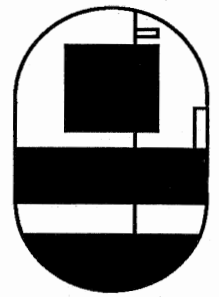




PANTANELLA NEWS



APRIL 1994

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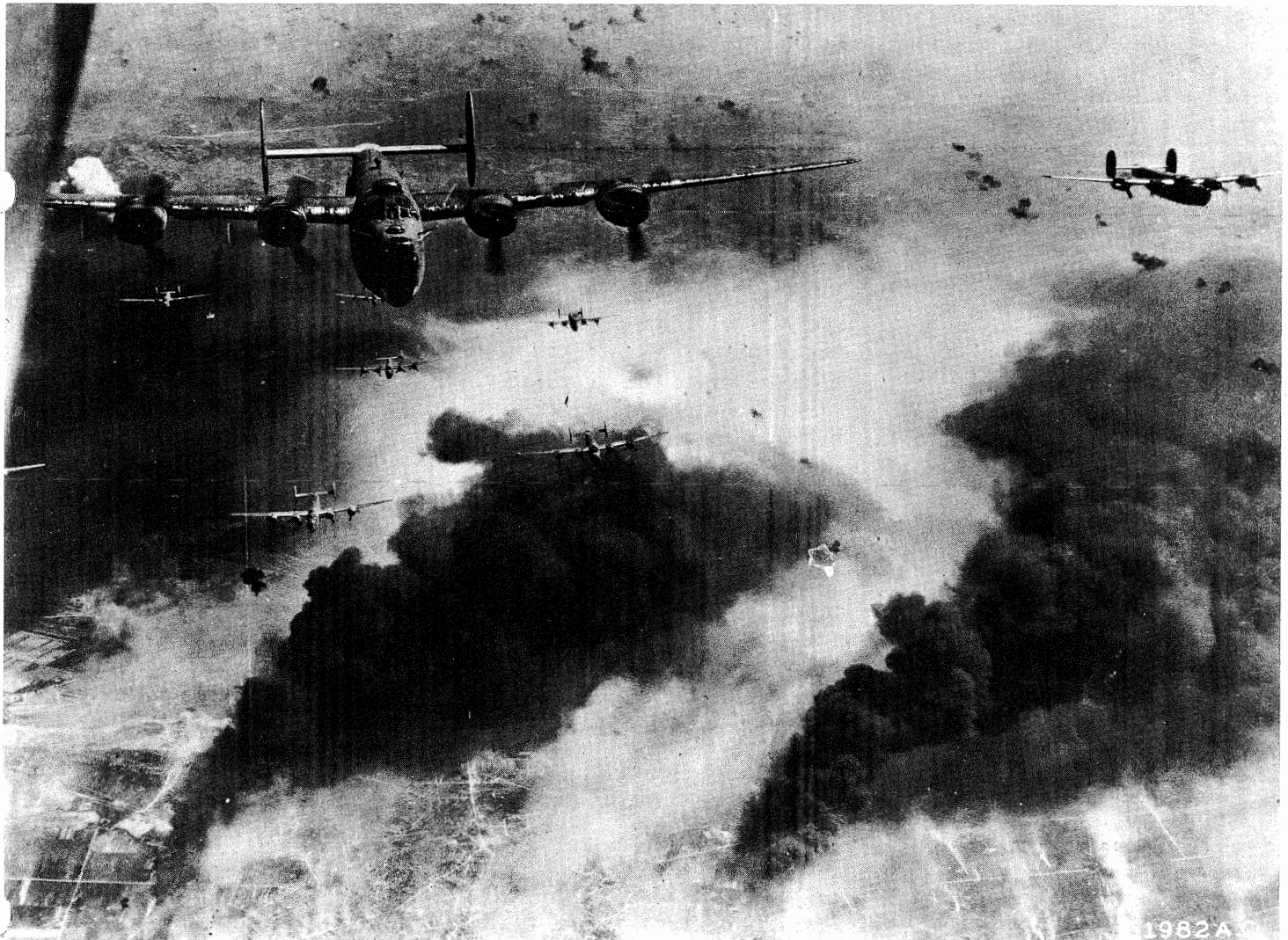
NUMBER 36

The Air Battle of Ploesti

The Air Battle of Ploesti was waged five miles above the rolling plains of Rumani between 5 April and 19 August 1944, in one of the decisive battles of World War II - a five-month bitterly-contested fight to eliminate Ploesti, the greatest single source of oil available to the Axis. This was a unique campaign, peculiar to the times and rendered possible by the supreme equipment and productive capacity of the United States, and above all

by the courage and resourcefulness of a group of intrepid airmen who would not be beaten. The battle of Ploesti was an air battle, carried on principally by huge fleets of American four engine bombers, the B-24 and B-17, penetrating deep inside enemy territory, bringing the attack to the heart of the German war machine and striking hard at its most vital installations.

During the campaign the U. S. Fifteenth Air Force, based in Italy, sent 5,446 bombers against Ploesti in twenty daylight missions, dropped 13,286 tons of bombs, and succeeded, long before the Russian occupation late in August 1944, in denying Germany a major



Here is where the oft-repeated crew debriefing statement about German anti-aircraft fire was coined - "flak so thick you could walk on it." It was taken over Ploesti, Rumania on 5 April 1944. Photo courtesy 15th Air Force Association.

portion of the fuel without which air forces cannot fly, modern mechanized armies are unable to move, and industry bogs down. In addition to the twenty daylight missions there were four night missions successfully executed by 229 Wellingtons, Halifaxes, and Liberators of the 205 Group, RAF, which with the U. S. Fifteenth Air Force, comprised the Mediterranean Allied Strategic Air Force.

Ploesti was struck twice before in 1942 and 1943 by Middle East based B-24s of the American Air Forces. The attack in 1943 was the famous tree-top attack by B-24s which flew a round trip of 2000 miles from Libya. Successful as it was, this attack could not at the time be repeated. Not until heavy bombers could be based within a reasonable operational radius of Ploesti would it be possible to destroy it again and again, and finally to prevent production of the great oil refineries. And it was determined that they should bomb from high altitude.

The successful invasion of Italy in September 1943 and the subsequent advance of Allied ground forces, opened up the plains of Foggia - a natural airfield on the East coast of the Italian peninsula. Early in December 1943 the Fifteenth Air Force commenced operations from Italy, taking part in the ground campaign, and in the counter-air program designed to knock the German Air Force out of the air - top priority assignment for the United States Strategic Air Forces in Europe. As early as March the future program for heavy daylight bombers based in Italy and England had become clear. February's operations had rocked German aircraft production to its foundations and

subsequent attacks by Allied bombers had further increased the strain on the enemy's air defenses. Moreover, prospect of summer weather gave promise that the remaining portion of the Fifteenth Air Force's "Point Blank" assignment would be accomplished in the near future.

It was time to initiate the all-out assault on Germany's military, industrial and economic life - for which destruction of the enemy's fighter defense had been a necessary preparation. Gasoline constituted the weakest link in the German war machine. As a target system it offered a relatively limited number of objectives, vulnerable to air attack, which could be readily identified and not easily dispersed. Oil products were essential to all phases of the enemy's war effort, and its stocks were known to be low.

Thirty per cent of all Axis oil production was concentrated at Ploesti within range of the Fifteenth Air Force and not open to attack at that time by any other Allied military organization. A total of six refineries were located around Ploesti; Astra Romana, Romano Americana, Concordia Vega, Unires Sperantza, Dacia Romana and Standard Petrol Block.

Thus the stage was set for what was to become strategic air power's greatest single contribution to ultimate destruction of the Wehrmacht. Eight months after the 1943 low-level attack, the first of 24 hammer blows was delivered to Ploesti on 5 April 1944. Although this attack and the four which followed were directed at the great Ploesti rail yards running through the heart of the oil refineries, so severe was the damage to adjacent oil installation that the desirability and effectiveness of aerial bombardment of oil refineries, was no longer questioned. Oil at once became top strategic priority. It was not only a way to cripple the enemy's war machine prior to the invasion of the European continent, but also the most effective means of keeping the German Air Force in check.

It soon became apparent that the task on hand was by no means easy. No one realized the significance of the Ploesti bombing more than the enemy. Its effort to defend the refineries was ample testimony to the importance of this objective. After the first few attacks the Germans found the aerial defense would not stop the seemingly never ending stream of bombers and their cargoes of destruction. The bombers were armed "to the teeth," their gunners could shoot as well as their bombardiers could pin-point targets. Added to the destruction of this fighter force by bombers and their escorting fighters was the inability of the enemy to provide replacement aircraft at a rate equivalent to its losses.

Heavy guns were constantly added to the Ploesti flak ring. Nowhere on the continent could be found a more accurate or deadlier concentration of "those little black flowers that bloom in the sky." Losses to flak were high, but not prohibitive, and still the bombers came, adding almost daily to the destruction of precious oil. What developed from lack of ade-

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781st BOMB SQUADRON

as part of the 465th Bomb Group, Fifteenth Air Force, flew B-24 Liberators from Pantanella Airfield located near Canosa, Italy, during WW11 (1944-45). During it's 191 missions over Southern Europe it dropped thousands of tons of bombs, shot down 23 enemy aircraft (German) and received two Distinguished Unit Citations.

quate fighters and flak that was good, but not good enough, proved to be the enemy's most successful defensive technique - a smoke screen to hide the Ploesti refineries from the keen eyes of the Norden and Sperry bombsights.

As the attacks continued and destruction of oil refining capacity increased, the enemy increased the use of smoke to protect the remaining installations. Eventually over 2000 smoke generators were in operation. Once alerted it took up to 40 minutes to effectively blanket the target with smoke.

In an attempt to counter the effectiveness of smoke, principally through the achievement of surprise, it was decided to send low-level bomb-carrying P-38s to attack the Romano Americano refinery at Ploesti on 10 June. It was also felt that should the screen be laid before the attack, this would not preclude successful bombing from low altitude. Enroute encounters with enemy fighters, however, prevented the achievement of surprise, but visibility over the target was such that the

attack was successful despite the protective screen. No further missions of this type were scheduled due to the losses of nearly thirty percent of the dive-bombing P-38s and P-38 escorts.

The radar equipped B-17s and B-24s overcame the smoke defense and continued to attack the targets with great success. Meanwhile our gunners in the bombers and the fighter escort continued to destroy the German Air Force. By the time the last mission was flown on 19 August 1944, for the first time not one German fighter was dispatched to engage the bombers. A grand total of 9173 aircraft (5,408 were heavy bombers, 38 P-38 Dive Bombers; 229 night bombers and 3498 fighters) dropped 13,663 tons of bombs, knocked down 360 enemy fighters - and destroyed Ploesti.

The Fifteenth Air Force losses were also heavy; 230 bombers, 111 fighter aircraft, and 3251 crew members. Some of the crew members, after bailing out evaded and walked back, others were killed, wounded or became POW. Approximately 893 POWs were liberated after the

Russians overran Ploesti. Others evaded and escaped resulting in approximately half of the lost crew members returning.

Most of the losses resulted from flak. Some bombers were disabled by flak, then were easy prey for the fighters when they had to drop out of formation. There were about 280 light guns and 278 heavy guns. The range of the 88mm was 28,000 feet, the 105mm was 32,000 feet and the 128mm was 39,000 feet. The heavy losses were from the high number of heavy guns and their accuracy from daily "practice."

The 781st Bomb Squadron, as part of the 465th Bomb Group, flew on seven of the Ploesti attacks. On the second attack to Dacia Roma oil refinery a number of aircraft were damaged. Capt. James W. Wray, flying with Tip-ton crew, was forced



Ploesti was circled by railroads and oil refineries. It was fortunate that railroads and oil were inseparable. A miss on one could easily damage the other.

to leave formation and bailed out later over the Dineric Alps in Yugoslavia. They were fortunate to receive help from Tito's troops and made their way back to Pantanella about a week later.

On 6 June in the attack on Dacia Romano the 781st lost two aircraft. Lt. Martin's aircraft was attacked by a single fighter, burst into flames and all bailed out, were captured and taken POW. Lt. MacFarlane's aircraft was damaged by flak and the crew bailed out over Yugoslavia. Four members evaded and returned to Pantanella four days later and six were captured and taken POW. Several men in both crews were wounded. The men in POW camps were freed when the Russians overran Ploesti and returned to the squadron.

On July 22nd to Romano Americana Lt. O'Brien encountered engine problems and was forced to return before reaching the target. On the return they encountered flak which hit and wounded Lt. O'Brien's leg and damaged the aircraft requiring an emergency landing at Brindisi, Italy. During landing the aircraft crashed into a ditch when O'Brien was forced to swerve off the runway in order to avoid another aircraft. Many crew members were injured and one was killed.

From the record it appears the Ray Hurd crew flew over Ploesti the most - five times, and R. J. Smith was next with four missions. However, Col. McKenna bombed Ploesti six times, part of the time with the 781st and part with the 464th Bomb Group where he was transferred as Deputy Group Commander.

Most of the information about Ploesti was taken from the book "The Air Battles of Ploesti" prepared by the Fifteenth Air Force within six months after Ploesti fell. A copy of this detailed book will be in the trophy room at the reunion in Tucson.

From FLIM FLAM "LAFF"

She - pouring out a drink, "Say when?"

He - "Well, if it's alright with you, how about right after this drink?"

FROM THE MEN WHO FLEW V GRAND

In response to a letter to George Leggate here is his reply. At the time he did not know what had happened to V Grand.

"My crew flew V Grand on its first mission. It was a beautiful flying aircraft. I always thought a special effort was made by the workers on this 5000th plane they made.

"The aircraft I brought to the 781st was a radar equipped B-24. It was designated as lead and my navigator and bombardier trained in radar. Unfortunately this plane caught fire and exploded while the maintenance men were refueling the auxiliary power unit. A few days later when we flew V Grand my crew members thought of it as our replacement aircraft.

"A rumor among the men was that the first crew to fly V Grand in combat would receive \$5000. My crew eagerly awaited the \$5 grand but were disappointed when they did not receive an answer to their letter from Consolidated Aircraft.

"I'm afraid V Grand had a short life. A few days after I flew another aircraft on a long mission (Blechhammer?) due to low fuel I diverted to Vis enroute home. Vis had a very short runway, but with a lot of luck, full flaps, and hard braking I landed safely. While waiting to be refueled we were astonished to see many wrecked B-24s on the other side of the run-

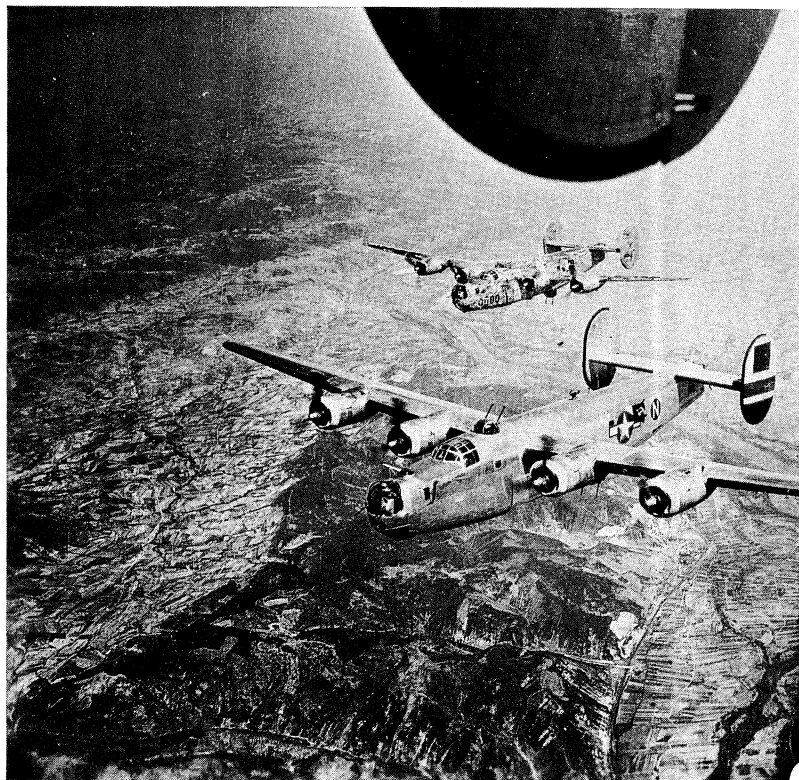
way, thirty at least. The one closest was V Grand. The crew that made that unfortunate landing is unknown to me. The aircraft was so badly wrecked that we doubted if any crew members survived. No one at Vis would give names or discuss fatalities. Inquiries at the squadron also went unanswered.

"That is all I know about the beautiful V Grand. I started her on her short combat tour and a few days later I saw where it ended."

Rumors at Pantanella at the time were that if had it not been a famous plane, V Grand would have been junked along with the other aircraft on Vis.

From **John Stark**, "My assignment as bombardier on V Grand's first mission was with a crew I had never flown with before. It was my 27th mission and a comparatively easy one. This was a pleasant surprise to me as I felt like we were flying a bulls eye. I suspect that powers-that-be wanted her to have an easy time on her maiden flight - a bride on her wedding night."

From **Bill Zewadski** from the 780th BS. "I am sure it will appear



V GRAND, off of the wing of Yellow "N," on its second mission to bomb bridges at Le Teil, France on D-Day for the Sourthern France invasion, August 15, 1944

in some record, but my understanding of why the 465th Bomb Group was given V Grand was the fact that we had a record of the most enemy fighters shot down per ammunition expended. We had some "hot" gunners!

"I was briefed on the new hydraulic system along with our engineer and other members of the crew. We did not have to feather the propellers at about 40 pounds pressure, but could wait until it reached 8 pounds. This made it possible to use 4 engines on the return trip from Vienna and keep good formation until the German fighters peeled off. After I had to feather engines 1 and 2 on V Grand I kept 200 feet altitude above the Alps in case of another engine failure so we would be able to bail out. We threw out all excess weight including ammunition and luggage. In order to hold a safe altitude I kept our two good Pratt & Whitneys at "military power" of over 40 inches of mercury pressure for about two hours. We were told five minutes was the limit, but we had to have room to bail out if another engine failed.

"Since I was operations officer, I always assigned V Grand to myself when I flew a mission."

We did hold a record for the least number of shells fired per enemy aircraft destroyed. Also a record for enemy fighters destroyed to bombers lost by fighters. The Fifteenth Air Force commendation to the group on these two records will appear in a future Pantanella News.

What Happened to all the B24s (cont'd)

by **Harold Farrar.**

The article titled "What Happened to All the B-24s" stirred up some old memories. In addition to the 19,000-plus B-24s produced by the time the war ended there were thousands of B-24 parts in various stages of assembly in the manufacturing plants. When I got back from POW camp in June 1945, I returned home to my family in San Diego. Having worked at Convair before I was drafted, they hired me and several other veterans in December

1945. Our \$1 per hour job in the transportation department was to move mountains of B-24 parts by fork-lifts and tractors, pulling small trailers, from the large assembly buildings to the main building. There the parts were weighed and Convair was paid by the pound for all the parts and labor. This went on for several months and I always wondered how many B-24s could have been assembled from all these huge piles of scrapped parts.

The notice about the availability of the missile-silo tour during our next reunion also brought back lots of memories. I was a Group Engineer for General Dynamics/Convair in 1961 and 1962 in Plattsburg (NY) during the Cuban Missile Crisis. We were installing the Atlas missile in the silos for SAC.

The Atlas missile was the first intercontinental weapon system that had the range to hit Russian from the U.S. Our missile had to be fired from the top of the silo above ground. The whole system was massive as you had a fifty foot diameter seventeen-story deep silo with two million pounds of crib steel hanging on springs held by brackets on the silo walls. The 275,000 pound missile was sitting on a 275,000 pound launch platform which had to move up seventeen stories as a 540,000 pound counterweight was lowered to the bottom of the hole. At this base I learned to appreciate the dedication and sacrifices made by the officers and enlisted men of SAC, as these airmen shifted from aircraft to missile systems. The long hours they had to work and the pressure from the SAC readiness procedures during the Cuban crisis was unbelievable. I left there with even greater admiration for all the troops because they performed very difficult and dangerous tasks for very low pay and sometimes their work didn't seem to be appreciated by the general public. I guess what I am trying to say is I believe that most everyone will be fascinated by the Titan tour.

A briefing will be given on the Titan missile by John Kennedy who was project manager for the installations around Tucson.

BOMB DUMP EXPLOSION INFORMATION REQUESTED

by **George Harteloo**

I served during WWII from May 1944 until March 1945 and was assigned to the 781st Bomb Squadron at Pantanella. During my tour of duty I was classified as a Radar Navigator, as such I flew most of my missions with other flyers whom I didn't know well because I was never assigned to a crew. I just flew in radar equipped planes which was usually in the lead position of the bomb group. Fortunately, I completed my 35 missions without ever getting shot down or wounded.

I spent about 10 days on a troop ship on my return to the U. S. and on Easter Sunday, April 1st. I sailed past the Statue of Liberty. I've heard very little about what occurred at Pantanella after I left, and I'd like to learn more about the unfortunate explosion of the bomb storage dump. I first heard about it from a veteran of the 464th whom I became acquainted with long after I was discharged, but he did not know any details. In the January issue of the *Pantanella News* I have learned more than from any other source.

Enclosed is a \$25 check for which I am asking someone to make copies of any written information readily available on the subject of the bomb storage dump, or write me a letter to tell me the date it happened, number of known fatalities, or any other information on the subject. I don't remember getting acquainted with any of the men who worked loading and hauling bombs, but there must have been quite a few of them. It seems that the potential for a huge calamity was very great, but I hope there were not a lot of unfortunate men killed or crippled.

OK, men, it's time we get the full story on the bomb dump explosion and someone will get a \$25 bonus! Write up your stories and send them in. I will copy and forward them to George Harteloo and the winner will be named. Then the story will run in the Pantanella News and we will all be better informed.

REUNION REGISTRATION BEGINS

Our upcoming reunion at Tucson scheduled for Oct. 13 - 16 has generated a lot of excitement. From the letters and phone calls inquiring about registration it looks like many are eager to get registered. I am surprised at the number of inquiries from some who have not attended before. It looks like another "biggie."

The registration form is enclosed. We have suggested that you send in your meal and registration costs with your registration to speed up the check in time. If you feel you want to wait until arrival you may do so, but remember all pre-payments are refunded 100% at any time. Make checks payable to the Association and send to O. J. Cowart.

Our hotel is just a few blocks off of I-10 if you are driving, or a free ride from the hotel van if you fly in. Remember that we have sign ups for those without cars so that once you get to the hotel you can always get a ride to one of our functions away from the hotel if we do not have a bus scheduled.

Here is a brief reunion outline:

Wednesday - Afternoon early-bird registration. No other formal reunion function on this day except the hospitality room. Over half have been registering on Wednesday. Many will be wanting to see the sights of Tucson and check in with old friends. We will have a bulletin board for messages, who is registered, or any other early information that will make your reunion an enjoyable one.

Thursday - All day registration. hospitality and trophy rooms will be open. In the evening there will be a group dinner and program.

Friday - Bus tour of Davis-Monthan Air Force Base with Air Force Officers as guides to see the hundreds of planes in storage, then a service at the chapel, group photo and lunch at the Officers Club. And we expect to have a special Post Office set-up with our own cancellations stamp similar to the one at Boston. After lunch we will be bussed back to the hotel (10 minutes away) and an afternoon on our own

to visit nearby Pima Air Museum which has a B-24 in a hanger, or to visit another area of Tucson.

Friday evening is open and is a time when crews and sections get-together for their individual gatherings. The hospitality room and trophy room are always open when we are not at a scheduled function.

Saturday morning is a meeting to include planning for future reunions, some 781st business, a simulated briefing just like at Pantanella with the cast of some of the men who performed the task at Pantanella like Byron Thompson, Hank Willet, "Doc" Rapoport, etc.

Saturday afternoon is free to visit friends in the hospitality room or trophy room, or to see some more of Tucson. Saturday evening will have the usual banquet to end the reunion activities.

To the widows and family members of deceased members we want you to know that you are welcome to attend to learn more about your husband's, father's or brother's service and meet some of his friends. Our welcoming committee will be there to get you acquainted.

Tucson is where the original cadre of the 781st Bomb Squadron, 465th Bomb Group formed.

MISSION SAN XAVIER DEL BAC

One of the most interesting sites to see in Tucson is Mission San Xavier Del Bac. It is in the center of the Papago Indian settlement along the Santa Cruz River seven miles south of Tucson. Known as the "White Dove of the Desert," it is proclaimed the finest example of mission architecture in the U. S.

It was founded in 1692 by Padre Eusebio Francisco Kino. The present building's foundation was laid in 1700. Construction did not begin until 1783 and continued intermittently over a period of fourteen years before the Mission, which is a graceful blend of Moorish Byzantine and late Mexican Renaissance styles, neared completion.

The mission was restored in 1906 and major exterior restoration again took place in 1984. One of the oldest missions in the country, it is still used for services for the Tohono O'odham Indians. It is a spectacular view, a beautiful white church standing out in the desert.

Like the building, the Mary Pew Garden grounds have been beautifully preserved complete with planting and a cool refreshing pool and brick walkway.



Welcome New Members

On December 23rd **Bernie Badler** called to say he located one of our missing comrades. He purchased the Air Force Associations roster of their retired members, a 614 page book in fine print with seventy thousand names. He came across the name Richard J. Bilger. Our New York address was way off - he now is a California resident. **Richard J. Bilger**, 8211 Lanark Dr., Stockton, CA 95210. Phone 209 477-5997. Richard was a radar navigator.

Ben Donahue recently brought me a copy of this book and we began checking for other names. It then occurred to me that Bernie may have checked for more names. I called him and learned he had gone through the entire book of over 70,000 names for all our not-located men. What dedication!

This past year a friend of mine, **Corky Cosgrove**, who served in the Air Force and is searching for men serving with him in the Berlin Air Lift, asked me for some help in searching for his men. I told him about the U. S. phone book on CD ROM discs and other ways we have located men. In the recent newsletter he saw that I had asked for help on locating two men. I just received a letter from Corky with the phone numbers of both men! Here was a switch, instead of me helping him, I got the help. One of the men had died and the other was **Jesse Edge**, who lives at 820 Elwood circle, Byron, GA 31008. Phone 912 956-2099.

What is interesting about Edge is that he was engineer on the Leggate crew and only lived a few towns away from George Leggate. Earlier last year if you recall Leggate's copilot, Harry Nolen, passed away. Leggate found out that he lived just a few towns away also about a year before when Nolen had taken ill.

During a recent trip to Florida John Zadrozny located **Peter (Joseph) Ministrelli** (Ordnance) who lives at 79125 Jack Rabbit Trail, LaQuinta, CA 92253. Phone 619

564-0656.

John Zadrozny also found **Edward Chavey** (Ordnance) who lives at 5665 Rawnsley St., W. Bloomfield, MI 48323. Phone 313 626-5329.

Another one located from Engineering - **Charles Butta**, 2027 SW 16th Place, Deerfield Beach, FL 33442. Phone 305 426-8804. I located relatives in New York, but it took several months to run down Charles.

If you know these men give them a call or drop a line to welcome them back into our squadron. They have a lot of "catching up" to do.

"Hoot" Hosier's Mail Gets Through!

Each year as the rivers freeze over in far off Alaska Paul "Hoot" Hosier can get off of his island and make it to the post office. The photo of the two-holer in the October Pantanella News triggered a memory for Hoot. Here is his recent letter to O. J. Cowart. "I'm still in perfect health and I hope you are also. I have another story of the two-holer. B. J. Barrie and my cabin was about 200 yards from that two-holer and I guess someone wanted the boards for something as they disappeared leaving a hole in the ground with about 30 inches of excrement. One day, our plane was real late returning from a mission. Well, one of the armament guys was walking across the field and a plane appeared on the horizon and this person started watching the plane back over his right shoulder. I was watching him and the plane when suddenly just his head and shoulders were sticking above the ground. Then I figured out what happened and started laughing. Well, pretty soon he came to the cabin and wanted me to give him a clean pair of pants to put on his crappy body. I declined the opportunity to become a hero and he stalked off mad. Now I'll leave it to him to confess his name.

"Hoot," you have such a good

memory you should try to get across those rivers and fly down to the lower 48 and make our reunion so that you can tell some more of your stories. We're all wondering if you have had any more run-ins with a bull moose, or visits by the bears? How about some photos of your cabin, yourself and some wild life?

Ben Donahue remembers

The story by Robert McGee coming to Naples from England aboard a Limey tub and Milt Levinson being sent to Naples from England on the Arundel Castle, then to Bari by train before assignment to Pantanella, is a strange coincidence. The gang that I arrived with in Naples was transferred from our ship to a Brit "tub" several docks from our ship. We walked, carrying all of our baggage and boarded the "Arundel Castle." We stayed in Naples harbor for two days subsisting mostly on K rations. Brit chow was horrible. We left Naples and proceeded to Taranto harbor where we were unloaded onto a barge. Then into the inner harbor and onto a convoy of 6 by 6s to Bari. Then two days later we ended up at Pantanella. I wonder if Levinson remembers the skipper who read a chapter of the bible over the PA system each morning.

LET'S TOUR RUSSIA!

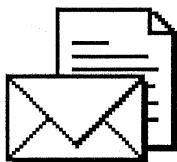
A two-week tour has been planned by Marcel Snyder with A.W.O.L. Travel. Marcel has custom-designed this tour taking advantage of his many experiences in Russia. He had a tour of duty at the American Embassy, Moscow.

The tour is focused on the Russian people rather than a study of Russian architecture although some of the latter is included. One interesting experience will be an overnight stay in a Russian home.

The tour leaves September 6th and returns the 19th. Contact; Richard Feinberg, A.W.O.L. Travel at 407 365-8811 or 1 800 992-2965. If you want further details contact Marcel Snyder at 407 365-7938.

There is still room for about six couples, so contact A.W.O.L. Travel soon if you are interested.

MAIL CALL



Again, from far away France **Lolette Tucci** sent Holiday Greetings and a donation in memory of her husband, group Master Sergeant Joe Tucci.

A letter from **'Doc' Rapoport** informed me that he and Blanche are 'wintering' in Florida until April. He enjoys the *Pantanella News* so much that he requested the next issue to be sent to Florida.

From **Harold Baughman**, "The January issue is one of the best. We read it from cover to cover when it arrives.

"I served for a short time with the 781st BS in the spring of 1944 while we were setting up operation and maintenance facilities for the pathfinder ships which were starting to arrive. We had previously set up an operation for the 376th and went on from the 781st to Spinazzola. I loved the B-24, flew over in one, via South America, Africa, and on to Italy. Great plane.

"We are planning to attend the reunion in Tucson."

Here is a reply from **Richard Bilger**. "I have kept all my records for my twenty-five years of service. They show I was assigned to the 782nd Bomb Squadron. When I became a radar-navigator I was assigned to fly in all squadrons of the 465th Bomb Group.

"On March 1st, 1945 I flew with Lt. William Smith and his crew in a B-24J, serial number 44-48861 (Yellow Y) of the 781st Squadron. Lt. Smith did an outstanding job that day and should have received a medal for his flying ability. It was a good crew.

"Although I was assigned to the 782nd Squadron you could say we were sired by the same father - the 465th Bomb Group. So it was still in the family.

"Being a radar navigator, it was difficult to break in with a good lead

crew with many missions behind them. We were sort of an odd man, however, as I have said, Smith's crew was good - they were professionals."

Usually all radar navigators were assigned to the 781st. However, Bilger was trained as a radar navigator after arriving at Pantanella.

What Richard did not write about was the interesting mission he had that day with the Smith crew. They bombed Moosebierbaum, Austria oil refinery. From Smith's diary that is in the squadron records, he has it listed as bombing from 21,500 feet altitude, flak; intense, accurate and heavy. Hit in #3 and #4 engine by flak; #4 caught fire, feathered; #3 lost all oil, feathered; #4 unfeathered, but not much use. Landed at Pecs, Hungary and returned to Italy March 23, 1945.

In our History book on page 88 and 89 you will find more information on the mission and a copy of a Russian document and its translation. The Russians had overrun Pecs, Hungary and were in possession of the airport. The Russians turned them over to American officials for evacuation to Italy.

William Hugus notes, "I just received the *Pantanella News*. I was at the reunion in Ohio. I was one of the crew members from England. I settled with the Major Blankenship crew. I hope to see you in Tucson."

Chris Murphy sent in a nice letter with compliments to me and the men of the 781st. Here is part of his letter, "I think it's about time I offered to help you with an attempt to contribute some historical items about the Pantanella area (which you asked for in the October 1993 issue). Several years ago I did some reading in the Baltimore Country public library concerning the Apulia region of Italy. What I read was quite interesting, but I made no notes for future use since I was just curious about where I had been in 1944-45.

"In order to attempt some orderly method of approach to a 'historical' account I will try to find the books I read originally and begin

anew. I would like to contribute something to the surviving sons of the PO'd Indian, Jo-Jon."

Recently I received a letter from **Byron Thompson** who also "volunteered" to put together an article about the history of the area in which we were stationed. I have referred Chris' offer of help to Byron and look forward to receiving an article about the interesting history surrounding Pantanella.

A letter from **Robert McGee**.

"I was one of a crew made up of spare personnel who, I believe, hadn't completed the required number of missions. I don't recall any names of the crew but the B-24 was named "Skin Wagon," Yellow "J." It had camouflage paint so it must have been in the squadron a long time.

"We flew to southern Italy, stayed a few days at a former Italian air-drome until it was our turn to leave. Part of the base had barracks with a latrine at the back. The toilets were unusual. They were a square porcelain affair, set in the floor, with places for your feet to rest. You didn't sit, but rather squatted with your pants down far enough, you hoped. The center was a "T" shape set lower in the floor with the drain in the center. A chain operated the flushing system. I was hiking around an unused area which had wooden bases where tents could be pitched on. I also noticed the largest privy I have ever seen. It was a 24-holer (two rows of holes), built on a wooden platform, with a roof and screened sides. That place undoubtedly had seen a lot of action.

"Although we were allowed in town, I didn't go. We got a lecture about the food in some of the restaurants. When we would leave our mess hall, there would be a couple of Italians there begging for the leftover food and coffee. It seems the food we discarded would be recycled for restaurants.

"A few of the men were looking through the dump and found cases of flares and some flare pistols. One would shoot at the other who was about 150 feet away. You could dodge the flare very easily as it didn't have a lot of speed. After about a

dozen shots, the MPs made them quit. They were probably spotted from the control tower.

"From southern Italy, we flew to Africa, west to Marrakech, Morocco; southwest to Dakar, across the Atlantic and the Equator to Natal, Brazil, northwest to Georgetown, Guyana, again crossing the Equator. Leaving South America, we flew to Puerto Rico. We stayed an extra day as one of the oil gages didn't work and had to be replaced. Our last stop was at Savannah, GA. "

The photo Bill Pruitt sent in about the two-holer on the line has stirred a lot of memories about other facilities in Europe. No one has yet mentioned the bidets in Africa and elsewhere. And I experienced an unusual one-holer on a trip through southern France near Lourdes. It was a stop along the road. Upon opening the door I was surprised to see nothing but a large hole in the center of the concrete with footprints on each side of the large hole to keep from slipping when you squatted. The hole was quite large because the only flushing was a roaring stream underneath. The freshest facility I've ever seen.

Aviation History in England.

by **Bill Jostworth**

Should anyone be heading for England, I would personally recommend a visit to the Royal Air Force and the Battle of Britain museums. They are located on the same premises and can easily be reached by taking the underground to Colindale, Approximately 35 miles NW of London. It is a most interesting experience, perhaps better than Wright-Patterson in Dayton, Ohio.

I suggest starting with an early AM visit the main RAF museum first because it presents, in chronological order, a unique collection of their aircraft from the earliest flight p through the Harrier jump jet.

In the "Bomber Command" hall there is a massive

display of British bombers. One very interesting story is about the Lancaster, probably the closed to our B-24. Interesting statistic is the average age of the crew was 22 years old and the average life of the Lancaster was 21 missions before it was lost!

The Battle of Britain museum includes restored German bombers and fighter planes among the Spitfires and Hurricanes.

A reconstructed "Ops Room," with narrative, details succinctly how operations were handled by the Brits for their survival.

A trip to these museums is a fun-filled, full day and one never to be forgotten. For anyone who's been around aircraft, this is a must to see. It's the greatest show on earth.

Dues

Our normal dues notice should have been in the January news. I became aware of my slip-up when a flood of dues payments arrive. Therefore, this notice is only for those who forgot like I did. Check your label and if it does not have a 94 after your name you are delinquent. Dues are \$10 a year, or a bit more if you can afford to help a less fortunate comrade.

FOLDED WINGS

Otto L. Marcucci (Leggate gunner) passed away June 1991. His son informed us of his passing.

Carlton F. Sargent (Hewitt co-pilot) passed away October 11, 1993. His wife, Peggy, notified us that he had a quadruple by-pass a year ago and never did regain his strength.

Al Honey (Gunner, 783rd Bomb Squadron) passed away December 7, 1993. Al was known to a number of our 781st members. It was Al who encouraged me to go to the 783rd reunion in 1985 where I met Marcel Snyder. After this reunion the 781st Squadron Association began.

Robert E. French (Pilot) passed away December 19, 1993. Ken Parkhurst notified the association about Bob French. He developed cancer in October and passed away in December.

We would like to hear when a comrade passes away so that we can post it in the *Pantanella News*.

We extend our deepest sympathies to the families and friends of our comrades whom we loved and respected. We give them a final salute.



The above is a picture post card sent by Bill Jostworth to his mother over 50 years ago. At the time Bill was attending mechanics school at Gulport Field.

Glen Haywood and His Love for the B-24

As to the B-24, about the only real pleasure I ever got out of flying it was on our way back from a mission. By then we had dropped our bombs and used enough fuel so that it started to feel more like what a plane should. Over the Adriatic when the air was like silk and flying in number four Lt. Mullan would darn near kiss the 50 caliber guns between his nose and the tail guns on the lead plane. I would then sock in on him tight — and that was fun. Because I had gone through single engine advanced and was shanghaied out of the training command, I had never flown anything larger than an AT-6 until I was slapped into the right seat of the B-24 in phase training. After a time I guess crew loyalty set in and I never did pursue the Bari contact to fly P-38s.

The story of John Fountain and his king-size headache brings to mind a little problem we had one day. Very shortly after dropping bombs I looked around and found our bombardier, Gene Fallon, trying to kick free a hung-up bomb, but his oxygen hose was hanging free. He was reeling around, quite euphoric and oblivious to the open bomb bay. At the crook of my finger he wobbled up close enough that I got an arm through his chute harness, and there was no chest pack attached. Staying belted in my seat, I called our engineer Giammarco (of Bocce ball fame and a cool head under fire) to lend a hand. He got the doors closed, and after plugging in to the intercom told me the regulator near the main bulk head was SNAFU, and this had started the problem in the first place. They were now reduced to alternating use of his walk-around bottle. As I recall, this meant a third crewman got involved before all was back to normal. Such were the joys of unpressurized flight.

MEANWHILE, BACK AT PANTANELLA

by O. J. Cowart.

OJ recalls some happenings at Pantanella after he returned from intelligence school in Bari.

Shortly after returning to Pantanella I was on my way to the mess hall and stopped on my way at our tufa hut. Living in the hut was Sergeant Stallings, Schlossin, Cooper, Fitzpatrick, Lupinski and myself. As I came in Sergeant Stallings said in a loud voice, "Cowart, what in hell have you been doing?" Not knowing what he had in mind, I replied that I had been in headquarters. He then said, "The FBI was here (at Pantanella) checking on you!" He did not give any details or explanation, just leaving the impression that I had committed a crime and the FBI was in the process of throwing me in prison. Actually I was being checked for security clearance because I would have access to secret documents being transmitted on the Sigcun code machine I had just finished school on. As the mission plans were being received, and the mission was to Blechhammer, Vienna, Ploesti, Munich, or Budapest, I knew the next day when the Pantanella Bombers returned, there would be lots of holes in the planes and possibly some casualties.

Also, my mother wrote me a letter saying the FBI was in my neighborhood in Houston and was checking me out with the neighbors. While at school in Bari, I had

"mug shot" pictures taken and filled out forms for security clearance. I was the only Sigcun person in the 465th group and I had an interesting job. I was on duty from noon until midnight. Sometimes shortly after going to bed, one of the cryptographers from the code room would come and shake me saying, "Cowart, the machines out." At that particular time of night, I sure didn't feel very sharp to work on complicated equipment.

Just outside of the code room, Sgt. Daniel would daily update the battle lines. He had a map under a piece of plastic and would draw the battle lines with a grease pencil. Some days the lines would go forward for the Germans and then the lines would go forward for the Allies. Some days it seemed like the war would never end.

Since all Teletype operations and ground Radio Operators were handled at the group level, we had all four squadrons operating as a single unit. Major Jesse Milburn and Master Sergeant Robert O. Daniel were in charge of this group operation. I was placed in charge of all the Teletypes which were located in headquarters, the code room, and the weather station. We also had eight emergency power units that we had to keep up for stand-by



June 1944. A lonely B-24 among wheat being harvested. Photo courtesy Robert Babcock of the 780th Bomb Squadron.

operation. Since I did not have an extra stripe, it only meant that I ended up doing more than my share of the work.

The Code room machine was called a "Sigcum" privacy machine and was connected to a regular Teletype. All Groups were connected to Wing headquarters 24 hours a day. Each group had "call letters" so that an individual group could be identified. The call letters for the 465th group was LEKO for the administrative machine and the Code room had an additional letter LEKO-S. Only when the Code room machine was in operation was the administrative machine off line. The Teletypes in the weather station operated around the clock.

Willie Rupert, Ground Radio Operator did his duty in a small "prefab" building that was self contained and was located in the Group compound on top of the hill. The Radio Shack (we had this name before the Tandy corporation) was also in operation 24 hours a day. At night, I would occasionally go to the Radio Shack and listen to Axis Sally broadcast Lili Marlene along with the best merican music in Italy. She would also give news and information in a very seductive and pleasing voice.

BITS & PIECES

There seems to have been some problem getting through on the phone number listed for the B-24s and the Ploesti raid as was shown on the Discovery Channel. In calling 1-800-423-1212 you need to request "Air Combat." Further information in the October newsletter.

Recently I had a surprise visit from **Leonard Goldstein**, Radio Operator on my crew. Leonard had flown to Los Angeles to meet with a business associate and stayed in one of those fancy high rise hotels. All went well until 4:30 A.M. the next morning - it was shake, rock, rattle and roll out of bed! The earthquake had hit.

Leonard wasn't sure what was going on. He could hear people in the hall, so he put on one of the robes the better hotels furnish and went out to

join similarly clothed people all making their way to the lobby.

I never did ask Leonard if his departure from Los Angeles a day early had anything to do with the quake. Anyway, we had a nice day in San Francisco talking about our days in Italy and our lives since.

In the recent meeting with **Col. McKenna** we were discussing some of the targets and flak and fighters. He told about the different colors of flak that I had not seen. Col. Mac remembers that when fighters came in to attack near the targets the Germans would shoot up a round of red flak to send the fighters away so the flak gunners could take over. Then when the bombers were getting out of range they would fire a green round to tell the fighters they would be clear of flak and could continue their attack on the bombers.

Bernie Badler called recently to inform me he had just completed 72 sit-ups and it was his 72nd birthday! Besides that he was pumping iron and all the good stuff. Here's someone who likes to keep himself in good condition.

OTHER REUNIONS

Some of our members attend the reunions of our other squadrons. I will list them as dates and places are decided.

780th Bomb Squadron, July 27 - 31, 1994 in Wisconsin Dells, WI.

782nd Bomb Squadron, Oct. 20 - 22, 1994, New Orleans, LA.

The 783rd Squadron Reunion will be held in Nashville, TN in fall of 1995.

781ST HISTORY BOOK

We continue to get requests for our history book. I'm sorry to say there are none available. If there is anyone who has an extra book and may want to sell it please let me know and I'll put you in touch with those wanting one.

SICK CALL

Curt Reed had a slight stroke and is recovering nicely. He is now out there hitting that little white ball on the short course.

Hugh and Ellen Cooper both had major surgery during the year. They have recovered and are looking forward to Tucson.

William "Bill" Ellett took care of his ailing knees - he had both replaced during the year and he is now jitter-bugging!

Charles Zwerko lost a battle with the ice in one of the many winter storms - he fell and broke his hip walking to his home. He is doing fine and will be at the reunion.

ADDRESS CHANGES

Melvin L. Derry, 130 Lewis St., Edgewaater, FL 32141. Phone 904 345-0339

Thomas L. Williams, M.D., 1008 Stone Stack Rd., Bethlehem, PA 18015. Phone 215 838-2817.

Chester Chiles, 133 Cybalo Creek, Boerne, TX 78006. Phone 210 249-2930.

William T. Pulley, 125 Beaverdam R., Fayetteville, GA 30214.

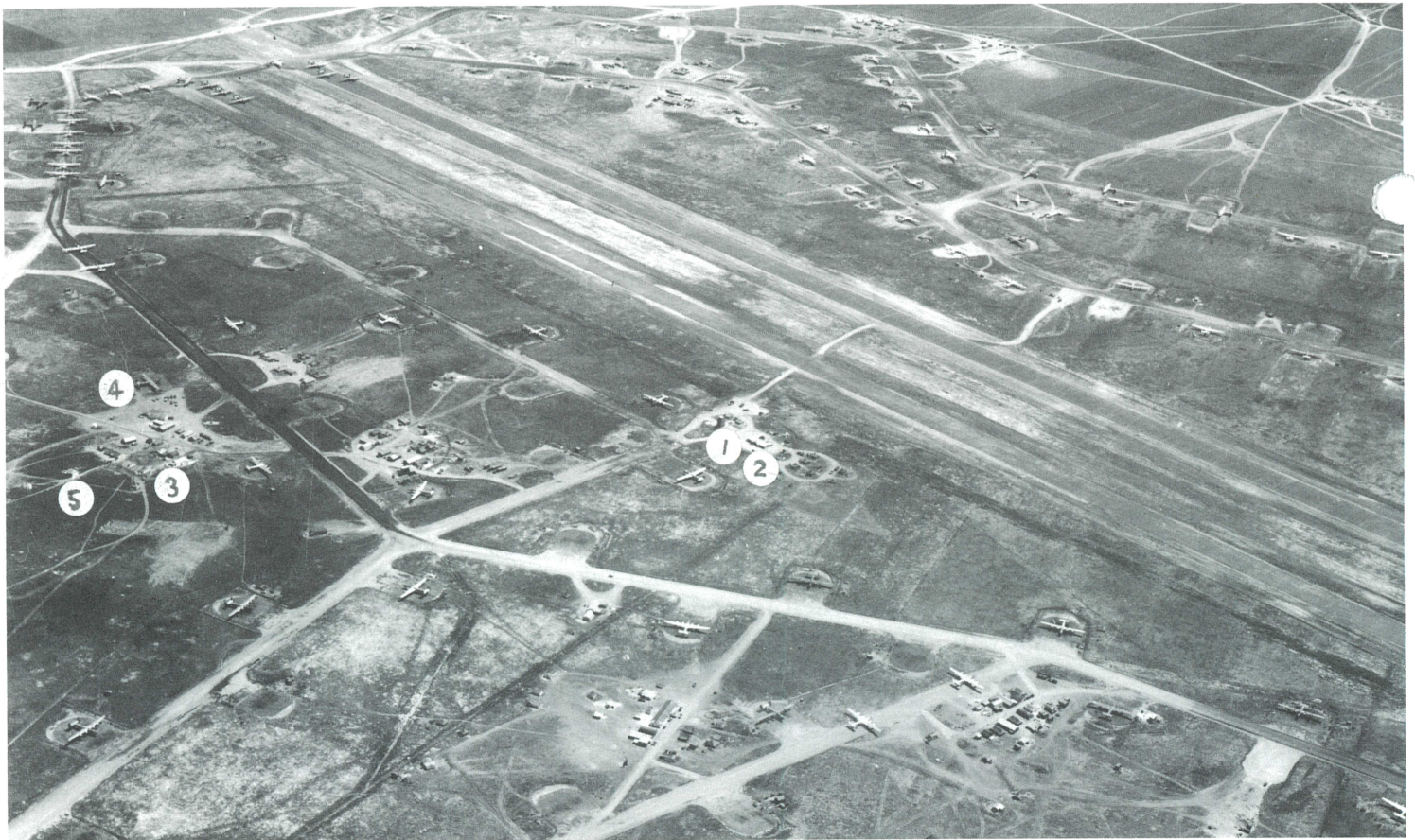
Mrs. Betty French, 23033 Westchester Blvd., Apt F-207, Port Charlotte, FL 33980.

EDITORS CORNER

The July *Pantanella News* will be mailed later in July since our reunion is later this time. The October issue will be after the reunion, probably in November.

Ken Sutton and his committee are working hard on plans for another great reunion. Make your plans now to join us at this memorable one - our 50th Anniversary. Tucson AZ, September 13 to 16.

And thanks to all of you who have responded with information or articles for the newsletter.



Pantanella Army Air Base, Italy. #1 control tower, #2 radar maintenance, #3 781st maintenance, #4 yellow "Y", and #5 Harry Carl and Dave Orr's casa. Note planes lined up on runway and on taxi-way for take-off.

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