

**Jerry Hofmann**  
**1916-1945**

**Childhood**

John<sup>1</sup> and Ella Hofmann<sup>2</sup> were married 21 months when their first child was born May 23, 1916 at 566 Park Place in Brooklyn. Baptized John Gerard Hofmann, he was initially called "Gerard", presumably to distinguish him from his father, John. Eventually most people called him Jerry.

Within days of the World War Armistice (11/11/1918), an itinerant street photographer took a picture of the toddler, Gerard, posing with the photographer's prop, a Shetland pony. Jerry's mother Ella purchased a 5 X 7 picture mounted on cardboard intending to send it to her 61-year-old mother<sup>3</sup> back in Ireland. On the back she wrote:

*Mom--how do you like your Grandson, a man with a pony passed one. So Gerard thought he would have his picture taken. I knew nothing about it until the man brought the picture back. Don't you think he is big for his age, 2 yrs. 5 mths. I made his over coat, how do you like it*

While Ella periodically sent letters with money to her mother in Ireland, she never did send this picture. The same pony and a slightly older, more confident, Gerard posed for another photograph a year or so later.

In 1920, the family purchased a simple three story brick building at 537 Park Place just a block from their parish church, St. Teresa of Avila. Jerry's father operated his butcher shop (with wooden floors and sawdust) on the ground floor; renters lived on the middle floor, and the Hofmann family (still just Pop, Mom and four year old Gerard) lived on the top floor.

Jerry was an only-child until his sister Mary Teresa (Tess/Terry) was born in 1922. The same year, six-year-old Jerry had his tonsils removed. His later military records indicate that Jerry's only other major childhood illnesses were measles and mumps.

In May 1929, a week before he became a teenager, Jerry welcomed a new baby brother, Bobby.<sup>4</sup> Later that year, the historic stock market crash heralded the Great Depression. At some point during this time, John sold his butcher shop to the Bohack grocery chain and began working in their meat department.

Jerry graduated from St. Teresa's grammar school (c.1930), and later Manual Training High School (c.1934), also in Brooklyn. He eventually worked at the Produce Exchange at 2 Broadway in Manhattan. In his late teens and early twenties, Jerry was involved in church activities: the football team, basketball, Holy Name Society, Usher's Society, Young People's Group, Bingo Committee, and Dance Committee. This was the depth of the Great Depression and the height of FDR's New Deal. The family was solidly Democratic and active in the local ward politics.

Jerry enjoyed photography, both still pictures and movies. The black & white silent home movies included c. 1936-1939 scenes of:

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<sup>1</sup> John Albert Hofmann (1890-1950) was baptized Johann Albrecht Hofmann at a German speaking Lutheran church. He was named John after his maternal grandfather, a German basket weaver named John Kill

<sup>2</sup> Eleanor Marie Goff (1885-1951) emigrated from Arraghan, Bellanagare, County Roscommon, Ireland at age 15 in 1906 with the help of her maternal uncle.

<sup>3</sup> Maria Dockery Goff (1857-1942) had been widowed for over 25 years. Gerard was her only grandchild at this point. She eventually lived near or with her four Irish grandchildren, the Kelly's. She never met her three American grandchildren, the Hofmann's.

<sup>4</sup> Robert Francis Hofmann was born May 15, 1929; his mother Ella was nearly 44.

- Soccer matches at the Parade Grounds adjacent to Prospect Park
- Jerry in a white tux in a friend's wedding
- Classon Avenue, the commercial street on which the church and the ice cream parlor hangout were both located
- Scenes with Bobby, their sister, Tess and her friends in their Easter finery at the Brooklyn Botanic Gardens and in swimsuits at either Coney Island or Riis Park beach.

## The Winds of War

By the fall of 1940, the Nazi Blitzkrieg had overrun most of Europe. The Luftwaffe was ferociously bombing London but suffering double the losses of the Royal Air Force (RAF) in the "Battle of Britain". On October 1, 1940, Jerry and 14 friends<sup>5</sup> from St. Teresa's Church enlisted in the Army after their New York State National Guard unit (101<sup>st</sup> Calvary located at the armory at Bedford Avenue and Union Street, Brooklyn) was called up for Federal service. They left for basic training at Fort Devens, Massachusetts, on January 17, 1941. Military records listed his height at 5 feet, 6.5 inches and blonde hair. (Photographs show the classic Hofmann receding hairline.)

Jerry's first mail home was to his parents. On February 5 Jerry wrote his mom (then in St. Catherine's Hospital, Buswick Ave):

*Arrived here (Ayer Mass) about 8a.m. after about 9 hours on the train. The weather is about 18 degrees and clear as a whistle. No foolin, but I got sunburn this afternoon. The country is beautiful, covered with snow. Hurry up and get better fast Jerry.*

Jerry's postcards indicate he was a driver for a Colonel when they and 50,000 other troops headed south on September 28, 1941 to Fort Bragg, North Carolina. Jerry was pictured in the local newspaper riding a motorcycle as the column passed through Allentown, PA on October 2. Jerry wrote in November about a *big* (war games) *battle that lasted two weeks.*

*Thanks dad again for candy & cookies.... Driving for General Eckfedlt we were captured for a few hours then an old style "cavalry charge" rescued us...Returning to Fort Devens about December 7<sup>th</sup> (1941) So Long—Jerry.*

If the 101<sup>st</sup> Cavalry was on schedule, they arrived back at the fort on the very day that the Japanese surprise attack on Pearl Harbor plunged the nation into the Second World War.

In May 1942 Jerry, a Private First Class since July 1941 and apparently a Military Policeman (MP), returned from other training maneuvers down south. In July he traveled with the army through Rutland Vermont to Fort Ethan Allen near Burlington.

After 19 months in the Army, Jerry's August 18, 1942 Western Union telegram confirmed his transfer to the Army Air Force:

*Arriving Tomorrow Morning Early. Leaving For Air Force Thursday.*

The luggage decal in his scrapbook suggests Jerry soon flew on American Airlines to Nashville Tennessee. In an October 1942 postcard from initial training in Nashville, TN, Jerry told his 13-

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<sup>5</sup> Peter Cox, Ralph Gallo, David Powers, Andrew (Andy) Pflaumer, Edward (Ed) O'Dea, Al Flanigan, Thomas McGrath, William (Bill) Woods, James Donlon, Thomas Gavigan, James Thomas, Thomas Doran, Gerard Hofmann, Frederick Gatens, Eugene O'Donnell (according to a Feb. 4, 1941 church newsletter clipping). Many of these men were in Jerry's photographs.

year-old brother Bob: *I'll know in a few days what they want me to be, Pilot, Bombardier, or Navigator.*

Apparently the answer was pilot. This was the choice assignment that most men sought. He attended two pilot training schools but was ultimately trained was assigned as a bombardier. Jerry traveled by train from Nashville, through Alabama, eventually grazing the Mexican border at El Paso Texas, on to New Mexico, Arizona and eventually Santa Ana Army Air Base in California. As the train raced along, camera always nearby, Jerry documented the sights that a Brooklyn boy would find noteworthy including swampland, deserts and little Mexican children.

In Santa Ana, Jerry was a non commissioned officer (T/5) Aviation Cadet at Sequoia Field learning how to fly simple airplanes reminiscent of the First World War. Jerry sent home a photograph of the front of his barracks with a 38<sup>th</sup> Squadron and e flag displayed out front. On the back he wrote:

*This is the "E" we won for "Excellence". Best drilled & marching Pilot Squadron in Santa Ana for 7 weeks. We carried it each Sunday – oh, me ---- fame.*

For Christmas Eve dinner they had a feast, which included Roast Young Western Tom Turkey, Whipped Idaho Potatoes, Diced Orange County Avocados and Sliced Egg Nog Ice Cream.

Jerry received his next level of Pilot's training at Mira Loma Flight Academy, Oxnard CA. Jerry was impressed with the step-up in accommodations from prior camps:

*Each room of two cadets has a private bathroom & shower, Venetian Blinds & curtains, two writing desks – ah me!*

On the back of a picture of himself in an open cockpit, Jerry noted his limited height: *Tell Bob – I've got to sit on a seat cushion as well as my chute & have my seat all the way to the top so I can see out.* On the back of a serious pose (of himself looking towards the rising or setting sun) Jerry wrote:

*Look out – Japs & Jerries Here comes "Stinky"*

Jerry's solo flight was in a PT 18 (plane # 109), which resembled a Lindbergh-era plane. Some of the pilots were drenched with buckets of water as an initiation or celebration after their first solo flight. The March 1943 graduation program says that *though many the Son's of Erin in her ranks, Squadron Six seemed destined not to be blessed with the fabled Irish luck.... beset by quarantine and rains.*

Next it was on to Kingman, Arizona for instruction at the Army Air Force Flexible Gunnery School. Here Jerry trained on machine guns. He also practiced identifying airplane shapes and insignia to recognize friend (USA, Great Britain or Russia) from foe (Japan, Germany or Italy).

From here he sent his 14 year-old brother Bobby the base's weekly newspaper, "The Cactus". The June 24, 1943 edition had photographs of the Three Stooges (Moe, Larry & Curly) recent USO performance at the Kingman Air Field. The cartoons included Bugs Bunny, the base mascot; Italian Fascist dictator, Benito Mussolini having nightmares about his pending doom and American GI's fawning over long-legged attractive women. The high temperature for the week was 95 degrees; the high wind speed was 45 miles per hour. Jerry got out in the parched desert photographing caves, mines and cacti. On the back of a picture of the sun bleached cattle bones He wrote: *Some of the poor critters that didn't get to Dad's store.*

Jerry graduated from Kingman as a 1<sup>st</sup> Class Aerial Gunner on July 5, 1943.

Next stop for Jerry was Army Air Force Bombardier School at Demming, New Mexico (*Kingdom of the Sun, altitude 4333 ft.*). It was common for Army Air Corps enlistees to seek to qualify as a

pilot. Demand exceeded available slots, so only those judged the most qualified were given pilots appointments. Jerry was reassigned to be a bombardier.

In September Jerry underwent a comprehensive "Physical Examination for Flying":

Height: 5 Foot 6 Inches	Blood Pressure: 110/70, 110/80
Weight: 174 pounds	Resting Pulse Rate: 54 and 64
Posture: Good	Eyesight: 20/20
Figure: Stocky	Chest: 40 inches
Frame: Medium	Abdomen: 35.5 inches

His X-rays, hearing, lungs, arteries, skin, and virtually every body part were examined and judged "normal". Jerry's dental exam showed he had lost seven of his original molars.

He was honorably discharged from the army as an aviation cadet (20240903) on October 1, 1943 at age 27. It was exactly three years since his initial enlistment. His discharge noted his character as "Excellent" and his Physical condition as "Good". The next day, Saturday

## **ADD**

The following recaps his service prior to deployment in Europe:

c.1939-1940	101 <sup>st</sup> Cavalry New York National Guard
January 1941- August 1942	101 <sup>st</sup> Cavalry (Federalized) Army, Fort Devens MA
August 1942- fall 1942	Sq H-1 PAFCC Nashville TN
Late 1942-Early 1943	Sequoia Field, Santa Ana (CA) Army Air Base (Flight Tr.)
January-March 1943	Mira Loma Flight Academy, Oxnard CA (Flight Training)
Spring 1943- July 1943	Kingman (AZ) Army Air Field Gunnery School
Summer 1943-October 2, 1943	Deming Army Air Field, Deming NM (Bombardier Tr.) (Commissioned 2 <sup>nd</sup> Lt. and awarded Bombardier Silver Wings –Class WC 43-14)
Dec. 9, 1943	Avon Park, FL
Early 1944	4 <sup>th</sup> Sea Search VA
April 1944	Morrison Field FL Final stages before deployment overseas. Stouse provisional crew #39. Formed 296 Sq. 88 <sup>th</sup> Bomb Group

## **The Strategic Bombing Offensive**

American President Franklin D. Roosevelt remarked "Hitler has built a fortress around Europe, but he forgot to put a roof on it."<sup>6</sup> In January 1943, FDR and British Prime Minister Winston Churchill met in North Africa at Casablanca and approved the invasion of Italy in 1943 and France in 1944. They also agreed that the US would continue daylight bombing and the RAF would continue to operate at night.

The Casablanca Directive reaffirmed that the purpose of the air offensive was "to bring about the progressive destruction and dislocation of the German military, industrial and economic systems, and undermine the morale of the German people to a point where their capacity for armed resistance is fatally weakened."<sup>7</sup> Bombing by the 15<sup>th</sup> Air Force would be used as a long-term strategic weapon. The 12<sup>th</sup> Air Force would be used tactically to support ground troops by attacking enemy forces.

The priority targets (154 had been identified in pre-war contingency plans) included: oilfields, refining and storage; rail and other transportation targets; aircraft manufacturing; ball bearing factories; electric power plants and U-Boat Construction yards.

While Reich Propaganda Minister, Dr. Josef Goebbels was publicly exhorting the German people to work towards their eventual victory, he privately confided in his diary "*The day raids by American bombers are creating extraordinary difficulties. If this continues, we shall have to face serious consequences that in the long run will prove unbearable.*"<sup>8</sup>

In September 1943, Italy surrendered to the allied forces that had invaded the southern part of the peninsula from Sicily. Though the Germans would take over administration and the war effort in the northern half of the country, the allies gained the former Italian Air force bases along the southern Adriatic coast. This put allied heavy bombers in range of important targets in southern Germany, Austria, Czechoslovakia, and the Balkans. Available targets now included the Wiener Neustadt Industries, the Ploesti Oilfields, the Danube supply route and supporting the Russian offensive in the Balkans.

### **Final Training and Journey to the Mediterranean Theatre**

"We had a damn nice crew" is how Sergeant Earl "Red" McClish described the 10 men who trained in Langley, Virginia and Florida before heading to Italy. While in Florida the officers were invited for some R&R at co-pilot Roy Cooper's wealthy aunt's beach house in . The four officers<sup>9</sup> and three of the six sergeants<sup>10</sup> took nine days (April 30 – May 9, 1944) to fly the nearly 10,000-mile South Atlantic route from Morrison Air Force Base, West Palm Beach, FL to Italy. Their stops were: Trinidad, Belem, Brazil; Natal, Brazil; then after a brief layover and test flight they lifted off at 2 am for an 11 hour flight to Dakar Senegal in West Africa. They then flew north to Marrakech, Morocco, then east to El Aovina, Tunisia, then north to Amendola Airfield, near Foggia in southern Italy, which the Allies had captured from the Axis forces the prior year.



<sup>6</sup> Fortress Without A Roof p. xiii

<sup>7</sup> Fortress Without A Roof, The Allied Bombing of the Third Reich, Wilbur H. Morrison, St. Martin's Press, New York, NY 1982, p. 108.

<sup>8</sup> Fortress.... P. 134

<sup>9</sup> All second Lieutenants: Chuck Crafton (0753618), Pilot; Juan J. (JJ) Dyer (0679060), Co-Pilot; James J. Miceli (0698134), Navigator; and John G. Hofmann (0756981), Bombardier. Dyer was a last minute replacement for Roy D. Cooper, co-pilot who left abruptly just before the crew departed Florida. The crew speculated that Roy, who fancied himself a fighter pilot, had obtained a transfer.

<sup>10</sup> Don C. May (17034439) Upper-turret gunner, William M. Schilling (16162126), Radio operator; and Gerald V. Hamilton (39129778) flew with the officers. Isadore Berman, Flight engineer; Melford Moser and Earl McClish, tail gunner, crossed the Atlantic Ocean by boat.

<sup>7</sup> World War II Almanac: 1931-1945 *A Political and Military Record* Robert Goralski, Bonanza Books, New York 1981, 1984

Their aircraft, which bore no *nose art*, did have the distinction of being the first *Mickey Ship*, a plane equipped with radar on the bottom to aid in bombing in cloudy or stormy weather. Lt. Jim Micelli trained to use the new technology and missed the crew picture in April 1944 in Florida. The crew first used the radar in a mission against the Ploesti Romania oil fields on May 1944, the mission that Micelli flew with a separate crew, was shot down and made a prisoner in Romania.

## Italy 1944-45

Jerry served 12 eventful months with the 429<sup>th</sup> (Split Arrow) Bomb Squadron, part of the Bombardment Group, 5<sup>th</sup> Wing of the 15<sup>th</sup> Air Force. The squadron was based at Amendola Airfield, which had been captured from the enemy in late 1943.

The main risk to aviators was the metal shrapnel, *flak*, fired miles into the air by German anti-aircraft guns. Luftwaffe fighter planes, by 1944 less formidable than earlier in the war, were a secondary threat. German defenses were strongest near strategic targets like the Ploesti oil fields in Romania, Berlin and Munich, Germany and Vienna, Austria.

The 15th Air Force had achieved total air superiority in Italy so the main risks on this part of the mission were succumbing to damage suffered over the target or mechanical failure particularly over the Alps or the Adriatic. Nazi Air Marshal Hermann Goering admitted the Allied Airforce's domination to Adolf Hitler on May 29, 1944...."at the moment the situation in Italy is such that not a single Luftwaffe aircraft dares show itself." <sup>11</sup> This is the same Goering who in 1939 had bragged to the German people "My name is not Goering, if any enemy aircraft is ever seen over Germany, you can call me (the Jewish surname) Meyer!"<sup>12</sup>

## Eventful Missions

- June 13, 1944 Munich, Germany

Jerry was awarded the Distinguished Flying Cross for Extraordinary Achievement while participating in aerial flight. The award citation detailed: "During a bomb run on June 13, 1944 over a German target, Lt. Hoffmann's (sic) plane encountered intense and accurate flak which in addition to damaging the aircraft, wounded the navigator and radio operator. Coolly, he went about his work, dropped his bombs for a concentration of hits on enemy installations; then after repelling fierce attacks from enemy fighters he went back to the radio room and rendered first aid to the injured man, with utter disregard for personal safety- he worked on without oxygen. After dressing the man's wounds, he then came forward and aided the wounded navigator, only then did he replenish his oxygen supply. Throughout the remainder of the trip back to friendly territory, Lt. Hoffmann took over the navigation of the aircraft and materially aided in returning his ship and crew to their home base."

Nearly fifty years later, Bill Schilling (Sergeant, Radio Operator and Gunner), recalling Jerry's assistance to him, marveled: "Jerry was chunky and how he didn't catch any shrapnel is beyond me."

Jerry earned the distinction of being Squadron bombardier.

While Jerry was very serious about his duty as bombardier, he frequently found time for humor. As Lt. Arnold Witoff, the crew's replacement navigator, recalled, during one flight, as the

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<sup>11</sup> World War II Almanac 1931-1945, A Political & Military Record, Robert Goralski, Bonanza Books, New York 1981, 1984

<sup>12</sup> Fortress Without a Roof p. 41

plane returned from a mission, Jerry got on his belly with his arms outstretched. Asking the pilots seconds before landing: "Did you bother to put the wheels down?"

- November 1, 1944 Vienna, Austria

On this the 300<sup>th</sup> mission of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Bombardment Group, Jerry was the lead Bombardier. This meant as the formation of B-17's approached Vienna; Jerry used the lead plane's Norton bombsight to focus on the upcoming target, the South Ordnance/Ammunition Depot. As lead bombardier, he also used the bombsight to take control of the aircraft, actually guiding its flight pattern from his position in the nose of the plane; the other planes followed his lead.

Hampered by bad weather, this 9 hour, 35 minute flight was Jerry's longest in Italy. To celebrate, the 2<sup>nd</sup> Bomb Group's milestone, several Generals joined in a banquet at the officers club that night.

### **"The War Ends"**

Jerry finished his required missions<sup>13</sup> on November 7, 1944. Several of his fellow officers (Including Navigator Farley Mann and Pilot Chuck Crafton) encouraged Jerry to return home and not to volunteer for a second tour of duty. One veteran speculated that Jerry was perhaps interested in signing on for a second series of missions and perhaps a promotion to Group Bombardier and the rank of major. Captain Farley Mann said, "Jerry was thinking of flying a second tour; we were telling him to *go home*." Decades later Jerry's brother Bob recalled that Jerry was waiting for some friends to complete their required service, so they could return stateside together.

Jerry had given his family the impression that he would be heading home. On December 6<sup>th</sup> 1944 he signed his Christmas card "*Keep well! See you soon. My job nearly finished!*"

His family repeatedly asked when he would be safely home:

- (Letter) *April 10 – 45 11 PM Dear Jerry, A few lines, we haven't heard from you since 2 weeks B4 Easter. I have been worrying about you why did you not write by the time you rec. this we will probably hear from you. Got your Easter cards. Please write soon. I expected you home any day the last three weeks as you said you were leaving to come home. Will close hoping I hear from you soon. Pop*
- (Letter 4/17/45) *...Got a V-mail from you. What are you doing with the 5<sup>th</sup> Army?? Any news of coming home soon? .... Love, Tess*
- (Letter 4/20/45)... *Everyone asks when you're coming home. Sure wish I could say "Tomorrow" .....Love from All. Tess xxxxx*
- (29<sup>th</sup> Birthday card 4/25/45) *Best of Luck –Dad  
I do hope you are well and happy. Hope to see you Soon - Mom*

It was then during the early spring of 1945, as the war in Europe progressed to conclusion, that Jerry volunteered to be an exchange officer, an observer, with the army. Officers in different branches of the Armed Forces occasionally participated in these exchange programs to observe operations in the other branch of the service. Given that when Jerry was in the

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<sup>13</sup> Initially airmen were required to fly 25 missions, later this was increased to 35 and finally 50, with double credit for missions on targets in the Reich (Germany and Austria).

National Guard he was with the 101<sup>st</sup> Cavalry, perhaps he requested to be temporarily assigned to its successor, the tank division. In 1945 April Jerry was a military observer with the 11<sup>th</sup> Armored Infantry Battalion (1<sup>st</sup> Armored Division, IV Corps, 5<sup>th</sup> Army).

After resting and regrouping over the winter, at the front line 15 miles south of Bologna, the US Fifth Army joined the final offensive on April 14, 1945. Bologna was captured on April 21, Modena the next day. On April 23 the Military Governor for Northern Italy, SS Gen. Wolff, made further approaches to the allies for a unilateral armistice in Italy. His alternatives were to either follow Hitler's directive "to stand and fight to the end" or to prolong the fight by retreating to the Alps.

"By April 23, the German situation was hopeless. The permanent crossings of the Po had long since been destroyed. The German attempts to cross the river by ferries and pontoon boats were hounded day and night by the tactical air forces. Their main forces were largely confined to the plains of the Po valley, with its gutted roads and absence of natural defenses. They had neither the means to escape nor to hold off the onslaught of superior Allied forces, and the incessant pounding from the air. The fate of the German forces in Italy was, in effect, sealed at the south bank of the Po. Major German resistance had evaporated by the 25<sup>th</sup> - the Eighth Army having crushed the hard core of the German 10<sup>th</sup> Army against the Po. The Allies now were able to roam throughout Northern Italy at will."<sup>14</sup>

The OSS in Switzerland was finally given authorization to arrange unconditional surrender of German forces in Italy from SS General Wolff on April 27<sup>th</sup>. Partisans executed Italian dictator, Benito Mussolini on April 28<sup>th</sup>. The German military in Italy finally surrendered on April 29<sup>th</sup>.

Germany capitulated on V-E Day, May 9, 1945 thus ending the war in Europe. The Hofmann family anticipated word on when Jerry would be heading home. While in the Pacific the Japanese were still doggedly defending their home islands, at home the nation was basking in the euphoria of having defeated Hitler's Germany and Mussolini's Italy.

### A Terrible Loss

Any euphoria... any relief the Hofmann household was feeling was shattered on May 20, 1945 when John A. Hofmann received an abrupt telegram advising him "THAT YOUR SON CAPT HOFMANN JOHN G WAS KILLED IN ACTION IN ITALY 24 APR 45 CONFIRMING LETTER FOLLOWS"



John was distraught and shocked at the news of his son's death. Never prone to sentimentality, he wept. Also never known to drink to excess, John came home from work at the A&P market<sup>15</sup> intoxicated and in tears. Jerry's mom had been in and out of the hospital for

<sup>14</sup> Defenders of Liberty 2<sup>nd</sup> Bombardment Group History 1996 p. 306

<sup>15</sup> Sometime in the 1930's, John left employment with Bohack Markets, which frowned on his involvement in (Democratic) politics. He later worked on as a 5<sup>th</sup> Avenue Brooklyn butcher in the meat department of



physical and emotional health problems since Jerry left home in 1941. She never recovered from this emotional shock. Her physical and mental health declined until her death in 1951.

Unable to fathom the circumstances of Jerry's death, his father contacted the freshman Democratic Congressman from Brooklyn, John J. Rooney. Jerry had met the congressman the previous winter when he toured the Amendola airbase. John Hofmann asked Rooney's help to learn: Why Jerry hadn't returned home after completing his required missions? What was Jerry doing in the infantry?; and How he died? In a June 28 letter, responding to Rooney, a War Department representative indicated they had no further information and suggested the family address a letter to the Commanding Officer or Chaplain at Amendola.

In the meantime, Captain Morton of the 429<sup>th</sup> Bomb Squadron had the unenviable task of writing the confirming letter to the family. In a letter dated June 10, 1945 he indicated:

*It is with the deepest sympathy that we write this letter concerning the death of your son and our comrade, Captain Jerry Hofmann. A lack of details prevents us from giving complete information; but we are writing with the hope that what information we can give may help to cushion your great sorrow.*

*Captain Hofmann was fatally wounded by the point-blank fire of a German tank while he was a member of an advance scouting party. Captain Hofmann had elected to visit the front Italian lines in order to make military observations, notwithstanding the fact that he had led our group in some of the finest bombings recorded. He went on, ever fighting the enemy for the things he believed in. From the scant information at hand, death was practically instantaneous, and pain was not apparent.*

*His body was laid to rest in an American cemetery located in Northern Italy and the funeral was conducted by an American chaplain.*

Lt. Robert H. Shepherd, one of the participants in the battle gave the following report (May 20, 1945): *"On the morning 24 April 1945, on or about 0130 hours, the Battalion column had come to a halt due to enemy action at the head of the column. <sup>16</sup> While we were halted, an enemy tank column approached the road junction (at), which the Battalion S-3<sup>17</sup> track had stopped. It was confusing in the dark whether or not the column was Krauts or American. The Krauts were also in doubt as to our identity.*

*When the Krauts realized we were Americans, they immediately opened fire with machine-gun and A.P. fire from a tank. The first round of A.P. from the tank hit the S-3 track setting it on fire. Four more rounds were fired at the S-3 track. The vehicles in front of the S-3 track moved farther up the road when the action occurred. Due to extreme machine-gun fire from enemy personnel and tanks it was impossible to evacuate only Captain Cajka, which at the time was riding up in the front seat with the driver."<sup>18</sup>*

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the Great Atlantic and Pacific Tea Company, A&P. John got his teenage son, Bob employment stacking shelves for A&P.

<sup>16</sup> On April 23 the front where the 1<sup>st</sup> Armored Division was fighting went on an unusual bulge that ran from 2-3 miles west of Modena north, northeast to the southerly bend in the Po River. The front then meandered east to the Adriatic Sea.

<sup>17</sup> The lightly armored vehicle was a half-track. It had tank treads and an armored driver's compartment in front. The back of the vehicle had tires, side armor, a canvas top, a radio transmitter and room for 7 passengers. The S-3 designation indicated that this was the operational command vehicle for the unit.

<sup>18</sup> Two of the three passengers from the front survived. Captain Daniel L. Cajka, (0380595) died, T/5 James T. Wildes (33021140), and 1<sup>st</sup> Lt. Wenford W. Smith, (01683438) survived.

Six of the seven passengers in the back died immediately—Jerry, Major Richard W. Betzer (0349228); T/Sgt Robert M. Fenner (37018130); Pfc Walter A. Doucet (38379610); T/4 Raymond St. John (320445236); T/4 Walter E. Freiburg (36232955). The seventh, Pfc. Paul D. Hofer (13177140) died shortly after the battle on the way to the hospital

“While the Allied (U. S) Fifth and (British) Eighth Armies pushed triumphantly through the disintegrating ranks of the German Tenth and Fourteenth Armies across the Po River valley, and just eight days before the German’s unconditional surrender, John G. (Jerry) Hofmann, Captain USAAC, was killed in one of those innumerable tank battles in northern Italy. .... He was the (2<sup>nd</sup> Bombardment)Group’s last combat fatality.”<sup>19</sup>

Farley Mann felt: “Jerry’s death was one of the most difficult to accept. I lost crewmembers and friends who were killed on missions, but Jerry’s (death) seemed so unfair. He was a good man that should have been able to live a long productive life.

Jerry was initially buried at the temporary Army cemetery at Mirandola, Italy.<sup>20</sup> On June 23, 1948, his father, John, traveled to Manhattan to file a declaration selecting Jerry’s final burial place. His dad selected a permanent American Military Cemetery overseas versus either a private or military cemetery in the U.S., believing he should be buried alongside those with whom he fought and died. Jerry’s grave (Plot B, Row 4, Grave 2) in the Military Cemetery south of Florence is marked by the standard white cross with the following inscription:

John G. Hofmann  
Capt. 429 Bomb SQ 2 BOMB GP (H)  
NEW YORK APR 24 1945

### **Remembrances of Fellow Airmen and Friends**

Despite only having served with him for a matter of months, and despite the passing of nearly a half-century, Jerry’s comrades recall him as an unpretentious, friendly and funny person and as a proficient bombardier. Each veteran voiced the following descriptions of Jerry individually and independently without prompting.

Farley Mann felt: “Jerry’s death was one of the most difficult to accept. I lost crewmembers and friends who were killed on missions, but Jerry’s (death) seemed so unfair. He was a good man that should have been able to live a long productive life.

“Jerry was wonderful...he treated the enlisted men as equals.” Sergeant Bill Schilling (Radio Operator and Gunner, November 1991)

“Jerry was a happy-go-lucky joker... a nice guy with a good sense of humor.” Sergeant Isadore Berman (Staff Sergeant, Flight Engineer- October 1992)

“Jerry was big, not in height, but in character. He was head and shoulders over most of those serving.” He was “a superb human being who was good at what he did.” Lt. Bill Daly (Navigator- January 1993)

Jerry “was proficient, congenial, friendly.” Lt. Jim Miceli (Navigator- August, 1992)

“Jerry had a little chubby face, was humorous, jolly, hell-of-a-nice guy. Rank didn’t mean much to him. He told the enlisted men in the crew not to salute him.” Earl remembered Jerry “sneaking a

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<sup>19</sup> Defenders of Liberty 2<sup>nd</sup> Bombardment Group History 1996 p.307

The U.S. 5<sup>th</sup> Army fought from Bologna and west. The British 8<sup>th</sup> Army fought northward east of Bologna. Jerry and the 1<sup>st</sup> Armored Division were fighting the 14<sup>th</sup> Panzer Corps of the German 14<sup>th</sup> Army. While the Germans were in disarray they did have two veteran Panzer Divisions in reserve.

<sup>20</sup>Mirandola is located 18 miles northeast of Modena. Jerry was initially buried in Plot C Row 9, Grave 396, before being disinterred in late 1948 for final burial at the new cemetery (in Chianti, south of Florence) in the spring of 1949.

pitcher of beer out of the officers' club to Earl and the other crew members." Sergeant Earl "Red" McClish (Tail Gunner/Engineer)

Jerry was "real nice, happy-go-lucky, a good person... everybody liked him." Lt. Norris Slabaugh (Pilot- September 1992)

"Jerry was well liked." He "was an excellent bombardier", "Adventurous, very confident, an outgoing friendly man." Captain Farley Mann (Navigator- January 1993)

"Jerry was a real American and a true, authentic hero. God rest his soul." Arthur Hart (Friend from Brooklyn) Letter to *New York Daily News*, July 3, 1977

### **Postscript**

Jerry's 15<sup>th</sup> Air Force Certificate of Valor lists the following achievements:

#### Awards and Decorations

Distinguished Flying Cross

1<sup>st</sup> Oak Leaf Cluster for Distinguished Flying Cross

Air Medal

1<sup>st</sup> Oak Leaf Cluster for Air Medal

2<sup>nd</sup> Oak Leaf Cluster for Air Medal

3<sup>rd</sup> Oak Leaf Cluster for Air Medal

#### Campaign Medals

EAME (Europe, Africa, Middle East) Theatre

#### Battle Stars

One Battle Star - Rome,-Arno Campaign

One Battle Star – Southern France Campaign

#### Special Achievements

Completed 50 missions over enemy territory.

Led the squadron and the Group

Served as Squadron Bombardier

In addition he received the Purple Heart and the Russian 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Victory Medal posthumously.

Researched 1982-2003 by his nephew, Robert D Hofmann 223 Snow Hill Rd  
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**Bombardier Silver Wings –Class WC 43-14)**