually dark at breakfast and this added to the somber mood. Conversation was at its lowest ebb. After breakfast we would wash our mess kits in soapy water, then rinse them off in a disinfectant. Then we were ready to board the trucks to the airfield. When we got to the supply house at the field, we would withdraw parachutes, flying suits, etc. I noticed that men grabbed the newest 'chutes and latecomers were left with a choice of worn ones. I often took two. There were plenty of 'chutes available so I knew that no one would go without. I am surprised that I was not nicknamed "Two 'Chute Don." We carried most of our personal equipment with us in a large canvas bag called the B3 bag. We took our B3 bags with us on the truck. It contained all of the other things we needed—earphones, goggles, helmets, jackets, etc.

Now fully equipped, we would get back on the trucks to be taken to our bombers. By the time we got there, all the planes had been checked out by the ground crews—engines, fuselage, ammunition, bombs. All gas tanks had been filled and sometimes capped off. The term "capped off" refers to adding gasoline after the engine is warmed up to ensure a maximum gas load for a long flight. The electronics had been checked, the oxygen added, and all other necessary work for takeoff had been completed.

Each member of the crew performed his preflight duties at this time. I would climb to the top of the plane where I would add a safety wire to each gas cap. This wire fastened the cap to the wing so that it was virtually impossible for the cap to vibrate loose. If this had happened, the resulting siphon action on the gas might cause a fire. Another danger was losing enough gas to make it impossible to return to safe territory.

Then the engineer and I would conduct an inspection of the plane—tires, gauges, and everything else that we could check mechanically. The engineer was responsible for most of the more critical inspections. Tony did a great job on all of our missions. We were very fortunate to have such a fine engineer with us. He never failed to carry us through in emergencies.

It was my duty to stand by each engine with a fire extinguisher as the engines were started. On some occasions four of us would have to turn the props over to clear the cylinders before an engine would start. Usually this was necessary if the plane had been standing without use for some time. The propeller blades were huge, and two men had to push one blade and walk it through, holding it with both hands. Every time I did this I remembered the cadet who was killed in gunnery school.

Once the engines were running, I would climb aboard. Sometimes I would climb up through the hatch in the cockpit and sit up there watching for obstacles that the pilots might not see. I would let them know about anything they should avoid. Later, when I had been transferred to the waist gun, Tony the engineer took over this chore.

We would taxi down toward the active runway. The large number of bombers in each group made a mighty roar. It was a very impressive sight from my vantage point above and behind the pilot. This position placed me outside on the highest point of the plane. On one occasion it was a misty day with a low-hanging fog. The vortex of each engine created a tunnel of smoke or mist. I had never seen anything quite so weird. Each bomber with four engines threw out a circle of smoke and it seemed as though there were a thousand engines running one behind the other.

Each takeoff made me feel that we were breaking the laws of physics. Standing at the waist position, I would look out of the open window. The plane left the ground at 130 mph, or so we hoped. The sensation of speed and power was impressive. The 6000 lb. bomb load and 2800 gallons of 100 octane gasoline we carried did nothing to decrease the feeling. These figures represent a maximum load; I doubt that we carried that much all at one time. The bomb load and gas load were always adjusted to match the distance to the target.

Takeoff could be very hazardous to your health. There *were* times when bombers did not attain the necessary flying speed at takeoff. The end result need not be described. Given the momentum and the bomb load, not to mention the gas and ammunition, such a crash was devastating. Unbelievably, there were cases where the crews survived, usually because GP bombs with unarmed detonators seldom exploded on impact.

Detonators were small propellers located at the front and rear of the bomb. These would turn with the wind as the bomb dropped, unwinding until they fell away, leaving the bomb armed. When the bombs were inside the plane, a wire prevented the propellers from turning. This configuration made GP bombs relatively safe to transport and to handle. As I have said, RDX bombs were much more dangerous and could explode on impact.

More mundane problems included puddles on the runway, which could slow a bomber's takeoff. Trees at the end of the runway were known to lose leaves to planes struggling for altitude. I was informed by one of the gunners that his plane had cut electrical wires at the end of the field. It was absolutely imperative that the plane reach flying speed before the end of the runway. All of these things whipped through our minds on takeoff.

More than once I saw the trail left by a crashed bomber. Grooves in the ground would tell the story. A few times the evidence was there before us, a plane upended with its tail above its flattened nose. I can imagine the crewmen being hurled about inside as a plane impacted. That would certainly insure transportation by ambulance, or perhaps by basket.

The end of the airfield was a graveyard of aircraft. The ground crews scavenged parts from the wreckage to repair damaged aircraft. That was the way the war was carried on. Sometimes George and I walked through the aircraft graveyard and looked at the wrecks. Each plane had a picture on the nose, usually of a pretty girl in scanty attire or a Disney character with a caption underneath. I think the artists were usually Italians. Their work was commendable, and most of us had them paint personal pictures on the backs of our leather flight jackets.

### *The Ground Crew*

I have not mentioned the ground crew yet. Of the ground crew members that I knew, all were fine American soldiers who deserve credit for the work they did on our planes. I know that after each mission they worked very hard with a very short deadline and they worked seven days a week if necessary. No matter what happened, the missions had to go out. The air crews left for the US after completing their fifty missions but the ground crews remained for the duration of the war. They had to work at an ungodly hour in the morning. I would wake up to the racket of engines warming up even though the field was some distance away from our tent area.

We had some ingenious individuals in the ground crew. One mechanic made a car that I would have given a year's pay to own. He obtained a discarded wing tank from a fighter squadron and with the use of scavenged parts he fabricated a beautiful one-seater car. It used a couple of putt-putt engines for power and it was completely streamlined. The fact that it was made from a teardrop-shaped wing tank made it a work of art. The car had a plastic windshield and all of the necessary equipment. It was not uncommon to see that silver teardrop go whizzing by. I envied him and wished I could trade places with him.

The ground crew's job of loading planes with bombs and 100-octane fuel was a dangerous one. I know of one incident where a bomb loader was traveling along a bumpy road (all the roads were bumpy) and an RDX bomb fell off. Coffins were an afterthought at the funeral.

There was another incident where a grass fire got out of control and reached the ammunition dump. We had an out-of-season Fourth of July. I remember watching the fireworks for an hour. Still, I was not impressed. I had seen more fireworks on some missions.

Another time a young red-headed mechanic of about nineteen was ferrying a jeep to maintenance. Like the kid he was, he drove off the road for kicks. He was not doing anything bad, just enjoying the ride, but he defied the law of gravity by making wide "S" turns on his way down a steep hill. The jeep rolled over and he was crushed underneath. I mention these things because in truth many of our casualties were not combat-related nor did they only involve flying crews.

Since I am not given to dramatics, I would like to clear up a misconception that I have heard too many times. Whenever I read a story about combat flying, the author adds this remark, "The ground crew counted the planes returning from the mission," and he describes the anxious ground crew members, saddened if any plane fails to return. Truthfully, I never saw any evidence of such concern in all my fifty missions. When we taxied in at the end of each mission, I rarely even saw any ground crew. All of the ground crewmen I met were amiable GIs, but it would be absurd to think that any of them worried about me since I was not acquainted with any of them. In this story I want to report reality without embellishments intended to play upon the emotions of the reader.

### *The Base at Cerignola*

The mess hall at Cerignola had been fixed up to look like a reasonable facsimile of a dining room. It was spacious, cheery, and served us well, especially when you consider that at one time it had accommodated horses. Much of the renovation had been completed by artisans hired from the town. The dining hall even had a plaster or cement bas relief depicting the Fifteenth Air Force emblem. It was well made, a real work of art.

We were issued GI cookware known as the "mess kit." At each meal we would stand in the chow line with our mess kits. A GI stood at the head of each line and gave each one of us an Atabrine tablet for malaria. It was very bitter-tasting and with repeated use it made your skin a very definite yellow color. If you did not swallow it, you did not eat. To further aid in the battle against malaria, we all used mosquito nets. There were a good number of lectures to teach us the proper method of discouraging this dread disease. I do not think that it was prevalent in Italy but we took all precautions. After you had eaten your meal, you stood in another line and washed your mess kit. It was sterilized and kept very clean.

I don't remember having heard of any large-scale epidemics in the time that I spent over there though there were some sporadic cases of malaria. Don the navigator came down with sandfly fever. He was kept in the hospital for a few weeks because of it. This was one of the reasons that Don and I finished our missions together. He had been held up for sandfly fever and I for a bout with flu and the loss of two milk runs to Lyon.

We would tuck in our mosquito nets each night before retiring for the evening. I don't remember if we ever used mosquito repellent. There were other creatures around the area, including many lizards of varying colors. When walking in a field one day, I saw as many lizards jumping out of my way as I had seen grasshoppers jumping back home in Vermont. There were field mice also, and that will bring up another incident later on in this story.

No description of our home over there would be complete without mentioning the picturesque bathroom facilities. Showers had been created from water-filled fifty-gallon tanks suspended and heated. We could shower with warm water if we arrived early. The latrine was located at some distance from our tent village. It had eight or ten positions. Eighty years ago a latrine like that would have had ten moons on the door. However, our facility improved on the basic design with wire screening. I do not remember a roof, so



you could say that the latrine was well-ventilated. We did not flush the johns. Instead, one 100-octane gasoline was poured into the pit at intervals, depending on the direction of the wind.

It was bad when the wind shifted.

Chapter Six  
MISSION TO FERRARA BRIDGE

*Ferrara Bridge*

There were a lot of bad missions. Thinking back, I find it hard to believe that most of our crew made it. One of the missions that sticks in my mind is the mission to the Ferrara Bridge.

We left at an early hour that day. All of our missions began at an ungodly hour of the morning. I was so tired in those days that even the sound of engines being warmed up by ground crews would not wake me. After the Officer of the Day awakened us, however, I certainly heard the engines roaring. The sound was appalling. The roar of those engines jerked me back to reality from a very sound sleep and sometimes from pleasant dreams. We dressed, ate, were briefed, and boarded the trucks to the airfield. The transport trucks were fitted with benches on each side in an open back.

There was always a joker in the truck. On the morning of the Ferrara Bridge mission I could not believe that anyone could be or would attempt to be funny. Yet here our joker was, making wisecracks about bombing a toy factory in the Black Forest. I don't remember the exact jokes, but I know that the men in the truck laughed. They did appreciate his attempts at humor. I simply cannot understand where he got the guts to tell jokes when we were feeling so scared and worried.

We did not know what was in store for us that day. Perhaps that had something to do with our joker's levity, God bless him. We took off and headed for northern Italy and in due course we arrived at our target, Ferrara. Centuries ago, Ferrara was the home of Lucrezia Borgia of the infamous Borgia family. History tells us that she murdered a number of people with poison carried in a special compartment in her ring. She would empty the contents into the victim's wineglass. I have read that she sometimes used ground glass particles. That couldn't have been a pleasant way to die. I was thinking about that bit of history when we arrived at our target.

Ferrara Bridge was a mission unlike any other in a number of ways. We lined up for the bomb run as usual. Then it was common practice to lean on our guns in the waist gunner station and sometimes even relax just a little. We might stare out at other planes, the ground and the scenery in general. I mention this because I remember very well that I was staring out at the nine o'clock position, which was my normal lookout.

We were just coming up on the bomb run, and I was looking at the gunner across from me perhaps a hundred feet away. He was in a trance like my own. Then I felt a very hot blast of air across my face like a momentary sunburn. In front of me was a huge wall of orange flame blotting everything else from my sight. I went into a momentary state of shock. Oddly, I do not remember noticing any concussion. I finally recovered, knowing that I should be doing something, but still in a sort of stupor. I pushed the intercom

button, and, knowing full well that I had just witnessed the plane next to me exploding into bits, I said, "Pilot, there must be a new kind of flak out there."

I could see huge black chunks of debris flying backwards away from us. Some of the planes behind us were using evasive action as they tried to skirt the flying objects. I was told after landing that some of the planes behind us had blood on their wings from flying bodies or body parts.

We continued on regardless and bombed the target. Unfortunately, we missed the bridge completely. Then we turned back toward home base. The flak was unbelievable and the sky was literally black from the huge number of bursts. They must have had our bombers in their gun range. To realize that one can disappear from this earth so quickly, that in a split second you no longer exist, this I believe is what makes combat so different from normal life. It added a sense of unreality to all my future missions. Awareness is a human trait, and it can be a less than pleasant gift.

We flew on and on. The flight home seemed interminable. At last we saw the airfield in the distance.

Just before landing it was my duty to check the landing gear to verify that they were down. After observing a yellow block of aluminum that became visible when the gear engaged, I would tell the pilot over the intercom, "Landing gear down and locked." As we landed that day, I did what I had done many times before, verifying that the gear was down and locked. As we touched down on the runway, the plane lurched and began to slow down much more quickly than usual. A tire had been punctured and had wrapped itself around the rim. The pilot and co-pilot applied the brakes and the plane stopped in a cloud of dust and sand. We waist gunners were thrown forward sharply but hung onto our gun mounts for stability. One wing of the plane was nearly touching the ground.

Considering the seriousness of the accident, the plane had sustained only minor damage. I had not seen that the tire was flat because in flight it looked perfectly normal, there being no load to compress it. I was standing just behind the bomb bays when we landed, waiting to start the putt-putt. When the doors opened, someone yelled "Go!" and I went. If I remember correctly, I was the second man out of the plane. The nose gunner was first. I know for a fact that I missed running into a propeller by about twelve inches. I heard someone else yelling, "Watch out for the props!" The propeller was not moving very fast when I passed it but it didn't have to move very fast to cause an accident—it weighed about four hundred pounds.

Our plane was called *Miss Kay*. The Colonel who commanded our bomber wing had named the plane after his daughter. When *Miss Kay* landed that evening in a kind of controlled crash, the Colonel came racing out to the field in a jeep to speak with the members of our crew. He asked me about the plane that had exploded in midair and whether I thought there were any survivors. I replied, "Not a chance," and I neglected to add "Sir." Then someone piped up with: "You never can tell!" Since that someone was a major, I simply replied, "Suit yourself." I knew perfectly well that no one could have survived that blast. Again I forgot to say "Sir."

This was the only time I ever spoke to a colonel in that way. To neglect the use of the word "Sir" when addressing a colonel is simply not protocol, and I might add that it isn't done with a major either. I wonder to this day why I didn't end up in the stockade. I think the Colonel realized that we had had quite a shock and that I had seen and felt the explosion from very close by. He must have excused me for my scrambled brain.

Headquarters was very unhappy with the results of the Ferrara Bridge mission. The very next day we returned to the same target and again met extremely heavy flak but no fighter planes. Unfortunately, we missed the bridge again, or so we thought at the time. Later we learned that the target had been damaged but not destroyed. We were certain there would be another mission to finish it off. Luckily for us, it turned out that there had been enough damage to stop traffic for quite a long time so we did not have to return again.

Dick and I looked over the plane after we had landed and discovered that we had acquired more holes in the plane than we had ever seen before. One hole was about a foot from where I usually stood, and I congratulated myself on my good fortune. When I examined the other side of the plane, I could not find where the flak fragment had entered or exited. It must have gone straight through Dick's window. How close it came to his head we will never know.

We also found that our improvised urinal had warmed up, melted and splashed about the bomber deck. Dick suggested that I empty it. I thought about it. Someone had to do the job and so I did. I feel that Dick should have taken care of that chore, but he was not always in agreement with me and I was unable to convince him.

A transport truck drove up to our damaged plane and we climbed aboard. The ground crew hustled the plane off the runway and over to the repair area. Meanwhile we enjoyed our lemonade and donuts in the Red Cross line, after which we lined up again at medical headquarters and collected our double shot of medicinal whiskey. Each crew member was issued whiskey after a mission. I collected mine in my canteen and later gave it to one of our crew members. At last we got back to our tent area and cleaned up for dinner.

Before retiring for the night we sometimes played a game of Hearts in our tent. The next day, weather permitting, we were off again. Our regimen was a very tough one, and I now know why this was a young man's job.

### *The Isle of Capri*

When we had reached our eighteenth mission the powers that be decided it was time for us to have a vacation. We bundled up our necessities and flew down to Naples in a B-24 bomber. We were very pleased to be going away for a week without the worry of a combat mission each day. The bomber was crowded to a degree that would not be allowed in a plane today. We landed at Naples Airport and were trucked down to the famous harbor. As I stood at the water's edge, I could see the Isle of Capri in the distance.

The Mediterranean was a beautiful blue and I was in very good spirits. So were all of the crew. Partly in sign language, with one or two words of badly broken Italian, I asked a man the distance to the island. He smiled and said "Twenty kilometers." I knew nothing of the metric system at that time and I thought it must be about twenty miles. Today I know that twenty kilometers is closer to twelve and one-half miles. At the time I could have cared less. We took a ferry and rode across in style. It was not a fancy boat but I greatly enjoyed the trip.

When we arrived on Capri we were driven to our hotel. It was a beautiful place situated high on the side of the island overlooking the water. The sheer cliffs of Capri loom about 1600 ft above the Mediterranean Sea. There were other flying crews in the hotel and we soon became acquainted. I met a friend there who I was destined to meet again. His name was Tony Anzalone. I learned a lot from Tony. He had been shot down once with his crew and they had bailed out over Italy. Fortunately, they had been close to the American-occupied sector and had managed to walk back to the American side with the help of friendly Italian partisans.

A couple of times members of other crews that I knew came by to visit me at our tent area in Cerignola. One was a friend named Sherman who I had met in gunnery school. He told me this story:

#### *Sherm's Story*

Sherman and his bomber crew were on a mission to Austria when their plane was crippled by flak. They flew as far south as they could before it became apparent that they could fly no longer. The pilot asked the crew members if they would rather jump or try a water landing. They were unanimous for attempting the water landing.

The plane was now over Northern Italy. As they descended towards the Adriatic, they jettisoned their bombs and braced themselves for the impact. Three of them sat on the floor of the plane with their backs to the bulkhead beside the bomb bays. They padded their heads and backs with cushions and anything else that might help to absorb the shock. It was a good landing, but the shock of hitting the water was unbelievable. The bomber began to fill with water right away and the crew abandoned the plane. As they jumped into the water they were surprised to find that, although they were a good distance from shore, they were able to stand up. They were in shallow water. They had started wading towards shore when they heard a voice yelling "Help, help! Don't leave me!" It was Henry Haggy, one of the gunners who had braced himself against the bulkhead. You may remember that Henry was the man who reached for his .45 when the guard challenged us in Africa.

The men returned for him. Henry's back had been slammed so hard against the metal bulkhead that he found himself paralyzed from the waist down. They removed him bodily and once again headed for shore. Luckily for Henry, feeling began to return to his legs and he was soon his normal self again.

Upon reaching dry land they decided that it would be wise not to continue in such a large group. The crew was made up of four officers and six sergeants. They held a consultation and decided that the four officers would travel as a group and the six sergeants as another. So they parted. I am sorry to say that the officers were never seen again.

Sherm told me that they felt very helpless as they began to walk south along the beach. In a short while they spied some people in the distance and decided to head inland. They kept walking south but found themselves in a thick woods where progress was very difficult. Soon they were tired, hungry, and lost. Finally they came upon a dirt road. They walked along it, keeping a wary eye out for traffic. There wasn't much, but whenever they heard a motor they hid along the roadside. That night they found a brook and drank, purifying the water with pills that were included in their survival backpacks. The backpacks also contained a compass, a fishline, bird shot for the .45 cal. pistol, a machete, and a cloth map of the area. Each man had the equivalent of \$48 in local currency.

They slept fitfully and in the morning they were a sorry sight. They held another conference since it was apparent that they would not be able to continue this way much longer. They decided to give themselves up to a home nearby. It was known that there were many people in north Italy who would help. The problem was who. They had been told that there were two parties in the north—the Partisans and the Fascists. They were told to stay away from the Fascists at all costs.

They knocked on the door of the most isolated home they could find. If they had not been fortunate enough to find helping hands, I would not be writing this part of their story. The people who answered the door seemed friendly and knew how to contact the Partisans, and this they did in due course. At first Sherman was not sure whether their hosts would contact the Germans or the Fascists instead of the Partisans. Since they had no other choice, they stayed in a small hay barn near the house, keeping a lookout. If any unfriendly troops appeared, they planned to make a run for it. But the family proved to be friendly. No one had much food in that area but the family fed them with what they had. It was boiled pasta with nothing on it to enhance the flavor. Most of the crew members ate it, though without relish, knowing they needed their strength. One man, however, couldn't eat it and over the next four days he suffered and lost a good deal of weight. Luckily, the Partisans soon contacted them and gave them peasant clothes to wear. They put the clothes on over their uniforms and after darkness had fallen they were on their way.

They traveled by night and spent the days hiding in the mountains and valleys. Sherm told me that one night a Partisan began to talk to him with gestures and some broken English. Sherm thought he was saying that he needed a pair of boots and was going to get them from a soldier. Naturally he thought that the Partisan intended to buy them on the black market. Then the Partisan ran his finger across his throat. That evening, he was wearing a new pair of boots.

Sherm and his crew made their way back to friendly territory after having been in enemy country for over 35 days. When their journey to freedom was nearly done, the Partisans furnished each of them with a rickety bicycle and explained that they would now travel by day. Henry, the gunner who had been paralyzed from the waist down, was not the greatest bike rider ever. He wavered and struggled along. As they entered a small Italian town they passed a group of German soldiers. As luck would have it, Henry, never a graceful rider, fell with his bike in front of the German soldiers. Perhaps it was nerves, but an English word that must not be mentioned in good company burst from his lips. He picked himself up, limped back onto his bike, and rode off. He told Sherm later that the sweetest sound he ever heard was the laughter of the German soldiers. His misfortune had added a bit of fun to their day. Fortunately they had not recognized the English expletive.

The crew slept in haystacks and any other place they thought was safe from discovery. As a result they were severely bitten by insects and their faces and bodies were swollen and red when they got back to base. As he left for the States with his crew for a well-deserved rest, Sherm said to me that it was worth the pain to be going home. "I'll see you in the good old USA," he said, and I replied, "See you there!"

### *The Funicular*

"It was on the Isle of Capri that I first met you..." This popular song of the Forties was written about a most beautiful island familiar to the Roman emperors of long ago. I have read somewhere that Tiberius Caesar, if angry with his current concubine, would go to his retreat on the highest cliff and throw her bodily into the sea so that no one else could touch a woman Caesar had touched. I do not know if that is true but it does not detract from the fact that Capri is indeed a very lovely isle.

We were well-treated during our vacation on Capri. One of the fun things to do was to ride up and down the funicular. Perhaps you remember the song "Funiculi, Funicula" that was written about that unusual conveyance. The funicular consists of two cable cars, one car balanced in weight by the other on the opposite end of the cable. The incline is very steep. As you sit in one of the cars, you always pass the other car at the same location about halfway up the mountain. At that point one car goes around to the left and the other to the right, and we the passengers would wave to each other. Upon arriving at the top you disembarked into the square, which was a small shopping center of that era.

I was pleasantly surprised to be awakened in the morning and served a very fancy breakfast on a balcony overlooking the brilliant blue sea. The balcony was high on a cliff that plunged directly down into the water below. To make this even more delightful, musicians played for us as we consumed our meal. I have never had the equal of the ravioli that was served to me that day and yet—I have no reason to say this—the whole thing made me feel like a turkey on the day before Thanksgiving.

Down below at sea level were some Italian shops, and, due to the popularity of the island with American tourists before the war, some of the shopkeepers could speak

English. I spoke to some of them and was pleased at their friendliness—after all, they had been the enemy not so long ago. I rented a kayak and paddled out into the ocean where I would drift for hours. The scenery was lovely, and I was attracted to the many caves in the sides of the cliffs. Some had bent and rusted steel bars imbedded in them and I wondered what role they had played in the island's history. I was able to paddle my kayak into a few of the caves, but then I decided I'd better not be too adventurous since I needed all my luck for later.

On one fine day we gunners decided to rent a sailboat together. The Italian sailboats were very picturesque and we had seen them many times on the water as we flew home from the north. Once I saw a whole fleet of twenty or more fishing boats with orange sails. They were beautiful down there, bobbing on the deep blue sea.

We bargained with an Italian boatowner for his boat and his services. Since it was such a nice day, we decided to rent the boat for the whole day. We all boarded the boat and scattered ourselves about the deck in various places. George lay down near me in the bow. We lolled around half asleep as the boat sailed out of the harbor. There was a gentle swell as we left and everything was just great. After about half an hour I noticed that the clouds I had been watching were beginning to move in large sweeps relative to the mainsail. At first this was amusing and I dozed off. When I awakened I noticed that George had left me for the middle of the boat, where he stood at the rail with a greenish tinge to his face. My own stomach felt distinctly odd and I hastened to join George, who told me later that I looked a bit green myself. No one was complaining, so I decided that air crews are not sissies; we could take a little boat ride.

But after a few more minutes of ducking and rolling, I decided that the others could take a little boat ride, but not me. I told the owner in sign language that I wanted off *pronto*. He just laughed as I tried to explain to him that I would like to see his beautiful island from shore. I said that he could keep my money and consider it a tip. This communication was no simple feat since I could speak only about ten words in Italian: *Si, poco, multi, multibono*, and so forth. He kept on laughing until I grabbed his arm and said very sternly: "*Go!*" He did go. We had a chance to laugh then but we didn't. Everyone thought I had come up with a very good idea. Strange that we agreed so readily!

There was a navy ship docked at Capri at the time and we were welcomed aboard. We looked around the ship, finding it a pleasant diversion from our usual doings. The crew was very friendly, but I thought to myself, "After that sailboat trip we took, you Navy guys can have it. You earn your money buying your breakfast twice each day."

On another day we decided to see the best-known landmark on Capri, the Blue Grotto. It is every bit as beautiful as you may have heard. We hired a guide to row us around the foot of the cliffs to the entrance to the cave. He waited, timing the swells until a big one dropped the water enough to let us row inside. We had to duck our heads as we went in. Inside the cave, which is not very large, the water is a beautiful blue, an incredible color. Our guide swirled his oar and raised it from the water. The droplets falling from it looked exactly like blue fire. The Blue Grotto was well worth the visit and I have never forgotten it. I do not know why the water is so blue though I am sure some



scientist will have a ready explanation. I do not want to hear it. I wish to be left with the thought that the Blue Grotto is one of the wonders of God.

All things come to an end. It was very difficult to leave such a lovely place to return to the hell of war, but we did. There was no alternative. It was not that we were especially patriotic or brave. I would have loved to stay on Capri forever.

The flight back to base was a wild one. The pilot, who was not our regular pilot, must have been a frustrated fighter pilot. He decided to scare a flock of sheep grazing on a hilltop, and in doing so he scared the living daylights out of all of us. I looked out the window and saw sheep scampering in every direction as we buzzed them. Of course we veterans didn't bat an eye, but that pilot was lucky that wishes don't always come true.

### *Manuel*

The tents of the squadron's flying crew members were all located in one area with headquarters located approximately in the center. The officers lived at one end and we noncoms at the opposite end. We met different crews in the noncom area, became acquainted, and sometimes developed a friendship. We seldom became close friends because each crew tended to stay together much of the time. I did meet a number of men from other crews and in the course of events some of us became friends.

One such friend was Manuel. He was about my age, and although we did not become close friends, we were good friends. Due to our different duties and flight assignments, we did not see each other very often. Manuel was very pleasant and certainly above average when it came to courage. I never heard any complaints from him about flying missions, but something happened to change that.

It all started with our heating arrangements. Although southern Italy is very warm in the summer, we discovered it could be very cold in the winter. There were times when the sand floor felt like ice to my bare feet. Outside, ice was sometimes mixed with the muddy ground.

So each crew installed a homemade heater to heat their respective tents. The heaters were made from a fifty-gallon tank cut in half like a huge can with the bottom open and the top intact. The open bottom end stood on the sand or brick floor. Inside the tank was a pan. There was a copper tube with a small shut-off valve running into the tent with 100-octane fuel in the line. We would regulate the valve so that gasoline flowed into the pan. The pan was ignited, a rather dangerous process, and the flame would heat our tent. It was a simple and ingenious arrangement. All of the tents were heated in this way.

I'm sure the reader must realize that this heating arrangement was quite dangerous. On a more or less regular basis a tent would go up in flames and within minutes everything in the tent would be burned. We had been fortunate that very few crews had been injured.

On one fateful day, Manuel's tent exploded with a rumble and everyone left the tent in a mad scramble. Unfortunately, Manuel's right arm was burned. It was not a serious injury but it was sufficient to keep him from flying any missions for a few days.

His crew had been scrubbed from a mission on the day of the fire and was rescheduled to fly a mission the following day. Manuel was too badly burned to be in a condition to fly so his crew went on without him.

It is not easy to sit back in the living area and see your crew gaining on you in missions. It made me feel left out and vulnerable when this happened to me because I realized that I would be required to fly with a strange crew to make up that mission later on. Quite often the crew on the makeup mission would be inexperienced, increasing the probability of their not returning.

I am sure Manuel felt this way about missing the mission. He had no choice in the matter, he was grounded. As fate would have it, this was the very first mission his crew had flown without Manuel, and none of them returned.

The report was very bad. His plane had gone down in flames. Manuel was very upset. Not only could he have been with them, he also had to deal with the feeling that he was now quite alone. He had no crew. Life and death became starkly real. Of course we all realized the possibility of death, but when something of the nature of what happened to Manuel took place, we would all become sharply aware of our mortality.

The Air Corps' dictum is "Keep a warrior active. Do not allow him to dwell upon his misfortune. He must at all cost retain his nerve." Consequently Manuel's arm was suddenly deemed to be serviceable and he was scheduled to fly the next day. The next morning Manuel dutifully went through all the routine flight preparations but just moments before they were scheduled to take off he left the plane, stating he could not fly. Radio contact was made with the tower and the plane finally left without him. I believe a replacement to cover his gun position was found in time.

The Air Corps is very unforgiving, particularly in wartime. Manuel was threatened, cajoled and finally made to understand that he would finish his mission either in a plane or in prison. I was given this information by a fellow crew member. But Manuel was adamant. Bomber Command was also adamant. Finally, after much harassment over the period of a week, Manuel decided to try again. I had seen him only from a distance since all of this happened but I had not spoken with him. Once he saw me but did not acknowledge my presence and left for some duty. As much as I wanted to help, I realized there was nothing I could do.

Again a flight was due to take off with Manuel assigned to the crew. They did take off this time but had to abort the mission about two hours later. Manuel had gone berserk and bitten through his lip. He was bleeding very badly and was a danger to the completion of the mission.

Scuttlebutt had it that headquarters again tried to force Manuel to fly but to no avail. I am happy to say that the last I heard was that Manuel had been permanently assigned to noncombatant duty in the mailroom. He remained there until the end of the war. I never heard anything more about him.

Such were the personal problems that beset us. We were never able to really help each other even though we wished to help. It was wartime, and in war the military must at times be brutal. The stakes are very high. To lose a war is to end freedom as we know and want it. The price at times may seem too high but I would not want to live in any other way.

At the time I was very angry with the Air Corps. Today I feel differently about the way Manuel was treated. To be sure, there could and should have been a better way to enforce regulations. It may seem as though the Air Corps was very cruel, and I believe it was, but the alternative is not tolerable. I am saying that we must have a very powerful military at all times and it must be the best in the world. In wartime, win the war first; afterwards recriminations can be discussed.

### *Flooring the Tent*

One morning when we were not scheduled to fly it was suggested that we use this time to make our tent more livable for the winter months. Many of the tents adjacent to our tent had makeshift block walls with brick floors. We decided that this was the method we would employ to make our temporary home weatherproof. Thicker walls would keep out the cold winter winds.

Headquarters furnished us with an Army truck and a driver; then we were off to Naples. We had been directed to one of the bombed-out buildings where we could take some bricks to complete our project. During our ride to Naples we had a first-hand opportunity to see the countryside. There was little or no evidence of battle trauma there. Grapes were growing in the fields and there were many almond trees.

When we arrived at the city of Naples, there was plenty of evidence of war. Many buildings were completely demolished, bricks were piled where buildings once had stood, walls were spattered with bullet holes, bridges were demolished. I realized that an air war is fought far from the actual scene of destruction. This was my first close-up view of the results.

It was not pleasant to imagine the carnage that had taken place in Naples not too long ago. Nearly all of the bridges to nearby towns had been damaged by bombs or demolition of some kind. We passed a junkyard of aircraft remains where both American and German aircraft were displayed in the yard. That day, although meant to be a day of work and repair, was a revelation to me. It brought home very clearly the terror that these people must have lived through not so long before. The continuing parade of destruction depressed me. We were creating this type of carnage each day and suddenly I could see the parallel of our action to the enemy's. Although we had not begun the war, we were trapped into making an equally savage response.

Our destination was a building that at one time may have been a market of some kind. We proceeded to load our truck with the needed material. While in town I purchased a clay jug made by an Italian craftsman. I believe we all bought one at the same time. The unglazed jugs were about 10 inches high and held approximately two liters of liquid. I used mine for storing lemonade that I made with a concentrate. This storage system kept the lemonade comparatively cool due to the fact that the jug was porous. The outside was always slightly damp. As the liquid evaporated, the contents were cooled. I thought this was an ingenious process, primitive but effective.

Upon our return to the base we hired an Italian bricklayer to build a foundation for our living quarters. This was constructed with a brick floor and four walls about four feet high. The walls were made with blocks of tufa, a soft volcanic stone that we purchased from the bricklayer. He used mud for mortar because there was no mortar available. When our tent was placed carefully on this base, our living quarters were greatly improved.

When we had first moved into the tent, it had a dirt floor. I chose a corner location to the right rear as you entered the tent. As usual, I chose badly. It turned out that my bunk was situated near an ant abode. I would like to add that the ants I encountered were of immense proportions. The small ones were about one inch long and could walk away with a pencil. I ignored them in the beginning, but they were persistent and decided to invade my bed. I was never bitten but I did not feel that I should be obliged to share my bed with ants. I decided that they must go. The crew members were greatly entertained by the invasion of my premises by an army of ants and showed me little sympathy. George, whose bunk was next to mine, did not seem to attract the critters the way I did. There were some jokes about garbage being the favorite food of the beasts. I did not appreciate the humor and decided to declare full-scale war.

My first and rather simplistic attack was to fill their hole with dirt. The ants promptly cleared the hole. I tried again, digging down to a depth of twelve inches and adding an occasional rock. They came through to the surface a bit closer to my bunk. More serious efforts were in order, so I made a funnel and poured 100-octane gasoline into their hole. I think they drank the stuff and had a party. Some came out staggering like drunken sailors at the end of a long voyage.

I was at my wit's end the morning I discovered that either the ants or the crew had moved my bunk slightly. I was ready to move out. I threatened to open some shells and pour gunpowder down the passage, but that was too dangerous. Not knowing what else to do, I poured more gas down the opening for quite some time. The next day the ants were back. In desperation I lit a match and dropped it in. Now I know this sounds foolhardy, but a desperate man will do anything. I do not suggest this method to anyone of normal sanity and I do admit that it was not the most brilliant move I ever made. There was an eruption from the hole and a miniature volcano began to spout fire. The heat became uncomfortable as I attempted to subdue the flames. The fire died, then reappeared. I again subdued the flames and again the fire returned but this time only at about one

candle-power. I was satisfied and remained on fireguard duty until about an hour after the flame died for the last time.

I was very lucky. The tent could have gone down in flames. But I did get rid of the pests! When the bricks were laid, that settled the problem permanently. I never did see any more of the miniature monsters.

### *Explosion*

There were times when I felt that I needed a snack so I always kept a bag of almonds beneath my bunk. I enjoyed them very much and they were certainly reasonable in price—I paid about fifty cents for a big burlap bag about one-quarter full. That kept me in almonds for my full stay in Italy. Other prices were equally reasonable. The price for a haircut was seven cents and a shave with a straight razor about five cents. The Italian barbers always left me with too much hair. When I returned to the States and sat for my first haircut, the barber commented on how much hair I had. It took him about forty minutes to finish the job. Today he could do it in three.

One day I had not gotten more than ten feet from the entrance of our tent when I heard and felt the most titanic explosion I have ever experienced. The ground beneath me trembled and I felt as though I was falling. I learned what had happened later.

The day before we had flown a mission and at takeoff one bomber in our group had crashed with a full load of RDX bombs. Two of the crew had been killed and the others seriously injured. Since the bombs were unstable and had a time-delay fuse in them, Headquarters decided to demolish the wrecked bomber. The bombs were set to go off within forty-eight hours. The demolition team set a charge under the plane and blew it up. Rather than six explosions, there was only one.

We were never notified of this or of any other decision beforehand. I realized what it must be like to have such bombs falling about me at my home. I was very grateful that the war was not taking place in Vermont. Sad though our duties might be, at least we were not allowing the spread of war to consume our homes. We were containing it here where it had begun. I feel that this was the only fair way, if there was a fair way.

### *My Leather Jacket*

On the morning of what turned out to be a very bad day, I was rushing to get to our plane and accidentally left my leather jacket behind. I realized this only as the plane was taking off, and I never saw my jacket again. Originally I had been so slow in withdrawing it from supply that the pilot had told me to get it or he would rescind the authorization. It turned out to be a perfect fit and soon became my lucky jacket, or so I thought.

I am spending considerable time on this subject because most of us felt that some item was our lucky charm. To lose it was very bad luck. I confess that I felt very vulnerable for a few missions to come. I hope that the S.O.B. who swiped my jacket is

capable of realizing how much I missed it. I will forgive him the day he returns my jacket to me.

As I said, that was the beginning of a very bad day. How so many things could go wrong on one day is a mystery to me. Let me tell you how it started.

I caught the truck to the flight line as usual. We stopped at the supply station to withdraw our parachutes and other equipment for the mission. By the time I got inside there were only a few electric suits left for me to choose from. I searched long and carefully to find a good one but the suit I ended up with was an old blue suit made of a cotton-like material. The new electric suits were green and of a rayon-like material.

My search had taken more time than usual so I rushed outside to board the truck where the others were waiting. I did not realize that while I was in the supply station someone had swiped my B3 bag with all of my equipment. There were a number of B3 bags in the truck so I assumed that mine was there. The truck was leaving with or without me so I had no time to search. When we got off the truck at our plane I realized that my bag was missing. I had no time to go back for it.

I was alarmed, though how serious this was did not strike me immediately. Fortunately I had some of the needed equipment—my oxygen mask and the old electric suit. As we took off I began to scrounge around for the equipment I would need to survive the flight. Dick loaned me a summer flying helmet which was much too thin for the cold at altitude. I also borrowed some very thin summer gloves. George loaned me some spare goggles. I came up with a bastardized combat suit but the equipment was barely adequate. Once the bomber reached 15,000 feet, I knew it was going to be a long, cold trip.

Throughout that flight I was very nearly frozen. The crew had loaned me everything they had. None of them had expected to be asked to furnish an extra flying outfit. I flew that mission without a steel helmet.

To make matters truly serious, the old electric flying suit malfunctioned in a way that sent me jumping two feet into the air. One of the heating wires in the suit had burned through and burned me. I forgot about the burn quickly enough when I realized that I was about to freeze. I saw the first-aid kit above my head and looked inside, hoping to find some bandaids. Luckily there was some tape. I wound the wire ends together and used the tape to insulate the splice. I did not expect the suit to work, but it did, and probably for the last time because I had to tear it open to get at the wires.

The order was given to test-fire our guns. On that unlucky day, my gun refused to fire. My fingers were frozen but I needed that gun. It took me quite some time to fix it and progress was very slow. Without liner gloves, my fingers froze to the gun as I worked. My oxygen mask kept filling up with ice. I would take it off and break out the ice so that I could keep breathing. Then I would continue working on the gun. Finally I got the gun fixed. The work, although very difficult, kept my mind off my troubles.

As we neared the target I was grateful for my parachute, my flak suit, and the electric suit, which was now working. The machine gun also seemed to be working. It was my duty to take pictures on this mission, so I took my position at the camera as the bomber approached the bomb run.

Looking straight down through the camera, I could see large details on the ground below, a distance of four miles more or less, depending on the altitude. We heard the order: "Bomb bay doors open!" Then I began to see flashes down below, followed in a matter of seconds by explosions. When I spotted a flash I would count to ten seconds and then the explosion would come. This was an uncertain measurement because there were many flashes below and I could not be sure of the source of an explosion. Looking directly down at the guns was a bit unnerving. I couldn't see the actual guns, but from their flashes I knew ammo was on its way.

At first I watched this scene for the complete bomb run. Later I saved my talent for pushing the camera button for the *bombs away* phase only. When the *bombs away* order was given, I would try to photograph the bombs leaving the plane. As the bombs fell, they would follow us in forward motion, becoming smaller and smaller until they diminished to nothing. It is my understanding that the free-falling bombs would speed up to over six hundred miles per hour. Then they struck. The sight of the bombs striking the ground was amazing. The concussion was visible—there were actual circles spreading out from the point of impact. I suspect that this was caused by dust and debris rising and moving outward with the shock waves.

On one occasion we were warned not to be alarmed by a screeching sound as the bombs left the bomb bays. On that day we were carrying bombs armed with whistles which left the bomber with a piercing noise. The idea was to demoralize the enemy but I doubt that it was effective. It is entirely possible that the noise frightened the air crew more than it did the enemy.

### *The Pursuit Curve Theory*

After the *bombs away* order, our plane was buffeted by near hits and misses. I took over my gun position. We gunners were very alert for enemy fighters at that moment. We had been taught in gunnery school that an enemy fighter would approach us in a "pursuit curve." Scientific calculations had proved that the pursuit curve was the most effective way to shoot down a bomber so we were taught how to shoot down a fighter plane approaching in that way. I believe that all gunners were taught this theory. The trouble was that no one taught the enemy. I never once saw that line of attack used on our plane.

According to the pursuit curve theory, the enemy would approach you off to one side from behind and high, going in the same direction as the bomber. With his superior speed and height, he would drop down, seeming to slide towards you until he would be in line with the rear of the bomber. The gunner must make sure that the enemy fighter never got that far.

Through his gunsight the gunner would see the fighter sliding from the outer edge of the sight towards its center. The gunsight was divided into three radii. The gunner would keep a full three radius deflection when the plane seemed to be moving most quickly through the sight.

To understand this, picture the enemy aircraft with its nose pointed at the gunner. You would see the wingspan in the gunsight. The wing tip would seem to slide towards the center of the sight and the gunner would move the gun while firing, continuing this movement until the enemy plane was pointed straight at the gunner and no longer appeared to move. Then the gunner would not be using any deflection but would be firing dead on.

The way gunnery was taught, we learned that a three rad deflection was the most you could expect. I will qualify that by saying it was the most you could expect and still be using a gunsight. I never did see a real pursuit curve used. Sometimes the enemy would dive in at us head on. Once a fighter climbed up to us and dove through our formation from right to left. The action was usually so fast that it was very difficult to make a hit. Air warfare was completely different from what I had expected. Although tracer bullets could give us a rough idea of where the bullets were striking, they were not an accurate gauge. Tracers were often slightly off target.

Since a bomber is a large body, each gunner could only watch his own quadrant and hope that nothing was happening on the other three. If your plane was involved in the action, you would know about it in short order. Then again, you might never know about it. I felt that I could take care of my own part of the sky, but it was never that simple. On the Markersdorf raid it was a real shock to see so many bombers disappearing. Only then did I begin to understand that most of the action was beyond my control.

When we heard the telltale rattle of small pebbles hitting a tin roof, we knew that we had suffered some hits. We never knew how much damage had been done. The anxiety stayed in the back of my mind. It must have been the same for the others. A mechanical problem could be developing. In those days the sound of pebbles on a tin roof sounded like a death rattle to me.

Forgive me if I wander, but there are certain incidents that need to be explained as I go along. Getting back to the unlucky mission that started with the loss of my leather jacket, it seemed that everything that could go wrong went wrong that day. During that flight the navigator accidentally opened his 'chute inside the plane. He balled it up in a neat bundle as we had been told to do. If he had to jump, he would do so holding the balled 'chute and then release it, hoping that the 'chute would open by itself.

On our trip home from the target we saw bombers with engine trouble dropping below us. Their crews were disposing of all possible gear, hoping to lighten the plane enough to enable them to return to base. Some crews even threw away their parachutes and flotation devices. That was an all-out gamble, do or die. The real meaning of that phrase is very frightening and final.



I believe it was on that mission that the nose wheel refused to drop just as we were about to land. The navigator was preparing to push it down manually when, after repeated commands from the cockpit, it decided to come down of its own volition.

Things went wrong right to the last. When I alighted from the bomber, I stumbled and fell. It was not a serious fall, just an inconvenience, but at the time I was ready to throw rocks at the world. The crew left for our tent city but I wanted to find my missing B3 bag. I wandered about the airfield until I found it at last, empty. It had been looted and my lucky leather jacket was missing. My other things were missing too, but I missed my leather jacket most of all.

### *The Brenner Pass Mission*

One morning upon reporting to briefing we were pleasantly surprised to find that our mission was to take us only to the northern Italian border, a much shorter mission than we had anticipated. We were jubilant. The briefing commenced. The S2 officer pointed to a target in the Brenner Pass, which is located between North Italy and Austria. He told us we were going to bomb the meeting place of Hitler and Mussolini in the slim hope that we would catch them both and thereby shorten the war. We were also given alternate bomb targets in case we could not attack the primary target for some reason.

I would like to comment on bombing sorties in general. I had heard that bomber attacks had been turned back due to very heavy counterattacks by fighters and flak but I myself never flew a mission that returned due to opposition nor did I hear of that happening while I was flying. That is not to say that I would not have liked to abort on some of my missions. I might add that, fortunately for the Air Corps, I was not in charge.

On the Brenner Pass mission we took our heading for North Italy immediately after takeoff. On the way to the target it was customary for the gunners to clear their guns to detect any malfunctions before the guns became critical to our survival. The order was given and we fired our short bursts.

I knew that a good friend of George the ball gunner had died from a test burst of gunfire fired into his plane by accident. The unfortunate man's name was York, and he was a sergeant, recalling the famous Sergeant York of World War I. I had met Sgt. York only a few times, but he was very close to George, and George was strongly affected by the accident. So many deaths were accidental, and so often caused by human error. Our Sergeant York suffered a fatal 50-cal. wound to the head.

After firing test bursts on our way to the Brenner Pass we were warned over the intercom that we were about to have a practice drill in bailout procedure. Dick the radio operator gunner did not receive the call. When he failed to acknowledge the message, I said I would tell him. Dick wasn't wearing his earphones so I began to explain to him, using sign language and screaming into his ear, that the bailout bell was about to go off and that he should ignore it. As fate would have it, he misunderstood the message.

I returned to my gun post to await the alarm. Dick was engrossed in something and he may have forgotten my warning. The bailout alarm rang. Dick was a large man but he could and did move very fast. He was over the jump door in the bottom of the plane before I could blink my eyes. Knowing how serious this could be, I leapt over to him and grabbed his parachute harness. He struggled with me in a frenzy. I weighed 140 lbs. wringing wet and he weighed over 200 lbs., but by thrusting one arm through the safety belt as an anchor and hanging on to him for dear life with the other, I managed to bring his mad exodus to a halt. It took some explaining but finally we returned to normal.

In due course we arrived at our target and lined up on the bomb run. When bombers are flying straight and level on the bomb run, they are very vulnerable to anti-aircraft fire as well as to fighters. We had no fighter escort on this mission, and I wondered about that, our target being so important to ending the war.

I should mention that we did not have a fighter escort at all times. It depended upon the need in other quarters and the vulnerability of our bombers to enemy aircraft attack. I didn't expect a great deal of flak on this mission since the target would not normally be an important one but I started to get jittery when I realized that the enemy could be expected to have fighter planes protecting their two leaders.

As it turned out, resistance was slight and we noticed only a little flak, some bursts pretty close to us but not many of them. Dick and I sat on opposite ends of the 50-cal. ammunition box as usual. We had made a good bomb run and, as I heard later, hit our target or very close to it. We felt able to relax on the return run, knowing that we would be over friendly territory in very short order. We discarded our flak suits and parachutes and any other unnecessary cover. Some of us lay down on the corrugated aluminum floor. I was as near to falling asleep as I have ever been on any mission. Even though my guard was down this time, I never did fall asleep on any mission.

We were all resting comfortably when from the vantage point of the floor I saw alarming orange flashes streaking over our plane. They were exploding around our plane like fireworks. Suddenly there was a mad rush and at least two gunners walked all over me in a frenzied attempt to don their flak suits and 'chutes. I tried to do the same, but I learned in the mad scramble that bigger and stronger bodies are served first. By the time I finally got suited up and was ready for action, it was all over. The flashes had been rockets. Neither I nor any of the crew had seen rockets before.

Needless to say, we stayed awake for the rest of that flight. The box of ammunition we usually sat on had been shifted in the excitement, and Dick bent over to move it back to its usual position. He found himself looking right through the bottom of the airplane through a 1½" hole. He tipped the box over to look at the bottom. It was immediately apparent that a large piece of flak had penetrated the bottom of the ammunition box and lay wedged inside with the 50-cal. shells. We were lucky indeed that none had exploded. Dick had kept his butt intact that day. As he said later, "I would be embarrassed to wear a Purple Heart on my ass."

The remainder of the mission was uneventful. Upon landing we reported to debriefing and discovered that the wily enemy had thwarted our plans by not attending the expected meeting. Such are the fortunes of war, which, as we know, went on for almost one more year. I often wonder what would have happened had we caught Hitler and Mussolini there. Would the war have ended sooner with less loss in lives?

### *Sabotage*

There were days when we did not fly. We would get a short break from flying so the plane could be maintained and we could recuperate but the timing was decided by the weather. The weather forecasters helped to decide whether or not we flew. If it was raining, we knew we were unlikely to fly. On some mornings with very inclement weather in the offing, we would be awakened and go through the whole routine of preparing for a mission, only to get the order to stand down. We did not enjoy these dry runs—or perhaps they could be termed wet runs. They were of considerable annoyance to us.

Early one morning when we were not scheduled to fly, all was quiet at our group. We were sleeping soundly when abruptly we were nearly thrown from our bunks by a terrific explosion. The noise was shattering and even the ground shook. We rushed out of our tents half-dressed. Over to the east we saw a tall column of smoke and debris rising into the sky, then settling slowly downward. While we watched the smoke faded away into a clear sky, leaving little evidence that anything had happened. We went back to our bunks and tried to doze off into never-never land, where we sometimes felt at peace with the world. We had no sooner settled down again when a second explosion rocked our tent. Again we rushed outside. The same scene presented itself—a second column of smoke and debris rising high into the sky.

We debated the cause but it was pure conjecture. A gasoline truck exploding? I remembered that had happened in Charleston, but the gas truck had burned; it had not exploded. Perhaps a bomber had crashed on takeoff with a full bomb load? We decided that we would hear about it through the grapevine soon enough. We went back to bed but sleep would not come. Since we were all fully awake, we began to go about our affairs. Then there was a *third* explosion, and the same scene was repeated again.

A few days later we learned what had happened. One of the bomb groups located not far from us was preparing for a mission. A few planes had taken off without incident when suddenly, just as the next one rose from the ground, it exploded and crashed at the end of the runway. Such things did happen occasionally. But then a second bomber exploded, followed by a third. The remaining planes on the ground were held for inspection. They discovered that a mechanic had placed hand grenades in the wheel wells of a number of planes, wired so that the firing pins would be pulled as the landing gear retracted. The explosions blew a wing right off the body. Of course everyone aboard was killed.

This was sabotage, plain and simple. The grapevine carried the rest of the story. One of the crews caught the mechanic in the act of placing another grenade on the gear.

They were so enraged that one or more of them killed the mechanic on the spot. This was one of those very unfortunate events that take place in war. Thirty men had died, ten men to each aircraft, plus one saboteur.

### *Spit & Polish*

I would like to tell you about my encounter with Captain Tallent, an Air Corps experience unrelated to flying. As I walked to the airfield one day to finish some work on our plane, a passing officer called out to me: "Soldier!" I stopped short, mentally kicking myself because I had not saluted him. I knew from my experience with the major in Charleston that this could be bad news. On the other hand, when overseas we only saluted a colonel or better.

I recognized the officer as Captain Tallent, a West Pointer, all spit-and-polish. I was in the soup again. He said, "You are from the Spencer crew, are you not?" I said, "Yessir, I am." He looked me over closely and said, "Are you growing a beard?" and I replied, "Nossir." "Shave when you get back to your squadron area," he said. Then he added: "The top turret guns on your plane are dirty."

"I am in charge of the left waist gun, sir," I said. He was stopped for a moment but looked at a pad of paper he was carrying and said, "Oh yes, the left waist gun has a bit of rust on the gunsight post." Knowing that you don't argue with an officer, I replied, "Yessir." He had a gleam in his eye. I knew he was after the Spencer crew.

He tried again: "I noticed that your tent is the only one in the area without a slit trench, is that so?" I said, "Yessir." He went on, "If we have an air raid, where do you expect to go for protection? Dig that trench by tonight!" I responded, "Yessir."

Captain Tallent moved on. I could tell that he felt good. I think that he was overjoyed to see that someone, albeit a very young someone, was taking him seriously. He seemed so happy that I didn't want to hurt his feelings. I knew full well that he could hurt my feelings more than I could hurt his, so when I reached our tent I explained to the others the urgent need to dig a slit trench at once, expecting a mad exodus to man the shovels.

Most of the crew members yawned. A few choice invectives were directed toward the absent Captain. The pilot was notified of the incident. He was not impressed either. The slit trench was not dug.

I believe that our crew suffered from a poor reputation for a while and that the captain was trying to make us shape up. We never intended to make a poor impression on headquarters; we just had a few mishaps. I admit we could have avoided some of them, but in war you sometimes make mistakes. I would have been more than happy to dig the damn trench but the crew members did not want me to. Worrywart that I was, I expected Captain Tallent to come by our tent any minute and then we would really be in the soup.

It didn't happen, and my worries were for nothing. Within two weeks the captain was killed. His plane was hit by bombs from the last plane in a formation above and in front of him. His plane blew up, the entire crew was lost, and other planes were damaged by flying debris. It was human error again.

In wartime we did not have much time for trivial concerns.

Chapter Seven  
MARKERSDORF, AUSTRIA

*The Markersdorf Raid*

It was overcast, and we were not certain whether the colors of the day would indicate *Go* or *Stand Down*. With all of our preliminaries finished, we were hoping to go, not because we were eager but because we realized that we would have to make up the mission if we didn't. Finally the flares were sent up. The decision was *Go*.

Our pilot went through the normal checklist. We taxied out to the main runway and lined up behind the many bombers of our group. On some of these occasions I sat up on top of the plane directing the pilot in case there was some obstacle on the taxiway that he could not see. Up there, the sight of so many whirling propellers was one that I will never forget. The propellers tossed back wisps of fog, water and dew as they turned.

Finally it was our turn to take off. The noise of takeoff in a B-24 is something that must be experienced to understand. I can only say that the vibrating metal and the enormous power were almost outrageous. Taking off with 6000 lbs. of bombs and 2800 gallons of 100-octane gasoline is enough to keep anyone awake. The plane gathers speed ever so slowly at first and then tons of metal and explosive are hurtling towards the trees and power lines at the end of the runway. As you leave the ground the landing gear retracts into the wheel wells, which are openings in the wing that hide the landing gear to reduce drag, allowing greater speed. It was always a relief and a miracle when the wheels left the ground.

On this day we flew at our usual 20,000 feet. This altitude, plus or minus a couple thousand feet, was the most common altitude for us. We flew over the Alps, and they were truly a very pretty sight, but we did not really enjoy the scenery—we had other things on our minds. I cannot speak for everyone, but for me at least the beauty was marred by the danger.

Everything was going fairly well. As on most missions, we would see a bomber or two turn back due to some problem, usually engine trouble. Whenever we were deep into enemy territory, we all prayed that the engines would not let us down. To leave the group over enemy territory and head for home alone was a certain invitation for a fighter attack. I have always likened it to a moving herd of caribou—the stragglers are in deep trouble. I know how they feel. This is why pilots were urged to keep a tight formation, keeping the planes close together to deter fighter attacks.

We continued on toward the target. During briefing that morning we had been advised that fighters could be expected. We were also told that we would be bombing a graduation of fighter pilot cadets. This didn't calm my nerves. I knew full well that stirring up a beehive was not my idea of fun. The German pilots were of a very high calibre and they were not to be underestimated.

As we approached the target, I saw one of our fighter escort P-51 Mustangs peel out of his squadron and head for a cloud to my left. I didn't think much about it, but a few seconds later the Mustang swept out of the cloud with a large number of Me-109s on his tail. He came straight at us with his newly-discovered entourage. I saw teardrop wing tanks dropping away from our fighters to let them maneuver more easily.

Tommy the nose gunner was in the best position to see all the action. He would call out on the intercom: "Bomber going down at eleven o'clock low; another at two o'clock!" I tried to tune him out so as to concentrate on affairs at hand but I was painfully aware of bomber after bomber dropping out of the sky. I figured that if Tommy was firing at them coming and I was firing at them going, we must be in the thick of the battle. When Dick called out, "Bandit coming under to nine o'clock!" I could expect an enemy fighter on my side of the plane in a very short time. Tony the engineer in the top turret said very little but it was nice to know he was there. His expertise as a B-24 engineer was second to none and I felt confident that he would handle any contingency. As it turned out, he did handle all of the problems we ever encountered on our missions.

The Markersdorf raid was a revelation in more ways than one. I fired some rounds at a Me-109 but ceased firing when a Mustang appeared in my sights. I don't know if my own shots registered because the Mustangs ended the fight. I know Dick must have seen the Mustang come through from his side, but he never mentioned it to me. The really bad missions were never discussed in detail. I think that was because we were worn out, tired, and a bit fearful afterwards. I know that I was. We were not eager to prolong the feeling with further discussion.

We completed the Markersdorf mission and turned back towards home. Quite often on our way back we flew down the middle of Lake Balaton, a long lake where the Germans controlled one side and the Russians controlled the other. Both would throw flak at us, so we stayed in the middle. I don't believe that Ivan knew the difference between a German and an American plane. I dislike saying it, but I don't think Ivan knew the difference between any two planes. Their training must have been negligible. I heard this story about dealing with the Russians:

One of our flying crews was forced to bail out over Russian-held territory. As one unlucky gunner neared the ground, a Russian officer began to fire at him with his pistol. The helpless flier, dropping in his 'chute, could do nothing but try to dodge the bullets by twisting and turning. He was either very lucky or the Russian officer was a very poor shot. In any case the Russian officer failed to hit him. Instead, when the gunner struck the ground and rolled, the officer hit him with his empty pistol. Luckily, the gunner survived and was taken prisoner. Although he was an American and an ally, his freedom was negotiable. It was quite a long time before he was freed.

### *The Lone Straggler*

The following incident occurred as we were heading for home after another bad mission. We had overtaken and were about to pass a lone B-17. I have mentioned previously that the B-24 was approximately ten miles per hour faster than the B-17. The

German Air Force had captured some B-24s and some B-17s and whenever possible they used them to harass us. They would fly slowly into a position behind our bombers and we, thinking they were friendly stragglers from some group that had been decimated, would allow them to enter our formation. Then they would open fire on our bombers with very serious results. We had been warned by S2 to be wary of stragglers.

I was looking out the window from my gun position when I spied the lone B-17 slowly approaching. The pilot must have been running his engines to the firewall to catch up with our B-24s. I felt sure the B-17 was in distress. As it drew closer, I thought it must be miserable for that crew to be out there all alone. Inside our formation they would be relatively safe.

I should tell you that every plane was equipped with a Veri pistol mounted in the top. The Veri pistol was used for firing colored rockets to signal an emergency to other planes or to the control tower. The unfortunate B-17 fired a distress rocket, an action that was their undoing. Nervous gunners in the nearest group mistook the rocket for gunfire and they all commenced firing. The B-17 began to burn and crashed below us. I was so sure that the B-17 was friendly that I almost became sick to my stomach. This terrible loss of life was so useless. Their families back home would never know how or why they died.

#### *Buzzing a Warning*

Many men died due to friendly fire. I was standing outside our tent one day when we were not scheduled to fly. It was about five o'clock, chow time. Suddenly there was a roar of engines and P-51s began to buzz the tent area at a very low level. They were so low that the tents were nearly blown down by the prop wash. The noise was deafening. The buzzing continued for about five minutes and at the time I did not understand why we were chosen for this display. I am not certain to this day, but I suspect from what I heard later that one of our group's gunners opened up on one of our fighter planes. In such cases the offended fighter group would make this kind of display to emphasize the danger of accidents. It would be very sad to shoot down one of our own fighters.

Such accidents must have happened a number of times. I know that accidents did occur due to faulty training. I am sure that the military would never admit it, but faulty training is a normal cause of death in war and in peace. In the heat of combat accidents may happen more often than we could ever know. Not only can bomber gunners shoot down fighters; fighters can shoot down their own bombers. If that happened, there wouldn't even be a buzz job afterwards. The fact that accidents happen on both sides adds to the anguish of war.

Let me give you an example. We gunners were instructed to fire immediately at any fighter plane that flew directly towards us. To wait, we were told, was to die. This instruction may have caused numerous casualties. I was involved in such an action myself. Instead of firing directly at the plane as instructed, I fired a warning burst or two. This could have been a fatal mistake for all our crew if the plane had been an enemy. I reasoned that I could have continued to fire if there had been no acknowledgment, but I



will never know. I often wonder if that fighter pilot had been instructed not to point his nose at any bomber for fear of return fire.

### *Foggia*

The day after the buzzing our crew decided to go to Foggia, a city much larger than Cerignola. Using our usual mode of transportation, the thumb, in about five minutes we found ourselves on a truck headed in that general direction. After two transfers we arrived in Foggia, where we walked about and window-shopped a little. Actually, there was little to buy. Goods were hard to come by, and it must have been very difficult for the civilians. I noticed some children on the street begging for anything they could obtain. A few of the children had distended stomachs due to near-starvation, but I was assured that since the American occupation they were at least being fed properly.

There were many fountains and statues in Foggia as is common in Italian cities. It reminded me that their culture dates even farther back in the dim recesses of history than the Caesars.

It must have been a custom for Italian men to get together at about five o'clock in the evening. There were no women in these groups, but since the stores were served by women as well as men, women took part in that society. I saw groups of men, most dressed in black, gathered at a street corner engaged in discussion. Just what they discussed I don't know, but I believe people are the same the world over. They probably were discussing exactly what we would have discussed in the good old USA.

I was enthralled by all that I saw and curious as to what the Italians did and thought. How did they feel about us, the occupying troops?

We walked along, looking about us. Invariably a young boy would walk up to us and in broken English would try to sell us his sister in prostitution. This was so common an occurrence that we failed even to notice it as time went by. It was like brushing away insects. There was something very sad about this, and I doubt if the children in most cases understood what they were saying. Some children would walk along beside us, begging to carry our bag so that we could tip him. However, if the boy could run faster than you could, he might run off with your bag. It was impossible to help all of the people. I hope that the U.S. did help these unfortunate people.

I made my usual stop at the Red Cross for cookies, donuts, and lemonade. Today my choice would be coffee but at that time I was not a coffee *aficionado*. Then it was time to leave. We thumbed at the trucks that were pulling out in our direction and in short order were given a ride by a covered Army vehicle. As we climbed aboard, an Italian civilian jumped in with us. We thought this was a bit unusual but said nothing, just chuckled at his temerity. The truck began to roll, then came to a sudden stop. The driver climbed out of his cab and walked back to us. He motioned to the civilian to get out. The civilian laughed and tried to talk the driver into allowing him to ride with us. The truck driver was adamant and insisted. The civilian refused to leave. The driver lost his temper and with an uppercut and a bodily lift threw the civilian into the street. This happened

very fast and I was amazed, not realizing that the civilian had committed a serious breach of regulations. The truck pulled away, and as the figure of the civilian receded into the distance we found ourselves looking at a lunar view—he had dropped his pants and was mooning us.

The world has changed in fifty years. Mooning now seems to be considered normal, even an art form. In recent years I have been a reluctant witness to this unusual perspective on at least three occasions. On one occasion we were following a school bus on our way to a skiing holiday and a youngster in the school bus provided the entertainment. My wife, a former school teacher, continued reading her magazine as if this was perfectly ordinary.

We bounced along in the truck and in due course ended up at our home area. For supper that evening we enjoyed the most delicious cubed steak in gravy. I ate heartily and went back for seconds. The other crew members enjoyed the meal as much as I did, and they too had seconds, even thirds. I cannot vouch for the fact, but I later found out that a mule had been hit by a truck. Knowing that steak was seldom served, I came to an odd conclusion. The chef must have been a genius.

Before turning in we checked with squadron headquarters and found that we were scheduled for a mission the next day. As usual, we could only guess our destination. We knew that the bomb load affected the gas load and vice versa. The maximum bomb load we could carry was 6000 lbs. When we heard rumors that the planes were carrying only 4000 lbs. of bombs, it indicated a long mission because we could carry more gas. But then we would hear that the bomb load had been increased during the night. These rumors were floated to hide the length of our mission from informers among our Italian kitchen helpers and, like Paulo, houseboys. There was an ever-present danger of informers and sabotage. Headquarters had to be very careful.

### *The Sarajevo Mission*

In the fall of 1944 we flew a mission to Sarajevo, Yugoslavia. Our assignment was an unusual one: to bomb a large convoy of trucks. The mission was flown at the unusual altitude of 14,000 feet. We normally flew at 20,000 ft. or more.

The Sarajevo mission was the most messed-up mission I ever flew. As we approached the target we could see trucks lined up for miles and miles on the road below, not moving. It was a huge traffic jam down there. How S2 knew about this mess I will never know, but we had been able to take off, rendezvous, and catch them in broad daylight in the act of moving supplies. This was duck soup. We lined up for the bomb run but the lead ship apparently was not satisfied with our approach so we circled around and got ready for a second pass, something that I had experienced only once before.

We made our second pass, and again the lead ship refused to drop because of an imperfect approach. More voices were shouting at one time over the interplane radio than I had ever heard before. The confusion was unbelievable, something I had never

experienced. The language was pretty bad. The pilots were furious with the manner in which the raid was being conducted.

I was a bit nervous. There had been no flak yet but fighter planes could be expected at any time. We all knew that the longer we lingered over the target, the more likely we were to get clobbered. Believe it or not, we made a *third* pass without dropping our bombs. Each pass was taking twenty minutes. We had been over a sitting target for one full hour. There was no doubt in my mind that we were going to be in deep trouble. Someone called out, "Fighters at ten o'clock!" I swung my head but couldn't see them. I felt sure that every soldier down below was shooting up at us with small-arms fire, but we were too high for that to be much of a danger.

Let me take time out to tell you that I had an uncle named Brian who was four years older than I. After the war I surprised to learn that he too had been a gunner in Italy and had flown the Sarajevo mission. He clearly remembered the trucks lined up on the road below and the incredible confusion in the air above.

Finally, on the fourth pass, we dropped our bombs. The havoc below was considerable. Many trucks and supplies were completely destroyed and there were great gaps left in the roadway. Some of the crew saw soldiers down below jumping into a nearby lake to escape our bombing. We had certainly caused a great delay in the German war effort.

But *Miss Kay's* problems were far from over. When the *bombs away* order was given at last, our plane was not flying straight and level but was in a slight bank. This caused some of the bombs to fall onto the bomb bay catwalk instead of out and away from the plane. The catwalk is a large beam which runs down the length of the bomb bays. We used it to walk across from the waist position to the pilot's compartment. It was a tight squeeze, and with a parachute on nearly impossible. Having several bombs shifting back and forth on the catwalk was extremely discomforting because the wind howling through the open bomb bay doors had unwound their arming propellers. The propellers had fallen off. The bombs were armed and ready to explode on contact.

#### *Don Littel, Hero*

There are moments that require bravery above and beyond, and this was certainly one of them. Our navigator, Don Littel, knew perfectly well that we would go up in one great explosion if a detonator received a hard blow. With wind and cold making the job very difficult, he crawled out onto the narrow catwalk over the open bomb bays. Out there over the void, he replaced the safety propellers with his nearly frozen fingers and rolled the bombs off the catwalk down to the enemy below. I will always feel that he should have received a medal for valor.

We were now able to close the bomb bay doors. This reduced our drag and helped us to maintain airspeed. We waist gunners really felt it when the bomb bay doors were open. A gale of wind would blow away anything not anchored to the plane. When the bomb bay doors opened, you knew you were beginning the bomb run and you'd better

have your parachute close by. The bomb run was the worst part of any mission because the plane had to fly straight and steady, making you a sitting duck for the anti-aircraft guns below.

One thing in our favor that day as we left the target was the strength and direction of the winds aloft. Don called over the intercom, "Take note, boys, we are flying with a groundspeed of over three hundred miles per hour!" I was very pleased to hear those words, knowing that we were headed home in a hurry.

Our course home followed the shores of the northern Adriatic. We had never taken any flak in that area before but on this day it was fierce. S2 always tried to route us around any known artillery but the ships down below us must have got there after S2's latest information. We weathered the barrage of flak by using evasive action. Upon landing we found two small holes in the side of the plane, none of them near any vital equipment or, I may add, vital organs. We returned to base and the lemonade line.

### *Some Stories*

I would like to tell you a few stories I heard while over there. I heard these stories from friends of mine and I believe that they were told to me unadorned by the spirit of braggadocio. We would often trade stories to release tension or for sake of conversation. This was very necessary for therapeutic reasons. I always felt better after sharing an unhappy experience; it is simply human nature. We were always prepared to talk about our experiences with others who had shared in our battles. A crewman told me this story:

He was flying towards the target when one of the bombers below and to his left was struck by flak. It must have been a mortal hit because the plane wavered and then slid out of formation with smoke coming out of the fuselage. Two 'chutes left the bomber. The crew member's attention was riveted to the top of the plane as the pilot or co-pilot began to climb out of the top hatch. He was having trouble getting out of the plane. Perhaps he had gotten stuck on the hatch due to the bulky equipment he was wearing. Whatever the reason, he struggled and then—it must have been by accident—the 'chute suddenly popped open in the slipstream of the plane's propellers. The bomber began to burn fiercely and plunged towards the ground below, completely enveloped by fire, with the 'chute streaming out as it fell.

The next story was told to me by Rod, my old friend from my home town, the soldier who was inducted into the service after me. Rod flew missions in the Eighth Air Force in England. This is one of his stories:

On one of his missions Rod saw a B-24 suffer a bad flak hit on one of the four engines just behind the propeller. The propeller spun off the plane and continued ahead for some distance, then fell towards the ground, rotating as it went. Good fortune was with that plane, for it returned to base safely with no other damage. The engine, however, must have been ruined. Happy air crew; unhappy ground crew.

That story reminds me of the fantastic amount of damage a B-17 could take and still get itself home. Shortly after the war I read an article in a newspaper about a B-17 that had its tail section severed from the fuselage by a burst of flak. The tail section, including the elevator, the rudder, and the tail gunner, glided haphazardly to a safe landing below. This must have been one of the classic survival stories.

A story from our own plane is this one: One of our crew members found himself in dire need of toilet facilities after we had made our bomb run. He climbed out of his turret and rushed for the rear of the plane, dropping his steel helmet to the floor as he went. On his return he picked up his helmet and put it back on his head. One of the hinged steel earcups was missing. While it lay on the floor, a piece of flak had ripped off the earpiece. Had he been wearing it, he would have become hearing-impaired.

The next story is one that I heard from a friend in Italy but others have claimed that it happened in a different battle theatre. I will tell it as I heard it originally.

There was a bomber group called the Cottontails from the white ball painted on their rudders. On one mission the Cottontails were attacked by a German fighter group and the battle was hot and heavy. During the fray one of the Cottontails, knowing that he was about to be destroyed by the German fighters, lowered his landing gear. This was supposed to indicate surrender. Two German fighters promptly flew alongside the bomber, one on each side, intending to lead the captured plane to a German airfield. According to the story, the B-24 pilot ordered his gunners to shoot the German escort down. If this really happened, a trigger-happy gunner might have done this on his own. However, as the story goes, the pilot ordered the attack and the two German fighters were shot down.

Of course the Germans soon learned about this by radio or word of mouth. Thereafter, whenever the Cottontails appeared, the Germans attacked them with redoubled fury. After a few missions the Cottontail group was so badly depleted that they were forced to change the painting on their rudders. Their new insignia was soon reported to German intelligence and the vendetta continued. According to the story, no Cottontail could ever escape from the wrath of the deceived German airmen.

According to yet another story, a bomber with nobody in it landed nearly intact in an English farmer's field with only a little damage due to the fact that the landing gear had not been lowered. The plane had apparently flown a long distance on autopilot until it reached England. I suppose that the crew would have been identified through the records of the bomber group. I wish I knew why the crew abandoned ship. I guess theirs is a modern version of the tale of the Flying Dutchman, the ghost ship that sails forever.

### *Practical Jokes*

I do not wish to leave the reader with the impression that we never had any fun. There were times when the crew members decided to play a joke on someone. On one occasion I bore the brunt of the joke. I don't know why I was chosen to star in this little comedy but suffice it to say that I was.

I had gone to town that day and had stayed there longer than usual. George told me later that the boys were wondering what had happened to me. When I walked into our tent, I noticed a tenseness and a few muffled chuckles. I gave little thought to this. Only later was I able to untangle their strange behavior.

George was standing by silently. Tom and Dick were smiling widely. Tony and Ernie were expressionless. I went to my bunk and sat down there for awhile. No one was moving. I felt that something was up but I wasn't sure what. I was thinking that perhaps I should tread lightly.

I decided that there could be no harm in writing a letter home. To do this I needed my pen and paper. I reached into my home-made desk, a wooden box with a cover and four wooden slats for legs, where I kept my personal items and my stash of chocolate bars. When I lifted the desk's cover, a fieldmouse ran up my arm, over my neck, and out of the tent. I flinched as the mouse squeaked by my neck, but I will say to my credit that I said nothing. I just looked at the wiseguys and without a word or a smile I lay down on my bunk. The mouse had left my chocolate bar alone so I ate it with gusto. There was some laughing and giggling from the crew but not very much before they went about their duties. I think my behavior spoiled their fun.

I remember a day when Dick the radio operator woke up late on one of our non-flying days. Everyone else was already up, washing and cleaning the area. When Dick woke, one of the crew said something to him, I don't recall what, but Dick exploded with a few choice words. The crew member took offence and responded in kind. Dick left for coffee and breakfast. When he returned, gentleman that he was, he apologized. I was amused that someone else besides me was in for it.

I don't like to admit it, but of the six gunners I was quite often the one in trouble. I have tried to analyze this in an objective way. The conclusion I have come to is that I was a maverick and did not always conform to the ways of the others. Maybe I wasn't as respectful of the pilot as he expected me to be. He and I were often at odds over something, things like not having my stripes sewed on, shooting over his head in training, not picking up my leather jacket and then losing it, not saluting him ever, and transferring fuel in what he thought was a dangerous manner. I could go on, but I know that if I had to do things over again, I would probably do just as I did before except for one thing: I would not lose my beautiful leather jacket.

#### *To Vienna with a Strange Crew*

One morning I was scheduled for a mission to Vienna, Austria. As I look back at my records, I find that I flew two missions to Vienna and on one flight we aborted. On most of the missions that I have recorded I was flying with my regular crew but on this day I was flying with a strange crew because I had fallen behind my own crew in numbers of missions flown.

I did not know any of these crew members and I was flying the tail gunner position. If I had been flying with my own crew, Ernie would have been tail gunner, but

we gunners were used to manning any position that was needed. I was replacing a gunner who had been killed on the previous mission when a 20-mm. shell had exploded in his turret. Strangely, this did not affect me in any way. I reasoned that it was not likely that a shell would hit the same place twice on consecutive missions.

The flight was on schedule and all seemed to be going well when an engine started smoking. This went on for what seemed to me like a long time. I listened on the intercom and knew that the pilot was aware of the problem. The smoke became more intense and the engine was shut down and feathered. I had never lost an engine so close to the target and so far from friendly shores. The situation was a bit nerve-wracking since I knew from S2 that there would be fighters about.

Then another engine began to overheat and we were no longer able to stay in formation. The pilot decided to return without jettisoning our bombs. I suddenly experienced a weird feeling that this was it—my last mission. The other bombers disappeared from sight and we were quite alone. Since I had been listening on the intercom, I had not heard the interplane communications and the pilot said nothing to keep us informed as to what was transpiring.

This crew was definitely not on the ball. I could see by their inattentive manner that they must be very green. Some of the gunners were actually lying down on the floor and attempting to sleep. I decided to be doubly vigilant. Suddenly I was startled by the appearance of two dots in the sky heading directly for our plane, I became totally alert. We were far from any safe haven. I recalled that in the event of an emergency landing or bailout, Switzerland was the place to be. Just now that was small consolation because Switzerland was too far away from us to be of any help.

During advanced training in Charleston, South Carolina, we had been told to immediately shoot down any fighter approaching head on. This order had been reinforced in Italy. To wait too long was to die. Even from the side a Me-109 and a Mustang P-51 looked very much alike. As these two dots became airplanes, I knew I should follow my training and fire directly at their noses. There was no way of knowing whether they were friend or enemy. It was certain that they were fighters because they were moving at a high rate of speed.

I warned the snoozing gunners and quickly fired two bursts low. The fighters responded by wagging their wings—they were P-51s! In about one more nanosecond they would have been hit. There was never any doubt in my mind that I could have shot them down. They pulled up alongside and one of them came up quite close to me. I waved and he waved back. I think that if he had held a wrench in his hand, he would have thrown it at me. The pilot had requested a fighter escort. He should have told us.

At least after that the gunners stayed awake. I am happy to say that I never had to fly with them again. I can only hope they made it.

## Chapter Eight

# GRAZ, AUSTRIA

On the day of the Graz mission we took off without any untoward event. The sky was clear as we left Italy and flew over the Alps as we had done on many other missions. We had been asked by S2, our intelligence officers, to be on the lookout for any information that might be useful to the Army. So on this day as I looked down at the foothills of the Alps I noticed an airfield with at least four planes visible and made a mental note before continuing with my duties.

One of my duties was to activate the camera mounted near my position in the floor of the plane at the proper time to record the bombs as they left the plane. I had to move the camera in synchronization with the ground to record the bomb strikes. No one liked that job because it was necessary to look straight down at the guns flashing as they fired up at us. I did not care for the job either but it was mine about 95% of the time.

As we were approaching the target at Graz I prepared to man the camera. The plane was flying straight and steady on the bomb run. I was looking down when a tremendous crash struck our plane and I was jolted bodily from my position over the camera. I levitated from the deck enough to tell me that we had been hit hard by flak.

I continued taking pictures while looking around to see if anything was on fire or if we were in serious trouble. I knew that we had suffered some damage simply from the concussion. After a few moments the intercom reported that one of our engines had been hit and was running wild. It could not be slowed to a reasonable rpm. We heard the pilot give the order to feather it. Feathering an engine means to shut it off and tilt the propellers so that the blades all face forward with the knife-edge on. This allows the plane to stay in the air without being battered by the propellers rotating out of synchronization.

Gas was streaming out of one of the wing tanks, creating a very serious threat of fire and explosion. This was all too evident in the waist position where Dick and I were stationed. Actual liquid was entering the window at Dick's position and I know that he must have had gasoline all over his clothes.

There was activity in the pilot's compartment as they decided on what action they should take. I was hoping it would not be to bail out over enemy territory. They decided to transfer as much fuel as possible from the leaking tank to the undamaged tanks and the engineer hastened to start the procedure.

Our situation was extremely precarious. The plane smelled like the inside of a gas tank and we feared we were going to explode. We were ordered to open every vent in the plane to keep the gasoline vapor from building up to the danger point where the slightest spark could cause an explosion. As anyone who has flown at night knows, a constant flame spews from the exhaust pipe of most aircraft.



We were flying with the bomb bay doors and all windows wide open. Needless to say, it was *cold*. With the wind passing over our plane at 160 mph, the temperature could reach a point lower than 40° below zero Fahrenheit. With such a wind chill factor, frostbite on unprotected flesh was certain.

The flak was the heaviest I had ever experienced. The sky was black with it. As one pilot said later, "I could have lowered my landing gear and taxied on it." It was at this time that I was able to observe flak at close range. I must have been stupefied because I observed the explosions with the feeling that I was safe from danger. This was an illusion, of course, but it did give me the opportunity of actually studying the bursts.

A large black smoke cloud would materialize out of nowhere. Sometime the puff would be close to me, and I would see a bright white light which instantly turned red and then orange and then faded away to a large black puff that slowly drifted backwards. When the black puff moved back fast, I knew the burst had been close. Those fast-moving flak puffs were the ones that I saw most clearly because they were so close. The black smoke would uncurl rather like an ink spot unraveling. It would dissipate but so slowly that it would be visible for at least five minutes. Distant flak bursts opened soundlessly due to the roar of the engines. Perhaps it was merciful that our engines drowned out the sound.

The Graz mission was definitely not a milk run. The bombers were milling around, trying to keep the formation from becoming too ragged. I became conscious for the first time that the plane was buffeting from the constant concussions. How I kept my cookies inside me, I don't know. Our wing was trailing gasoline and the smell made George the ball gunner sick. His upchucking did nothing to improve my shaky stomach but for some reason I did not become ill. I had that problem only once in gunnery school and once on a combat mission. In both cases it happened when I began to sweat. How can that be? In gunnery practice it was a warm day so sweating seems normal, but how can you sweat when the temperature is below zero? The truth is simple: fear. "Scared shitless" was the expression we used over there.

The flight home running on three engines was no picnic. It seemed to me like Russian roulette. The pilot took the chance of burning out our remaining engines to stay with our bomber group. He seemed to have a sixth sense when it came to nursing his engines along and getting every last erg of energy from them.

If left behind, we most certainly would have been picked off by fighter planes. Looking back, we could see planes going down behind us. I saw one plane hit. It broke up into a number of pieces. What appeared to be the wings and tail sections spun around like bits of tinfoil as they fell. I saw some small black objects and then a few 'chutes. The objects must have been bodies. No 'chutes opened behind them.

The sky was bright blue and the burning planes were of the brightest orange. Even in rarefied air, 100-octane fuel burns very well. I counted three flaming planes on my side of the bomber alone. I never did compare notes on this mission with the rest of the crew but I am sure there were other losses.

As we headed away from the target, we struggled along under constant strain when it became apparent that we would very likely be out of gas before we arrived at our field. Tony, our engineer, squeezed every precious drop of gas into the remaining engines by skillfully transferring fuel. When we were short of gas, the other crew members always joked about using the fuel from their cigarette lighters and I always volunteered the fuel in the putt-putt. In reality we couldn't have used the fuel if we had had it unless we'd brought along a professional wingwalker.

At long, long last the Graz mission came to an end, but not before we lost another engine. A second engine failed as we taxied to our position at the air base.

After landing we were debriefed. I reported the four planes I had seen on the runway in northern Italy but the S2 officer assured me that those planes had been reported several times. They were only decoys.

### *The Decoys*

S2, our intelligence unit, was not always perfect as I found out when we were attacked by those decoys. S2 insisted that the planes we had spotted were merely decoys made to resemble aircraft or weapons. Such decoys were often placed on airfields to lure attack and waste the enemy's ordnance. They were constructed as cheaply as possible, usually of wood and fabric. To add to the realism they were often moved at preset intervals.

On this particular mission, I'm not sure exactly which one, our group was returning from Austria with little damage and we were almost home. Oh those famous words: "Almost home!" I was looking out at nine o'clock from my left waist position and had a ringside seat for what followed.

About a mile from our group of about 28 bombers I saw a group of four lonely B-24s flying in formation. Groups were usually made up of 28 to 30 bombers. There were other bomber groups nearby but we happened to be the closest. I do not know why the tiny group was flying alone out there, only the four of them. For some reason they didn't seem to want our protection. Most likely they feared entering our formation because of a German ploy which had cost us dearly on other missions. When the Germans captured an American bomber, they would fly it into an American group to shoot down unsuspecting aircraft.

We were within about twenty-five miles of friendly territory in Italy and I was sure we had it made. Suddenly I saw four Italian fighter planes climbing up toward the four bombers. One fighter was corkscrewing vertically upwards under the bombers. I could see smoke from his guns. The bombers, realizing that they were under attack, closed with us for protection. Then the other three fighters started firing.

A dogfight in World War II was usually of very short duration. This fight seemed to go on for a long time. The four Italian fighters were later identified as Macchi 202s. I

expected to see at least a couple of the bombers go down from such a devastating fire but none of them dropped. Then a single Mustang P-51 came through at enormous speed. It made one swift pass at the Macchi 202s, and *two* of them went down. One exploded; the other hit a mountain top and burned. The P-51 made a high speed turn and shot the other two Macchis down in flames. Within twenty seconds the sky was full of P-51s but there were no more enemy fighters left to fight.

It was high drama and I was overjoyed that our fighters were so expert. It was difficult to realize that what had been a Roman circus to me had been a funeral for four men. It was very unlikely that any of the Italian fighter pilots had survived. They were hopelessly outclassed.

Those four Macchis were the planes we had reported to S2. S2 may have been humbled that day, but we simply did not discuss such mistakes.

### *Mail Call*

Mail call in the Army was a welcome ritual carried out each day. While I was in Italy I received mail quite often. My mother wrote to me frequently, keeping me in touch with life in the real world. I was grateful that my last name began with “B” for that meant that I got my mail among the first. We stood in a group, waiting to hear our names called out. Mail call was always done alphabetically and they never called the alphabet backwards to even out the waiting. It seemed to me that my friend Zydak would certainly go mad after a few months of being the last person to get his mail. I wonder to this day if he is still out there somewhere, waiting for his mail.

Zydak was a young man of my age who had arrived at our base a couple of months after I did. Just before he appeared my mother had written to me saying that I could not be in combat because her newspaper reported that the government said there were no eighteen-year-old soldiers in combat. I knew that I was eighteen and three-quarters years old but maybe someone had put me down as nineteen in Army records—who knows? I laughed it off. However, when Zydak arrived, I met a fellow gunner who was younger than I, only eighteen and a half. Then I realized how clever the government really was: Of course, we weren’t *exactly* eighteen; we were all a few weeks or months older.

Zydak and I became good friends. His first name was Joe. He reminded me of all the things I had left behind. He loved to build model airplanes, as I had. Since we were unable to buy anything useful for building a model airplane, Joe built one out of bits of wood the diameter of a toothpick. He made do with what we had.

Joe tied the pieces of his model together one by one, no mean trick. This required more patience and will than I had. Joe had the will and the skill and for a young man he was very patient. After a lot of work he completed the body and the wings of a pretty nice model. At this point he was stymied for a covering and a means to attach it. He had written home for supplies to build his plane but mail was very slow and sometimes it was months before we received a package.

As I have said, Joe was patient and determined. He worked on his model between missions. I marveled at his perseverance. Most of us were marking time and not doing anything that required much effort. He told me that when he had finished his missions, he would finish his model and fly it for me. I laughed and said, "I would love to see that day."

We two often talked about our flying experiences. Joe said to me one day, "I know we are having a rough time up there, but how bad must it be down there in the fields below? Our GIs are being killed and wounded and they are alone, at times miles from help. It rains and gets muddy down there. We have rain and mud too, but we can take a shower, eat a hot meal, and sleep in a dry bed." Joe was an old young man with a lot of heart. I wish I could have had his compassion and selflessness. Joe did not seem to realize that if we were shot down in enemy territory, we too would be alone and miles from home.

I would visit his tent quite often because he and his crew had managed to buy a radio. It was a large console-type radio, and I believe it was Italian-made. They had all pitched in and paid about forty dollars for it. That was a month's pay for some soldiers. We would listen to the radio and especially to Axis Sally. What GI living has not heard of Axis Sally? Her program beamed from Germany was the best on the air. She played all of the popular music and made us all homesick. Tokyo Rose was nothing compared to Axis Sally! I know I'm prejudiced, but my brother John would agree with me for he was in Germany during the war.

Axis Sally played great music but she also succeeded in scaring the daylights out of Joe and me one night. She mentioned that we would be flying to Munich the next day and told us that the German Air Force would be waiting for us to end it once and for all. She urged us to quit and not to become cannon fodder for a foolish cause. She would say, "Don't be a martyr, GI Joe! Give up; you cannot win this war."

Yes, we did fly to Munich the next day, Joe with his crew and I with mine. In retrospect I realize that this was probably a coincidence but at the time it was highly unnerving. I said nothing to anyone but I was plenty worried. Suffice it to say, we made it, but it wasn't easy. The Luftwaffe was not there, thank God, but they made up for it with anti-aircraft fire.

In spite of Axis Sally's effective propaganda, I think we got more pleasure than harm out of her program. We would all berate her in no uncertain terms when she said something we did not agree with. We did not take her too seriously, and I actually enjoy thinking of the program as one of the almost nice things that happened in World War II.

Joe flew a mission one day when my crew was not scheduled to fly. We spent the day in town. When I returned that evening, one of my crew members told me that Joe's crew had not returned.

Later, after we had eaten our dinner, I foolishly walked by his tent and looked in. I was wishing, hoping that he would be there. The model airplane hung by a string above his bunk. I had built many models at home and I too had tied them with a string above my bed. The model was slowly turning in the breeze. I never saw Joe again.

Chapter Nine  
MILK RUN TO LYON

It was unusual for an entire crew to complete their missions with all of its members finishing at the same time. I had hoped that this would be so in my case but it was not to be.

To this day I do not understand why they would let nine members of the crew fly to Lyon and leave one behind. This is an unsolved mystery. I will never know the logic that Headquarters used to make this decision. Having been left behind on two easy missions made it necessary for me to fly two very dangerous missions later. Luckily my crew was spared this dilemma. Psychologically, it was devastating to me, and I felt orphaned from my crew from then on.

It came about this way. We were scheduled to fly to Lyon, France, a city which had been liberated three days before. Our plane was loaded with 500-lb. bombs to be transferred to P-47 Thunderbolt fighter planes. The P-47 was a very heavy fighter and it had become quite successful as a bomber. In essence, our bombers were being used as freighters to deliver bombs to France.

Delivering bombs was a choice assignment and a definite milk run. With each delivery we got credit for a mission. When the time came for take-off, our plane was supposedly over-loaded and I was told to stay behind. I felt quite bitter about that. I knew that later on I would have to fly a dangerous mission as a make-up mission. The same thing happened to me on the next trip to Lyon. The pilot asked the nose gunner and me to draw straws for the flight. I drew the short one and stayed behind again.

I finally got one flight to Lyon, one milk run where the others got three. I know the plane was similarly loaded, yet they were allowed to take me along on the third flight. Fearing I might be left behind again, I asked no questions. I was stowed in the rear of the plane hemmed in by 50-gallon drums without access to the front of the plane or the other members of the crew. It was a lonely flight.

We flew to Lyon with no opposition and landed there. Once on the ground we unloaded our cargo of bombs. One member of our crew suggested that we just salvo the bombs onto the cement taxiway to save us the trouble of unloading them. I *think* he was joking. The bombs did not have detonators in them, so in reality they could suffer considerable rough handling. Maybe they wouldn't have detonated but I took a long walk just in case. The bombs were unloaded properly by crane.

While we were waiting around, a man approached me and asked in French for some K-rations. I could just make out what he was saying if I listened very attentively. I was pleased that I understood him at all. I do understand Canadian French, but Parisian French is very fast indeed. I gave him a box of K-rations and tried to speak to him in French, but he just said "Thank you," and left.

I wandered around the airfield, which had been burned either by the enemy or by us. I saw some German fighter planes that actually had melted where they stood. The heat of the fire had caused their aluminum to flow in puddles onto the cement. I saw some 7.5-mm machine guns that looked intact. I wanted to take one as a souvenir but discarded the idea as too much work. I also doubted that the pilot would approve.

Lyon was a pretty city from what I saw of it but I did not see that much. As we flew in, I noticed that parts of the city and all of the bridges had been destroyed by bombs. I had flown much but seen little of ground warfare and Lyon gave me a close-up view. I could see the damage our bombs had done. I wonder how the people of those cities feel about us today. Even though we were there to liberate them, we were killing them. It is ironically true that we had to destroy them to save them.

After our business was completed, we boarded the plane and returned to our base without incident. I was happy to have one milk run under my belt but I still felt hurt that my crew members were given three. I guess I felt cheated. I had good reason to feel that way because my remaining missions were all rough ones.

About that time I became too ill to fly. It must have been some kind of flu because I was burning up with fever. I was very upset because I desperately did not want to have to make up any more missions. In my feverish ramblings I finally decided that I was so far behind, what did one more mission matter. So I did not fly that mission, and a good thing too. If I had been shot down, I would have been too sick to survive.

After being sick for about two days, I felt fit enough to fly and reported for duty. I expected someone to let me know when I was scheduled to fly but I did not receive any notice and by then I didn't care. I went about my duties, knowing that I could not catch up with my crew. A week must have passed, and in that time the pilot, the nose gunner, and the radio operator all finished their missions and left for the States. Six more days went by. I decided to speak to Don the navigator, who was a good friend, about returning to duty. Don got me scheduled for the next day.

The next day was Christmas Day. I drew a mission to Rosenheim, Germany.

Before I tell you about Christmas, let me tell you how we celebrated Christmas Eve. I went to bed that night after a couple of nightcaps with George the ball gunner. I was awakened from a sound sleep by several rounds of gunfire and went outside to investigate what was going on. I could not see clearly because lighting in our area was nonexistent. I jumped aside as a near-naked GI rushed by with a .45 in his hand. There was a general ruckus and some more shots. Some of the GIs were celebrating Christmas with fireworks.

Most of the crew slept through the noisy celebration. I didn't stay awake very long myself. As I fell sleep again the possible danger of this celebration did not bother me in the least. The next day we noticed a hole in the top of our tent. George the ball gunner has always maintained that the left waist gunner put it there.

Forty-nine years after this incident I received a Christmas card from George. In my card to him I had asked him who put the mouse in my footlocker. He replied with a question: "Who put the hole in the top of our tent?"

A few days later we found out that there had been some gambling on Christmas Eve. Two GIs had become embroiled in an argument over the winnings. One had been killed by the other in an exchange of .45-cal. gunfire. The two had been close friends before the unhappy confrontation. War breeds war even among friends.



## Chapter Ten

# ROSENHEIM, GERMANY

It was Christmas morning, 1944, and the mornings were cold in southern Italy. I had not flown for some time and now for the next mission I was flying to Rosenheim, Germany to bomb a fuel depot. I should tell you that when we bombed fuel tanks in Germany and German-occupied areas, we took particular care to avoid the prison camps that often were located nearby.

It was damp and the sky was cloudy. I doubted that we would pull this mission off. The weather would decide. Probably, after all the preparations, we would return with a wasted day.

At briefing we were told that fighters could be expected and also that we would get some flak. S2 explained that, due to our bombings, the German Luftwaffe was very short of fuel, although their fighters could give us some opposition. To increase their fire power, S2 had heard that heavy guns were being moved in with horses.

As we headed out towards Germany, the weather became worse and some of the groups were lost from sight. As I learned later, most of them returned to home base but our lead ship decided to continue on. We flew most of the way in very poor visibility. There was a grave danger of collision. We held formation but we also held our breath. At times a plane near us would drift too close and we would move away quickly only to find ourselves close to collision on the other side. There was much discussion in the lead ship about turning back, but we continued on.

In those days radar was in its infancy and we were equipped with it on this mission. As we approached the target enveloped in clouds, it seemed that our bombing would be useless. The group flew over the target without opposition. I learned later that our leader had decided to wait for a show of resistance. There was none. The bombing was accomplished on our second pass with the use of radar. I had known that we used radar but I had not realized that it was being used in bombing.

We worried as we swung into a second bomb run, knowing that this was a risky proposition. The danger of an air-to-air collision was very real. It must have been stressful for the pilot but it was nerve-racking for us as we watched plane after plane come close to colliding with us. I was at nerve's edge when suddenly flak began to fall about us and we heard the *Bombs away!* I was on the camera and made my usual number of pictures. Though I was flying with a strange crew, they were on the ball and had a number of missions under their belts. I realized that they were a good crew.

After dropping our bombs we turned back towards base. Unfortunately, the bomb bay doors refused to close and the drag slowed down the plane considerably. If the problem kept up, we might not reach a safe haven before we ran out of fuel. Fortunately the mechanical problem was resolved, the doors were closed, and we continued on.

Upon landing we discovered that there had been no hits on our plane. It was about a week later that I received a pat on the back from the bombardier of the crew. He told me that we had almost lost credit for the mission since we hadn't been hit and didn't have any proof that we reached the target or bombed it. I was the man of the hour. By some miracle the clouds had opened enough at the right moment for me to take a picture showing the bombs falling against the background of the target. I must confess I never saw the background when I took the picture. It was just a happy accident that the photos came out so well but I certainly did not argue the matter with the bombardier.

How I hated flying that mission. I could not help but feel sorry for the city that was being bombed on Christmas Day. Santa should come down chimneys; not thousand pound bombs.

#### *Last Mission: Blechhammer*

I believe that the emotional health of a flyer began to deteriorate as he approached his 50<sup>th</sup> mission. We hoped we might make it home again before we were killed, maimed, or taken prisoner, but we became progressively more unsure of surviving.

It never occurred to me that I would feel any different on my last mission than I had on my first. The meaning of the expression "fifty mission jitters" was beginning to dawn on me. The notion that we might, just might, actually make it began to assert itself, and rather than becoming more complacent, I became more nervous. I know that others felt the same way. As we approached the fifty mission mark, the same expression clamped down on our faces, rather like a perpetual frown. There was a standing joke about the fifty mission twitch.

I began to realize that mental attitudes are built up from experience. You may be more frightened on your last mission but it does not follow that you are in more danger than you were on your first. On my first mission I had not seen the deaths and the mayhem that I now carried in my memory. Like the others I was plagued with stories of crews lost on their last missions. The truth is that crews were lost on their last missions no more frequently than on other missions. But to us it felt like a game of Russian roulette. We knew we were daring the odds and stretching our luck to the limit.

The growing tension made it harder to be an efficient crew member. I knew now why fifty missions had become the limiting factor. It was not out of humane consideration for human endurance. It was due to the practical danger of losing an entire plane and crew due to wear and tear on its human parts.

I have written more about the fifty mission jitters than may seem necessary but I cannot overstate the emotions of that last foray into hell. It is simply not possible to describe such feelings to the uninitiated so I will leave this chapter in psychology to your imagination. Those of you who have gone through the same experience will understand what I am trying to convey.

On my last mission I was scheduled to fly with a strange crew although Don the navigator would be flying with the group in a different plane. It was good to know that at least one of my original crew would be with me in heart and spirit. I had talked with Don about how spooked I felt and he did his best to make me feel more comfortable. I don't know how he had the courage to offer solace to another at a time that was equally critical to him. It shows what a very fine officer and human being he was.

Morning dawned on my last mission. I was at the peak of the fifty mission jitters. The knowledge that, one way or the other, this was my last mission did nothing to calm me. That thought, "one way or the other," was a little too final.

It didn't help matters that this was our second try. The previous day's mission had been a stand-down, and a stand-down on your last mission is the final straw. But somehow I had survived it, and here I was going through all the motions again while wondering if today's mission would be another stand-down.

Nerves or not, I ate some breakfast, telling myself that if captured I might not be able to eat on a regular schedule as a prisoner of war. Preparations seemed more difficult than usual. Finally we got to our briefing and took a look at the mission map. My heart sank. The sketched line seemed to go up past the ceiling of the room. It went all the way to Blechhammer, Germany. I had flown to Blechhammer before. It was a *long* way north. I knew from the groans about me that this was going to be a long, tough pull.

We took off without incident and proceeded on up and over the Alps. The mountain tops were deeply covered with ice and snow and looked very forbidding. My mind drifted back to my conversation the previous day with Don the navigator. We were both feeling twitchy about mission fifty and the stand-down. We assured each other that the last mission was no more dangerous than the first, while secretly we were thinking otherwise. Don tried to make me feel more comfortable by pointing out that he would be the navigator in the lead ship again. I did not see how that could make a difference to the outcome of the mission, but he seemed so positive that I could not help but feel relieved. He said to me, "Don, don't worry. I promise you it will be an easy mission." He seemed so confident that I relaxed and the waiting became more bearable. Just a few words from a kind friend did so much for me.

But only a knockout blow could have made me sleep well that night. I tossed and turned and woke up feeling fatigued. Now, as I looked down at the Alps passing under me, I knew we were on our way for better or for worse. This was it. This was the last mission. Tonight I would celebrate. Or else.

Gunfire began, thick and heavy. We cleared our guns for action. Remembering Sergeant York, I fought the urge to hide my head next to my 50 cal. machine gun as we went through the ritual. Knowing that nothing less than an 88 mm. could penetrate the gun was small comfort. An 88 mm. shell would have moved the gun with me attached some distance away from the plane.

As we pursued our course northward I noticed that two of the bombers from our group had turned toward home due to engine trouble, one trailing smoke from a malfunctioning engine. I remembered the fateful abort we had made on the mission to Linz when we lost our good friend and co-pilot Herbie. My feelings at that moment were mixed. If given the choice, I think I would have aborted this mission even though I would have had to make it up

Today I was flying in the tail gunner position. Again my thoughts wandered. The tail gunner position was supposed to be the most vulnerable on the plane. I had always discounted that belief because I knew that when disaster struck, usually the whole aircraft suffered, but now I worried about the tail gunner position and everything else imaginable.

I knew that our target at Blechhammer was a well-protected synthetic oil refinery. I knew that the German Army was using horses and mules to move their equipment due to their shortage of fuel. Wouldn't that make them protect their oil works at Blechhammer with more than the usual vigor? As we flew deeper and deeper into enemy territory, I couldn't help telling myself that a long and dangerous way in meant a long and dangerous way out. A warning came in to be on the lookout for fighters and a popular saying repeated itself in my ears: "One of these days, someone is going to get hurt." Superstitious thoughts like these flickered relentlessly through my nervous mind.

At long last we reached our target. The bomb run began and flak began to burst around us. As usual I reasoned that a small target was less likely to suffer a hit and turned myself into a close facsimile of a ball. Out of the corner of my eye I saw one bomber going down smoking with 'chutes popping out. A rough mental image told me that about three 'chutes were out and open but I was much too busy watching for fighter planes to take in much detail. Then another bomber went down and I stopped counting.

But the most terrifying event on the Blechhammer mission was a near collision with another B-24 during the bomb run. From the tail turret I saw a bomber closing in on us. It was much too close and its pilot did not seem to know that we were there just beneath and ahead of him. On he came with his bomb bays open, his bombs hanging from their racks. He was sliding from one side to the other and back again.

Captain Tallent had died from such an accident. When you are dead, it doesn't matter that you died by friendly fire.

Time stopped. The on-coming bomber dropped further and continued directly over us. I yelled into the intercom, "Pilot, go down! Go down! Go down!" I was shouting as loud as I could into the microphone in my oxygen mask. There was no change in our plane's attitude or altitude. And then the bomber was on top of us. The roar and vibration were unbelievable. As I later found out, our top turret gunner leapt out of his turret and readied to jump. The bomber did not miss us by more than two feet. If there had been a collision, I would not have had time to bail out. The roaring subsided as the bomber moved away. I said a prayer.

At last I heard the *Bombs away* report and the bomb bay doors closed. Over the intercom I heard that we were traveling at a ground speed of over 240 mph towards home base. What welcome news that was! We flew for the last time down the middle of Lake Balaton and were greeted as usual with flak from both sides, but it was far away and hardly mattered. We touched down, caught the truck, and I stood in line for my last lemonade at the Red Cross.

That was the best lemonade and donut I have ever had, before or since. It was delicious; it was wonderful. It was over.

It was over. As the realization that I had completed my missions began to sink in, I felt the whole world lifting from my shoulders. Nothing whatever could equal the feeling of relief and well-being that swept over me then. This was euphoria; this was the nectar of the gods. It was over.

## Chapter 11

# GOING HOME

Having finished my missions gave me a wonderful feeling of freedom and exhilaration. Consequently, I wore a smile for days. My original crew had all left for home with the exception of Don Littel. I didn't see Don often after we had completed our missions but I'm sure he felt as I did, and knowing that was enough for me.

One crew member who finished his missions on the same day as I did became a new friend. His name was Hal. I never found out whether that was his full name or a nickname. He was as elated as I and felt that we should celebrate with a friend of his at a nearby field. We walked over to have supper together. His friend greeted us with a big smile. When we sat down for supper Hal's friend stood up and yelled, "Hey guys, these two lucky S.O.B.'s are finished flying! Who says it can't be done!" Loud shouts of approval welcomed us. In a short while we garnered the personal history and particularly the number of missions each nearby crew member had flown.

We were the experts now. They wanted to know if we had succeeded through skill or good luck. I would like to think that it was skill but maybe it was luck that got us through. Much more likely it was a greater power than either of those. Sometimes I feel that we are very small and unimportant pawns in a cosmic game of chess where we each play our role with the outcome known only at the end of the play. There was much philosophizing that day, and we joined in.

My elation was tested the following day when I returned my combat equipment as ordered. I loaded up my bag and Hal and I walked over to the tent that handled this work. There I was directed to a lieutenant sitting at a large table. He began to check out all of my combat equipment: gas mask, 'chute harness, bayonet, .45-cal. automatic, etc.

I had expected merely to drop off the equipment but the lieutenant scrutinized each article with meticulous care. His thorough inspection took a lot of time and I was beginning to feel rather impatient. Finally he began to check out the .45 automatic. I heard him gasp, "This gun barrel is filthy!" Only then did I remember that I'd last fired the gun some three or four months before and had forgotten to clean the barrel. The lieutenant hastened to bring out a swab and commenced to clean the gun barrel. His eyes were round and wide with shock and his face was changing color like a chameleon's. I listened distantly as he rambled on and on about what low species of soldier did not clean his gun.

Some people who will make a statement and then stop, knowing that they have made their point, but this officer was picking up steam as he talked. His words were coming out fast and loud. I suspect he was envious of the fact that I was going home and he was not. He would be sitting here for the rest of the war. That was the trade-off between risking one's life every day versus sitting it out on some ground assignment. Yes, I listened, but he knew I was bored. That made him even more furious. When he

showed no signs of stopping, I said, "Come on, Hal; let's go," and we left. I heard a fuming sound or a sob behind our backs.

Once we had finished our missions, all our equipment was considered lost in action, though that is no excuse for the treatment I had given the poor old .45. Thank god, it had only been used for target practice. Any good soldier will hate me for my blatant forgetfulness. I'm sure there are many Army officers seriously offended by my lack of care. In this sort of a predicament I always said to an officer, "No excuse, sir," but damned if I did that last time. Frankly, and I'm ashamed to admit it; I felt good.

That evening I walked to the airfield alone. I saw a familiar sight in the distance—*Miss Kay* shining in her patched aluminum coat. The sun was low on the horizon and I hurried over for one more look before leaving. There she stood, my plane, battered but proud. We had been through so much together. The long flights and the terror, the leaking gas, the rips and tears in her sides and wings. Perhaps it was my imagination, but I know what I saw. Subtle colors ran over *Miss Kay's* silver sides and a rainbow shimmered over her wing. Perhaps it was the fading light of sunset seen through the prism of a tear. She was a beautiful old gal after all. I whispered softly, "Goodbye, *Miss Kay*." Then I turned and left her there.

#### *To Naples and Oran*

Knowing that the ponderous gears of Army life move slowly, I had not expected to leave for the States right away so I was caught by surprise one evening to learn that I would be leaving for Naples the next day. I contacted Don Littel and found out that Don, Hal, and a number of other officers and crewmen had received their orders as well. We were told to report to Headquarters at 0800 the following morning. I packed my belongings quickly, thankful that I did not have a great amount of luggage. I think there was one very full B-4 bag and a small duffel bag.

All went smoothly and we were off the next morning. For the last time we boarded our truck transport to the airfield, where a B-24 took us on an uneventful flight to Naples.

Just before we landed I caught a good look at Mount Vesuvius and remembered the lost city of Pompeii, buried by volcanic ash so long ago. Alien and ancient civilizations hold a magnetic attraction for me and Pompeii is a city captured in a time capsule. I would have liked to walk where people walked two thousand years ago, hearing the whispers of the ancients who once lived and worked there. I was determined to return one day in peacetime and to wander about as a tourist. But on this day Vesuvius was not active and that disappointed me. I had thought that all volcanoes gushed smoke all the time. At least there was a small white cloud hanging over the crater, probably caused by a difference in air temperature.

As we landed at Naples it occurred to me that this could be my last flight in a B-24. Somehow the thought did not bother me at all. We debarked and boarded a truck to the harbor. Hal was with me. We were directed to a warehouse where we spent the night

in our newly-issued sleeping bags. Again I slept on a cold cement floor but it was a deep and comfortable sleep. Who cared? We were going home at last.

The following day we boarded a ship whose name escapes me. One of the soldiers said it was from the Grace Line. In any event it was a comfortable ship. Compared to sleeping on cement, it was a nice change.

The motion of a ship at sea is rather like the motion of a plane in flight but a ship takes forever to get where it is going. On a mission we would stop flying after about eight hours but in a ship you keep sailing for days. I felt continually dizzy for the two-day trip across the Mediterranean, but I did not get sick and I am grateful for that. None of the aircrew had much trouble with seasickness, and we enjoyed our time on the water.

We disembarked in Oran where we boarded a different ship, the USS Gordon. I was bunked far below toward the stern of the ship and not too far from the propeller shaft. When the weather got bad, the engine noise would rise and fall, rise and fall. The changing volume and pitch kept me awake for a while one night, but most of the time I slept well.

#### *On the USS Gordon*

There were 400 Canadian infantrymen on board the USS Gordon and they were all seasick. The ship with its rocking motion kept them hanging on the rails for days. Most of them slept on the open deck all night for fresh air and relief from seasickness. The deck was very slippery where the unfortunate soldiers slept. I had a very strong stomach in those days.

The Canadians had suffered greatly in the four years that they had been over there. All of us among the air crew felt very sorry for them, four years away from home and returning in such misery. We spoke with the ones who became more adjusted to their new mode of transportation and they told us many interesting stories of their experiences in Europe and Africa. In their talks with me I gathered that they found our equipment much superior to theirs, the eating utensils in particular. I realized that a simple item like a mess kit could be the reason for much griping. The Canadians were amiable and likable and we got along famously. Unfortunately I do not recall much of our talk, just the impression that four years is a very long time and that they truly had suffered much privation. I was happy that they were going home to a much-deserved rest.

One night an unusual thing happened. I *volunteered* for KP. I confess it was for a very selfish reason—I had heard that ice cream was available. While on KP one of the sailors confided to me that we were being followed by a submarine. Somehow I knew he was trying to frighten me, and laughed. He kept at it until I told him I could care less. I truly felt that way. I had endured enough in the air to make me inured to any danger on the sea. I know that was illogical but it made my trip across the Atlantic much more pleasant. Later we were told that we were taking the southern route where we would be in much less danger of submarines. I know that was true because one morning as I walked



the deck for exercise, carefully skirting the Canadian area, I was pleasantly surprised to feel warm, damp air circulating about the ship.

Early on our journey we passed close to a floating mine. A floating mine with its barb-like detonators is an ugly looking piece of equipment. The Navy gunners began to shoot at it with what I think was a 37-mm. gun in an attempt to sink or explode it. The mine drifted off into the distance, apparently unhurt, as we sailed on. One of the sailors told me later that a hit on the mine might not be visible right away. It might have sunk later without an explosion.

The galley personnel must have thought me odd because when candy bars were available, I bought as many as I could. I ate candy bars the whole way home. Finally, on one fine afternoon there was a great commotion and all of us gathered on deck. As I set foot on the top deck I was greeted by the most beautiful lady in the world, the Statue of Liberty. She was green. I had expected her to be gray as seen in the black-and-white movies of those days. It mattered not.

As we nosed our way into New York Harbor, I watched the silhouette of the Lady with her torch of freedom move against the backdrop of New York City. There were some sunken ships in the harbor. That made me realize that our own country was becoming vulnerable to warfare. That troubled me greatly. This was *my* country. the Land of the Free. How dare the enemy attack us here at home? And then I thought about how lucky we had been in this war so far. Americans do not always realize the blessing of a peaceful countryside without cruel intruders in our own backyard. I saw no children with bloated stomachs here.

The ship continued on into the harbor. I returned to my bunk since that was the only real estate I owned on this ship. It was only a short wait before I heard that we were to prepare for a Customs check. Many of the soldiers had collected souvenirs during their overseas stay. Much later my brother John came home to Vermont with many souvenirs. I had collected none, so I passed Customs inspection with ease and in very short order we left the ship.

There was ice and snow in New York Harbor that day but as we disembarked a brass band played us a welcome with all their might. To be welcomed that way was just plain great. I will not attempt to describe the feeling of really being home.

We were carried off to Camp Kilmer, New Jersey, where I slept on American soil for the first time in what seemed like a hundred years. That first night of sleep was without any doubt the most restful sleep of my life. I awoke the next morning really knowing what it was like to feel like a million dollars.

### *Camp Kilmer*

We lived in a dream world for the next few days. The welcome, the food, the service, the smiles—I can't describe them. On the voyage home I had made new acquaintances, Howard Buzby and Joe Gaughe, and Tony Anzalone from Capri was there

too. Buzby was from Vermont like me, and that made him a great friend. Gaughe was a friend of Buzby's and was nicknamed Gopher. He didn't seem to mind the nickname but I called him Joe. We hit it off famously. At that time nothing possibly could have gone wrong.

Still, life is never simple. An incident took place that I would like to tell you about.

It happened as we were walking along a rail track at Camp Kilmer, probably going to chow or some such thing. There were six or seven of us ex-gunners all spruced up in our dress uniforms complete with wings, stripes and medals. As we rounded a bend, standing there in front of us in an Army truck was a group of men wearing German hats and other paraphernalia that instantly identified them as German prisoners of war.

This was a real surprise. We walked on towards them, appraising the situation. As we drew closer, one of the prisoners pointed at me. He roared with derisive laughter and the other prisoners joined in. Somehow I knew that they were making fun of us, the diminutive ones. How dare short men fight the elite German Korps? I don't know why I suddenly saw red. I yelled at them and they stopped laughing. I shouted, "OK, boys!" and we gunners picked up snowballs and blasted the hell out of all of them. They cowered and hid in a huddle. When I saw water dripping off their noses from snowballs accurately aimed by good gunners, I felt triumphant. We left them a thoroughly trounced, frightened, and silent group of Nazis as we marched off. Some of them were spitting snow and dirt.

I must say that during the entire war this was the only time I had ever reacted to fighting in a rage. We discussed the incident later and we all agreed that the POWs had been insulting us. Had the situation been in their favor, I can imagine the difference in treatment.

From Camp Kilmer we shipped home on furlough. I will leave you to imagine my feelings upon arriving home after so long and harrowing a time away. It is enough for me to tell you that the reunion was one of the most memorable moments of my life. There was just one shadow over our joy. My brother John had shipped to Europe on virtually the same day that I arrived in Camp Kilmer. That part of the furlough did not fit the occasion. Now I was the one who felt the helplessness of a worried civilian with a dear one overseas and in combat. Now I understood the constant worry and suspense being borne by many families. Few people escaped the misery of war.

### *Atlantic City*

All too soon our furloughs were over. From our various homes we were sent to Atlantic City, New Jersey. The two weeks in Atlantic City with its famous Boardwalk were a delight. We were wined and dined like royalty. Having subsisted under rationing and Army food for several years, we were suddenly the most pampered soldiers in the world. It was unbelievable.

We lived in plush hotels and woke at any hour. We took elevators down to the first floor and there found unbelievable riches. Laid out on many long tables were snacks freely available before or after breakfast: candy, chocolate bars, ice cream, oranges, pears, a boy's delight, everything unheard of or unavailable in the world we had left behind us. After choosing whatever we wanted, it was on to the breakfast table and again a choice of anything you would like. Seconds were never called for or needed. Lunchtime servings would dwarf the breakfast plates. And after all this there was dinner, a meal too big and abundant to describe. If I remember correctly, cocktails were available at all times. Steaks were the size of dinner plates, accompanied by many other good things.

On our first night in Atlantic City life seemed like a dream. Buzby, the original wild man, suggested we try to work our way through the 200 or more bars in the city. I was not nor ever have been a drinking person, but not wishing to be a party-poofer I went along with Buzby and Gopher. Hal was not with us; he had gone elsewhere.

We servicemen were well-treated everywhere. After sightseeing a bit, we stopped at the first bar. At that time the song *Moonlight in Vermont* was popular. Buzby and I were from Vermont, so at every bar we loaded the jukebox with coins and saturated the air waves with this beautiful song. Although I did not overindulge in the many beverages consumed by Buzby and Gopher, I did enjoy their company. I often settled for a coke and watched the two of them with admiration as they stored away booze for a rainy day.

In later years I met other friends who could consume alcoholic beverages with strange-sounding names in prodigious quantities with no apparent ill effects. They were made of stern stuff and much more experienced than any of us were at that time. Buzby tried hard, but he didn't make it to the full 200 bars. At our final stop I found myself on the horns of a dilemma. Gopher remained articulate although unintelligible. Buzby was sound asleep on his feet. I was reasonably sober or at least a reasonable facsimile thereof. A taxi solved the problem, and we encountered no problem at the hotel. Although MPs were everywhere, they were quite tolerant of us. Roman gladiators were wined and toasted after a victory over death. Well, we were certainly toasted that night.

Atlantic City was a lovely place after the war. It was so different from the life we had recently left. I was wary of everything new that we encountered. I felt as though something was lurking around the corner, something that would rudely awaken me from this paradise. We knew we were due to be sent to the Pacific theater of war. Our hope was that the war would end before that took place.

We began to hear stories about the new B-29 bombers. There were rumors among the troops that we would be flying the B-29s but we tried not to allow the thought to mar our happy time. I was convinced that after our leave in Atlantic City, the Army would reassign me to new duties. Always the pessimist, I began to believe that I would be on my way to the Pacific very soon.

During this time we traveled to New York City and visited the Empire State Building. From the vantage point of what was then the tallest building in the world, the tiny taxicabs and tinier pedestrians were an amazing sight. In flight you are constantly

moving and some intangible feeling separates you from the sensation of height, at least that is the way it seems to me, but while looking over the balcony railing at the Empire State Building I felt a sudden surge of fear of heights that I had never known before.

Was it because I was looking down the side of a building that seemed to taper away with its distance from me? Was it that the very small base could not hold all this enormous weight? The building seemed to lean outward, ready to fall. I may never know the true reason why, but I stepped back in astonishment after just one look nor was I anxious to return and look over again.

Back in Atlantic City we walked the Boardwalk and rented horses to ride along the beach. We enjoyed life to the fullest while we could, and when it was time to leave we knew there would be nothing like this ever again.

When our two weeks in Atlantic City came to an end, we were evaluated by a group of doctors. This was S.O.P., standard operating procedure, to be medically evaluated before reassignment. I was certain that the Pacific would be my new home. Maybe those 200 bars affected the outcome but I was delighted to hear that I would be sent to another rest camp. Wow! I wasn't complaining. The Army was extra nice because they sent me to a base at Plattsburgh, N.Y., which was only about 20 miles as the crow flies from my home in Vermont. I admit that Lake Champlain lay between my base and home but that was of no consequence. During the summer I often went home by ferryboat.

### *Plattsburgh, NY*

My six months at Plattsburgh were like Atlantic City on a subdued scale. Although the base maintained a modicum of Army regimentation, it was not overly military. I found Gino there, and Tony Anzalone, and again we all made new friends. Among the activities provided at Plattsburgh were archery, golf, biking, and horseback riding. We could choose our own activities and everything was free.

Gino and I decided to try horseback riding. Neither of us had much experience in riding but I had rented horses and was confident that I could ride anything that the Army had available. We checked in and found out that the horses were Army Cavalry horses. They had been retired because there was no longer any use for them. They were not old horses by any means.

Each of us was assigned to a particular horse. My horse's name was Jaboni. I thought it was a comical name for such a fine-looking animal. We were instructed on how to care for and brush our horses, how to put on the saddle and tighten the cinch, and how to cool the horses down by walking them about. Jaboni was very quiet through all these procedures.

We set out with our instructor on the lead horse. It was delightfully easy to command these horses. They would rein left and right with a mere touch of the reins on

their neck. I had always steered rental horses by pulling the rein in the hoped-for direction of travel. This was a great improvement.

Our group of about ten horses and riders trotted along and eventually entered a wooded area where the path wound past a building. There stood a rain barrel painted white. I didn't mind but Jaboni did. He stood up on his hind legs; he snorted and whinnied and danced. I bounced and rolled, half in the saddle and half on his back. At last he decided this *thing* was not a mountain lion and quieted down. After the excitement was over, the instructor looked back and remarked, "Don't worry; he's skittish near that barrel."

We began to get the hang of it and the ride was quite enjoyable. The instructor told us, "Do not let the horse decide what to do. You must be the boss." Then he called for a short gallop. I decided to test Jaboni and reined him in. But Jaboni's pals were galloping away. He fought the reins, swinging his head, jumping and kicking, pawing with his hooves at the sky. He tried to wipe me off against a tree. As I pulled my leg to safety, we took off at a gallop.

The others had stopped and were waiting for us in an asphalt parking lot. I gave Jaboni his head, but too late. Stopping on the slippery hardtop was impossible. We slid together beneath the horses' feet. After some frantic jumping and fancy footwork, the other horses remained standing. I can tell you that horses hooves so close to one's head are a fearsome sight.

As Gino described the incident to me, it was as though a torpedo had been launched among them. I was never able to talk about it later due to the laughter that broke out at the mere mention of Baril's Ride.

The instructor's face was dark red. I decided to forgo riding for a few days. I will say I outranked him by a good deal so I was free and clear. Jaboni didn't hold it against me; when I showed my face again he was quite content to eat the carrot I brought him.

We were returning from a ride on April 12<sup>th</sup> when we heard the news of President Franklin Roosevelt's death. It was an enormous shock. Some feared we could lose the war without him, but not even so great a leader as FDR is indispensable. Vice President Harry Truman took up the burden of bringing the war to an end. In less than a month the war in Europe ended on May 8, 1945, V-E Day. Three months and a few days later the war with Japan ended on August 15, 1945, V-J Day.

My war was over too. As soon as I received my Honorable Discharge papers, I shipped home for good. I was twenty years old.

*END*

## POSTSCRIPT

I had not heard from my old crew members for 48 years. Many times in the intervening years I re-lived the past and thought of the times we had weathered together. I wondered if they had survived these many years and where they lived. Were they married? Did they have children? How much had they changed since I had last seen them?

I wanted to see them again and wondered if some day one or more of them might cross my path. I wondered if they had kept in touch with each other and if I were the only one not accounted for, but somehow I never made a serious effort to find them. Forty-eight years is a long time. I knew that George was from Texas, but was he still there? I knew that Dick was from New York State, but where? I had no idea where the others might be. In this day and age I doubted that any remained in their original setting. As the years passed, I began to believe that not knowing about them might be a blessing. I did not want to hear that some had passed on.

One night as I sat down to dinner, I received a phone call. The caller identified himself as a Mr. Chang. He said that he had been locating members of the 461<sup>st</sup> Bomber Group and had found me from my records in the VA medical files. I had had a bypass operation in a VA hospital and was recovering at the time of the phone call.

Mr. Chang told me that Tom Hagie the nose gunner had passed away the previous Christmas. I was saddened to hear about Tommy but delighted to hear that most of the others were alive and well. Mr. Chang said I would be hearing from them. Old memories began to flood into my conscious thoughts. I was the last of the original crew to be located. Our replacement co-pilot, Alan Anderson, had not yet been located but they were still trying to find him.

About two days later I received a phone call from our pilot, Jim Spencer. Jim filled me in on a lot of things I had not known. I told Jim that I had written to the squadron and was told that Alan Anderson had made it through his fifty missions. Jim said it had been hard to find me since I had moved from place to place. To my surprise I found that I had been living about thirty miles from tail gunner Ernie Troupes, and Dick Falcone was now living only eighteen miles away as the crow flies. I called Dick and we made arrangements to meet by air.

Since I could no longer fly as a private pilot, I contacted a friend, Steve Fogarty, who was still flying. We got together with Dick and had a great time flying around the area. We landed at an air show where we found a B-24 on display. This B-24 was named the *All-American* but it had the names of other B-24 bombers inscribed on its fuselage. We were pleased to see the name of our old bomber, *Miss Kay*, printed there.

Dick and I explored the B-24 together and it took us right back to World War II again. The plane seemed to be much smaller than I remembered, particularly inside. I recalled the struggle I had gone through with Dick the day the alarm bell for bailout had

rung. It seemed to me that in the old days there was much more room to move about. Memory does very strange things, but somehow I could not believe it was as crowded then as it seemed today. I used to lie down on the floor to rest as we were landing after a mission, and there was room for three of us lying there. In the plane I visited there seemed to be very little space for that.

Our first stop in the plane was at our old gunner positions, I in the left waist and Dick in the right waist position. It seemed strange that we both moved automatically to our old and familiar positions. The guns were wooden replicas of the 50-cal. machine guns we had used. It bothered me that they were not real. The plane seemed to be crowded with equipment and I could not get over the feeling that it was much smaller than I remembered.

There were many new aircraft at the air show. The old bomber seemed out of place compared to the latest planes of the U.S. Air Force. There was a display of modern aerial fighting techniques. A Harrier jet hovered with a deafening roar and pivoted in position above the ground at a height of 15 feet, held aloft by the thrust of its engines. We were greatly impressed and I could not help feeling sad to see the half-century old bomber standing there quietly as the world passed her by. That old bomber had brought many men home. Many others had died. If only the bombers could tell their stories.

Time moves on. Since I was contacted by the crew, we have lost two more good men, Don Littel and Tony Fortuna. It was a shock to hear of their passing and to know that they have left us forever. Others have suffered family tragedies. Somehow these losses help us to see life as it really is: we become aware of our mortality. In my memory I can see and hear them all quite clearly, Tony saying, "I have less hair than any of you, but some day, after this is all over, I will see you again and I will have more hair than any of you." Tony was right in my case.

I can see Don with his easy smile, a great guy. I remember when he complained that the bees had been eating his chocolate bars. Was it really the bees? Don Littel and I had flown our last mission together and had taken the same ship home from Italy. The trip across the Atlantic lasted seventeen days because we took the longer southern route to avoid German submarines. It was a long but pleasant voyage. When you know you are coming home again, everything seems to be all right.

These friends have left us, and I miss them all. Out of the crew of eleven, there are six remaining at this writing. To date Alan Anderson has not been located. We hope that he will be found soon. As for the rest of us, I can say we are home again. How good it is to be home.



## WHO'S WHO

**Brownie** was Robert E. Brown from Bangor Maine; he called it God's country.

**Perry's** name was Perry Anderson.

**Gino** is Gino Chiodetti.

**Sergeant Duneasy's** real name was Denise—he called himself Deneeeeese, so I call him Duneasy and a few other unflattering names used by the guys in basic training. I might add that his name was always announced with four letters. Corporal Denise did make sergeant again just before we left. He was the embodiment of the sergeants you often see in the movies or read about. That the guys dared to do the things they did to him is the big miracle in this book. I would wonder what was going to happen when they stood up to him. He was not too mean to me but he called us shorties *short shits*. There are times when I think I actually miss the ugly son of a bitch. I think it is because it reminds me of when we were young.

**George Lee Brock**, I called him Lee. He was a full blooded Cherokee Indian, short with jet black hair; we were good friends. He was very broad and strong.

**Bailey, Balch, Becker, Batten, Brock, Brill, Brosky, Baril, and Wizzy.** I'm not sure, but I think Wizzy's last name was Warren or something with "W." I heard that Balch, Becker, Batten, and Brock were shot down over Germany but I never knew for sure.

**Joe Bonatak** was really a guy named Bonatakus or something like that. He was a Greek and huge.

On my crew there was the Pilot **James Spencer**, Co-Pilot **Herbert Hartford**, Navigator **Don Littel**, Bombardier **Howard Haas**, Gunners **Anthony Fortuna** top turret, **Dick Falcone** right waist gun, **Ernie Troupes** tail gunner, **George Veselka** ball gunner, **Thomas Hagie** nose gunner, and **Don Baril** left waist gunner. Our new co-pilot replacement for Herbie was **Allen Anderson**. He has not been found at this date. I wrote a letter to the group headquarters fifty years ago and they said he had made it. I gave that info to the pilot when they found me.