

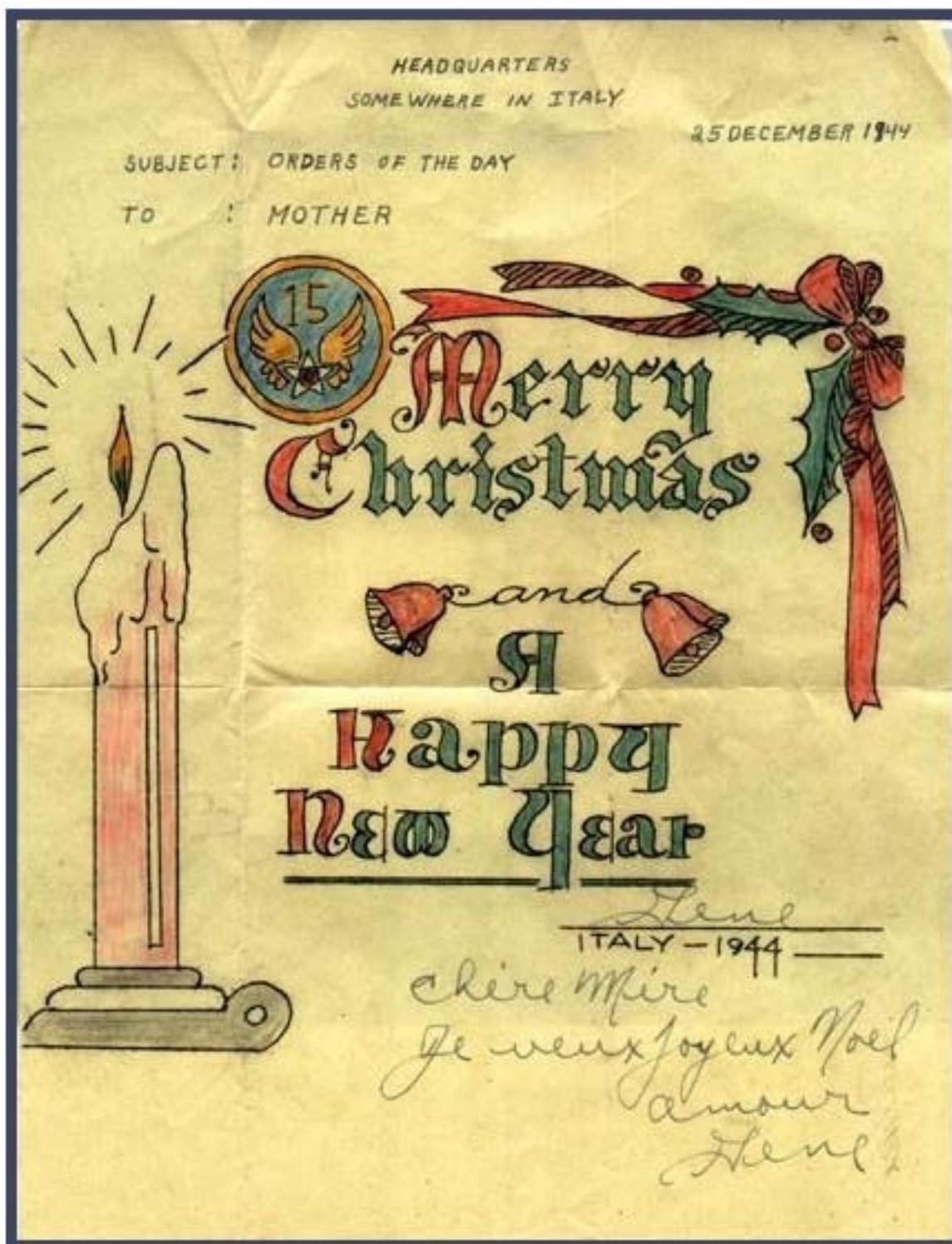


Flightline



Newsletter of the 780th Bomb Squadron of WWII

December 2013



Your News & Letters

Kathy,

While sorting through Jack's papers I found the attached. I thought the article about the "Agony Wagon" and Wes Schulz might be included in a Flightline, or, anything else you choose.

All is going OK in Kansas City, keeping busy. I know you are busy with all the girls' activities.

Hope you all have a Happy Thanksgiving.

Eleanor Ball

5901 W. 107th #285

Overland Park, KS 66207

Editor's note: Eleanor sent a broadsheet photocopy of the January 28, 1945 issue of *Sor-tie*, the newspaper of the 15th Air Force, that was printed in Italy. The article about "Agony Wagon" appears at right. There are other interesting articles, including one about a dog chewing gum, that I will include in future issues.



Dear Kathy,

Thank you for your note. I was pleased to hear that at 90 years of age I can recognize professional writing.

As for me, I was a pilot with the 780th. I will always remember

Veteran Plane Points Toward Century Mark

15TH AAF -- Agony Wagon, veteran Liberator bomber, has again demonstrated her ability to take rough treatment.

At the railyards at Bronzola, Italy, Agony Wagon, together with the other planes of her formation, dropped a fine concentration of bombs despite accurate flak.

As the plane turned for home, a smashing blow almost turned her completely over. Crew members were hurled to the floor and the pilot had to grab the controls to right the careening plane before she crashed into another bomber of the formation.

A shell, piercing the plane's left underside, continued on through the radio operator's compartment and came out just below the right waist window. Fortunately, the shell failed to explode. If it had, Agony Wagon would have been shattered to fragments.

Sergeant William R. Smith, radio-operator and gunner maintains, "The shell couldn't have missed me by more than a few inches." There were no casualties and despite the huge flak hole, Agony Wagon safely reached base.

"I've been in charge of her since she arrived from the States," says crew chief, Technical Sergeant Wesley H. Schulz. "She's had plenty of flak holes before and has always taken them in stride. She's a strong plane, takes the worst the Jerries throw at her and comes back for more."

In three months Agony Wagon flew 44 consecutive missions without a turnback. To date she has flown over eighty sorties. Now under repair, the goal is to complete one-hundred missions.

my first raid. For their first two raids both the pilot and co-pilot had to ride as a co-pilot with an experienced pilot and crew. This raid was to bomb an airdrome in Regensburg, Germany. We were on the bomb run with plenty of flak all around us. Suddenly, the lead plane was nothing but a great ball of fire. The left wing fell off and the plane went into a roll and went down. It was at this moment I realized what war was. No previous training in the U.S. prepared you for this.

My co-pilot and I wanted to get in as much flying time as possible, and so on days we were not flying we volunteered to fly the crews that had finished their tours to Naples where they departed for home. Or, when an engine on a plane had to be replaced we would take the plane for a two-hour trip, and after take-off cut the power on the replaced engine way down to break it in. We got to see a lot of Italy from the air this way.

After the war ended we flew a plane back to the U.S. by way of South America. After I was discharged, after Japan surrendered, I took advantage of the G.I. Bill and went to college. After college I joined my father in the general insurance business. When he died I took over the business and when my youngest son graduated from college he joined me. His wife, who had been a vice presi-

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dent in a national bank, joined us a few years later. A few years ago they joined together with another agency here in Easthampton and now have the largest agency in the area.

Beside the general service organizations, I was president of the board at Hill Institute. Hill Institute was founded in the third quarter of the 1800s. It was the first free kindergarten in the United States. There had been other kindergartens but they charged. In the early 1900s they added adult classes which included such things as weaving, sewing, woodworking, basket making, jewelry making, art classes, cooking, canoe making, etc. Over 600 people take classes in the two 10-week sessions each year.

In December of last year my wife and I moved to a retirement community in Easthampton where we celebrated our 65th wedding anniversary. Hope this will give you some idea as to whom I am.

Sincerely,
Dick Finck
55 Mulberry Ln.
Easthampton, MA 01027

Editor's note: Thank you for sharing your flying anecdotes, and for the review of your life after the war, Dick. I look forward to reading and printing more letters like yours. In fact, here's another one:



Dear Kathy,

Thanks again for keeping the Flightline flying.

In the issue I just received there was a letter from Jim Alter. He and I trained together as AAF cadets and then became commissioned officers and bombardiers and became part of the 780th squadron. As an aside - on my 31st mission, our plane was shot up and crash landed in Russian territory, who flew our crew to Odessa, Ukraine, where we celebrated the war's end.

Like Jim, my life after the war was exciting and eventful. I became an architect with offices in Beverly Hills; Tampa, Fla.; and Paris, France; which meant a lot of traveling. My clients were mostly well-known personali-

ties and movie stars. I designed homes for Robert Stack, two for Liz Taylor, Janet Leigh, and others, as well as projects in Denmark, Norway, Bavaria, Italy and Greece. Luckily my dear late wife loved to travel, so I had a good companion on the many trips.

I was commissioned to design various projects for D.K. Ludwig (founded Westlake Village in southern California where he dug a lake and built a dam). He was one of the richest men in the world at that time. I designed his home in Beverly Hills, was associate architect on his Princessa Hotel in Acapulco, and designed and supervised construction of his International Bazaar in Freeport, Grand Bahama Island.

...continued on page 4



"Golden Girl," pictured above, circa 2006, is owned and operated by the Collings Foundation and is now known as "Witchcraft." Note the 780th marking on the right vertical stabilizer, but disregard that "other" aircraft flying alongside her.

TAPS



Robert "Bob" Bleier, 96, of Los Gatos, California, passed away November 28, 2013. He was born January 31, 1917, in New York City. He served in World War II as a lead navigator with the 780th Bombardment Squadron in Italy. He flew 47 missions. After the war he remained with the Air Force for 20 years, retiring with the rank of major. He also was a stock broker with E.F. Hutton. He was preceded in death by his wife, Bette, to whom he was married for 49 years. He is survived by three daughters, Robin Clayton, Jay Searle and Wendy Shrank; and three grandchildren, Ben, Rachel and Courtney.

Bob was the long-time editor of *Flightline*. An old custom in journalism is to "turn the rules" - changing the thin lines that used to appear between columns of type in a newspaper to thick lines - when a publisher or editor passed on. In honor of Bob's long-time stewardship of *Flightline*, we are using a thicker line than usual around this TAPS box.

...continued from page 3

One of my last homes was for J.R. Mellor, ex-CEO of General Dynamics. During the war General Dynamics' Consolidated Aircraft in San Diego built B-24 bombers. Knowing this, he had an old B-24 completely rebuilt into flyable condition. He put the 780th marking on the tail and information about the 780th squadron was inscribed on the plane. This plane flies to and is exhibited at air shows around the country.

There are probably not too many of us ol' "Greatest Generation" guys left. Love to all who get the Flightline!

So, at 91+ years old, I'm still doing small architectural jobs, but I have cut back on cigars, bourbon and chasing girls!

Frank Diedericks
539 Shadow Ln.
Simi Valley, CA 93065

Editor's note: You had time to chase girls?! What a fasci-

nating career. The B-24 Frank mentioned is pictured on the previous page.



Dear Kathy,

Thank you so much for all you are doing to keep the 780th apprised and active. I am the daughter of a deceased veteran on your mailing list. My dad, John E. Stock, was a bombardier on 52 missions. He passed away in 2005.

I truly enjoy reading about everyone and I'm particularly excited about the project being done by Josh. I've sent him an email.

I plan to send you a small contribution to help with printing and postage. Meanwhile, thanks again for your service to these wonderful vets and their families!

Best,
Lisa Stock Warren
Orlando, FL
warren1333@gmail.com

Editor's note: Nice to hear from you, Lisa. It is an honor to publish the *Flightline* to keep the extended 780th family together, and to remember our members who have passed.



Hello Kathy,

Bob's oldest daughter, Robin, called today to let me know that Bob Bleier died on Thanksgiving Day at age 96. He suffered from severe dementia, but remained cheerful and pleasant to the very end. He was certainly a wonderful step-father to me. I told Robin I would let you know. There will be a simple funeral December 11th at Oak View Cemetery in San Jose, and I will be there. Robin has arranged for an honor guard for him. He no longer remembered me, but he did still remember Robin, which was good.

The only war story I know of his service was that one day when he and one other crew member were

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Italians Still Grateful for Americans

Beth Berger Martin, daughter of the late William E. Berger, and her husband, Ken, visited Pantanella and took the photos that appear on the next page. In addition to seeing what remains of the airfield buildings Beth talked to the locals, who remember the men of the 780th. In her words:

"The Canosans are becoming increasingly aware of the history of the site, and if we can preserve it, we should!

"I am so happy my husband and I made it to Pantanella. The property that gives you

on a day off, the plane crashed and the entire crew died. He continued to serve until the end of the war. He was very proud of the squadron, and loved attending the yearly gatherings. He loved his time of putting out the Flightline.

Barb Jones

Editor's note: Robin and her husband called me and we had a nice conversation about Bob. I believe he was the glue that held the squadron together, being association president and *Flightline* editor for so many years. He will be remembered fondly by all.

access to it says in the past year two buses have gone up to it. I wonder who that would have been? She said they were Americans.

"Every Italian we met treated us so graciously. I wore my father's dog tags and when they realized my dad was at Pantanella, they could not do enough for me. People came up to me to thank me for my dad's service. They speak so well of

the American soldiers.

"I also did not realize that they were so impoverished before the war and that the Americans stipulated upon leaving at the end of the war, that land must be given to all the people so they could live off the land. Many Italians told us this but you can't find it in a history book. They all say their lives would have been dramatically altered if not for the Americans."

THANK YOU!

The *Flightline*
is grateful for donations from

Bill Sturm

and

Debbie Haggerty

in honor of the 88th birthday of her dad,
Bill Edwards

to keep *Flightline* flyin'

If you would like to contribute
please send your donation to:

Kathy Le Comte, *Flightline*
1004 Williams Blvd.
Springfield, IL 62704
johnkath5@comcast.net
(217) 787-6512

Do You Recognize These Buildings? - Part 2



The September issue featured one of the many photos Beth Berger Martin took of the remaining buildings at Pantanella. Here are several more. She would appreciate your help in identifying the buildings.

The building pictured middle right is attached to a larger building and has a fresco of a woman in a bikini top (inset) and another fresco of an insignia. What was this building?



At bottom right is an aerial photo. The inset of the church is located at the bottom left of the aerial, and the meeting room inset is the top right building in the aerial photo. What were the other buildings?

If you can tell Beth anything about these buildings, call her at (773) 456-2846, or email her at bethbmartin@gmail.com.

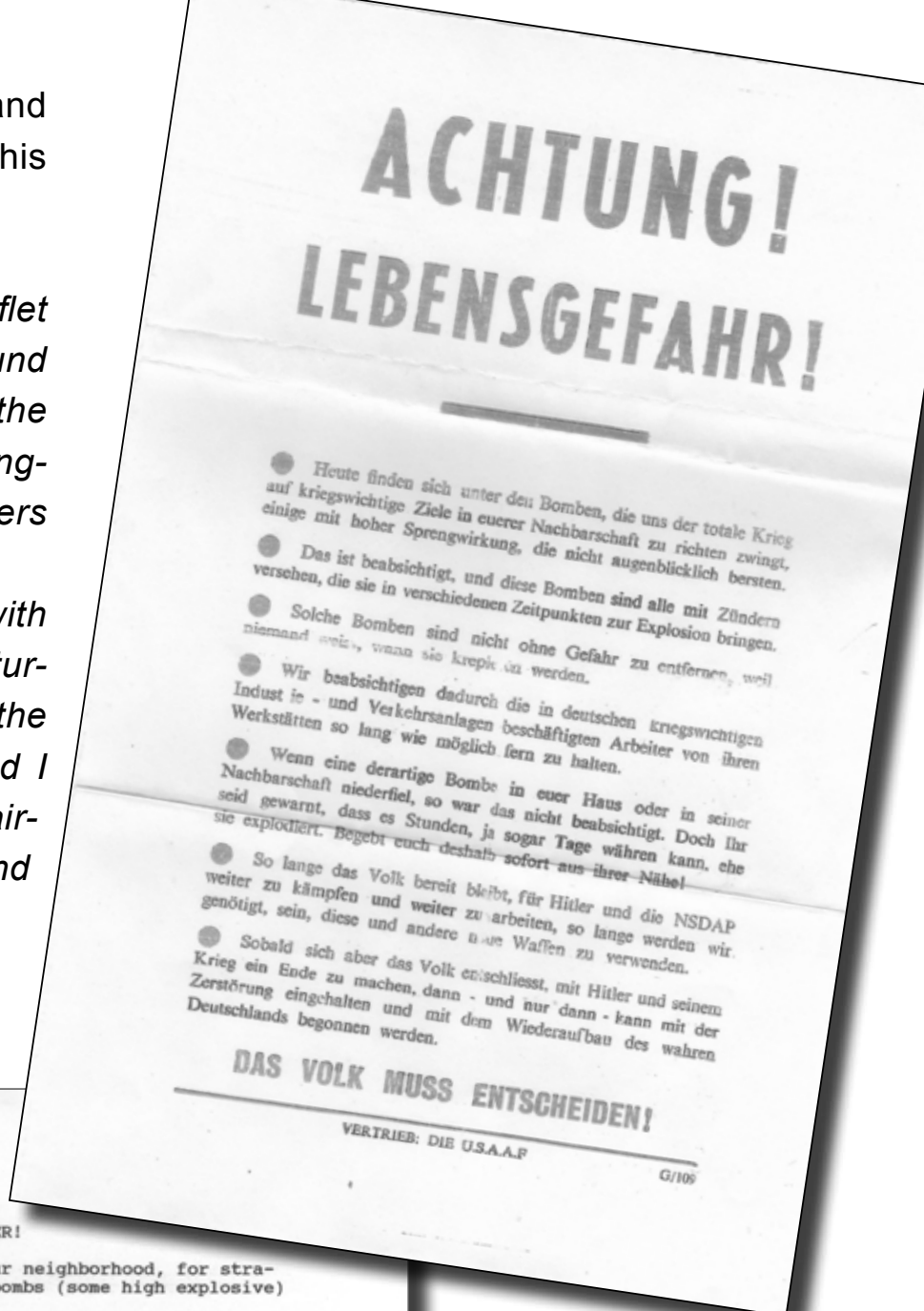


Bill Lukens shares the flyer and accompanying translation on this page. He explains:

Enclosed is a copy of a leaflet dropped by the squadron. I found the original in "Red Q" after the mission. Also included is an English translation. Flightline readers might enjoy reading them.

"Red Q" was radar-equipped with a radome in place of the ball turret, and flame dampeners on the engine exhausts. Jack Ball and I were the ground crew on the aircraft; Jack was the crew chief and I was his assistant.

Bill Lukens



NOTICE!
MORTAL DANGER!

- We are forced to direct into your neighborhood, for strategic reasons under Total War, bombs (some high explosive) that do not instantly burst.
- This is intentional, and these bombs are fitted with fuses that set off the explosives after varying times.
- It is dangerous to remove such bombs, because no one knows when they might go off.
- We intend thereby to keep workers away from their shops in German war industries & transport facilities for as long as possible.
- If such a bomb falls in your house or neighborhood, that was not intended. But you are warned that it could take hours, or even days, before it explodes. Remove yourself from its vicinity!
- So long as people continue to permit Hitler & the NSDAP to fight & work, we will be forced to use these and other new weapons.
- However, as soon as people decide to put an end to Hitler & his war, then--and only then--can this destruction stop and the rebuilding of the real Germany begin.

THE PEOPLE MUST DECIDE!

Source: the U.S.A.A.F.

On The Cover

This 15th Air Force Christmas card possibly was made by someone in HQ Detachment. Credit: Collection of S/Sgt Eugene L. Majeski, HQ Det.

Kathy Le Comte
Editor, *Flightline*
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Springfield, IL 62704-2832

Flightline



A Blast from the Past - As we look forward to 2014, here is a look back at the recent past. This is a group photo from the 2007 reunion in Indianapolis, hosted by Roberta and James Halter. Happy holidays to everyone in the 780th family.