

# **A Funny Thing Happened On the Way to Prague**

by

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For some strange reason, I always think of my soldiering years around Christmas time. I suppose it's because I spent the Christmas of 1944 in North Africa, and then went on to Italy for the remainder of the war in Europe.

In Italy, I was based just outside the tiny village of Cerignola- a minor dot on the map about thirty miles south of Foggia. I was assigned to the 461<sup>st</sup> Bombardment Group, 767<sup>th</sup> Bomb Squadron of the Fifteenth Air Force (Army Air Corps). I was a B-24 pilot with missions as close as Northern Italy and Yugoslavia, and as far as Austria and Germany.

Early one morning, about midway through my tour of duty (probably March or April), we were briefed on a major strike which was to take place over Prague, Czechoslovakia. This was a long haul for us, and the folks in command of the Fifteenth Air Force felt that this major effort would take the Germans by surprise. For us, however, it was not to be.

About three hours into the mission, we began to lose power and we determined that we had lost a turbo super-charger on one of our inboard engines. Despite our efforts, we were unable to keep up with the formation. We radioed our dilemma to the lead ship and were advised to abort. They also told us to call in assistance from the fighter command, which we did without arguing.

At this point, I must say that the Germans - mostly in ME-109 fighter planes - were always around. However, because of fuel shortages and decreased aircraft capacity, they were slow to attack large bomber formations, but instead, they watched and waited for stragglers or aircraft in trouble, and they would then pounce upon the "cripples".

As we slowly turned and headed back south toward the Adriatic Sea, we noticed two small dots which seemed to be growing larger by the minute, and were coming straight at us. The familiar silhouettes of ME-109s appeared and came roaring in at full throttle. At the same moment screaming out of the sun from the east, came a single P-51 American fighter. He cut directly in front of the ME-109s, fired a short warning burst, and then, like a protective mother, he did a barrel roll around our crippled ship. This accomplished, he positioned himself a bit higher and directly off our right wing, as if to say "OK you bastards, come and get it". I suppose that the Jerries in the ME-109s knew how to add because the firepower in our ship plus the rapid maneuverability and superior skill of the P-51 pilot covering us, made up their minds for them in

a hurry. With great dispatch, they dropped about 500 feet or so below us, and roared out of there to become small dots once again.

When all the excitement was over (and it didn't take long), we glanced over at our protector. He had a grin on his face from ear to ear, and a skin texture that looked like fine ebony.

When we reached the Northern Coast of the Adriatic, our escort peeled off, wagged his wings, and headed south. The only thing we knew about him was that he was a hell of a flyer, and on the upper cowling of his ship he had painted "Lucifer II".

The remainder of the trip back was uneventful. We feathered the faulty engine, and returned to our base at Cerignola with a sense of relief and a feeling that we were lucky as hell.

We received a couple of shots of bourbon with our de-briefing, and received the radioed good news that our mission had been successful, and that no further casualties had been reported.

I wandered back to the tent that we called home, pulled out some clean clothes and walked down a small rise which led to a shower room. After a lukewarm shower and a shave, I dressed and walked over to a toufee block barn that we used for a mess hall. (Toufee blocks, by the way, are light aggregate bricks that are made up from sand, local mud, and whatever else happens to be available. They seemed to work pretty well and the concoction also qualified as a pretty fair mortar for the joints).

There were just a few guys in the mess hall. It wasn't quite noon, as I recall, and the squadron had still not returned. Since the lunch menu wasn't quite ready, I settled for whatever they had left from breakfast. It wasn't too bad.

A major I had met when we first arrived at Cerignola was finishing off a cup of coffee, and I moved over to where he was sitting. He was a very nice guy (an intelligence officer who handled a lot of briefings, and was also in charge of all the alcohol that was allocated to our group - a very good man to know). I told him about our aborted mission which he, of course, already knew about. I then asked him what he knew about the black airmen. He said the report on them was that they were the best qualified fighter pilots in the business, and that we were fortunate that they were assigned to the Fifteenth Air Force.

I told the major that I really wanted to see their outfit, and particularly the guy who saved our ass. My only clue to his identity was the name on his ship - "Lucifer II".

The major - I'm sorry to say that I can't remember his name - knew quite a bit about the outfit, and particularly about a fairly large contingent of southern politicians who raised a good deal of hell about allowing black airmen to train, or for that matter, to even participate in the flying end of the air corps. It seems that their idea was to confine the black folks to the mess halls. In reality, the black airmen did very well, and with few exceptions, showed themselves to be every bit as proficient as their white counterparts. In addition to that, they were required to have much

more education and flying background than their white Anglo counterparts. They became known as the Tuskegee Airmen. "To my knowledge", said the major, "the Tuskegee Airmen are set up about thirty or forty miles down the coast, and just outside a little town called Bari. I've got a jeep that will probably get you there if you don't mind a lousy transmission".

I thanked the major, and also asked him if he'd like to join me. He had already got word of the formation coming in within the hour, and he had to pass around the booze and de-brief the crews. He could only say, "Give me a rain check".

I left the mess hall, and headed for the major's jeep, which was parked in a small enclosure that was reserved for field grade officers. Bill Jones- a pilot friend of mine who was not flying that day- saw me get into the jeep, and wandered over to bum a ride down the hill to his tent. "I'll do better than that, Pal - how about joining me on a ride to Bari?"

"What happens in Bari?" Bill wanted to know. I gave him a brief story about our aborted mission, and about the black guy in a P-51 who literally saved our bacon. I told him it was probably a needle in a haystack, but what the hell - it was nice day and there wasn't anything else to do.

We tossed a couple of cigars, a beat up road map, and some candy bars into the jeep, and headed south.

The roads in Italy were nothing to write about, but the scenery was great. We followed the Adriatic, and passed several fishing towns that looked old and inviting. Bari was the largest town in the area - I'd guess forty or fifty thousand. We drove down the main drag and looked for something or someone who might direct us to the P-51 base of the Tuskegee Airmen. Neither of us spoke Italian, but we felt something would tell us where to go. We criss-crossed several downtown streets, and saw nothing familiar, and the strangest thing was that unlike Foggia, and some of the other seaport towns, we saw no uniforms. I was beginning to think that maybe we took a wrong turn or something when we both caught sight of a singular clue. It was a Red Cross sign with the word "Welcome" in both English and Italian. We pulled the jeep over to the curb, cut the engine, and walked over to the Red Cross and the door beneath it. It was plastered inside with posters, directions, photographs, announcements, and a bunch of additional information in both English and Italian. A young lady with an English accent said "Hello", and then asked if she could help us. We told her that we were looking for a black pilot of a P-51 American aircraft, and wondered if she could direct us to the airbase where he might be stationed. "That's easy", said the young lady. "You need to go to the base - about 16 miles west of here, and I would suggest you continue approximately one half mile on the street outside, and then turn left on guess what - AIRDROME ROAD".

We thanked her and were almost out the door, when she said: "By the way, two streets behind you there is a bar with no name that I know of. There's a painting of a P-51 above the door, but

nothing else. It may be that someone in the bar can direct you to the gentleman you are looking for. At least it's worth a try".

We thanked the lady again, and headed for the bar. It wasn't difficult to locate and we soon found ourselves walking through the doorway of a dark wooden structure that had a bar running the full length of the building. There were no empty seats, so I went over to the closest guy I saw - (they were all black) - "I wonder if you could help me". Two officers turned around and the closest one said, "What can I do for you?" I told him that I was looking for a pilot who had 'Lucifer II' painted on the cowling of his plane. He thought a minute and said, "And why do you need this fellow?"

I looked at him for a couple of seconds, and I wasn't sure what I was going to say. "Well it's like this. A few hours ago, I was flying a B-24 in a formation that was headed to Prague. About midway we lost a turbo super-charger, and had to abort our part of the mission. We turned back south, and called in fighter command for some help".

"You don't need to say anymore. I think you'll find the guy you're looking for about eight chairs down. He'll have a beat up cowboy hat on his head".

We looked for the hat, and headed to it. For some reason, I was suddenly scared to death. We arrived at his chair, and he didn't turn around. The grin I had been close enough to see in his P-51 was not present. His collar had the shiny silver emblem of a Lieutenant Colonel. I had not experienced the pleasure of being around pilots that were Colonels, and I found myself almost mute. Without turning around, he said softly, "What do you need young man?"

I sort of choked, and finally said, "Thanks a lot for your help early this morning. I was in the aborted B-24".

He said, "OK- What else?" He still hadn't turned around.

"Well", I said, "We sure were glad to see you".

He said, "Yeah - I imagine you were. Anything else?"

"No Sir".

"Well - OK young fellow, Good Luck!"

At this point in our stumbling conversation, I said, "Thank you". My friend and I left. We never really saw him except in profile. I was still scared to death. And another thing, we never knew his name, and he never volunteered it.

This about winds up much ado about nothing. When, several years ago, a movie was made about the Tuskegee Airmen, I took another shot at finding out about my friend, but I never did any good. I talked to folks at Tuskegee and also in Washington D.C. and in New York. I'm afraid I

waited too long, and even if I had found him again, I suspect that like Gary Cooper, or some of the other strong silent characters of yore, he would say, "OK Kid", and then would ride off into the sunset.