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Dear Martha,

In my last letter I left out (blame faulty memory) something that happened on the flight from Gander, Newfoundland to Wales. Recall that we had extra gas tanks installed in the bomb bay of the new B-24 we were bringing overseas. Apparently our crew-chief engineer, Bill Hunt, hadn't been specifically trained how to transfer gas from these tanks since they were a one-time-only use and operation – nothing you'd run into before or after the ferrying job was complete. After all, bomb bays are for bombs, not gas tanks.

Anyway, about two thirds of the way over the north Atlantic, the plane was on automatic pilot. Both the pilot, Hansen and your brother, Bill, co-pilot, were asleep. It was pitch-dark and, of course, we were not flying at bombing altitude of 20,000± feet. Engineer Hunt decided to transfer gas from the bomb bay tanks to the wing tanks (or something like that, according to his story later) and, bless my soul, he turned off the valve(s) that routed the gas to the engines. Some aircraft may glide when power is cut off, but the B-24 does not – it drops like a stone, which is what we did that night.

For those of us aft of the bomb bay, the absence of engine sound and the sharp decline of the deck were ample indication that something was drastically wrong. We jumped up from reclining positions and rushed to the rectangular openings in the waist (no Plexiglas windows there). It was obvious we were going down, and soon we could see the white-caps of an angry ocean rushing up toward us. We thought we'd had it without ever flying a mission, or dropping a bomb. About that time, the engines started up and we leveled off and started to climb. Engineer Hunt had switched the gas on, the pilot/co-pilot woke up and flew the plane manually. The crisis was over, but our hearts didn't stop thumping, and the adrenalin didn't stop flowing for many minutes after that. We often swore we were close enough to the waves to reach out and touch them, but that was probably an exaggeration. My best recollection and estimate is that we were about 50 feet above the water, but I'd swear you could hear the waves and smell the salt! (Engineer Hunt denied for years that it was his fault the engines quit, but finally when we met for one of our reunions a few years ago, he owned up to his goof.)

Okay, back to Cerignola, where we landed after leaving north Africa, some time in December 1944. It was wet and muddy when we landed, and it rained off and on all the rest of December. We enlisted men were assigned to a typical pyramid tent, which had previously been occupied by a crew which didn't return from a mission. I don't know where your brother and the other officers were quartered. The field at Cerignola was located on what used to be a farm, or agricultural operation of some kind, and several old stucco buildings became headquarters offices for the 461<sup>st</sup> Bomb Group and the 767<sup>th</sup> Squadron. Whether there were enough buildings or space for officers' quarters I do not recall.

Our tent had no floor, so the first thing we did was to scrounge (a marvelous GI word, meaning to liberate an article from its former location and purpose) lumber from bomb crates and anything else we could find to raise our cots and foot lockers from the mud. The tent had no heat, so the second thing we did was liberate a 55-gallon drum and some tubing and an oxygen tank (from a disabled B-24) and construct an oil stove which we put in the center of the tent. The oxygen tank stayed outside, filled with oil piped to the burner inside the oil drum. It worked. GI ingenuity at its best!

Two great disappointments befell us when we first arrived. First, we didn't get to keep our brand new, shining B-24 that we brought over from the States. The seniority system prevailed. As the "new kids on the block" our missions were usually flown on the oldest, most patched up, most decrepit plane on the field. Second, it was our job to do "scut work" for the senior crews who were flying the missions, i.e. disassemble and clean their machine guns, clean out their turrets, haul and load ammo and stuff like that. We got balky, and were called up before the squadron commander who explained to us the facts of life. The bottom line is that the combination of rainy weather causing many non-flying days and serving our apprenticeship – that is, letting other senior crews go first – meant that we flew no missions in December 1944. So, here we were, gung ho to do our glorious duty and bomb the Hun, sitting around in the mud grumbling and cleaning up problems which weren't ours to start with. Christmas of 1944 was not very jolly.

More to come, and Bill will be featured more prominently than sleeping while the auto-pilot flies the plane.

Happy St. Valentine's Day, anyway  
Bruce