

Our Trip Home

by

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Ball Turret Gunner

Crew 16-3

764th Squadron

461st Bomb Group (H)

MAY 15, 1945

Everything was mass confusion at our base. Crews were packing up their personal things getting ready for the move back to the states. Crew briefings were held informing us of our route home. Most of the planes were to be ferried back to the states by the present combat crews. Our crew was assigned an older B-24 named 'Cherokee'. Our Crew Chief went over the airplane with his line crew and fine-tuned the old bird for her last long flight.

Lt. Brashawitz had been promoted to lead navigator for the entire 461st Group and would not be making the trip home with the rest of the crew. A navigator who had lost the rest of his crew was assigned to our crew. We also had an extra flight engineer riding along.

FIRST STOP

TUNTSIA, NORTH AFRICA

The airfield was in great shape, with wide paved runways and no mud this time. Our stay was a short one, just to refuel and check over the airplane. After a hot meal and a good night sleep, we were ready to fly the next morning.

STOP # 2

MARRAKESH, FRENCH MOROCCO

NORTH AFRICA

The only thing I remember about this stop was the weather. It was so hot on the runway that I think you could have fried an egg on the concrete. The food was much improved from our previous visit and they even had cold beer. I was not a

great lover of beer but that one sure did taste good. It was the first cold drink we had in about 6 months. The beer was in a metal can and brewed in Fort Wayne, Indiana. The next morning we refueled the airplane and headed south over the Alas Mountains and a great desert.

STOP # 3
DAKAR, SENEGAL
WEST AFRICA

If you look at a map you will see that Dakar is the closest point of Africa to South America. The airfield had been carved right out of the scrub brush. There was no fence around the field and very little security. Natives were walking along the runways and around the planes as we landed which was a very dangerous situation. Many of the women were carrying water cans and big bundles on their heads. The men were content to just tag along.

The food was not too great and the housing and support facilities were meager. Housing was no problem for Eddie and me. We volunteered to pull guard duty on the airplane once again. The revetment where we were parked was very near the heavy bush. During the night we heard a lion roar several times. We didn't go out to investigate.



Crews waiting for take off



Our B-24 'Cherokee

The next morning the rest of the crew returned to the airplane and started the preflight prior to take off. A short time later word came down that no flights were to go out today. Bad weather was brewing off the coast of Africa. We spent most of the day just lounging around the plane and talking to some of the natives.



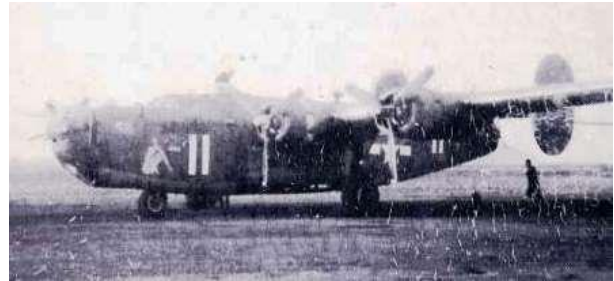
Eddie & Jimmy with natives



Group of natives



Native soldiers and Gilbert



Our B-24 'Cherokee'

Early the next morning all ten of the B-24s were ready to go. Planes were lined up waiting their turn to take off. The first plane lifted off the runway, retracted the landing gear and promptly exploded in a huge ball of fire. There were no survivors. All flights were canceled and ordered back to their parking area. Planes were double checked for any possible problems. After a delay of about one hour the group started taking off again.

The trickiest navigating was from Dakar to Natal, Brazil across the South Atlantic. The navigator had to use celestial for the first time, shooting the sun all day and getting fixes by reading the waves with a drift meter. When we established radio contact with the Natal tower we were informed that they had 10/10 cloud cover. Arriving over the field we found a hole in the clouds and landed. Several other planes had to go to another field at Recife, Brazil.

STOP # 4

NATAL, BRAZIL

The airfield was very good with security and adequate facilities for the crews and airplanes. They were geared up for our arrival and for the many hundreds that would follow in the coming weeks. We were not going to risk anyone fooling

around our B-24 so we posted our own 24-hour guard. Eddie and I pulled the night shift once again.

At dusk Eddie and I took over the guard duty on old 'Cherokee', while the rest of the crew lived it up at the clubs on base. They discovered that the Brazilian beer had a high alcohol content and like any good airmen went to bed early. Tomorrow we fly north towards the United States.

The next morning the crew reported to the flight line early to relieve Eddie and me. While we were using the facilities and getting our breakfast they discovered that flight engineer Salyers was missing. It is time to refuel the plane and flight check and no Ernie. The rest of the crew started a search of the barracks and found Ernie in a strange barracks very drunk and naked. Lt. Miner found some clothes for him and walked him back to the flight line. It was quite obvious that the Brazilian beer had done him in. The rest of the crew pitched in and refueled the airplane. The ground crew was amazed at how much fuel we had left in our tanks. They accused us of stopping for gas somewhere else. Thanks to our ground crew chief in Italy, who was a genius, our plane was running mean and lean.

Take off time was 0900 and old Ernie was breathing pure oxygen and trying to sober up. He proceeded to get very ill and made good use of a gallon tin can. No one had any sympathy for Ernie and his problem.

About two hours into the flight we flew into a severe tropical rain storm. The wind turbulence was bouncing us around and we were forced to hang onto something solid. The rain was so heavy that we couldn't see the tips of our wings. I was thinking what a terrible place to get forced down. We were over the Amazon River area and lots of deep jungle. If we went down in that mess no one would ever find us. Fortunately the storm only lasted about 30 minutes and suddenly we were in bright sunshine. Old 'Cherokee' had not missed a beat and was flying like a new bird.

STOP # 5

BRITISH, GUIANA

British, Guiana (Now called Guyana) is in extreme northern South America - a very hot, tropical climate that seemed to be mostly jungle. Our landing strip was

good and refueling was immediate. Our stay was to last overnight, just long enough for the gang to visit the Officers Club and sample rum and coke. They kept an eye on Salyers to make sure he didn't disappear again. Everyone was on the flight line and ready to fly at 0900 the next morning.

STOP # 6

JUNE 7,1945

PUERTO RICO

We flew north on a beautiful day at about 5,000 feet over the south Atlantic. The water was so blue and in some areas very shallow. Faithful old 'Cherokee' just cruised along without a care in the world. What a horrible ending for such a fine airplane. She would soon be in the salvage yard at Kingman, Arizona and destined to be made into pots and pans.

The Air Force at Puerto Rico was built as a permanent base to last forever. It had served as a base for south Atlantic patrols looking for German subs during the war. The base was first class and one of the most complete facilities I had ever seen. They had everything that a small city could offer for the personnel. Our visit the first night to the cafeteria type mess hall was a big surprise. The food was the best and they had ice cold milk! The barracks were all brick structures and very comfortable with beds that had mattresses. We were up and down to the cafeteria bright and early for a real all American breakfast of bacon, real eggs and all of the trimmings. At 0900 we were in the air again headed for Hunter Field, Georgia.

LAST STOP

HUNTER FIELD, GEORGIA

Our flight across the Gulf of Mexico was one unforgettable sight. Flying low over the Gulf and following the Gulf Stream up the east coast of Florida. Miami Beach was a beautiful sight and our destination was rapidly approaching. Lt. Rathfelder got on the intercom and said, "Men, this is our last flight with old 'Cherokee' and as a crew and members of the 764th Bomb Squadron of the Fifteenth Air Force. When we land, we will all be Air Force personnel due for reassignment. We may never see one another again during our Air Force careers. I wish you all good luck in your new assignment." He was absolutely right for that's just what happened.

Landing at Hunter Field the confusion really started. Everyone was trying to get his personal bags and things off the airplane. B-24s were everywhere, some landing others taking off to be ferried to Kingman, Arizona to the salvage center. It was a little hard to take knowing the fate of all of those airplanes, that they were being replaced by big brother B-29s. This was the last time I saw a B-24 until 40 years later.

As far as I know there are only two flying models of the B-24 in the United States. One called 'Diamond Lil' owned by the Confederate Air Force Association which is a stripped down transport version. The other B-24 is the 'All American' which is completely restored in every detail. There were 19,256 B-24s produced during World War II and were used by many nations in all parts of the world. At one time the Willow Run bomber plant in Michigan was producing a new B-24 every 58 minutes. The Liberators never had the glamorous press coverage that was lavished on the Flying Fortress B-17s. We who flew the B-24s had a special feeling about the big ugly brutes.

THE B-24:	WING SPAN:	110 FEET
	LENGTH:	67 FEET 2 INCHES
	GROSS WEIGHT:	65,000 POUNDS
	RANGE:	2,100 MILES WITH 4,000 LB BOMB LOAD
	SPEED:	300 M.P.H. AT 30,000 FEET
	ARMAMENT:	10 - 50 CALIBER MACHINE GUNS
	MAX. BOMB LOAD:	12,800 POUNDS
	CREW:	10 MEN

Our 461st Bomb Group was officially shut down and ordered back to the States on May 17, 1945. During its 13 month deployment in southern Italy it achieved one of the highest records in the Fifteenth Air Force. In those 13 months the 461st had dropped 10,885 tons of bombs in nine countries:

AUSTRIA	CZECHOSLOVAKIA
FRANCE	YUGOSLAVIA
GREECE	HUNGARY
ITALY	RUMANIA
GERMANY	

Losses sustained by the group were:

Killed in action:	198
Missing in action:	93
Killed in the line of duty:	33

Since activation of the 461st Bomb Group, over 5,300 men served within the squadrons. During its tour the group lost 99 B-24s to enemy fighters, flack, and weather. Gunners downed 129 enemy fighters, probably destroyed 44 more and damaged 16.

Group personnel were awarded the following Military Decorations:

- 4 Legions of Merit
- 11 Silver Star
- 319 Distinguish Flying Crosses and 28 Bronze Oak Leaf Clusters
- 66 Bronze Star with 1 Oak Leaf Cluster
- 15 Soldiers Medals
- 2,806 Air Medals with 29 Silver Oak Leaf Clusters
- 4,328 Oak Leaf Clusters
- 271 Purple Hearts and 8 Bronze Oak Leaf Clusters

The 461st Bomb group was called back to active duty during the Korean War and again during the Vietnam War.

During WWII in the European theater the British and the Americans lost 33,770 airplanes over Europe. 79281 British airmen were lost. 79,265 members of the United States Air Force were also lost. This was indeed a high risk occupation.

EPILOGUE OF CREW 16-3 AS OF THIS DATE JUNE 2, 1998

LT. M. RATHFELDER - PILOT remained in the Air Force until 1947. He was promoted to Captain and assigned to the Sioux Falls base working at a desk job processing personnel for reassignment and discharges. Returning to civilian life he was back at flying. This time he was the personal pilot for a very famous radio personality in the Chicago area. He flew for Don McNeil for several years. Later

he was an insurance investigator for a large company based in Ohio. Deceased 1995.

LT. ROGER MINOR – CO-PILOT was discharged in late 1945 and returned to his home and wife in Connecticut. Roger returned to college and received his degree in archaeology. He moved to California and went to work for a large oil company exploring for new oil deposits. His job took him to Alaska and many places in central and south America. Deceased 1997.

LT. T. MARVIN - BOMBARDIER was discharged in 1945 and returned to Louisiana. No one ever heard from him again. The 461st Association could find no record of him with the VA, Civil Service, or Social Security. Status unknown.

LT. BEN BRASAHWITZ - NAVIGATOR stayed on in Italy for several months. Returned to the States and secured an appointment to Air Force flight training. Graduated as a fighter pilot and remained in the Air Force for two more years. After returning to Ohio he was engaged in a successful tool and die business. He now owns and flies a state of the art glider. Ben has changed his name to Brash.

SGT. E. SAYLERS - FLIGHT ENGINEER was discharged in late 1945 and returned to the hills of Kentucky. No one ever heard from him again. Records of the 461st Association indicate - deceased.

SGT. J. EBERLINE - TAIL GUNNER was discharged in late 1945 and returned to the Chicago area. We exchanged Christmas cards and messages for many years. Deceased.

CPL. W. QUIGLEY - RADIO OPERATOR - WAIST GUNNER was discharged in late 1945 and returned to California where he operated a service station. We exchanged Christmas cards for many years. Deceased.

CPL. J. GEORGE - TOP TURRET GUNNER was discharged in late 1945 and returned to Warren, Ohio. He worked with his brothers in the pin ball business. Mary Jane and I visited Jim and his wife in early 1950. Later Jim went into the insurance business.

CPL. E. PESESKY - NOSE TURRET GUNNER was discharged in late 1945 and returned to New Jersey and married Maurine. Later moved to Denver and operated a TV and radio repair business. We visited Ed and Maurine in New Jersey and they visited us in Ohio several times. On several occasions we visited the Pesesky's in Denver. Deceased.

CPL. R. GILBERT - BALL TURRET GUNNER was discharged in late December 1945 and returned to Ohio. Married Mary Jane in 1948 and tried farming for a living for a few years. Received an appointment as a Rural Letter carrier in 1951 and retired in 1982.



Bob meets Mary Jane - summer 1946