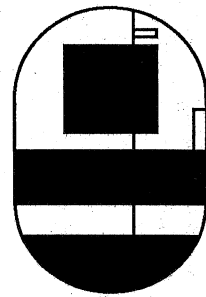




PANTANELLA NEWS



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NUMBER 23

ONE-HALF A MISSION!

WORLD WAR 11 MARCH 22, 1945

by McHenry Hamilton, Jr. Colonel USAF, Retired

Foreword: In reading the following recapitulation of the mission over Vienna, we must all recall the German situation at that time. It will help to understand some of the actions described. The Germans had been on a "high" for some time and now they were at the end of the road. Frustration, defeat, and apathy no doubt precipitated actions which probably would not have happened otherwise.

March 22, 1945 was not a good day for all aboard our B-24 when it received a direct hit over Vienna, Austria. For those of us who survived, it will forever be remembered as a day when our luck was with us. For those who folded their wings, all we can say is "Why them and not me?" As I start to write about what happened that day, my thoughts are similar to those that almost everyone experiences. Why me? Why did I have to be so eager to start flying combat? The answers to this will be mentioned later. We all have the "whys" throughout life and most of the time the answers are not readily available.

My "why" goes back to a day in 1944. Sitting at my desk at Selfridge AFB, Michigan as CO of a training unit responsible for training a colored B-25 Bomb Group which was to be deployed to the ETO, I realized that this unit would never get overseas. We had trained the

pilots and the co-pilots but there were no personnel in the pipeline to make up the rest of a crew. With this knowledge in hand, I flew to First Bomber Command Headquarters. Fortunately, the CO was General Caleb V. Haynes with whom I had served before. I was eager to get overseas and into combat and my only out was to get assigned to the 8th Air Staff Class at Command School at Leavenworth after which I was assigned to the 15th Air Force.

We departed Norfolk Navy Yards on a Liberty ship, forty field grade

officers with nothing to do but drink coffee and play poker for 29 days. The first night out of Norfolk, the German subs got two of the ships. It was a real blackout as we never knew about this until after the war.

We arrived in Naples and were transported to the replacement center. I'll never forget that first night in Italy. One of those cold fronts had moved south and the temperature dropped to below freezing. With only a sheet and one army blanket, we almost froze. The next morning, I went in search of blankets. The Major in charge would not issue from supply. His CO, a Lt. Col., had issued orders not to issue until he returned. For the first time in my career, I ordered someone not in my command. We got the blankets. When the Lt. Col. returned we had a few words. He did, however, say that it made sense.

Fifteenth Air Force Headquarters changed my assignment while I was at the replacement center, from a B-25 Group to CO of the 465th Bomb Group. They said that the losses in the B-24's had been increasing and the B-25 losses had decreased. A couple of days after my orders were issued they sent me out to 55th Wing Headquarters. To my surprise, the CO was none other than Maj. Gen. George R. Acheson who had been my CO back in the States. General Acheson advised me my



Lt. Col. McHenry Hamilton, Jr. at the time of his assignment to the 465th Bomb Group

assignment was to the 465th Bomb Group. The present CO, Col. Josh Foster had already gone on R & R.

My tenure of a few days with the 465th was too short. Most of my time was spent processing so I could start flying. I really did not get to know anyone well enough to recall names and faces. The crew that went down with me I met for the first time the morning before takeoff.

Now for the mission as I recall it. I was eager to fly the first mission for the experience - my baptism of fire, so to speak. Capt. Richardson, the pilot, pleaded with me not to go. He

said that he had a feeling about this one that he had not experienced before. He said the last couple of times out their luck had been getting worse. He may recall that my reply was that I was there to change his luck. Unfortunately, his prediction was right on target. Had I known he was starting his second tour, I might have backed out. Experience is a great teacher.

We were leading the bomber string that day. It was to be a drop on Helingertstadt Marshalling Yard, 100 pound bombs dropping on the leader. Everything went great on the way to the target. Clear skies, no fighters. The IP was NW of the target which would put us directly over Vienna. After we turned at the IP, the navigator picked up the ground speed. That was the beginning of the trouble. A tail wind had been forecast and that was 180 degrees off! It was right on the nose, a sitting duck situation. The Krauts had all the time in the world to zero in. That they did. The bomb release light started blinking and we counted off as the bombs left. Just as the last one left, Capt. Richardson started a slow diving turn to the right. It was at that instant we sustained a direct hit under number three engine. We later discussed the impact and thought it may have hit our last bomb. Sitting on the jump seat between the pilot and co-pilot, I turned to check the damage. A sheet of flame rushed through the cockpit. It was so intense that it burned all the exposed hair on my face and the back of my neck. Fortunately the spurting flames subsided enough for us to prepare for bailout. There was no question of trying to keep the bird in the air. Number four engine had started burning and had gone dead. Capt. Richardson started to close the bomb bay doors after the hit. He then said if he did this the top turret gunner would not be able to bail out, so it was left open. (Records indicated the top gunner, Alfred Maas, was wounded and never did get out of the turret).

Inasmuch as the plane was in a skid, the window on the pilot's side jammed due to pressure. The co-pilot dove through his window and

Capt. Richardson motioned for me to follow. I motioned for him to go first and I would follow. He stepped into the co-pilot's seat and dove through the window.

Now it was my turn. Wearing chest chute under a flack vest, with the chute only fastened on one hook for comfort created a problem. At 192 pounds and all that gear on, it would be a tight fit. I discarded the vest and started to make my exit. At that moment, I heard a cry from the navigator's department. Looking back, somehow the navigator (who was probably Lt. Alden) had started through the upper exit and was half in and half out. The chute had somehow gotten jammed. Stepping back into the navigator area, I gave the chute a shove and he was on his way.

I was not far behind. The last thing I remembered was when I started through the exit. Probably the lack of oxygen was the culprit. When I started regaining consciousness, there was not a sound. It was really weird! I was falling with my back to the ground, with the chest chute stringing above. There was still only one ring fastened! I pulled the chute down and secured the other ring. When I reached for the rip-cord, it was not there. I had put the damned thing on backwards. Lucky for me, I had a good left hand. Getting hit at twenty-four thousand feet, it had not occurred to me to check my altitude. Glancing over my shoulder, the ground seemed to be coming up fast! I pulled the cord and the chute popped open. My estimate at that time was that my altitude when the chute opened was about five thousand feet.

There was a stiff, gusty wind blowing, so the landing was not going to be too easy. With a 24 foot chute and my weight with the heavy flying gear, the rate of descent was too rapid to be safe. Added to this, my landing area was downtown Vienna. It looked like my touch down would be on a tall building. All I could think about was getting dragged off a tall building with a collapsed chute. What a way to go! There was an open space next to the

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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.

building, so I decided to slip the chute and get down faster to hit the open area. Doing this, however, created another problem. It would increase the rate of descent dramatically. It was a matter of choices and a little time to think about it. Anyway I hit the building at about the second floor and slid down the wall to the ground. I had passed out. I awakened to find about a dozen female faces staring down at me. When I started to sit up, one of them hit me over the head with something and I went out again. This happened several times until I learned to stay down.

Several minutes later, a non-com in the Wehrmacht appeared. He propped me up against the building,

He propped me up against the building, backed off five paces, pulled out his Luger and took aim.

backed off about five paces, pulled out his Luger and took aim. I dodged to the side and he came back and propped me up again. This time I would surely get it! At that moment

Luftwaffe Officer appeared and took over. To this day, I do not know if the non-com was showing off for the women or if he was going to do me in. One thing is for sure, it scared the hell out of me.

The Luftwaffe Officer took me to a small interrogation building where I saw Lt. Osburn, the bombardier, on a stretcher in the hallway. When I stepped over to speak to him, the guards intervened. They always did.

The next day they escorted me to an office where an Intelligence Officer (Major) was surrounded by several of his staff. The night before they had stripped me of all my clothing. When I got the uniform back, I could see where they had ripped all the seams and had sewed them back. I realized they were looking for something out of the ordinary. The cocky Major was about as insolent as they come. He stated that he knew we had used a new type of jamming device to jam their radar. He also said they knew it was coming from the lead airplane. Of course, this was news to me. Since we had

an extra man aboard in the navigation section, it dawned on me that this might be true. I still don't know the answer. Anyway, I gave the Major the usual name, rank and serial number. He then started the same story I got from all those who interrogated me. They said we should be fighting with them and it was stupid for the United States to enter the war. He bragged so much about how smart they were, he really got my adrenalin going. At this point I lost my cool and told him they were not as smart as they thought they were. Where upon I pulled a fifty dollar bill out of the watch pocket of my trousers. They had completely overlooked it in their search. As all of you will remember, a good many of us carried several dollars hidden away in case we went down behind the Russian lines. It would help our getting back to Italy. This was a foolish thing for me to do and it was fortunate that I only got a few days in the cooler. Looking at the incident from hindsight, it has given me a lot of satisfaction, but I realize it could have had serious results.

Several days later, Lt. Paul Durckel and I, with several others, were taken to an old housing area that was built after World War I. I'll never forget the first nights. The temperature was as low as the first night I stayed at the replacement center in Naples. They made us sleep on wooden cots with slats. No cover, no heat. When we tried to get on the floor in order to stay warm, they made us get back in the beds. Fortunately for us the weather changed. Every time I was treated like this, it made me think of my short tour at Fort Knox. We had many enlisted Italian prisoners housed in nice comfortable building with good bunks, hot and cold running water, etc. In the late afternoons they were allowed to go to the PX and order anything on the menu. They did so without guards, only had to check in for bed call. For us then to be treated like this was utterly ridiculous.

We were then put on a train for Munich. Just a few prisoners and loads of German troops. When the train stopped at each station, the

platforms were filled with troops. Allied planes had knocked out so many train engines that they were really hurting for transport. We were only an hour out when the train crew ducked into an overpass to hide from our fighters looking for targets of opportunity. The train crew was not so lucky in the afternoon. Fighters swooped down and started strafing the train before they could stop it. Thank heavens, they concentrated on the two engines hauling the train. Only a few of the fighter jocks lined up on the passenger cars. Here I was with a bum leg and could not take off to the woods. My luck was still with me. Lt. Durckel was on the train but in a different car. I talked to him recently about the incident and he said that in his section some of the troops were up in arms and were trying to start a lynch mob. This I did not know or had forgotten that he mentioned it when we got to Munich.

Before arriving in Munich there was one other incident that stands out in my mind. Through the years, this event has returned to my thoughts more often than the situations which directly affected me. Sitting across from me was a young ground officer. A most hyperactive type who continually raved that he could not take being held a prisoner and that he was going to make a break for it at the first opportunity. A couple of his buddies tried to calm him down but were not having much success. They continually counseled him to be careful and at least pick a time when he would have a decent chance to make it. We had a very young German guard who spoke excellent English.

We arrived at a station with at least 5000 troops waiting for transport. As the train stopped, this impetuous young man stood in his seat, put one foot in the window and vaulted through. He got about five yards before a German soldier hit him across the face with the butt of his rifle. We last saw him being dragged off toward the terminal building. The most interesting part of this event was the action of the young German guard. As he was being so vocal, he never realized that

the guard might be able to understand every word. I am sure that the guard had his eyes open all the time. He had his gun out and trained on the escaping prisoner as he outlined himself in the window. At five paces, he could not miss! I was watching the guard. His face turned white as he turned the safety off and started to squeeze the trigger. HE DID NOT FIRE! I asked the soldier why he did not shoot. He was so young, could not have been more than seventeen. This is what he told me. "I suspected he might make a break for it and watched him very closely. When he did, I was ready. As I started to pull the trigger, it flashed across my mind that it is only going to be a few months before this war will be over and I have not had to kill anyone yet. He could not get by those troops. I've been in the army only a few months and I do not want to go through life with his death haunting me." Such a mind and with such empathy for so young a man! I am sure this young soldier has been a credit to his society.

We arrived in Munich and were able to see that giant hole right in the middle of the Terminal. When I say "middle," it was in the center of the area where all the trains backed up to be loaded. The British had dropped on of their Block-busters in the most ideal location. It could not have

been more perfect if they had had the opportunity to center the impact with a measuring device. It was a joy to see.

At Munich they separated me from Lt. Durckel and the rest of the prisoners. They took me out to a small interrogation center just west of town. The next day, I saw my first jet. A Me 262 flew by and it must have been out of a dive as the speed was overwhelming. All I could think of was; how many of those do the Germans have? Are they ready to go into combat? Thank God, they were not, as our losses would have increased substantially. My stay in the interrogation center was limited

to three days. My second day, the Captain interrogated me. It was the same old story. Why did we enter the war against them? How much could have been gained if the U. S. and Germany could rule the world and make it a better place to live.

On the third day they put me on a truck with one guard headed for some small interrogation center west of Nuremburg. I had read about wood burning vehicles and this was my opportunity to see one in action. It moved at a moderate rate of speed and was quite noisy, however, it never stalled on the journey. About noon, I heard the engine of a P-51 in the area. Not speaking German, it was a futile effort to



A recent photo of McHenry Hamilton, Jr.

convey to them the danger. Not until the P-51 banked and headed for the truck did they realize it was an enemy plane. The pilot was not too accurate as he completely missed the truck as we dove for the ditch. He made only one pass which was perfectly fine with me. At this point, I used my expertise at charades to explain to the guard and driver that I could tell the difference in the sound of German engines and our P-51's and P-47's. They were quite happy after they got the picture. We did not get spotted again so all that effort went for naught.

Late that evening we arrived at our destination. I was housed in a

rather nice-looking country home with only a few rooms to accommodate prisoners. As far as I know, there was only one other captive on the premise. It was also the first time they had given me food served on a plate. Not much - about 350 calories. Losing weight at a pound per day, this morsel was most welcome. The other prisoner was a Russian infantryman and the jailers were having a time with him. When they served his tray, he would toss it back to them. The jailer told me the Russians had told him not to eat anything they gave him if captured, that they poisoned the food to get rid of their captives! I saw the Russian only once, for a minute, and he looked terribly unintelligent. Guess he wanted to starve to death vs getting shot. War has always precipitated strange behavior; this certainly was no exception.

Another bizarre event happened. On a Sunday afternoon there was a loud commotion in the street in front of the house. Since the holding cells were in the rear, I could not make out what was going on. It lasted about an hour and then gradually died down.

The next morning, I was marched into the office of the CO. This had an unusual arrangement. It was like you were in the office of a hunting lodge, not like an interrogation center at all. Here, I got the same story. How unfortunate it was that the U. S. was on the wrong side of the war. The gentleman was giving me his views on all aspects of why the Germans were doing what they thought was right. He was not in uniform, so I never knew his rank. For sure he had been educated at Oxford as he had that accent. At the end of the session, I inquired about the commotion the day before. He took me out to the garden and ordered one of his servants to bring out two bottles of beer. Here I was, dirty, unshaven, smelly, with scabs all over my face from the burns, beard growing through the scabs, being offered a cold bottle of beer with an obviously

high ranking German at what I believe was a country estate. You would think he would have sent me to a shower room to freshen up a bit. As we were drinking the beer this is what he told me. On Saturday afternoon a high school group had gone on a picnic to the nearby woods. When returning through an open area a U. S. fighter pilot had killed four of them. (He probably was on his way back to his base with a few rounds left). When the local populace found out he had me at his place, they organized a lynching party. He may or may not have been telling the truth. One thing for sure, he got me out of there and on the road to Nuremburg after dark that evening. There were two other prisoners in the party, with two guards. We walked until about noon the next day. The guards then flagged down an army weapons carrier and we went on to Nuremburg prison compound. The camp had been evacuated and all the U. S. prisoners had been transferred to Stalag VIIA, which is where I eventually wound up.

I saw only one other prisoner while in Nuremburg. This is one of those unbelievable things that happened during a war. The C.O. had come to tell me about President Roosevelt's death. He seemed to be actually remorseful while giving me the news. I decided this was a good time to improve my situation so I told him how we treated his men in the States, even the lower grades. I reminded him that since being captured, they had not offered me a bath or the opportunity to shave or clean sheets. Also that I was still walking around in the felt slippers that we wore with our flying boots. (When I came to after bouncing off that wall in Vienna, one of the first things I noticed was that someone had stripped me of the flying boots and my watch). It did not take long. I was escorted to a shower room where there was hot water, soap, towel, and an old safety razor. After weeks of inhaling body odor, that bath was like nothing else! The shaving was pure agony. The whiskers had grown through the scabs on my face and here I was with a dull ra-

zor. On the way to the shower room, I passed another U. S. prisoner. I was about two strides past him when it dawned on me that it was Major George Alvin which whom I had been stationed in Puerto Rico (1939-42). He had not recognized me. Small wonder with all the facial hair gone, thirty-five pounds lighter and scabs all over my face. I turned to yell at him and the guard poked me in the side. George turned and said "I can't believe it!" The guards as usual prodded us on our way. What makes this so unusual was that we had been together for three weeks at Greensboro, N. C. (holding area for overseas shipment). He was flown over to command a B-17 Squadron and was shot down on his third mission.

It was at Nuremburg that I got my first view of what we were doing to the enemy. It was a beautiful day, not a cloud in the sky. As I recall, it was about midday. They had let me out to get a little sunshine. You could hear our boys coming, a string of bombers which stretched for miles and miles. The British and the U. S. were flying a joint mission dropping on Nuremburg. It was unbelievable! There were no fighters to contend with and only a few bursts of ack-ack. What a sight! I thought it would never end. One of the officers made a remark that I'll never forget. He said, "There they go turning over the rubble that they turned over a few days ago." It really was that bad.

Several days later, a group of us were put on a train going to Regensburg. The enemy had just about run out of food. The guards had only a small loaf of black bread and a piece of sausage. We had nothing. We arrived with no difficulty. The next day, we were on another train bound for Stalag VIIA. The P-51's got the engines again and so we hit the road still another time. We stopped at a farm house just outside a small place called Landshutt. No food for several days, we were about at the end of the road. In the yard there was a large mound of half-rotten potatoes, the ones the hogs had left. The farm lady said we could pick out the good pieces and

boil them in a big black pot. The guards were as eager as we were. Just about the time the spuds were ready, a squadron of P-51's started circling the farmhouse. We thought they had seen our uniforms and were giving us a greeting. Then they peeled off in a strafing formation, lowered their flaps about one-fourth and started a run. In about ten minutes they had about fifteen German fighters on fire at a small airfield just across the road from the farmhouse. When they departed the farm lady came out and turned over the pot of potatoes. Believe me, as hungry as I was I had mixed feelings about P-51's at that time!

Our group finally arrived at Stalag VIIA. What a relief it was to be where there were lots of old comrades and many with whom I had served before the war. The first night I was bunked with Dave Jones, an upperclassman at Randolph. He had gone on the Doolittle raid, got back to the U. S. and was assigned to take over a B-25 Group in Italy.

The Germans had run out of food so the Red Cross packages were always a welcome sight. For sure the forty-three pounds I had lost would not be improved on at Stalag VIIA. Thank heavens the stay here would not be too long as Patton and his tanks were really on the move. I believe it was the Eleventh Armored who liberated us. General Patton showed up a couple of days after the liberation. He came in the gate and stopped in front of the First Battalion. I had been elevated to Battalion C.O. because the officer who ranked me had moved to Headquarters Staff. The General marched through our barracks, got to the back door and turned to me and said, "It's been tough, hasn't it?" Before I could answer, he went on to say, "You know, it could have been a lot worse."

Vernon L. Burda's account of the day he saw ten thousand men cry in Pantanella News #19 was something that none who was present will ever forget. Even now, after all these years, recalling that event elevates my blood pressure.

After liberation day, the weather closed in and we did not get out for

about ten days. Then it was on to Camp Lucky Strike to get deloused. Standing in line waiting to get deloused, I passed out. It was pure exhaustion and pain in the left leg. I was sent to the 179th General Hospital in Rouen. There my leg was x-rayed and I found out I had three greenstick fractures just above the ankle. They had not healed and I was on crutches for about two weeks. When I recall how I had hobbled around the countryside for six weeks, I realize how lucky I was not to have had the bone snap. One thing helped me. My left side was so bruised that when not walking, most of my time was spent in the sack.

From Rouen, I was sent to the 1st General Hospital in Paris. A couple of nights later, someone came in and asked me if I could be ready to go out to catch a plane to the U. S. in thirty minutes. I said, "Hell, I'm ready right now!" "How about your personal gear?" they asked. "I'll buy some more when I get to the States" was my answer. That plane was not going without me being on board!

We landed in Newfoundland,

serviced the plane and arrived at LaGuardia in the afternoon. They bused us to Mitchel, where I had been assigned after flying school. I really felt like this was home. The phones at Mitchel were so busy with returnees calling their families that you had to wait in line for thirty minutes to make a call. Then, through mutual understanding, we would only talk for three minutes. I called my wife, who lived in Coral Gables, Florida. This was the first news of me she had had since the message came from Washington that I was missing in action. Where did all those letters go that were posted in Rouen and also in Paris? It has always been a mystery. Home, sweet home. It is what it has always been and I pray will always be.

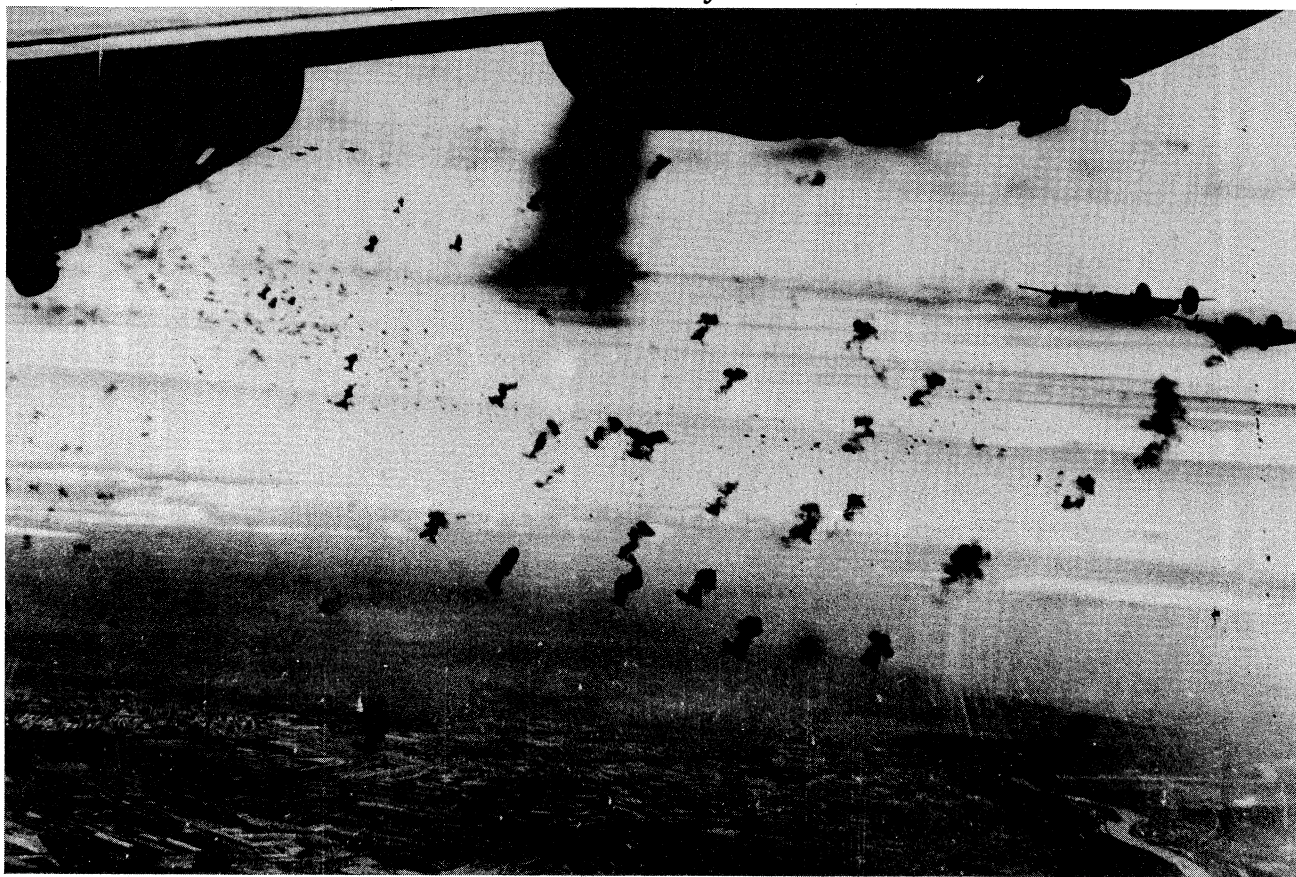
This is the first time the entire story has been told. About twenty-five percent of what you have just read has been related to various people. My wife, after reading parts of this said to me, "You should have told your sons and also me." Now they will have the opportunity to read it. Under the circumstances, I feel lucky to have made it so far. Believe me when I say that it could

have had a much sadder ending. McHenry Hamilton, Jr. Colonel USAF, Retired.

Col. Hamilton was flying with Capt. Richardson from the 782nd, in Yellow "X". They were leading the group over the target. The position was Able one. From the group records - Able one took a direct hit, exploded after 60 seconds and went down. Another aircraft took a direct hit and exploded. No chutes were observed. Three other planes from the group failed to return to Pantanella that day.

In Yellow "X" were three 781st men; Lt. Ernest Alden, radar navigator, got out, but was hung by Austrian civilians, Alfred Maas, gunner, was observed to be wounded in his turret. Reports indicate he went down with the plane, although one report indicates he may have also been hung by Austrian civilians. Lt. Paul Durckel, group navigator, bailed out and was taken POW. The rest of the crew, all from the 782nd, were also taken POW.

It was a rough mission. There will be further individual stories on this mission.



A typical day over Vienna. Note "Blue" Danube lower right. It was brown after a bombing raid.

MAIL CALL

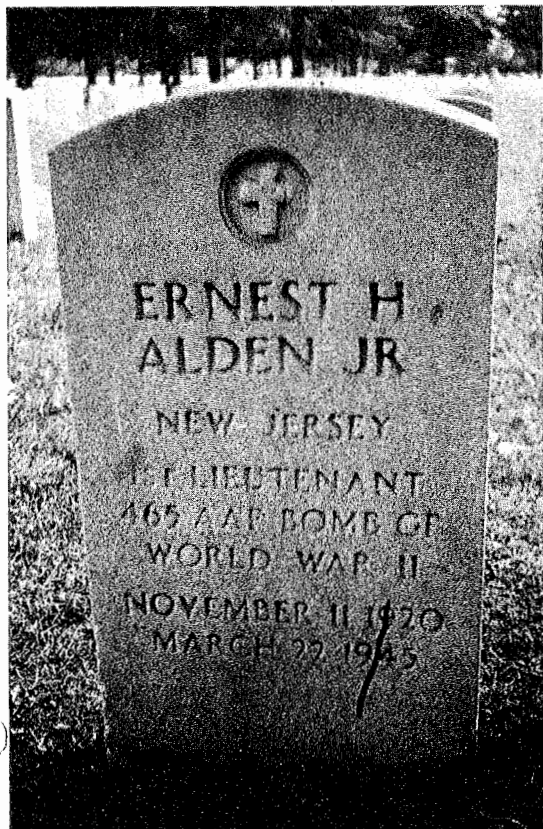


*In August I received a letter from **Gilbert Carter** of the 780th Bomb Squadron.*

"After obtaining the information from you on Forest View Enterprises, I arranged for them to make 780th Squadron pins which we distributed at our 1989 Reunion in Washington, D. C.

"Also with your help I obtained a copy of the 781st Squadron History Book, which I find amazing. The fact that your Squadron with Harry Carl could put this together so many years after the war is unbelievable.

"If I am not mistaken that is Blue "Q", Lt. Col. Locker's plane on page 152, which went down over Blechhammer on November 20, 1944. My original crew with Joe Norman as pilot was in the slot behind Blue "Q" and was damaged by the explosion and went to Russia with the crew returning to the 780th just before Christmas. On the day before, November 19, 1944, I was in Blue "Q" as Navigator with Lt. Col. Bullock, over Linz, Austria.



"On page 158 of the 781st Book is a picture of some of the Radar Navigators. On page 93 I read of 1st Lt. Ernest Alden's experience over Vienna. These facts were unknown to me before reading it in your book. I live about 5 miles from the Beverly National Cemetery in New Jersey. About 5 years ago I drove through the cemetery and stopped at random by the side of the road and decided I would see how much information they put on the head stones. To my surprise the one I selected read, Ernest H. Alden, Jr., 465th Bomb Group. I am enclosing a photo of the stone. I inquired at a later 780th reunion and Wendell Galbraith, from the 782nd, told me Alden was on the same plane as he but Alden did not bail out when he - Galbraith did. Galbraith became a POW.

"On May 9, 1990 I had the opportunity to see and visit the "All American" while it was at the Chester County Airport in Coatesville, PA. Bob Collings and his crew have done a fantastic job in restoring this B-24. I understand from Jack Van Slyke it will be at the 781st Boston Reunion in August.

"I contributed two checks for two 780th Honor Crews, Lt. Joe Normans crew \$240, and Capt. Mathew B. Liles crew \$264 (11 man crew).

"I am sure that the 781st will have a successful reunion in Boston. Please say hello to Jack Van Slyke for me. I won't be able to make the 780th Reunion in September due to illness."

Thanks for your letter, Gilbert. And thanks for the information on Ernest Alden.

Yes, Bob Collings did a superb job on "All American." Anyone at our reunion can attest to that. It would be nice if your squadron gave it some publicity and more helped in contributions. For the second year in a row the 781st has been primarily responsible for the 465th Bomb Group insignia on one tail assembly.

Forest Sinclair (Personnel Clerk) wrote a note that the only person who ever called him Clement was **John Messmore**. On our records we had Forest listed as Clement. We must have received that from Messmore!

A letter from **Charles Fry** (McKenna Gunner) informs us he lost his wife November 29, 1990 after a long illness.

O. J. Cowart, Jr. informed me that he received a letter from **Clarence Knox** (Communications) stating that he lost his wife in August. Therefore, he was unable to attend the reunion.

Bob Bassinette (Blakita Bombardier) went to Europe after the reunion. He wrote that some names that we should remember were Vienna . . Munich . . Augsburg . . Linz . . Budapest . . Styr . . Regensburg etc. "This was the first time I ever looked up from these cities" he notes. He said he came away from the reunion feeling lucky and proud to have been a part of the 781st.

Dennis Flaherty (R. J. Smith Tail Gunner) wrote a note with his donation, "I have enjoyed all the reunions and newsletters that we have had. I also greatly appreciate the fact that we have such a great organization after all these years. Hope to be able to attend the reunion in Omaha in 1992."

Harold Farrar (Tipton Gunner), "The Boston reunion was wonderful and I had a great time. I am still somewhat in shock from having my "dog tags" returned after all of these years. It was a very emotional experience."

From **Lewis Coghill** (Engineering), "I received the *Pantanella News* today and was happy to see a large group was able to attend. Sorry I missed it, but I was with you in spirit. After many years I really have a hard time putting faces and names together, but I am sure that contact with some of the Engineering would improve my memory.

I am retired, but my work with the Shrine and their hospitals keep me jumping and very busy."

From **Bill Coonan** (Engineering), "Enjoy the *Pantanella News* so much. The reunion pictures were so clear and great. I did not see many names from the Engineering section attending. That is one reason I have not been there. I would not know too many. Wish a special effort were made by our section to attend the next reunion, or better still have a reunion of the Engineering section."

Bill, why not start contacting some of your Engineering section and get them to join you at Omaha. Other sections have done it, as have air crews. And you don't have to know anyone to enjoy reliving the days at Pantanella. Widows of our men attend that have never met any of them before - and they return year after year.

I was pleased to receive a letter from **Lolette Tucci**, widow of Joe Tucci (Group Sergeant Major). She appreciated the article about Joe in a previous *Pantanella News* and she enjoys receiving all the issues. She sent in a very generous contribution.

Lolette, we all wish you the best for the coming year.

There were many other letters and notes of appreciation. We are always pleased to hear from you and we take note of your comments.

FIRE SALE

We discovered we have a few leftover reunion booklets for the 1985 reunion in Colorado Springs and the 1986 in Dayton. Price reduced from \$15 to \$5, including postage. These booklets are 32 pages, filled with great photos and the story of the reunion, all done by Harry Carl. While they last! Order from O. J. Cowart, Jr.

The **REUNION VIDEO** shipment was delayed, but should be in the mail by the time you receive the newsletter. Argene Barnett is doing the video work and will be mailing it out when ready.

James Culbertson

In November I flew to Hilton Head, South Carolina for a business meeting, and from there drove to Greenwood, South Carolina to visit James Culbertson, (photo below) nose gunner on my crew. James was the only one of the crew who I had not seen since WWII, except for the three in Folded Wings. He lives in Ware Shoals, seven miles from where he was born and raised. He has been in sales since his discharge in late 1945, retiring earlier this year.

I had forgotten, but Sgt. Michael Miserlis (Operations) had his res-



taurant in Greenwood and passed away there several years ago.

Although serving in the nose gun position James Culbertson was also an engineer and served in that position later on and went home a Tech Sergeant. He recalled the mission when he was flying as engineer on my crew when we were flying Baker One and had to make an early return after an oil leak in number two engine causing it to be feathered, then supercharger problems in another. This is when the mid-air occurred, but no one got hurt.

Another mission he remembered very well was when we were flying Jim Wray's wing and we got as close to a direct hit as you could get. It tore a gaping hole right in front of me on the side of the plane so that the first aid kit was blown apart, an oxygen bottle exploded, radio and

some instruments went out, and I got hit in the leg. James thought sure we "had it" that time. Since the nose was full of dust and smoke and no radio communication to the nose I thought they all "had it" in the nose.

It was a pleasure to see James again and I enjoyed our visit very much. James plans some traveling and expects to drop in on some old crewmates.

Sick Call

In a recent call to **Bill Bruce**, President of the 782nd Squadron, I learned that he had a stroke. He attended our reunion, then held the 782nd Reunion. Bill is getting around well and expects to be taking up his duties in January or February. We wish you well on your recovery, Bill.

In a phone call to in December to **Paul Brady, Sr.** I learned that Paul has had some medical problems this past year. In March he had open heart surgery, then in April he had one lung removed. If Paul did not seem quite as perky at the reunion you can understand why. Then leaving the reunion he went to Chicago and stayed with his daughter and was in and out of the hospital for 15 radiation treatments for two tumors. He is now home and in the meantime has had pneumonia and a broken hip.

Paul would sooner be flying combat than making trips to the hospital. He hasn't lost his moral, however, and sounds as feisty as ever. He said he was looking forward to Omaha. We'll see you there Paul!

In a Christmas card from **Mal-lory Simmons** he notes that he was sorry he could not attend the reunion due to surgery on his left knee and right foot. He reports he is much better now and looking forward to Omaha.

From Walter Sutton I learned that "**Woody**" Wood (McKenna Navigator) was on sick call in December. Hope all is well with you now "Woody."

EUGENE WEISS' DOG TAGS RETURNED

On October 18th a mini reunion was held in Sacramento, California for members in the northern California area. The purpose was to have the dog tags returned to Gene Weiss, survivor of the Tipton crew not present at the reunion to receive his dog tags, and to give local members a chance to meet one another. It was held at the Officers Club at Mather Air Force Base. The membership was not told about the return of the dog tags in advance.

Carl Dahl handled the local arrangements. Members, some with their wives, began arriving by 11:00. I brought along a TV to show some video of the reunion along with other memorabilia and the PX. Most arrived by 11:30 and all got into the swing of it. The Base Commander, Col. Daniels, arrived just before noon and got acquainted with our lively group.

During lunch two TV crews and a reporter arrived and set up. No one seemed to be concerned - at least know one asked me what was going on.

After lunch I said a few words about our fine squadron and then introduced Col. Daniels, who called on Gene Weiss and presented him with his dog tags. Gene was quite surprised and then spent a half hour or more being interviewed. The story appeared on two TV stations that evening and a large article was in the newspaper on Saturday.

We were invited to visit the base museum nearby in the afternoon. Between visiting with each other and going to the nearby museum everyone was busy. All agreed it was a very worthwhile reunion.

Those attending were Bernie Badler, Carl & Wanda Dahl, Elizabeth Crawford, Ben Donahue, James Gingrich, Reuben & Verna Krogh, Walter & Vera Kroskey, Kerry Myers, Margaret (Albert) Myers, Curt Reed, Dale & Zibbie Samuelson, Wessley & Melba Shaw, Eugene Weiss, Kennard Wiggins, and Jim Althoff.

Below - Gene Weiss receives his dog tags from Col. Daniels



DUES

Our plea for support has not been completely satisfactory. We find the same members are making significant contributions each year, but many others do not respond at all. The board of directors discussed this matter and they have decided reluctantly that dues of \$10 per year must be established to spread the cost to all members. In the past a number have contributed well over \$10.00 per year and we will continue to accept such contributions.

We will initiate a method to keep you informed if you are current on your dues. Your mailing label will have a number after your name to indicate the latest year you have paid. For Example Joe Jones 90 will mean he has paid his dues for 1990. If no number appears it means we do not have a record of receiving any contributions from you in the past three years.

If you have not contributed and are interested in the Association and want to continue receiving the *Pantanello News* please respond with your check for \$10.00 to cover the first years dues. The check should be made payable to the 781st Bomb Squadron Association and sent to O. J. Cowart whose address is on page two.

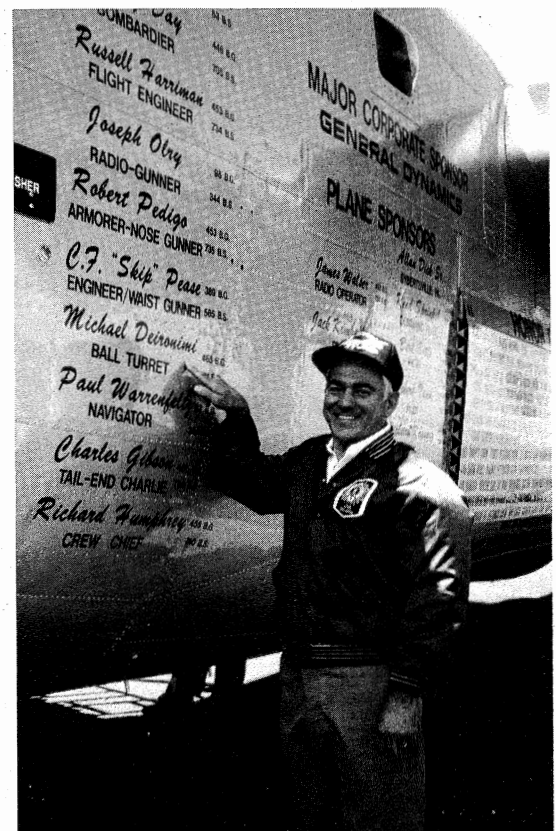
While we are on the Tipton crew, not mentioned previously was the attendance at the reunion of **Paul Brady, Sr.** and **Michael Deironimi**. They also went down with the crew on the July 16th mission to Vienna. Their dog tags were not located. Paul Brady was Cauble's nose gunner, but was assigned to the Tipton crew to replace their nose gunner Soteropoulos, who was injured on their first bail out on return from Ploesti. Paul stayed in the Air Force and retired after becoming Chief Master Sergeant.

Michael Deironimi was Tipton's crew ball gunner and has attended all the reunions.

After the war he returned to his old position in the machine shop he worked at before service. In 1950 he opened his own machine shop and operated it for 20 years.

He then went to work for the Town of Hempstead, the largest town in the US with a population of over 800,000. He was a member of the town board for 15 years before retiring.

He has been a big supporter of *All American* being one of the largest donors from the squadron. He is a member of *All American's* lead crew.



All American and other B-24 news.

Bruce Miller (Armament) sent in information on the International B-24 Memorial Museum at Pueblo Memorial Airport in Colorado.

The museum is only one of it's kind, museum for the historical Word War II airplane, the B-24 Liberator. It was opened in 1989 at the site of the former Pueblo Army Air Base where 900 B-24's were stationed for combat crew training.

All American paid a visit here after our August reunion.

William Feder Sr., Lt. Col. CAP (Ret) is the Curator, 31301 Aldred Road, Pueblo, CO 81006. Phone 719 948-9219.

In the August/September newsletter from the **Collings Foundation** it reported officially that the 465th Bomb Group, along with the 453rd, are the 1990 donation champs and the tail markings will remain on the rudders. We all can be proud of the support many of you have given to this great project.

The newsletter through December also just arrived and gave some interesting figures. During 1990 *All American* made **96** appearances which included **26 Airshows, 64 Barnstorming Stops** and **6 WW11 Bomb Group Reunions**. They estimate 3 million Americans saw the *All American*. Since it's first flight on Sept 8, 1989, *All American* has flown **285 hours**, 205 of those in 1990. During 1990 *All American* **flew more hours and made more stops** than the Confederate Air Force B-17 "Sentimental Journey", B-17 "Texas Raider," LB-30/C-87 "Diamond Lil" and B-29 "FIFI" - **COMBINED!!**

One of it's stops in September included **Republic Field, L.I.** with **Mike Delronimi**, Lead Crew member from the 781st. host for the Collings Foundation.

Another stop at Wilmington, NC was hosted by **R. Leon Crouch**, (Co-pilot/Ashley Crew) Honor Crew member from the 781st. Leon was located just a year ago and attended his first reunion in Waltham.

A stop in Chattanooga *All American* was greeted by **John**

Layne (Dahl/Ball Gunner), who is a Distinguished Flying Command member.

Noted in the newsletter was the welcome to **Adrian Martin** (Tail Gunner/Dahl) to the rank of Plane Sponsor. Adrian has attended all of our reunions. He served in Korea and retired from the Reserves as a Lt. Colonel.

At the reunion you saw both the 781st Bomb Squadron recognized on the right side of the nose and the 465th Bomb Group on the left side of the nose. This is a result of your donations. The 465th total donations are over \$30,000, of which the **781ST BOMB SQUADRON MEMBERS DONATED OVER \$26,000!!!** **Our squadron leads all World War II squadrons in donations.** As a result of our squadron donations it puts the 465th Bomb group as the second highest group donor to *All American*.

We all can be proud of the members that have donated because they

have recognized the great part our B-24 played in WWII history and the need to have one flying and fully restored to show todays Americans this historic aircraft. Your contributions are "Keeping It Flying."

Others interested in more information or desiring to make a donation contact the Collings Foundation, River Hill Farm, Stow, MA 01775, Phone 508 562-9182.

The January Schedule is a 13 stop tour in Florida. This newsletter will no doubt be received too late for that information, but watch your papers or television, or call the Collings Foundation (508 562-9182) for your local schedule.

In the planning stages are plans to come to Southern California in late March, then to Northern California and on other stops on it's eastward flight. I expect to notify California members when the dates and locations are finalized for California.

REUNION 90 NEWS

I was unaware of the late arrival of **Charles N. Fry** (McKenna Gunner) and **Ralph Finch** (McKenna Gunner). This makes the McKenna crew with the most attending, if you consider Hank Willet as co-pilot (He replaced Jim Wray when he went to Group). There were eight in attendance. Jewell Shelnutt, Charles

McKenna and Jim Wray were missing.

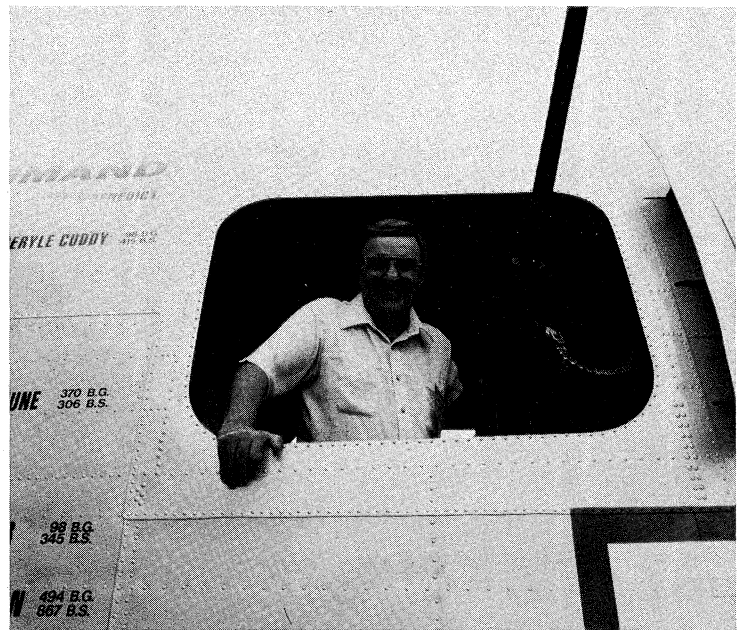
The McKenna crew is the only squadron crew with all men surviving! Wouldn't it be great if this entire crew made the next reunion! Worthy of national news coverage wouldn't you think.

In the photo L t R, Harold Straughn, Hank Willet, Jim Waggle, Charles Fry, Walter Sutton, William Wood and Nick Belik.

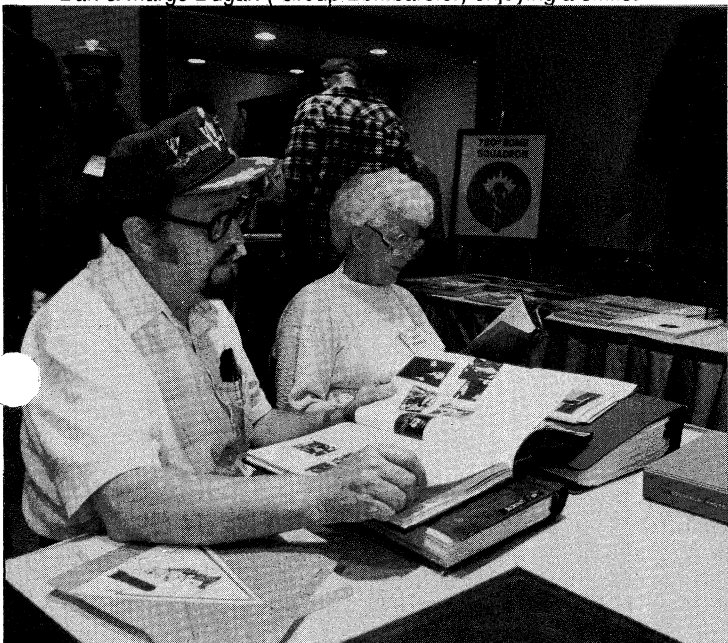




Dan & Marge Dugan (Group Bombardier) enjoying a smile.



Frank Ambrose on the receiving end of the camera



Bonnie Rowe and Owana Humber serious about a photo album



Walt and Ann Longacre enjoying *All American*



Jim Waggle and Walt Sutton find something interesting



Self explanatory

HISTORY OF THE RAE BRANCH CREW

By **Bernie Badler**

It begins with Rae's graduation from Advanced Flying School, Class 43-E, at Ellington Field, Houston, Texas. He was sent to Gowen Field, Boise, Idaho to learn to fly B-24's. The Squadron Commander of the unit that he was assigned to was Lt. Jimmy Stewart (Yes, THE Jimmy Stewart) and he checked Rae out as a B-24 pilot. Shortly after being checked out Rae was walking down the flight line and he ran into Ken Braley who he had known when they were both in bombardier School from which he graduated. With some smooth talking by Jimmy Stewart to the Squadron Commander who Ken was assigned to, he had him transferred to Rae's crew.

This was taking place in June and July, 1943 when the rest of the crew, not including the navigator, were being assigned. I joined as co-pilot early in August. After getting training as a crew for a short while we were sent to Wendover, Utah for training as a replacement crew. There Al Rodman joined us as our navigator, and now we were a complete combat crew.

On Nov. 16 we got orders sending us to McCook Air Base, Nebraska assigning us to the 465th Bomb Group. Along with us were the Shetterly, Stenerson, Wheeler, and Van Slyke crews who ended up in the 781st Squadron.

It was at McCook that we got our most intensive training. The one thing that I still remember from our flying out of there was what happened on one very cold night cross country mission. We were up over twenty thousand feet and the heaters in the old B-24D were either not working very well, or not at all. Well, Rae always had trouble keeping his feet warm and I could never keep my hands warm, so after the two of us suffering we decided to fly the plane with his hands on the wheel and my feet on the rudders. Then he kept stomping his feet on the floor to get the circulation going and I put my hands in my armpits to warm them up. We flew this way until we got to a lower altitude where the plane warmed up.

We got orders on February 2, 1944 sending us to Lincoln, Nebraska for staging preparatory to going overseas. As we were in the Air Echelon we flew our plane, in the group formation, over to Lincoln.

On February 12 we took off from Lincoln with the temperature of 25 degrees below zero. Our destination was

Morrison Field, West Palm Beach, Florida, and when we landed there the GI's were walking around in short sleeves, a far cry from what it was when we left Lincoln.

At Morrison we got everything ready for our flight to our unknown overseas destination. There is where they loaded our Bombay with sacks of mail, it occurred to me that someone used their head and decided to make good use of all that space in the plane.

Our departure from Morrison was in the dead of night, 0529 on February 15 for Waller Field, Trinidad. I still have the vision of lights of the field behind the plane and wondering if I would ever see the US again. We landed at Waller at 1559 which was routine for us but not for the plane ahead of us flown by Lt. MacFarlane, who was running out of gas and had to make a downwind landing and ran out of runway! Luckily there were no fatalities.

We left Waller Field the next morning at 0917 for Val de Caes Field, Belem, Brazil where we landed at 1546. Now we could really feel that we were nearing the equator as the weather was getting very heavy and humid, and we were being introduced to atabrine as we were in malaria country.

Next stop was Fortaleza, Brazil. After an overnight stay at Belem we took off at 1030 to make our final flight on this side of the Atlantic Ocean. The short time that we were in Fortaleza is still very vivid in my mind. The weather was just delightful and the officers club was very lush. I remember the four of us, the officers, sitting on the veranda of the club playing pinochle. We ordered four beers and what does the waiter bring but four QUART bottles of beer! Well, after a couple of bottles we had no idea as to what kind of card game we were playing. All in all the stay there was very pleasant.

The next leg of the flight was the ultimate test of Al Rodman's navigational skills - a hop across the Atlantic Ocean to Africa. There weren't all the radio aids that they have now to navigate across the oceans, but Al did an excellent job as we were right on course and only six minutes late on his ETA. The most memorable part of the flight was when we flew through an equatorial front and encountered up and down drafts and with all the static electricity the entire plane was rimmed with St. Elmo's fire - a very weird sight to behold. On this leg we left Fortaleza at 0238 and landed in Eknes Field, Dakar, Senegal, French West Africa at 1334.

The change in scenery from South

America to Africa was shocking - an entirely different atmosphere. The one thing that I will never forget was our "sleeping accommodations." Our beds consisted of a wooden frame on which were placed rope mattresses. They were about the most uncomfortable thing that I have ever slept on, but after that long flight over the ocean we all managed to get a decent night's sleep. Up to this time we were not allowed to leave any of the bases where we landed to check into the local towns, but this was to change when we reached our next destination - Marrakech, French Morocco.

We left Dakar at 0626 and flew over the Sahara Desert, an immense wasteland with absolutely no sign of life - no place to make a forced landing! But all went well and we landed at Marrakech at 1347. Here we did get to go into town to do a little sightseeing and to take a few pictures. One picture taken of Branch, Braley, and Rodman sitting at an outdoor cafe was printed in the Squadron History Book.

It was at this time that we opened our sealed orders and found we were headed for an air field near Tunis - Oudna. Here we stayed for about 2 months until our field was ready at Pantanella. Of course the time at Oudna wasn't wasted as we flew practice missions to get us ready for the real thing. I might say at this time that by the time we were sent up to Italy the Group was very proficient in formation flying. Also it was at Oudna that they took away our plane and sent it up to Italy to replace their losses - a nice comforting thought. It was also at Oudna that the group suffered its first casualties when there was a mid-air collision of 2 planes with a loss of 19 men - the bombardier on one of the crews went on sick call that morning. Even though this happened 46 years ago I can still remember the names of the two pilots.

Before we were able to go up to Pantanella we received a new plane - a shiny one without the OD paint. It was a real beauty, and promptly got named "Long John Silver." It was made by North American Aviation and it was a sweet flying 'bird.' We flew it until the time that John Dickey, with Ray Cauble's crew, borrowed it and was shot down!

Fortunately no "gory stories" can be told about our tour of combat, all that can be related are incidents that happened on our missions. One of the most noteworthy was one to Valmontone, Italy on May 22, 1944 when we ended up on top of the overcast on the way to the target and found out that there were

only four planes that made it through. We must have found the only hole to climb through! In the lead ship was Maj. McKenna flying with Bob Shetterly, the rest of the formation consisting of Jack Van Slyke, George Prince, and ourselves. This was the entire effort of the 15th Air Force on the way to bomb the Germans that day. Maj. McKenna called and asked if we were going to the target with him and of course nobody said "negative." Before we reached the IP he called and said that his bomb sight was out and he told us to take the lead as we were flying #2 position. Well, the overcast forced us to descend to about 15,000 feet and as soon as we got over enemy territory we ran into some very heavy flak. We finally had to ditch our bombs and high tail it for home. Branch had a piece of flak come up through the bottom of the plane, cut the outside of his right boot and just redden his leg (he still has that piece of flak). We had two engines knocked out so we had to throw everything out that we could to lighten the plane so we could make it back to base, so overboard went ammo, batteries and just about anything that was loose. Fortunately nobody was shot down, but when we got back they counted over 60 holes in George Prince's plane!

While on the subject of George Prince, he was flying on our right wing on the day that he was shot down. Flying as co-pilot I saw the entire thing from the moment that he was hit by fighters and started to burn between #3 engine and the fuselage, until the wing broke off and went down. I still remember one of our crew members calling out that guys were bailing out of the plane and then he said, "there goes one guy holding his nose as he was jumping." I can still see the entire scene as though it just happened yesterday.

Our crew flew on both of the missions on which the group received the Presidential Unit Citation and hit all the tough targets such as Weiner-Neustadt, Munich, Vienna, and Friedrichshafen to name a few. Fortunately I can say that no one in our crew was ever wounded and that every one of us flew a complete tour of 50 missions.

The last comment that I will mention concerning our combat tour is what happened to Al Rodman's on his last mission. He finished first due to the fact that he flew lead navigator on several missions that the rest of the crew did not. On our way back from the target Markersdorf, Austria, the plane in #7 slot in the box underneath us pulled up and chopped his throttles. His tail turret

was so close to us that you could count the rivets. Branch, who was flying at the time yanked the plane up just in time to avoid a collision. Needless to say Al really got "soused" that night for more than one reason.

Just to set the record straight all the dates and times that I have quoted are not from my memory, which happens to be very good, but were taken from my copy of Al Rodman's diary.

My personal comment about our crew is that they all did their job in a professional manner and with the safety and survival of the crew utmost in their minds. I was very proud to have served with every one of them.

It is amazing that as close as the combat crews were when you are flying missions that how soon you lose all contact once you return to the States. In my case the only one that I kept in contact with was Al Rodman, and that was only through the exchange of Christmas cards every year. Until I first heard about the 781st reunion I had no idea where any of the rest of the crew were located, or if they were even still living.

To get information for this crew history I sent letters to the surviving members and thankfully I got replies from everyone of them. Sadly three of our guys are in "Folded Wings" - Jim Zimmerman, Engineer - Ray Huch, Nose gunner - Joe "Sparkie" Lavender, Ball gunner.

Now for the history of the individual crew members. Up in the nose was Ken Braley, our bombardier. In his letter he states that his closest call in combat was on one of the Ploesti missions he got a piece of flak that went through his helmet without even scratching him.

When he returned to the States he was sent to Atlantic City, NJ for redistribution where they sent him to Langley Field, VA, to be a radar observer. He was separated in September 1945 and went to work for a wholesale auto parts store where he learned the business. Later he became branch manager of Standard Auto Gear of Brockton, MA. Now 73 he lives with his sister and brother-in-law near Boston.

Al Rodman, the navigator, returned home from Naples aboard the "Santa Rosa", a United Fruit Line ship, which also had a large group of German POWs on board. After R & R, then duty as navigation instructor at various bases he returned to Lincoln Park, Michigan to return to his job as machinist. He and Lee have three sons, retired in 1982 and enjoying his retirement.

Rae Branch finished his missions

August 29, 1944, then remained in the squadron for a month doing test hops and instructing. He returned to the US and instructed in B-24's until discharge in July, 1945. The last time he put on his uniform was VJ day in downtown Denver. Rae and Margery have three sons, a Navy Captain scheduled to be the Executive Officer on a new nuclear carrier, another a Navy Lt. and one who works for Hewlett-Packard.

Joe Ferguson was top gunner and assistant engineer. On one mission he had a piece of flak go through the plexiglass of his turret right in front of his forehead, never touching him. When he left Pantanella he was sent to a POW camp near Naples which had German, Polish, and Italian prisoners. His job was to guard them with a Thompson sub machine gun on the trip from camp to the Naples harbor. He returned to the US on the Liberty ship, the Patrick Henry, along with the POW's. He was a gunnery instructor in Florida until discharge in September, 1945. He returned to Chester, PA to work as a machinist. He married and had a son and daughter. He retired in 1989 and is enjoying the good life.

Cliff Flowers was radio operator and waist gunner. He remembers a raid over Ploesti when the B-17's were flying directly over us on the bomb run with the bomb bay doors open. He also remembers a mission over Vienna in #2 position when we were jumped by German fighters from the right which put him on the inside of the action. We got credit for two planes shot down but he didn't get a chance to fire a shot. He returned home to McClellan Field, CA, then was discharged and returned to his wife and home in Dunsmuir, CA. He retired in 1983 from his job as locomotive engineer for Southern Pacific. He spends his retirement golfing, traveling, and upland bird shooting.

Ben "Curley" Kraeger was the tail gunner. I visited him after the San Antonio reunion and he showed me a couple of pieces of flak he picked up in his turret on one of the missions. He recalls one mission over Weiner-Neustadt when we were hit by Me109's and five of them came at us from the rear in trail. He said that he sure used up a lot of ammo and it seemed that a couple were seen to go down. After completing his tour he returned to the US as gunnery instructor. After discharge he went back to teaching 5th or 6th grade or Jr. high school classes. When I visited him I was glad to see that he was the same old "Curley." He still has vivid memories of his time with the 781st.



Rae Branch Crew L to R Rear - Rae Branch, Pilot; Bernard Badler, Co-pilot; Kenneth Braley, Bombardier; Alfred Rodman, Navigator; Front L to R - Raymond Huch, Nose Gunner; Joseph Ferguson, Top Gunner; Benjamin Kraeger, Tail Gunner; James Zimmerman, Engineer; Clifton Flowers, Radio Operato; Joe Lavender, Ball Gunner.

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