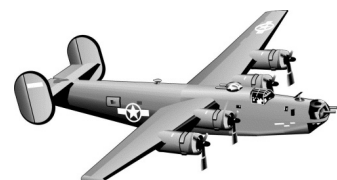




Flightline



Newsletter of the 780th Bombardment Squadron of WWII

March 2021

Testament to expert flying, maintenance crews

780th treasured two notable airships

There are two aircraft most associated with the 780th squadron: *Agony Wagon* and *V-Grand*. Despite their positive notoriety it's been difficult to compile the full story of either aircraft, but what is known is that both planes served the 780th well in combat (*Agony Wagon*) and celebrity (*V-Grand*). Following is a brief history of both ships, derived from the squadron history book, *780th Memoirs*, and online sources:

Agony Wagon was the patriarch of the 780th fleet. Officially designated *Red H*, serial number 42-52376, but more fondly known as *Agony Wagon* (*Shades of Marcellus*), she was assigned to the 780th Bomb Squadron at McCook, Nebraska on 14 January 1944.

Between 5 May 1944 and 6 Aug 1944, the airplane flew 44 missions without a single early return. On 30 Aug 1944, *Agony's* No. 3

engine, with only 31:50 hours, was damaged sufficiently by flak to require an engine change. This was the first engine change in the history

of the squadron for flak damage. By the end of August *Agony Wagon* was a veteran of the squadron, having completed 60 combat missions over enemy territory.

According to *Memoirs*, after her 70th mission *Agony Wagon* not only received the attention she richly deserved by squadron personnel but also was the subject of much interest throughout the Group as each succeeding takeoff brought a correspondingly successful return. But her luck changed on 4 January 1945 when she was almost lost on a mission to the Bolzano, Italy, marshalling yards. According to *Memoirs*, an 88-mm shell penetrated the waist, leav-



Above: Only known photo of 780th's *Agony Wagon* (b24best-web.com). Below: 81st Service Group mechanics celebrate successful No. 2 engine install following *V-Grand's* second emergency landing at Vis, 29 October 1944 (fold3.com)



continued on page 3...

Your News & Letters

The last couple issues of *Flightline* prompted a number of welcome calls and emails.

Alice Lindeman, widow of Louis "Dyke" Lindeman, called in January to say she had a number of photos from past reunions. A friend of hers scanned and sent the photos and they will be published in the June issue.

Alice is doing great, by the way. She will be in 86 in

April and volunteers every Wednesday at the Buffalo Bill Cody Cultural Center in Oakley, Kansas. She has eight grandchildren and one great-grandchild, swims, and eats out with friends. It was great to hear from you, Alice!



In February I got a call from Edwin and Bertha Rostedt's son, Walter, in Ohio. He had

the sad news that both his parents had passed away - just two weeks apart late last year. Their obituaries appear on page 5. Walter also said the front page article in the December issue about World War II slang touched home. One particular example, "jumped out at me," he said, as something his dad said - "pucker factor" (to describe the tenseness or danger level of a situation).

Peteraf first replacement officer to go home T/Sgt. Miller awarded Silver Star for heroic act

In the December 2020 issue of *Flightline* Jim Smith, son of gunner Jack Smith of the Ralph Humphrey crew, asked if anyone had information about the rest of the crew. In researching the front page article of this issue I came across information about the crew's engineer, T/Sgt. Ed Miller. This description is taken from *Memoirs*:

On the first mission of March 1945, flying over the alternate target of Maribor, Yugoslavia, an act of heroism was performed that is worthy of mention. The "flak" encountered was described as "heavy, very intense, extremely accurate" ("most accurate ever seen"). A few seconds after "bombs away," the plane in which T/Sgt. Edward V. Miller, engineer, was flying received a direct hit through the bomb bays, a piece coming up through the doors to the flight deck, hitting one of Sgt. Miller's legs and severing it. First aid was immediately rendered, just as the bomb bays caught fire. With the bomb bays badly shot up, the hydraulic system shot out, preventing the doors from being closed, danger of the airplane blowing up was great. Despite his serious condition and excruciating pain, Sgt. Miller calmly and bravely stuck to his post and when No. 3 gasoline tank ran dry, directed others on how to properly transfer fuel, aiding materially in the safe landing of the airplane on a emergency landing field. Despite his serious condition, Sgt. Miller retained consciousness and his fortitude so inspired the rest of the crew that they were able to crash land the airplane without loss to personnel. For his heroic action under such trying conditions, Sgt. Miller was awarded the Silver Star Medal and his bed in the 26th General Hospital, Bari, Italy, became the gathering place for members of the Squadron who flocked down there to pay him homage.

Memoirs also had details about another crewman who is believed to have been with the Humphrey's crew. On 4 March 1945, Lt. Alfred W. Peteraf departed for the United States. According to *Memoirs* Peteraf was the first combat replacement member to complete his tour of duty. Peteraf completed his tour on 23 February 1945, the first replacement officer of the squadron to do so, and therefore likely was not on the Maribor mission.

There were many examples to choose from, and I'm glad at least one of those I highlighted registered with a *Flightline* reader. If anyone else has a World War II slang anecdote, please let me know!



I have also received a number of emails. Debbie Haggerty, daughter of the late Bill Edwards, said she especially liked the December issue and requested to receive future issues by email. Done!

Susan Ackerman emailed to say that her father, John Ackerman, nephew of Joe Kling, had passed away in December. She said her dad enjoyed the *Flightline*, and I can say I enjoyed his support and correspondence, dating back to 2014.



I also want to say thanks to George Huntington, son-in-law of the late Ardel Steele, and Michael Campbell, son of the late Ord Campbell, for their Christmas wishes and appreciation for the newsletter. It is personally rewarding to research and prepare each newsletter, but it's even more rewarding to know that it is of value to you.

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ing a gaping hole large enough for a person to crawl through. Fortunately the shell failed to explode. *Agony* limped her way back to base for repairs and "its splendid ground crew soon had it ready for further flying." By the end of January *Agony Wagon* had 78 missions to her credit.

But her luck finally ran out on 8 March 1945 on Mission 156 to the Verona, Italy, marshalling yards. No other details about the mission or the exact circumstances behind *Agony Wagon's* loss could be easily found, except that she was flown by a freshman crew of another squadron in the group, not the 780th.

Agony Wagon's loss was a big blow to the 780th. In fact, *Memoirs* states that the other significant event for March 1945 - the elimination of Vienna as a target following its capture by Russian armies - was second to the loss of *Agony Wagon* to the squadron. Incidentally, the 465th was the last group to bomb Vienna before it fell.

"When lost (*Agony Wagon*) was well on its way to a record of longevity which was hoped would match anything ever done in combat for this type of airplane," notes *Memoirs*. "To those who flew this airplane, as well as her ground crew which was instrumental in making this record possible, go full credit."

Including its 4 original engines, *Agony Wagon* had a total of 19 engines, the average engine life being approximately 335 hours per engine. This was by far the highest average of any aircraft in the squadron, according to *Memoirs*. When she took off for her last mission *Agony Wagon* had a total flying time of 999:25 hours, and had just passed 1,000 hours when she crashed which was also the highest flying time of any airplane in the entire bombardment group. She flew a staggering total of 92 combat missions over enemy territory with only 6 early returns.

V-Grand

V-Grand was a famous aircraft for a couple reasons. First, she was the 5,000th B-24 manufactured by Consolidated. The exterior of the aircraft was signed by the factory workers, and the signatures remained throughout her combat career. Second, she was known for getting in and out of tough scrapes.

The 780th was honored to receive the history-making airplane on 11 Aug 1944. The plane already had received wide publicity in the United States prior to being flown overseas. One member of the crew that flew *V-Grand* overseas to Pantanella and joined the 780th was bombardier Sgt. Forrest "Dew Drop" Morgan. In addition to flying the famous aircraft Morgan became famous himself for winning the national bobsled championship in 1959. He also was a former manager of the U.S. Olympic team.

continued on page 4...

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V-Grand, serial number 44-41064 and officially designated aircraft "L" in the 780th, was in demand and flown by many crews. She was considered a lucky ship despite her checkered career. According to *Memoirs* she "was a sturdy plane, being able to 'take it' as well as 'dish it out.' She weathered the heaviest 'flak' but always managed to return from missions despite engines shot out and other battle damage."

For example, in early October 1944 on a mission to Vienna, V-Grand had two engines shot out by flak and barely made it to the emergency landing field on the island of Vis. After extensive repairs she was back in action quickly, heading back to Vienna that same month. The co-pilot on this second Vienna mission was 2Lt. William E. Rondeau of the 780th.

According to Rondeau's hometown newspaper, *The Grand Island (Nebraska) Independent*, returning crews reported V-Grand had been set afire over the target and was lost. However V-Grand turned up safely at Vis, again, setting several records. Here is Rondeau's account of what happened:

Flak alley at Vienna was operating on high and we were peppered as we came in on our bombing run. After bombs away, we found that the oil cooler of one engine had been hit and set afire. We couldn't cut the engine to prevent the prop from running away, we had to keep the plane at a nose-high altitude. We finally put the fire out but lost our formation in the process. The pilot tried to head to Russia but couldn't get a bearing so he plunged V-Grand into an overcast. Despite the danger of icing we remained in the clouds for almost two hours. When we came out, we found ourselves 7,000 feet south of Budapest. We headed away from there plenty fast. We flew V-Grand over the Yugoslavian mountains (Alps), keeping her nose turned toward Italy. By this time, the plane had flown three hours with no oil in the No. 2 engine. The crew expected the "bail out" signal at any moment, but we kept pushing the plane toward home. She stayed up beautifully. Over the Adriatic Sea, she flew

until a friendly island airfield was sighted. The brakes were out, the bomb bay doors shut or the nose wheel lowered, but the engineer cranked down the landing wheels by hand and V-Grand came in for a landing.

The pilot was Capt. Everett W. Steiner of the 780th. Steiner's 2014 obituary mentions that this was his third mission on V-Grand, and that "he piloted the crippled bomber for 4-1/2 hours at the near stall speed of 120mph before successfully landing the plane on the island of Vis, Yugoslavia," (now Croatia). "He had the crew tie their parachutes to the gunners' side doors and deployed them when the plane touched the ground to slow it down as the hydraulics were shot out. For this effort, he was awarded the Distinguished Flying Cross by Gen. Curtis LeMay."

After flying just ten combat missions in the squadron and being diverted to Vis twice, each time needing a new engine, on 16 October 1944 the plane was transferred to the XVAF Service Command. However on 2 Jan 1945 she made a surprising return to the squadron. Per *Memoirs*, "This airplane had already had a stormy career in its short combat tour, but would now go back after more glory for its manufacturer before hostilities would end."

It is not readily known how many more missions V-Grand flew with the 780th but on the 17 February 1945 mission to Pola, Italy, V-Grand lost one engine; collected over 150 holes with large holes in the nose and ball turrets; lost all hydraulic fluid with no flaps, no rudder controls and partial aileron controls; had a hole in the nose wheel and the oxygen system was shot out.

"But we were lucky," wrote S/Sgt. Loveless J. Simon in his mission diary, posted on the website of the 458th Bomb Group where Simon was stationed before being transferred to the 780th. "Yes, very lucky and made it OK to our base."

V-Grand was sent home on 8 June 1945. A 2016 online post claims that V-Grand, one of the most famous B-24s during the war, sits in the U.S. military aircraft boneyard at Davis-Monthan Airfield outside Tucson, Arizona. See more photos of V-Grand on the back cover of this newsletter.

TAPS



Bertha C. Rostedt, 95, of Tallmadge, Ohio, passed away November 22, 2020, in Akron, Ohio. She was born in Danielson, Connecticut, on February 19, 1925, the daughter of Walter and Sophia Sroka. She graduated from Killingly High School in 1943 where she met Edwin Rostedt. They were married February 11, 1946. Bertha is survived by her husband of nearly 75 years, Edwin J. Rostedt; sons, Walter (Jill) of North Ridgeville, Eric (Vicki) of Kent, and Brian (Ginette) of Springfield Township; daughter-law, Barb; grandchildren, Ryan, Kelly, Jon, Jason, Jessica, Mike, Elizabeth and Natalie; and thirteen great-grandchildren. She was preceded in death by her son, Markus, and sister, Lottie Ladefian.

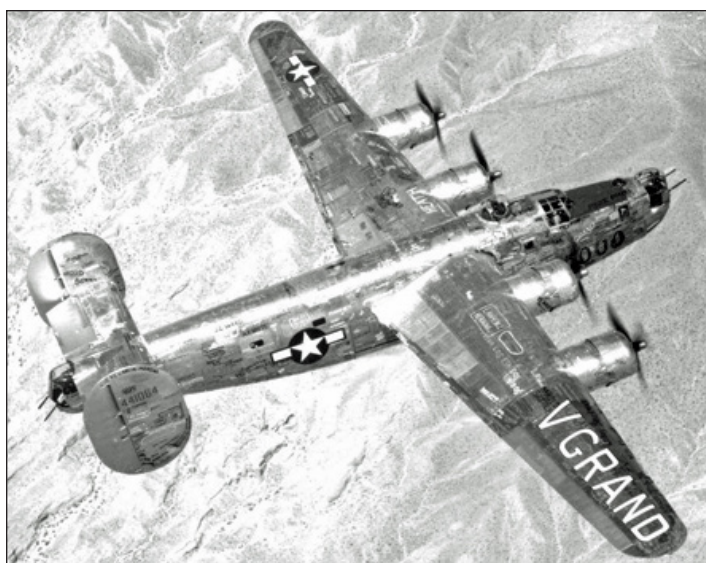


Edwin J. Rostedt, 95, of Tallmadge, Ohio, passed away peacefully after a short illness, December 7, 2020, in Akron, Ohio. Edwin was born December 1, 1925, in Brooklyn, New York, to new Finnish immigrants Senja (nee Minkkinen) and John Markus Rostedt. In 1935 the family moved to Connecticut where Edwin helped build the family home and poultry farm in the largely Finnish farming community of Brooklyn. It was at Killingly High School in Danielson, Connecticut, where Ed met Bertha Sroka and they began their

life's journey together before he entered military service. Ed was assigned to the 780th squadron, 465th Bombardment Group, 15th Air Force, flying out of Pantanella, Italy. As a top turret gunner on B-24 heavy bombers Ed completed 32 missions over enemy territory. On Friday, October 13, 1944, he went MIA over Blechhammer, Poland. Weeks later, the crew was found to have made an emergency landing at a Soviet airfield in Lvov, Ukraine. He always referred to Friday the 13th as his "Lucky Day." After their bomber was repaired, the crew returned to action until VE Day. Ed's "GI all expenses paid world tour" included stops in Iran, the Trucial States, Egypt, Tunisia, Libya, West Africa and Brazil. From there, his crew came up through Central America on their return flight to the States. After the war, Ed completed his education at aeronautical school and then moved to Akron, Ohio, to work for Goodyear Aircraft on navy defense system programs from blimps (lighter than air) to anti-ship torpedos and vertical launch missiles, retiring after 43 years. Ed and Bertha built a home in Tallmadge, Ohio, where they lived for over 70 years. As an only child, Ed took great pleasure in his family, his favorite hobby. In 2009, he took a trip to his parents' native Finland, where he toured the nation and reconnected with his parents' extended family after almost 100 years. Edwin was preceded in death by his wife of 75 years, Bertha; and eldest son, Markus. He is survived by daughter-in-law, Barbara; sons, Walter (Jill), Eric (Vicky) and Brian (Ginette); grandchildren, Kelly (Ben) Jessup, Ryan (Melissa) Rostedt, Elizabeth (Mike) Casula, Mike (Maria) Rostedt, Jon (fiancee Cortney) Rostedt, Jason (Justina) Rostedt, Jessica (Josh) Kvam and Natalie Rostedt, and 16 great-grandchildren.

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One of the most famous B-24s produced, *V-Grand*, was part of the 780th fleet. Top left: *V-Grand* flying over the rugged terrain near San Diego on an early test flight. Top right: 780th engineers replacing the flak-shattered bombardier's window. Bottom right: aircraft modification mechanics celebrate *V-Grand*'s completion. See the front cover for an article about *V-Grand* and *Agony Wagon*, another noteworthy 780th aircraft.

