

crashed in the area of Lake Belsema, Italy. All members of the crew bailed out. I bailed out at about 14,000 feet. Two engines of the ship were destroyed and one was smoking. Several members of the crew were slightly injured by flak before the bail out. All chutes opened and after I landed on the ground I met all the enlisted men of the crew except S/Sgt. (Horace M.) Mahabirsingh. I did not see the plane wreckage.

S/Sgt. (Charles E.) Ringler (he returned to duty June 10, 1944) is believed to be captured by the Fascists, as I was told later, by Italian peasants, that the area he was in was inspected and searched. I was also told by Italian peasants that S/Sgt. Mahabirsingh, who was the complexion of a Negro, being East Indian, was immediately captured and the description, given by the Italians, fits him. Other members of the crew who returned to duty stated that they knew Lt. Pederson (he returned to duty June 12, 1944) to be safe somewhere in the vicinity of the plane crash.<sup>14</sup>

T/Sgt. Bernard L. Scalisi, UTG, started his 6 month evasion adventure hanging 15 to 20 feet up in a tree with 15 angry men and women threatening him with pitchforks, scythes and sickles. Fortunately the crowd couldn't reach him. Two men came along, quieted the crowd, allowing Scalisi to come down safely. They did take his heated suit, Mae West, shoes and field jacket, and left him with his pants, shirt, and sweater. They gave him an old suit coat and a pair of hobnailed shoes that were too big. The two men took him about a mile away and hid him in some thick bushes and left him. Later, German soldiers did come through the area, but Scalisi went undetected. The two men returned in about three hours and took him to four members of his crew — S/Sgt. Anthony Brodniak, RWG; S/Sgt. Charles E. Ringler, LWG; S/Sgt. Ralph W. Truesdale, LTG; and S/Sgt. Horace M. Mahabirsingh, TG. The group decided to separate, with Scalisi and Brodniak together, Truesdale and Mahabirsingh together, and Ringler, the oldest at 35, going alone. The two Italians who brought them together, now told them they were on their own. Their advice was to trust no one and seek help only from poor farmers who were less likely to be Fascists.

Scalisi and Brodniak almost froze that first night on the mountain. The following day, while still in the mountains, they found an empty farmhouse, and scouted it long and carefully before risking entry. They gathered wood and after dark, started a fire in the fireplace, but ran out of gathered wood and burned some of the meager furnishings. They left at sun-up. The duo wondered aimlessly for about two weeks, trying to follow streams and other land marks to guide them south. When hunger overcame them, they stopped at farmhouses to ask for food. They were never turned down, no matter how meager the supply, and could never get those good people to take their money. They had Italian lira and Swiss francs from their escape kits, which Scalisi squirreled away in the waist band of his pants.

Then they accidentally ran into a band of about 9 Fascists. The Fascists were staying in an abandoned farmhouse, and on pretense (as it turned out) that the Germans were searching for

the downed airmen, the Fascists offered the two airmen a perfect hiding place, until the Fascists could help them contact the underground. One of the Fascists spoke good broken English. He had stayed with relatives in Brooklyn, and came back to Italy after he became homesick.

Scalisi and Brodniak were locked in the cellar at the farmhouse. They were given some candles for light, two meager meals a day, and a five-gallon crock that served as a portable toilet. They were allowed out only to empty the toilet. They could burn the candles very little because of the smoke and fumes. They were kept hidden for 10 or 12 days. The English-speaking one brought them their food. One night he told them the band was going to turn them over to the Germans the next day. He didn't want to be responsible for what might happen to them, so he was going to leave the cellar door unlocked that night. He was going to leave that night himself. He also agreed to take care of some fairly mean dogs at the house. True to his word, the door was unlocked, the dogs never barked, and Scalisi and Brodniak slipped out late that night and put as many miles behind them as they could walking and running in the dark. At daylight they found a cave and went to sleep.

The two men continued to work their way south, asking for food and swiping it from unoccupied farmhouses when necessary. They got into Viterbo by sneaking across a bridge in the dark past an inattentive guard. They bought oranges, bread and nuts from a street stand with a lira note that raised the eyebrows of the sales lady, but she didn't sound any alarm. The two got through the city as quickly as they could.

Back in the countryside, they ran into some shepherds and a large herd of sheep. They made known their desires to get through the lines to the Allied side and were told it was too dangerous and that they should stay with the shepherds. The Americans had difficulty stomaching the shepherd food and were repulsed by the absence of sanitation among the shepherders. They found another incentive to leave despite the shepherds warning about the danger. They were caught with the herd when German soldiers came to buy some sheep. The shepherds indicated none were for sale, but the Germans loaded about 25 in a truck, gave the shepherds some money and left. The next day Scalisi and Brodniak thanked their hosts and continued south.

A few days later they entered a medium-sized town, only to find it was alive with Germans. After fits of anxiety, they made it safely back to the countryside.

Some days later they met two Italians on the road who stopped them and wanted to talk. The Italians soon learned they were English or American. The Italians claimed to be in an Italian Tank Battalion. Their proposition was, that in exchange for guiding the two airmen, the Americans would help them come over to the Allied side. The Italian's scheme was to steal a boat and go across to Corsica or Sardinia.

Four days later the foursome arrived in Civitavecchia. The boat turned out to be a small ship about 100 feet long, which the airmen couldn't run and didn't have the audacity to try and steal. Scalisi and Brodniak left the two Italians and found shelter in cave near a small town south of Rome.

After a few days, boredom set in and they risked going to a bar in town. They over-indulged in some cheap wine, and became loud enough to reveal they were English-speaking. Three men hustled them out of the bar. Their new benefactors turned out to be British soldiers who had been captured in Tobruk, Libya, had escaped a POW train taking them to Germany, and had been evading for almost four years. They were living in a cave about thirty miles from Rome. Scalisi and Brodniak stayed with them until about the middle of March.

One night the man on whose property the cave was located told them the Germans were coming to get them and they had to leave. When asked where they could go, he told them some Allied soldiers had taken refuge in the Vatican, but that it was very difficult to get in. In any event he wanted them off his property.

The group split up, made their way to Rome, and re-grouped. They found Rome overrun with refugees, the Vatican walls high, the gates well guarded, and hosts trying to get in. Rome had a 7:00 P.M. curfew.

The five evaders reconnoitered the Vatican wall and gates, selected the gate they would scale and went back intent on doing so several minutes before the 7:00 P.M. curfew. They found a crowd gathered near by and learned that the Germans had shot two people who had tried to climb the gate. This called for a more thorough study of the Vatican wall. Their plan was daring and, as it turned out, needed more than a little bit of luck.

They found a high wall around a garden near the abandoned railway station that was close to the Vatican wall. They also found a 20 foot lamp post next to the Vatican wall. The light pole had some barbs to discourage climbing, a crossbar well up on the pole, and the Vatican wall had holes, perhaps used long ago for gun ports, that might be reachable for hand holds for someone standing on the light pole crossbar.

On the chosen night the evaders helped one another scale the garden wall, and secreted themselves in the garden before the curfew. About midnight they came out of hiding, climbed the garden wall, and went to the light pole to start the assault on the Vatican wall. Timing was crucial because a German guard passed about every fifteen minutes. One of the Englishmen took the lead, shimmied up the pole to the crossbar, and from there made the transfer to the Vatican wall. Those who followed had the advantage of using the leader's rain coat as a scaling aid. They all made it, with nothing to spare, because one side of the crossbar collapsed just as Brodniak made a successful first-try transfer to the Vatican wall. A narrow walkway, probably for ancient gunners, on the inside of the wall helped the group get down on the inside.

They walked to the gate guard to announce their presence, and soon found themselves about to be evicted by the garrison guard NCO. Their loud protests attracted the attention of an English-speaking Asian diplomat who came to their rescue. With the aid of the British Ambassador and American Charge' d' Affaires, they were allowed to stay in the Vatican garrison barracks until the Allies entered Rome. On June 6 the two airmen left the Vatican and made their way back to Amendola.<sup>15</sup>



**MISSION 125, JANUARY 16, 1944**

VILLAORBA, ITALY, LANDING GROUND

**MISSION 126, JANUARY 17, 1944**

PRATO, ITALY, MARSHALLING YARDS

**MISSION 127, JANUARY 18, 1944**

CERTALDO, ITALY

MARSHALLING YARDS/RAILROAD BRIDGE

**MISSION 128, JANUARY 19, 1944**

ROME, ITALY

CIAMPINO AIRDROMES NORTH &amp; SOUTH

**MISSION 129, JANUARY 20, 1944**

ROME, ITALY

CIAMPINO AIRDROMES NORTH &amp; SOUTH

**MISSION 130, JANUARY 21, 1944**

PORTOCIVITNOVA, ITALY

MARSHALLING YARDS/BRIDGES

**MISSION 131, JANUARY 22, 1944**

STAZ DI CAMPOLEONE, ITALY

ROAD/RAILROAD JUNCTION SOUTH

**MISSION 132, JANUARY 23, 1944**

SIENA, ITALY, MARSHALLING YARDS

From January 16 through the 23, the Group flew every day against targets in Italy in support of the ground forces. The Villaorba mission was to "post hole" the landing ground which was done. There were twenty-five airplanes on the field at the time of the raid, but only two were damaged. The enemy offered no resistance.

The small marshalling yards at Prato and rail installations were widely damaged and one explosion was observed. Again, there was no flak or fighters.

The Group was sent back to Certaldo after the confused mission on January 15. The marshalling yards were well covered but the bridges remained intact.

Much of the German resistance to the Allied ground campaign seemed to stem from use of their fighters to bomb and strafe Allied ground forces and lines of communication rather than opposing Allied air forces. The raids to the Ciampino airdromes were to wipe out the fighter strength there and leave the fields inoperable. The full array of Allied air power — heavies, medium, fighter-bombers, dive bombers and strafing planes — was loosed against the complex. Fragmentation bombs were used by the 2nd and although considerable collateral damage was done to installations and roads in the area, only 2 of the 20 aircraft on the north field were destroyed and one damaged and none of the 11 airplanes on the south field were destroyed or damaged. The follow-up raid the next day, January 20, succeeded in cratering the landing areas with 500-pound demolition bombs. Photos showed no discernable damage to the nineteen airplanes on the north field or the twelve on the south field. Photos did show that eight of the planes on the north field had been shifted in position, indicating they may have been unserviceable or were merely dummies.

Portocivitanova marshalling yards, railroad and highway bridges were struck as an alternate to the marshalling yards at Arezzo. The marshalling yards and roads were badly damaged, but the bridges were not hit.

While apparently unknown at takeoff time, the raid against the road and railroad junction near Staz di Campoleone was in direct support of the Allied landings at Anzio. The 5th Wing had strongly emphasized the importance of destroying this target. It was a key link in the enemy supply line and for any hasty withdrawal. The importance of the mission was apparent as the crews flying home were privileged to get a sweeping view of the landings. There appeared to be little resistance. The mission was particularly rewarding when the crews learned they had done one of their best jobs of precision bombing. Photographs showed that one of the bridges was hit, others received near misses, and electric and rail lines were cut in several places. Maj. Bradford A. Evans, Commander of the 96th Squadron led the Group.<sup>16</sup>

Lt. Robert K. Oliver, Group Weather Officer, forecasted that the weather would not be good enough for a successful mission against the marshalling yards at Siena. This proved to be true. The formation made two passes over the target, then only part of the formation dropped bombs. Cloud cover and poor visibility left results in doubt. Some hits were made on rail lines outside the marshalling yards, but most of the bombs were to the left of target. Thirteen of the airplanes that didn't bomb at Siena, attacked the rail line and bridges at Ancona with some hits on the tracks. One plane dropped its bombs on a track in the area that stopped a train heading north when it appeared that bombs hit the track 1-1/2 miles ahead of the train.<sup>17</sup>

**MISSION 133, JANUARY 24, 1944**

SOFIA, BULGARIA, MARSHALLING YARDS

The good luck, good leadership, and good performance of the combat crews during the prior week did not continue Monday, January 24, when they set out to bomb Sofia marshalling yards. Maj. Joseph Triggs, Commander of the 20th Squadron, led forty Group B-17s on what one member of the 49th Squadron called "the worst mission in history for the Squadron and the Group."<sup>18</sup>

Once again Lt. Oliver warned that the weather did not favor a successful mission. Despite his warnings the mission proceeded, and the formation headed east across the Adriatic Sea on a tragic day of miscalculations.

The strategy for this strike was to conduct a surprise counter-air-force and communications operation in the Sofia area. During previous strikes it was observed that the strong German fighter forces in the Sofia, Nis, and Skopje area, flushed to intercept the bombers, would assemble over Sofia and then land for servicing at Vajdebra, 4-1/2 miles east of Sofia. The strategy was to catch this "sitting duck" force of fifty to seventy-five enemy fighters on the ground and annihilate it. Four groups of B-17s would attack the marshalling yards at Sofia, flush the fighters, then one hour later, two groups of B-24s would bomb the fighters while they were on the ground. The two new groups of B-24s were now in operation. The 2nd would be the third group over Sofia behind the 301st and 97th, and ahead of the 99th.

The entire area was covered with clouds and

the 2nd became separated from the rest of the Wing. After going eighty to one hundred miles beyond Sofia, the leader decided to return to base. Some of the crews thought the leader was going to the alternate, but that was not the case. The mission became confused and ended disastrously.

Sixty to eighty miles north-northeast of Scutari, Albania, an attempt was made to go down through a hole in the clouds. The first wave was fairly successful, but the leader of the second wave decided not to follow, made a 360 degree turn, and tried to climb over the clouds. Both waves jettisoned their bombs in the vicinity because everyone was running low on fuel.

Continued confusion caused the first calamity of the mission. While the bombs were being jettisoned, airplane number 42-5836, commanded by 2nd Lt. Thomas J. Grissom, was struck by bombs dropped by another plane. The bombs did not explode, but caused damage to the number 2 engine and made a large hole in the left wing outboard of number 1 engine. The airplane was last seen thirty-two miles north-northeast of Skopje, Yugoslavia, headed toward Italy. No one was seen to bail out. The plane crashed thirty-five kilometers north of Skopje. Four men were killed — 2nd Lt. Norman Mirchin, B; S/Sgt. David B. Torrey, LT; Sgt. John A. Murray, TG; and T/Sgt. Ernest C. Terry, ROG. The rest of the crew became POWs. Upon liberation, Lt. Grissom reported what happened to him and his crew. He felt that the formation got in trouble because it was to go over the target at a much higher altitude, and that too much time was spent apparently trying to find a target of opportunity that was in the clear. These two factors consumed the fuel that put the formation in jeopardy. On the return flight, Lt. Grissom was part of a three ship element that broke from the formation when the first wave started to descend through the hole in the clouds. The element chose to continue to base above the overcast. It was then that he glanced back and saw the other wave under attack by fighters. He then tried to rejoin the first wave formation and was briefly attacked by four Me-109s which the crew fought off. The formation he rejoined started a steep climb to clear a cloud, causing Grissom to overrun planes above and ahead of him. One of his crew members shouted that the plane above had its bomb bay doors open. Grissom described what happened next: "A bomb struck the wing flat, smashing it almost in two. Another bomb struck the number 2 engine and propeller, which we had to feather. The wing at that time was vibrating at a terrifying rate, so after at least a minute flying under those conditions, we gave the order to bail out. Everyone began to get ready. The bombardier aided the navigator and engineer trying to open the nose hatch which they could not get open. They then crawled through the cockpit to go to the rear. The copilot again gave the order to bail out and the alarm bell was turned on. After a short interval, I sent the copilot on his way. The ship was slowly turning to the left, and I got no response from the wheel which I forced all the way over trying to lift the damaged wing. After the copilot left, I again called the crew to bail out and waited until I felt sure they had time to reach the waist window and door. I started through the bomb bay and met the copilot and



bombardier there. They asked me to pull the emergency release for the bomb bay doors, which I did, and only one (door) opened, then only partially due to the slip stream. I climbed over with intentions of holding it open for them to bail out. Just as I got in position and had it open, we felt a wing give way and the ship began to roll. I shouted a warning and dropped clear. The copilot dove for the opening. We two were probably the last two to get out alive . . . The next day, after we were captured, we were told there were two men recovered from the wreckage, and later, after learning there were ten of us, the story was changed to four. We have talked it over many times between us, and our conclusion is that just the few seconds of hesitation cost those four their lives."

Copilot 2nd Lt. Royce E. Shellabarger gave some explanation as to why other crew members perished. "The only explanation I can give for S/Sgt. (David B.) Torrey, (LTG), and T/Sgt. (Ernest C.) Terry, (ROG), not jumping is the fact that these two men and 2nd Lt. (Norman) Mirchin, (B), were in the waist with all the crew except the pilot and myself and these three men were talking about something and before they could jump, the wing broke off and it crashed. Why they were talking or what they were talking about is not known . . . I . . . made motions for them to jump. They had been ordered to jump about five minutes prior to this time. Suddenly the ship turned up on it's right side as the wing broke off and I dove out the bomb bay. Just as my chute opened, I heard the ship explode as it hit the ground."<sup>19</sup>

After the fighter escort was forced to leave, the Group was attacked by enemy fighters — six to ten attacked the first wave and ten to fifteen attacked the second wave. The gunners repelled the attackers and none of the Forts were shot down but 2nd Lt. Glenn N. Hodges, B, in the 429th Squadron was killed instantly by a 20mm cannon shell. Two other men were wounded. The gunners claimed five destroyed and three probable from the attackers.<sup>20</sup>

The second plane lost was number 42-25411, pilot, 2nd Lt. Warren E. Lins, of the 96th Squadron. It was last seen over the Adriatic Sea turning back toward Albania. The supposition was that they were running low on gas and had engine trouble.<sup>27</sup> All of the crew became POWs, and Lins said after liberation that they chose to crash land on the beach in Albania. All of them were okay after the landing.

T/Sgt. Clarence E. Bolt, UTG, stated, "We crash landed OK. S/Sgt. (Robert T.) Colihan, (LTG), was shot by a German soldier in the leg after we got out of the plane. He was given first aid by the crew, and later taken to a German doctor. S/Sgt. Walter (NMI) Nies, (TG) was shot and killed while in prison camp by a German guard. He was outside of the barracks during a period when the privilege was denied by the Germans. He was shot and killed at 5:30 P.M., 27 May, 1944 and buried 30 May, 1944 at Memel, Germany."<sup>21</sup>

## DITCH DAY FOR THE 2ND BOMB GROUP

The trials of the Group had not yet come to an end. Because of the confused and convoluted route taken on the mission, by the time the formation reached the Adriatic, crews were running

dangerously low on fuel. It was obvious not all of them would make it back to base. Four crews ditched in the Adriatic off the coast of Italy.

According to reported ditching times and locations, the first plane to go into the drink was that of 2nd Lt. Victor Brockman and crew in airplane number 42-31463 of the 96th Squadron. They went down fifty-five miles southeast of Bari at 4:10 P.M., because of lack of fuel and the loss of two engines to the Luftwaffe. None of the crew was injured. They took to their life rafts until picked up at 5:38 P.M., by a British air-sea-rescue launch that took them to Brindisi where they remained overnight. The next day they were flown back to base in two Group planes on the same mission that had landed there. Brockman's airplane stayed afloat for seventy-five minutes.

The second plane to ditch was number 42-29515, also of the 96th Squadron. Pilot 2nd Lt. Robert (NMI) Willis set his airplane down at 4:23 P.M., twenty-six miles north-northeast of Bari. The plane sank in 1-1/2 minutes but the crew escaped in the two life rafts. They fired flares to attract air-sea-rescue and a launch picked them up at 6:10 P.M., and took them to the British hospital in Bari. The crew suffered from exposure, but was released the next day except for 2nd Lt. W. Modene Bingham, B, who was taken to the 26th General Hospital, in Bari for observation of a possible skull fracture, and 2nd Lt. Phillip L. Cooper, N, who had a strained back. The other crew members were flown back to base in a B-17.

The third plane to ditch was that of 2nd Lt. Charles (NMI) McCrary, in number 42-29645 from the 49th Squadron, that splashed down at 4:30 P.M., fifteen miles east-northeast of Bari because of fuel shortage and a run-away propeller. The plane stayed afloat for about twenty minutes. The crew made it safely into the life rafts, one of which only half inflated, so they lashed the two together and started paddling toward Bari. There were three vessels in the vicinity whose search lights played on the rafts, but none picked them up. The crew made it to shore about 1:00 P.M. the next day and started walking towards Bari. They came to a British Army camp where they were fed and put to bed. The 26th General Hospital was called and an ambulance was sent to pick them up. All of the men suffered from exposure, one had frozen feet and another a slight burn.

The last plane that had to give up to fuel shortage was that of 2nd Lt. Charles R. Watkins, in plane number 42-29602, of the 20th Squadron. It went down just one mile off shore at Bari at about 4:30. The plane sank in about two minutes. The crew was rescued by two small boats manned by Italians. They were taken ashore where two ambulances took them to a dispensary for food and clothing and then to the 26th General Hospital.

Miraculously, and thanks to a calm sea, all of the ditched crews survived, though some with injuries. Two crews and airplanes were lost and four planes were ditched, yet neither the primary target or the secondary target were bombed and most of the bombs were jettisoned.<sup>22</sup> All the other groups sent on this mission returned safely, but they too did not get to the intended target, although the 97th bombed the marshalling yards at Vrattsa, Bulgaria.

Early on the morning of January 25, unaware of the fate of the missing crews, three airplanes from each squadron were sent on a search mission. They scoured approximately 15,000 square miles of the Adriatic without success.

When Lt. Watkin's crew returned to the Squadron, they related they had landed in a mine field so the rescue boats could not get to them easily. Their airplane washed up on the shore, but was a total wreck.<sup>23</sup>

After the disaster of January 24, the Group had no missions for two days. The loss of airplanes coupled with windy, rainy weather caused a welcome pause in the action. The combat crews were able to rest and catch up on their sleep. On January 25, Capt. Harold L. Chrismon, 96th Squadron Operations Officer, was appointed as the new commander of the 20th Squadron. Maj. Triggs was transferred to Group Headquarters staff.<sup>24</sup>

## MISSION 134, JANUARY 27, 1944 SALON DE PROVENCE, FRANCE, AIRDROME MISSION 135, JANUARY 28, 1944 AVIANO, ITALY, AIRDROME

These two raids were against He-111 and Ju-88 German bombers and their bases used to attack shipping supporting the Anzio beachhead. The Salon De Provence airdrome, a well-established base, was part of the complex of air bases around Marseille. B-24s hit Istres Le Tube at the same time. There were thirteen twin-engine airplanes on the ground at time of the attack. Seven of these were parked behind a hangar, of which one was destroyed and five were damaged. Otherwise, bombing was fair to good, with direct hits on a four-bay hangar, damage to other facilities in the dispersal area, and "post holing" across the center of the landing area. The enemy sent up flak and twenty to thirty fighters, part of whom got past the escort sufficiently to carry on a forty-eight minute attack. Fourteen planes in the Group formation were damaged, eleven by flak and three by fighters. Group gunners accounted for themselves very well by destroying seven of the foe and getting credit for three probable and one damaged. Several planes had to stop in Corsica or Sardinia for fuel and two stopped for repair to severe combat damage.<sup>25</sup>

The next day the Group was sent after GAF planes and the facilities at Aviano, some forty-five miles northeast of Venice. Reconnaissance as recently as January 26 showed forty-five Ju-88s and eight Me-109s on the field. The Ju-88s were known to have been based in Greece and Crete. Intelligence had learned that night landing facilities had recently been installed on the field. The crews were told there were only four heavy flak guns in the area. This proved to be wrong. The raid caught fifty-six GAF planes on the field, but the bombing destroyed only one and damaged four. Most of the Group's bombs missed their assigned target. Those that did fall within the target area, besides the damage and destruction to aircraft, hit three hangars and adjacent small buildings, the main building area and a dispersal area near the landing ground. These strikes caused explosions and fires among fuel or munitions stores. One man was slightly wounded and twelve airplanes were damaged, one seriously by flak.<sup>26</sup>



**MISSION 136, JANUARY 29, 1944**  
**RIMINI, ITALY**  
**MARSHALLING YARDS/RR BRIDGE**

This target had been attacked several times before by other groups. It was thought one rail line had been opened which was used to supply the German Tenth Army on the Adriatic front. It was an easy and successful mission. Considerable damage was inflicted on the already mangled yards, and any line that was open was definitely closed by the raid.

**MISSION 137, JANUARY 30, 1944**  
**LAVARIANO, ITALY, LANDING GROUND**

More than two hundred enemy bombers had been moved into landing grounds and airdromes in the general vicinity of Lavariano and Udine, Italy. They were thought to have come from Yugoslavia and northwest Italy. It was reported to be the greatest concentration of GAF bombers ever put into the Mediterranean theater. The two most obvious targets for such a force would be the Anzio beach-head and the nest of Allied air fields around Foggia. (To give some measure of credence to this supposition, a code "Red" air raid alert was sounded at Amendola that evening at 08:00 hours, signaling that a raid was imminent. No raid occurred and the "all clear" signal was given fifteen minutes later.)

A reconnaissance mission over Lavariano on January 28 revealed sixty-three airplanes, mostly Ju-88s. The raid on the thirtieth caught twenty-four planes on the ground, destroyed three and damaged seven. Bombardiers put bombs on the main landing area, part of the dispersal area and among the buildings and service facilities along the perimeter of the landing ground. Twenty-five to thirty fighters picked on the rear elements of the 2nd Bomb Group in the second wave for fifteen minutes of retaliation against the raiders. The fighters used rockets in addition to their normal cannon and machine guns. The 49th Squadron bore the brunt of their attacks. The Squadron had three men wounded, one mortally, and lost an airplane. Sgt. Kermit L. Carper, RWG, died of a penetrating flak wound to the chest and stomach. S/Sgt. Edmund F. Ward Jr., LWG, had a severe penetrating wound to his left forearm.

The 49th plane (41-24395) and crew, pilot 1st Lt. Joseph H. Taylor, was hit by flak just after release of bombs. The Group turned right off the target, but Taylor's craft flew straight ahead, trailing black smoke, and losing altitude. As soon as the plane was separated from the Group, the fighters sprung to the attack. According to survivors, on the sixth attack all engines were shot out, then the surviving crew bailed out.

Everyone forward of the bomb bay perished and everyone aft of the bomb bay survived as POWs. S/Sgt. Vincen J. Pesature, ROG, gave the following statement after liberation: "I don't know our plane location when we went down but it was near Udine, Italy. I was able to bail out with four others and to my knowledge, five did not. S/Sgts. (Raymond S.) Irwin, (TG), and

(Harold F.) Horton, (LTG), were wounded. Sgts. (Dale I.) Chaney, (LWG), and (Robert L.) Johnston, (RWG), and myself were not wounded. It is supposition on my part that the others did not get out. . . 1st Lt. Joseph H. Taylor, pilot, did not bail out to my knowledge. Just after bombs were cleared we were hit by a rocket and he yelled, 'Put on your chutes - we are going down.' He told us to get out at once, but we didn't. A few minutes later (still under attack) the copilot said, 'Stay at your guns.' If the pilot were still alive, I presume that he would have given the orders, being in position to understand the plane's condition.

2nd Lt. (Laurence F.) Madden, copilot, did not bail out to my knowledge and am not sure if he was injured. The last I heard from him, other than that to stay at our posts, was when he yelled, 'Get that son-of-a-bitch at one o'clock.' Then a rocket exploded in my radio room and the ship went into a dive. He was alive before the final blast described above. The final blast must have got him because the other crew members say the plane went down slowly and he would have had time to get out if he was alive or not injured.

I do not believe that 2nd Lt. Alfred E. Snyder, navigator, bailed out. The last communication I heard from him was when he told the pilot we were close to the I. P. As in the case of the other four, I believe he would have bailed out if he had not been killed or injured. . . all of the guns in the front of the ship were silent early in the battle.

2nd Lt. Warren G. Gay, bombardier, did not bail out to my knowledge. The last communication I heard from him was the bombs were clear and enemy fighters were attacking. I believe a rocket hit the front of the plane. He was not heard from again, on the interphone, early in the fight.

I believe T/Sgt. (Robert D.) Swan, (UTG), was killed early. When fighters were called out coming in, his guns were silent."<sup>27</sup>

The Group claimed three enemy fighters destroyed and two probable. Col. Rice led the Group. The 2nd was the only one to attack Lavariano. The rest of the 5th Wing groups attack other air fields in the area.<sup>28</sup>

**MISSION 138, JANUARY 31, 1944**  
**UDINE, ITALY, AIRDROME**

The Group plastered the airdrome installations with a show of precision bombing to close out a twenty-four-mission month. The airdrome had extensive permanent installations — five large hangars, one medium hangar, barracks, guard room, control room, officer's mess, stores buildings, motor transport depot, a school building, and the officer's quarters — all in a neatly confined v-shaped area that made an ideal target. The Group's bombs blanketed two-thirds of the installations area leaving wreckage and destruction. The Group shared, with another group, the destruction of nine and damage to four others of the forty-five airplanes on the ground. Flak and fighters again concentrated on the second wave.

Some twenty-five to thirty fighters made their assault on the Group before, during and after the

bomb run. All planes appeared to use rockets in addition to their cannons and machine guns. Despite this attack, the fighters succeeded only in slightly damaging five airplanes and the crews escaped without injury. This lopsided exchange ended with Fort gunners shooting down six of the fighters and damaging one.<sup>29</sup>

The 96th Squadron lost one airplane to flak. It went down some distance from the target. 1st Lt. Robert F. Kolstad, in plane number 42-29608, reached the target, released his bombs, but was hit by flak. According to survivors, the tail was damaged and engines number 1 and 2 were knocked out. The oil system was damaged and apparently made it impossible to feather the propellers. Later, when the number 2 engine caught fire, Lt. Kolstad gave orders for the crew to get ready to bail out. The tail gunner, Sgt. Joseph (NMI) Habif and the ball turret gunner, Sgt. Hayden B. Speede, took off their head phones and immediately bailed out. The plane was approximately ten miles off shore west of Trieste, Italy. These two were the only casualties and were never heard from again.

The rest of the crew stayed with the airplane until Lt. Holstad gave the order to bail out just off shore near Rovigno, Italy. The first out, S/Sgt. William H. Fleming, LWG, landed about one hundred yards off shore, and was picked up and brought ashore by local natives. The remaining crew members all exited safely, landed on shore and were gathered together by natives and evaded capture, except T/Sgt. William R. Parrish, ROG, who was captured and interned as a POW.

This mission and the mission to Ravenna, Italy, on December 30th, when Lts. Apple and Toole, bailed out prematurely, illustrate the dilemma faced by crew commanders and crewmen as to whether and when to abandon a stricken airplane. Aerial combat repeatedly thrusts upon the combatant the cruel, and often instantaneous, choice of whether to stay with or leave the airplane. The choices are never more cruel than those made over water, and combat offers heart-wrenching examples where the choice was wrong or made an instant too late.

A steady flow of new crews arrived at the Group during January. On those few non-operational days, new crews were given orientation classes in theater navigation, escape procedures, security, gunnery and enemy tactics. Apparently noting some lack of understanding or regard for military customs and courtesies, the 5th Wing ordered that classes be held on these subjects.

On January 6, Col. Rice flew to Bizerte to get building materials for the officer's club and mess. He returned the next day with everything he went for except cello paper. Another meeting was held with all of the officers to discuss the need for more money to complete construction of the club. The officers had already donated \$10.00 each. This time they decided to depend on strictly volunteer contributions to be repaid when the club became solvent. Construction was well underway with Italian laborers by the end of the month.

Initially, the 2nd shared the field with the 321st Medium Bomber Group of B-25s. On January 17, the 321st moved out, and the 97th





*Officer's Club under construction, early 1944. (Group Photo/W. Greenhalgh)*



*Italian workers at Amendola, 1944. (Group Photo)*



*Joe E. Brown entertained the Group. (Group Photo)*

Bomb Group moved in and the two Groups shared the base until the end of the war.

Entertainment and recreation became generally available for diversion from the work routine. Movies were shown regularly in the Cave Theater. Showing times were scheduled at 2:00, 6:00, and 8:00 P.M. to accommodate the crowds and work schedules. Live entertainers sponsored by the USO included comedian Joe E. Brown and actor Humphrey Bogart. Members of the Group went to Manfredonia to a stage show that featured singing and dancing by a civilian troupe. Those who attended judged it to be one of the best shows they had seen since coming overseas. Even Red Cross Hostess, Miss Betty Doubleday, from North Carolina, had a friend on hand who played the accordion during the coffee and doughnut period following the Sofia, Bulgaria mission on January 10. The 5th Wing organized a basketball league, with each Group to be represented by one team. A court was set up in a warehouse in Foggia. The 2nd's team included both officers and enlisted men. The team coach was 1st Lt. Keith E. Davis, the 49th Squadron Intelligence Officer. The team played its first game January 25 and was soundly beaten by the 57th Fighter Group.

At the regular church service on Sunday January 16, Chaplain Allen asked for a free will offering for improvements in the cave Chapel. Sunday services opened January 23 with a new altar, communion rail and choir space. These improvements were fashioned by Italian laborers.<sup>30</sup>

The Group received a farewell letter, dated January 22, from Gen. Atkinson who departed for an assignment in England. He was succeeded as commander of the 5th Wing by Col. C. W. Lawrence, former commander of the 99th Bomb Group.<sup>31</sup>

#### *Endnotes:*

<sup>1</sup> Rust, "The Fifteenth Air Story", 10

<sup>2</sup> McCoid, *Group History*, 217-129

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid*, 217

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid*, 218

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid*, 221

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid*, 222

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid*, 223, 224

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid*, 224, 225

<sup>9</sup> Richards, *Missing Crew Report*

<sup>10</sup> Lloyd, *15th Air Force Heavy Bomber Losses*

<sup>11</sup> McCoid, *Group History*, 230

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid*, 228, 229

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid*, 234

<sup>14</sup> Richards, *Missing Crew Report*

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid*, Bernard L. Scalisi, *personal account*

<sup>16</sup> McCoid, *Group History*, 243-245

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid*, 246

<sup>18</sup> 49th Squadron History, (AFRHA, Maxwell AFB, AL) microfilm B0042, fr. 104

<sup>19</sup> Richards, *Missing Crew Reports*

<sup>20</sup> McCoid, *Group History*, 257

<sup>21</sup> Richards, *Missing Crew Report*

<sup>22</sup> McCoid, *Group History*, 247-254

<sup>23</sup> 20th Squadron History, (AFRHA, Maxwell AFB, AL), microfilm B0041, fr. 41

<sup>24</sup> McCoid, *Group History*, 256

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid*, 257, 258

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid*, 259, 260

<sup>27</sup> Richards, *Missing Crew Report*

<sup>28</sup> McCoid, *Group History*, 264

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid*, 266-269

<sup>30</sup> McCoid, *Group History*, Jan., '44 Narrative

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid*, 254



The month started with the receipt of congratulatory messages from higher headquarters conveying the appreciation of Lt. Gen. Clark for the splendid assistance given by the air forces to the successful landing at Anzio.

After participating in the destruction of much of the enemy transportation system, and the German Air Force in Italy, the 2nd was free to devote more, but not nearly all, of its capability to the CBO. A third of the February missions were dedicated to direct relief of the Anzio beachhead and support of the Allied Italian ground campaign. The CBO portion of February operations proved to be a very difficult time for the Group. The weather during the first part of the month severely limited operations, and the 24th and 25th were the most costly two days, in terms of crew losses, in the Group's history. In addition, the Group participated in what is, even a half century later, its most controversial mission — the bombing of the abbey at Monte Cassino, Italy.

**MISSION 139, FEBRUARY 2, 1944**  
BUDAPEST/TOKOL HUNGARY  
AIRCRAFT FACTORY

On the first mission of the month, the Group set out to bomb the aircraft factory, got as far as Yugoslavia and was recalled. The crews did not receive credit for the mission.<sup>1</sup>

**MISSION 140, FEBRUARY 4, 1944**  
TOULON, FRANCE, NAVAL BASE

The Group's specific targets were two dry docks, a power station and some stores. Most of the bombs fell east of the assigned areas, but still caused considerable damage and destruction. Direct hits were scored on a 400 foot merchant vessel, on tracks, rolling stock and buildings on the quay, on a small marshalling yard, and scattered hits and near misses were made on several other facilities.

Twenty-five to thirty Me-109s and FW-190s attacked the formation during the bomb run, and continued the attack for about twenty minutes. One crewman was killed and one airplane was damaged so badly it had to be abandoned over water about 55 miles southwest of the target with the loss of the entire crew. Several airplanes were damaged by flak and fighters. Group gunners got credit for destroying four and two probables of the attacking force.

Sgt. Charles J. Rheinheimer, TG, 49th Squadron was killed instantly by a 20mm shell fragment through the chest. He was buried with full military honors at a civilian cemetery in Ajaccio, Corsica.

1st Lt. Rutherford G. Bingham and his crew in aircraft number 42-39903 of the 49th Squadron, were attacked by fighters that knocked out two engines and set them on fire. When last seen the plane had fallen well behind and below the formation and was headed for the mainland. Five or six parachutes were reported by one observer before the plane crashed. There were no survivors.<sup>2</sup>

Strong headwinds on the way to the target

sapped fuel supplies and only four crews were able to make it non-stop back to the base. Others landed on Corsica and at fields along the west coast of Italy, both because of fuel shortages and damage to airplanes. All the planes didn't get back to base until February 6.

**MISSION 141, FEBRUARY 10, 1944**

ALBANO, ITALY

**MISSION 142, FEBRUARY 12, 1944**

CECHINA, ITALY, CITY

**MISSION 143, FEBRUARY 14, 1944**

VERONA/MODENA, ITALY

MARSHALLING YARDS

**MISSION 144, FEBRUARY 15, 1944**

CASSINO, ITALY, MONASTERY

**MISSION 145, FEBRUARY 17, 1944**

STAZ DI CAMPOLEONE, ITALY, CITY

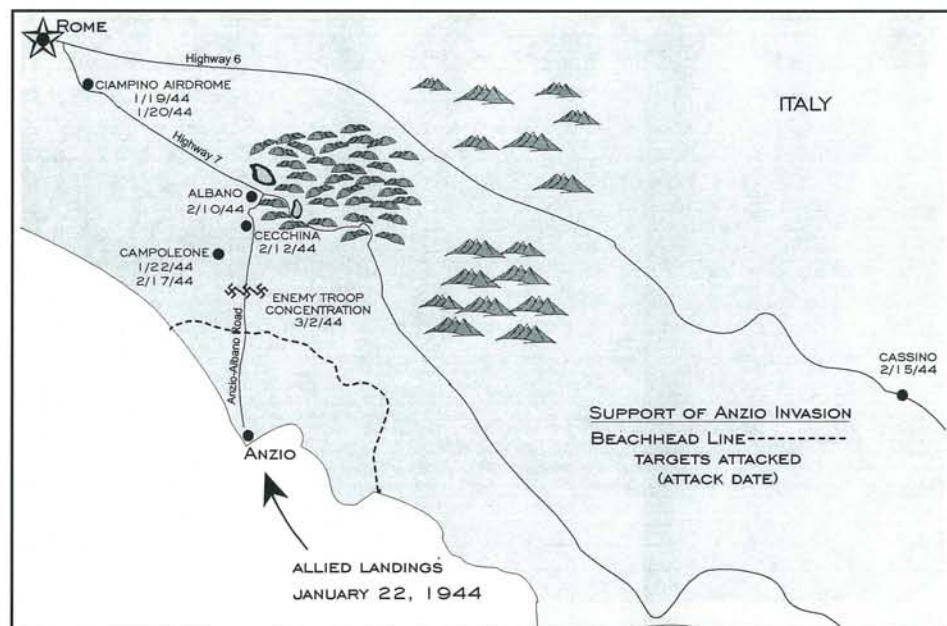
The Anzio invasion was made to establish a beachhead from which to thrust 20 miles northward to the Alban hills south of Rome, and cut highways 6 and 7 which were the main supply and escape routes for the Germans at the Cassino front to the south. The strategy was to get be-

hind the Germans and break the stalemate at Cassino. The invasion force of 40,000 sailed from Naples, undetected, and got ashore at Anzio on January 22 with light resistance. Anzio and Nettuna were captured virtually intact and the force moved quickly 2 and 3 miles inland. There the force paused four days to bring in men, supplies and equipment for the anticipated German counterattack and the northward thrust. The Germans used this time to rush in immediate reinforcements, and to reach out to units in Yugoslavia, Germany, France and northern Italy for counterforces. On January 30, the ninth day after the invasion, the Allies started a two-pronged attack toward the Alban hills. Elements reached Campoleone, 15 miles up the Anzio-Albano road, and more than half way to the hills. Then disaster struck as the Germans ambushed and decimated a thin line of U.S. Rangers on the right flank. In three days of fierce fighting the Allies, who mounted the invasion too quickly with too small a force, fought doggedly but had to give ground and suffered 5,500 casualties, while extracting a similar toll from the enemy. Maj. Gen. John P. Lucas, the Allied commander, was ordered to forget the northward thrust and to dig in behind a beachhead perimeter.

The coordinated attack to break out of the



Winter came to Amendola, 1944. (Courtesy of H. Berrywill)







Russian General, center, and five staff officers and two British officers, left and third from right, visited the Group February 10, 1944. They were escorted by Maj. Richard T. Headrick, Fifteenth Air Force, fifth from left. Maj. Charles Clapp, Group Executive Officer, fourth from left and Lt. Col. John Melcher, Deputy Group Commander, far right. (Group Photo)

Cassino front to the south started January 24, two days after the Anzio invasion.

Having assessed the limited size of the invasion force, the Germans attacked, on February 16, down the Albano-Anzio road intent on splitting the beachhead in two. Gen. Lucas called for air support and got 700 sorties against the oncoming Germans.

In the meantime, Gen. Clark had come to Gen. Lucas' aid with the 1st Armored and 45th Divisions. The Allies gave ground to the numerically superior Germans (10 divisions vs. less than 5), but refused to break. The 45th Division took the brunt of the German attack. After five days of fighting, and when their tanks bogged down in the mud, the Germans called off the counter-offensive. Nine days later, a bitterly disappointed Hitler ordered another attack. This weaker attempt to crush the beachhead failed.

Cruel stalemates settled in at the Cassino front and the Albano perimeter that lasted until after the middle of May.<sup>3</sup>

Starting as early as mid-January, air attacks as a prelude to Anzio and its aftermath, dictated a series of missions for the Group that diverted it from the strategic goals of the CBO.

The Albano mission was tasked in the midst of the German build-up for the attack to split the Anzio beachhead. Albano was the site of large stores of ammunition, supplies, and motor trucks, and considerable troop activity. The first squadron hit the target fairly well, but the bombs from the rest of the formation fell short and to the right, causing damage in other areas and one very large explosion believed to be munitions.

The bombers were forced to go over the target at 12,000 feet to get under an overcast. The flak was intense and accurate, and in addition to the two planes that went down, tail gunner Sgt. George R. Appleton of the 49th Squad-

ron was killed, and six others were wounded. Those requiring hospitalization were: 2nd Lt. John E. Sullivan, B, 20th Squadron, with flak wounds to the head, cheek and hands; S/Sgt. Alva A. Flowers, TG, 20th, with a flak wound to his right hip; and 2nd Lt. David W. Paris, N, of the 49th, with a flak wound and compound fracture of his left leg.

One of the crews lost was that of 2nd Lt Raymond W. Bosmans, 429th Squadron, in airplane 42-5773, "Scrubby Ol' Goat." About five minutes before target time, number 2 engine was feathered, but Lt. Bosmans still led his squadron over the target. Just after the target the plane was hit by flak, number 4 engine was feathered, and there was fire in the right wing. The plane left the formation and when last seen was headed back to land near Naples at about 5,000 feet. There was no word about the crew until February 19 when the Group received a Navy report that one of their launches had found crash wreckage on February 10 and had recovered bodies of three crew members from the water. None of the crew survived.

The second airplane lost on this mission was piloted by Capt. Fred R. Licence, 20th Squadron, in airplane number 42-31442. His copilot was Maj. Robert J. Lundell, on his first mission. Lundell had just arrived the first of the month and was scheduled to take command of the 20th Squadron. The number 4 engine was on fire on the bomb run and the plane left the formation. Then number 3 engine caught fire and almost instantly the entire right wing was aflame. A portion of the right wing broke off, the nose of the airplane dropped and the flaming craft went into a violent roll and began an explosive disintegration. T/Sgt. Robert H. Bentley, UTG, was blown from the plane and parachuted safely. 1st Lt. Walter D. Walling, B,

threw his injured and unconscious crewmate, 2nd Lt. George A. Hackett, N, out of the plane then parachuted himself just before the plane exploded. These three survived as POWs. All the rest were lost.<sup>4</sup>

Following the morning mission to Albano, an afternoon mission to bomb the Albano-Anzio road was briefed, then canceled because of weather. Later that afternoon the Group was visited by a Russian General and a staff of five officers. They were given a briefing on the maps and charts in the briefing room. Their names and purpose of the visit were not disclosed.

On February 11 crews were again briefed on the same Albano-Anzio road mission and kept at their stations until 11:00 A.M., when the mission was canceled. The same mission would have been flown in the afternoon had weather permitted. These efforts were reflective of how desperate the situation was at Anzio. The Cecchina mission was briefed the afternoon of February 12, the crews took off and were recalled by 5th Wing because of weather. Cecchina is a small town just two miles south of Albano.

The Verona marshalling yards had been scheduled five times and canceled because of weather. Even on this mission the target was totally overcast. Five planes dropped their bombs through the clouds with unknown results. Twenty-four planes bombed the alternate yards at Modena, 55 miles south of Verona, and left extensive damage to tracks, installations and industrial facilities.<sup>5</sup>

## THE BOMBING OF MONTE CASSINO

The biggest battle of the Italian campaign, breaking the stalemate at Cassino, involved perhaps the most controversial military action of the war in the Mediterranean — the destruction





*Mission 141, February 15, 1944 bombing of the abbey at Monte Cassino. (Group Photo/G. Walp)*



*The ruins of the Monte Cassino abbey, February 16, 1944. (Group Photo/G. Walp)*

of the abbey at Monte Cassino. Started by St. Benedict in 529, the square, squat, four-story white limestone abbey covered seven acres and rose from a scarp so steep the only approach road had seven switchbacks. Its huge bulk dominated the mountain top and commanded a sweeping view from 1,700 feet above the valley. It was a repository of significant art and an archive of thousands of parchments, manuscripts, printed books and illuminated scrolls.

There was little hope of breaking the German siege of the Anzio beachhead and marching on to Rome without overcoming the German defenses around Cassino. Monte Cassino blocked and dominated the only terrain that suited use of the superior Allied armor and artillery for the run to Rome. Frontal assaults by the Americans, the French, and the New Zealanders, had all failed to dislodge the dug-in defenders. The monastery became a symbol of those frustrating failures. The next assault was assigned to the British 4th Indian Division commanded by Maj. Gen. Francis Tucker. When intelligence was unable to find details of the abbey's construction, Tucker, doing his own research, found an old book in Naples that defined the fortress-like dimensions of the abbey. Armed with this information, and playing on the frustrations and political pressure to break the stalemate, Tucker argued convincingly that it was unreasonable to ask his men to battle uphill against such a ready-made stronghold. It mattered little whether the Germans were in the abbey at the outset, he was convinced they would use it when the battle began. "It (the abbey) is a modern fortress and must be dealt with by modern means. It can only be dealt with by applying 'blockbuster' bombs from the air," he declared.

Gen. Mark Clark and other senior American ground commanders opposed the bombing. Generals Eaker and Devers flew over the abbey in a small observation plane and reported they had seen a military radio antenna on the abbey, and observed German soldiers there. Those frontline troops who led, and fought the failed assaults, believed the enemy was in the abbey. Recognizing the symbolic impact the abbey had on the morale of his soldiers, Gen. Sir Harold Alexander approved the bombing. Because clear weather was needed for pin-point bombing, timing of the raid was left to the air commanders.

Gen. Tucker's 4th Indian Division had entered the front line only three days earlier, and did not yet have the mortars and hand grenades necessary for the assault immediately following the bombing. A tentative date of February 16 for the bombing was set, and Tucker's Division was preparing for that date.

On February 14, leaflets were dropped warning the 80 year old Abbot, the monks, and some 800 civilian refugees, many old and ailing, to evacuate the building immediately. Suddenly, the weather cleared on February 15, and the raid was ordered. This advancement of schedule was not communicated to the 4th Indian Division. Further, the fearful task of getting the refugees safely out of the monastery had not been completed. At 9:25 A.M. an unopposed stream of heavy, medium, and fighter bombers, led by the 2nd Bomb Group,



dropped 576 tons of bombs on the monastery, reducing it to rubble, while Allied soldiers cried and cheered wildly in the valley below.

The 4th Indian Division was outraged that the raid came a day early. Their three brave assaults in the next few days, started too late and with too little chance for success.

One hundred fifty to three hundred, (exact number unknown), of the non-evacuated refugees were killed. The Abbot and 40 others, including 6 monks, in an underground crypt, escaped unharmed. Weeks before, on advice and with the help of the Germans, the monks scrupulously removed the art and archives to the safety of the Vatican. Two days after the raid, arrangements were made for the Abbot, the monks, and remaining refugees to leave the monastery.

Immediately after the bombing, the Germans moved in and set up almost impregnable positions in the rubble. The destruction was largely for naught. A month later, March 15, Allied Air Forces dropped 1,400 tons of bombs on the town of Cassino, turning it into rubble so dense, bulldozers had to clear the way before tanks could move through. It wasn't until May 18 that members of the Polish II Corps raised their flag over the abbey ruins. By then, the Germans had withdrawn under Field Marshall Kesselring's orders as mounting Allied forces threatened to flank the Germans and cut off their escape. In the aftermath, the Allies learned the Germans had never used the abbey for military purposes. No Germans were killed in the February 15 bombings.<sup>6</sup>

Maj. Bradford A. Evans, commander of the 96th Squadron, led the Group's thirty-six planes over the target. The controversy over the bombing of the abbey was not of the 2nd's doing. It had done a highly proficient job of leading and bombing as ordered.

Campoleone is fifteen miles north of Anzio and just east of the Albano-Anzio road. The area had a high concentration of German materiel and troops. Allied patrols were within three miles of the town. The bombing was fair, and while the bombs missed the station, they fell in the general area used by the enemy.<sup>7</sup>

With the concentration of German ground forces in the area, plenty of flak was expected. Flak hit plane number 42-38067, piloted by 1st Lt. Adrian D. Cooper, from the 49th Squadron, on the bomb run, resulting in a fire between number 1 and 2 engines. The plane started straight down, went into a spin and after descending several thousand feet, began to come apart. According to survivors the first flak burst hit the tail and probably killed the tail gunner. The tail separated from the airplane. The two waist gunners, S/Sgts. Harvey J. Dupuis, and Lawrence (NMI) Carastro, bailed out of the opening where the tail had been and were captured. 2nd Lt. John L. Gill, N, bailed out and was captured immediately by the Germans. S/Sgt. George R. Hawk, UTG, did not bail out. Incredibly, he rode part of the wreckage down and survived. He was taken to a hospital by his German captors. The plane did not burn. It came down between the German and Allied lines. The rest of the crew perished.<sup>8</sup>



*BIG WEEK main target objectives of Fifteenth and Eighth air Forces. (Source: Craven & Cate, Vol III, pg 34)*

## ARGUMENT AND BIG WEEK, FEBRUARY 20-25, 1944

### MISSION 146, FEBRUARY 20, 1944

REGENSBURG, GERMANY

MESSERSCHMITT FACTORY

### MISSION 147, FEBRUARY 22, 1944

OLCHING, GERMANY, MARSHALLING YARDS

### MISSION 148, FEBRUARY 22, 1944

ZAGREB YUGOSLAVIA, AIRDROME

### MISSION 149, FEBRUARY 23, 1944

STEYR, AUSTRIA, AIRCRAFT FACTORY

### MISSION 150, FEBRUARY 24, 1944

STEYR, AUSTRIA, AIRCRAFT FACTORY

### MISSION 151, FEBRUARY 25, 1944

REGENSBURG, GERMANY

MESSERSCHMITT FACTORY

### MISSION 152, FEBRUARY 25, 1944

ZARA, YUGOSLAVIA

SHIPPING/HARBOR INSTALLATIONS

ARGUMENT was the code name for the coordinated attack of the Eighth and Fifteenth Air Forces against priority German targets. Drafted in November 1943, it had been repeatedly modified as weather stalled implementation. Finally, on February 19, 1944, a weather pattern developed, for the first time, that held promise to clear the skies over most of the target area.

Maj. Gen. Frederick L. Anderson, deputy for operations of the United States Strategic Air Forces, Europe, (USSAF), who had scheduled and canceled ARGUMENT numerous times, was now eager and determined to take advantage of the breaking weather pattern. Not everyone shared his optimism about the weather, but Anderson's persistence prevailed. The morning of February 20, USSAF dispatched over 1,000 bombers from England, with all available fighter escort, toward the selected priority targets. It was the largest American strategic force ever assembled for a mission. This was the opening salvo of six continuous days of maximum-effort strategic operations against German aircraft production that came to be called, Big Week.<sup>9</sup>

Fifteenth Air Force was invited to make full-scale coordinated attacks against targets in Southern Germany. Maj. Gen. Twining was forced to decline such wholesale commitment. The Fifteenth was committed to support the ground forces at Anzio, where the situation was still critical.<sup>10</sup> The 2nd Bomb Group was sent to Regensburg, but had to turn back early because of weather.<sup>11</sup>

The air armada from England achieved good results, with the loss of 21 airplanes, which was much less than the planners had expected. Generally good weather continued over Germany on February 21. Another all-out effort was enthusiastically launched from England. The results were not as good as the day before because of cloud cover over some targets.<sup>12</sup> The 2nd and the Fifteenth Strategic Air Forces remained weather-bound.<sup>13</sup>



On February 22, the Fifteenth sent forces to Regensburg as things went wrong in England. Weather over some of the England bases caused mid-air collisions and a coordinated mission to Schweinfurt was canceled. B-24s going to Gotha became strung out in weather crossing the channel, found it impossible to get organized, and were recalled. Five combat wings, scheduled to hit four other targets, had mixed success because of weather, and many had to bomb targets of opportunity. Fortunately, the Fifteenth had better luck, and of the 183 bombers sent to Regensburg, 118 bombed the Messerschmitt factory at Obertraugling with considerable success.<sup>14</sup>

The 2nd, scheduled to bomb the other Messerschmitt factory at Regensburg, didn't have the same success. The Group reached Regensburg without opposition, but the target was covered with clouds, and it bombed marshalling yards at the small town of Olching, Germany. Flak injured three crewmen, two of whom were treated in squadron dispensaries, but S/Sgt. Clem R. Pelligrino, ball turret gunner in the 96th, was hospitalized at the 61st Station Hospital in Foggia with severe wounds to his face and right leg. None of the other three B-17 groups were able to bomb their primary targets.<sup>15</sup>

The mission to Regensburg started on a sad note. On the way to the target, 2nd Lt. Frederick W. Melzer in plane number 42-38134, "Blow It Out Your . . .," of the 429th, had his plane catch fire, for unknown reasons, in the vicinity of the cockpit. The plane nosed up sharply, went into a diving spin and disappeared into the clouds. Eight chutes were observed before the plane disappeared. Another plane in the formation, aborting because of engine trouble, went below the clouds and remained in the area for thirty-five minutes without seeing any trace of the airplane or the crew. There are no known records of any survivors.<sup>16</sup>

A small formation of seventeen 2nd Bomb Group planes was to attack the airdrome at Graz, Austria, this same date, as a diversionary raid. Aircraft returning early reduced the formation to only seven airplanes and they dropped their bombs at the Zagreb, Yugoslavia airdrome. Frozen cameras prevented getting a record of the results.<sup>17</sup>

The scheduled mission on February 23, to the aircraft component factory at Steyr, Austria, turned back at 13,000 feet 110 miles north of Foggia, when weather forced abandonment of the mission.<sup>18</sup>

The briefing the next morning for the mission to the Steyr-Daimler-Puch Aircraft Component Parts Factory, stressed the importance of the target, and the priority the Air Force put on its destruction. The factory manufactured fuselages, undercarriages, cylinder crank-cases, cylinder heads, and other Me-109 components for shipment to Regensburg and possibly other assembly plants in the Weiner Neustadt complex. It produced approximately 100 fuselages per month. The buildings were all constructed of reinforced concrete, and precision bombing was required to destroy them. Destruction of the plant was one of the three highest priorities of the Air Force. Only forbidding weather was to prevent participation of the Fifteenth Air Force. Bombs were to be dropped on the ETA over the target if

necessary. No bombs were to be returned to base. For emphasis, four important alternate targets were listed.<sup>19</sup>

The Fifteenth was dispatching all available bombers. The battle plan was to send a main force of approximately 300 bombers after the Steyr plants, and a diversionary force of 150 to 225 bombers to other targets to draw off enemy fighters from the main force. B-24s of the 304th Wing were to attack the Aircraft Assembly Plant at 1:10 P.M., ten minutes after the 5th Wing B-17s attacked the component factory. To be successful, coordination and timing were critical. Friendly fighters were to cover the withdrawal of the main bomber force.<sup>20</sup>

The air crews had no reason to be any more apprehensive than on other missions into that area. The Fifteenth was putting up a formidable force, with fighter escort, and there were diversionary raids. Little did the crews know this would be the single-most disastrous mission in the history of the Group, in terms of total crews and planes lost, and yet one of the most honored. The omens of a catastrophe-in-the-making cast an ominous spell over the mission virtually from the beginning. The 2nd was assigned the "tail-end-Charlie" position in the B-17 force, manifestly the most vulnerable position. The 99th, which was to lead the 2nd against plant buildings number 22, 23, and 25, became separated in the clouds from the formation, and bombed the oil refinery at Fiume, Italy. The 304th Wing of B-24s never arrived, and the diversionary raids, plagued by weather and other problems, never materialized. The once formidable main force of 300 bombers was now down to 87, and there would be no fighter escort until withdrawal from the target. All of this played into the hands of the defenders, and they exploited it with a vengeance.

Enemy fighters swarmed to the attack at 12:15 P.M. It was the beginning of an hour-long ordeal by fire. One hundred ten enemy fighters — 58 Me-109s; 25 Me-210s; 10 FW-190s; 10 JU-88s; 6 Me-110s; and 1 Ma-202 — deftly applied all the tactics worked out in the past year against the Eighth Air Force. They used coordinated attacks by four and six single engine fighters firing cannon, rockets fired at long range from twin-engine aircraft, and aerial bombs. The attacks were made from high, low, and level, and from all points of the clock, but with preference for the 4:00 to 8:00 o'clock quadrant, which offered the best exposure to the rear of the formation. The Group's thirty-eight scheduled airplanes were reduced to thirty-three, by failures to take off and early returns. The formation was organized into two waves. As they approached the target, the squadrons moved into the bombing formation to concentrate the bombs on their assigned plant buildings. The number 3 squadron in the first wave moved to the rear of the lead squadron, and the number 2 squadron moved to the rear of number 3. The wave was then aligned in trail formation in 1,3,2 order. The second wave did the same, aligning in 1,3,2 order. Before bombs were away, the number 2 and 3 squadrons of the second wave, had been totally wiped from the sky by the Luftwaffe. This left only part of the number 1 squadron in the second wave, which was the fourth and last squadron over the target.

Flak over the target was the barrage type, moderate to intense and accurate, damaging five planes. Some fighters, showing utter disregard for their own flak, and attesting to the importance of the target, kept up the attack. Four more airplanes went down over or just past the target. The surviving crews clung doggedly to their objective, maintained a tight, disciplined formation and did a masterful job of precision bombing. The twenty-five airplanes that got over the target dropped their bombs from 1:08 to 1:10 P.M. Five minutes later, and one hour since the ordeal began, the P-38 escort arrived, and mercifully relieved the beleaguered bombers. The Luftwaffe scurried away.

The 2nd lost 14 B-17s — 2 from the 20th, 7 from the 49th, and 5 from the 96th — and brought home 9 wounded. It claimed 9 of the enemy destroyed, 7 probables, and 2 damaged.<sup>21</sup> In the confusion of the hour-long melee, it was not possible to determine, at the time, what precisely happened to each lost crew. That had to wait until liberation of POWs. The following accounts summarize observations at the time, and liberated missing crew reports.

Plane 42-37970, 20th Squadron, piloted by 2nd Lt. Paul A. Faust, had the vertical stabilizer shot off just as the formation was turning on the initial point. The bombs were dropped and number 2 engine caught fire. The maimed Fortress was under continuous and persistent attack by 10 to 15 fighters. Seven chutes were counted. The plane then rolled over several times and crashed.

Nine members of the crew successfully escaped the plane. One reported that parts of the plane fell around the area where he landed, leading him to believe it had exploded or disintegrated. Lt. Faust was killed. He was last seen ready to bail out, but was believed to be still in the plane when it exploded or disintegrated. Upper turret gunner, S/Sgt. John C. Clark, bailed out and was captured, but died of malnutrition and pneumonia on a forced prisoner march in Germany during the winter of 1944-45. The remainder of the crew was imprisoned and liberated.

2nd Lt. Donald L. Smith, 20th Squadron, was flying plane number 42-31425, which was hit just after bombs were dropped. About ten minutes away from the target, the plane started to pull out of formation, and 3 men parachuted. The plane continued to fly, apparently on autopilot, for about twenty-two minutes after which it crashed into a mountain southeast of Klagenfurt, Austria. No other chutes were seen.

The one fatality in Lt. Smith's crew was S/Sgt. Harold W. Garlick, the tail gunner, whose fate was unknown to the rest of the crew. The others of the crew came down in a rugged part of the Austrian Alps. Some were wounded and some were injured landing, but all survived to be liberated.

The 49th Squadron was in the last position in the second wave and took the brunt of the attack. Exactly where and when six of its seven planes went down was not definitely known. The Group could only generally summarize their loss. The 75 to 110 enemy fighters attacked the Squadron by formations of single and twin engine planes. They singled out and pounced on one after another of the planes until all six had been eliminated.

1st Lt. George J. Verbruggen's crew, in plane



number 42-31859, "Lucy," safely exited the plane. Some were wounded, or injured in the fall. All were taken prisoner, interned and liberated after the war.

2nd Lt. John P. Vandy, pilot, and his copilot, 2nd Lt. Wilbert F. Schwerin, in plane number 42-31419, both perished. They were seen by radio gunner, T/Sgt. Henry J. Klinkowski, who reported they were all right, but still didn't have their parachutes on. T/Sgt. Klinkowski was blown clear of the plane when it exploded. He pulled his rip cord and landed safely. The rest of the crew, except for Lts. Vandy and Schwerin, had already bailed out, and all survived as POWs.

The crew of plane number 42-31873, piloted by 1st Lt. Joseph Pausa, made an orderly evacuation of the plane from rear to front. Some had minor injuries, but all survived.

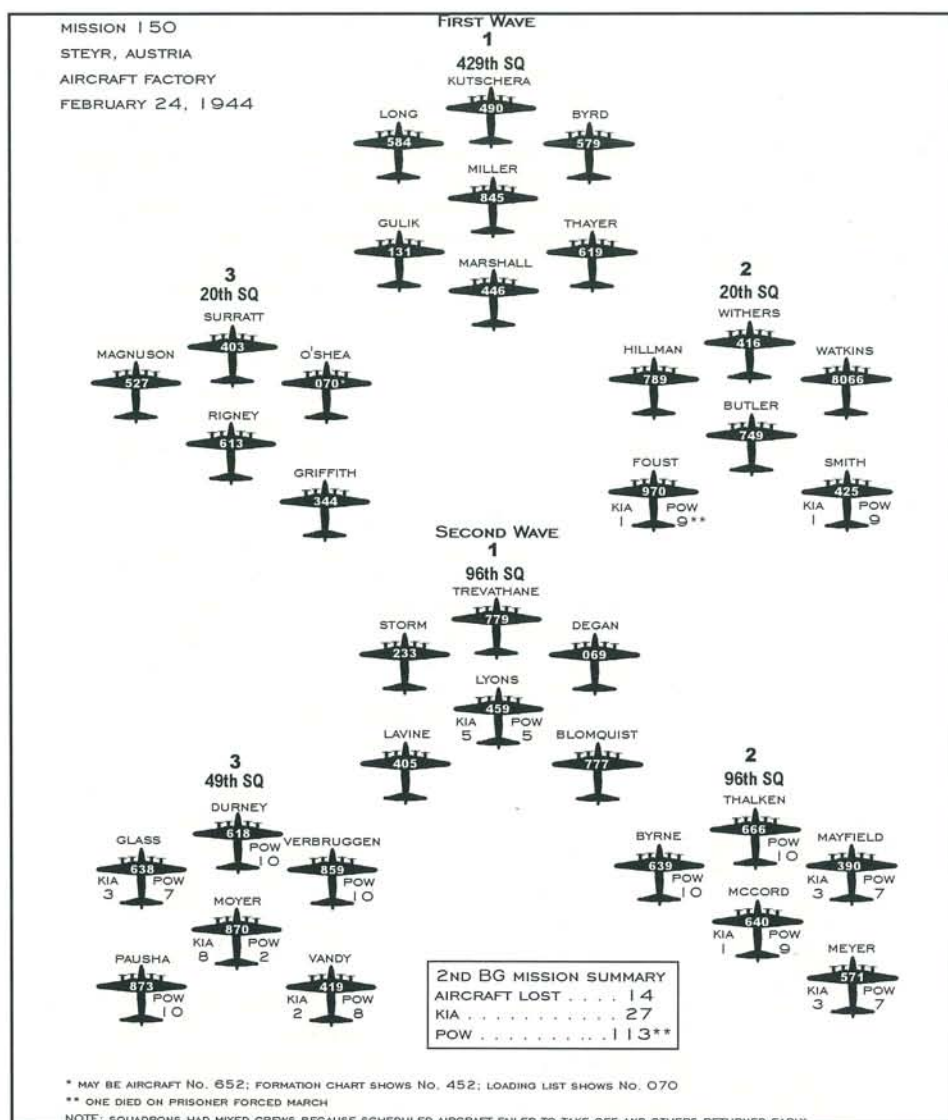
There are no known survivor statements from the crew of F/O George P. Durney in aircraft number 41-24618, but all were liberated after the war.

1st Lt. Frank H. Glass and his crew in plane number 42-29638, were mauled by fighters. The cockpit and tail section were riddled by shell fire and both the copilot, 2nd Lt. Russell L. Little, and tail gunner, S/Sgt. Rex C. Cooper Jr., were killed at their positions. A rocket exploded in the radio compartment, blowing a six-foot hole through each side of the airplane, and killing the radio operator, T/Sgt. Robert M. Rand. The rest of the crew lived to be liberated after the war.

2nd Lt. Clarence T. Moyer and his crew in aircraft number 42-31870, 49th Squadron, suffered the highest casualties of the fourteen shot down. The only survivors were copilot, 2nd Lt. Jay L. Monicken, and ball turret gunner, Sgt. Charles B. Ball. There are no known statements of record from them as to what happened on the mission or to the rest of their crew.

The seventh plane from the 49th Squadron, number 41-24571, "Indianapolis War Bird," with the 96th Squadron, was shot up so badly it was almost in shreds, particularly the tail. Number 3 engine was feathered, the right wing caught fire, the plane then pulled off to the left and wasn't seen again. No chutes were seen. The tattered plane was piloted by 2nd Lt. Harry C. Meyer. There were three fatalities and seven survivors in his crew. The three fatalities were believed to have died in the plane. A German casualty report states the three are buried near Moosbach, Austria. Lower turret gunner, S/Sgt. Edwin D. Jackson, was seen getting out of the turret when he was hit. The right waist gunner, S/Sgt. Webb J. Digh, was killed at his position by an exploding shell. Tail gunner, S/Sgt. John B. McMullin's last call on the intercom was, "They're coming in from all sides. I'm hit!"

The first of the four planes lost by the 96th Squadron, number 42-31390, was still in the formation until six or seven minutes before bombs were dropped. The plane then burst into flames between number 3 and 4 engines. It circled to the right and went into a dive. Three or four chutes were seen. The pilot was 1st Lt. Darrell W. Mayfield. The plane exploded, but seven crew members got out before the explosion and all survived. Lower turret gunner, S/Sgt. Nathan W. Lubowski, on his first mission, was the first to



2nd Lt. Paul A. Foust crew shot down February 24, 1944 on Steyr mission. Rear L to R: Foust; 2nd Lt. John M. Coppinger, CP; 1st Lt. Reginald W. Kurtz, N; 2nd Lt. Kendall E. Mork, B. Front L to R: S/Sgt. John C. Clark, UTG; S/Sgt. Chester A. Harvey, LWG; S/Sgt. Cornelius J. O'Leary, ROG; Sgt. Otha G. Beene, TG; Sgt. Silvio L. Riccio, LTG; S/Sgt. Dariel G. Hammond, RWG. Lt. Foust was KIA and S/Sgt. Clark died on forced POW march. (Courtesy of R. Peterson)



bail out, but it is believed that his chute failed. Tail gunner, S/Sgt. Ralph E. Johnson, also on his first mission, and radio gunner S/Sgt. Richard I. Basehore, were in the waist when the plane exploded. These three were lost.

Capt. John W. Thalken was the pilot of "Miss Laid," plane number 42-31666. It was observed to be in trouble about five minutes before bombs were dropped. The plane then left the formation with both wings on fire near the fuselage. It went into a steep dive and two or possibly three men were seen to bail out. There are no known survivor statements, but all ten of Capt. Thalken's crew were liberated from POW camps.

1st Lt. Thaddeus J. Lyons Jr., in plane number 42-31459, was on the bomb run when the plane left the formation with number 2 engine on fire. The plane appeared to be under control most of the time, however, the men started to bail out, and as many as seven chutes were seen. The plane continued on its course for eight minutes after which it crashed into the mountains. All crew members had plenty of time to get out if they were able. There were five fatalities on this crew, all victims of fighter shells. Lt. Lyons was hit by a shell exploding in the cockpit. His copilot, 2nd Lt. John N. Wilson Jr., is believed to have suffered the same fate. S/Sgt. Henry (NMI) Carrizales, LTG; S/Sgt. Arthur (NMI) Carl, RWG; and S/Sgt. Martin B. Lyons, LWG; were all hit by fighter shell fire as they were preparing to bail out. According to a German casualty report, the three were buried in a Jewish cemetery in Steyr.

Fire broke out in the right wing of plane number 42-31640 just before the bombs were away. The landing gear came down, the plane nosed up and then went into a vertical dive. Four chutes were seen and one observer said the plane appeared to explode about 1,000 feet above the ground. All eight planes in the formation around 1st Lt. James B. McCord, the pilot of 42-31640, were knocked down, then a fresh flight of 33 FW-190s turned on Lt. McCord's crew. The plane was on fire, the controls were frozen and two crewmen in the back were badly wounded. T/Sgt. William C. Payne and his fellow waist gunner, S/Sgt. Maynard D. Tingle, were knocked down by an explosion. One of Tingle's legs was badly torn. Radio gunner, T/Sgt. James O. Gatewood, staggered into the waist area bleeding badly with his right arm dangling and his parachute under his other arm. Payne helped Tingle to the waist door, snapped Gatewood's chute on, then opened the stuck waist door and the three bailed out. The rest of the crew all got out safely.

Payne later saw Tingle on the ground being pulled in a small sled across the snow by some Germans. The Germans had thrown away Tingle's first aid pack. Payne gave Tingle a shot of morphine from his kit, bandaged his leg and Tingle was taken to a farmer's house wrapped in his parachute. Tingle seemed much better following treatment.

Gatewood landed in a tree. Some of his crewmates helped him down, and he was eventually taken to a hospital in Wels, Austria where his badly mangled arm was amputated at the shoulder. T/Sgt. Gatewood died from loss of blood and shock two days later. A German nurse later told one of the crew that Gatewood was

given a military funeral and buried in the hospital cemetery. He was the only crew casualty.

Plane number 42-29639, "Skyworm," was attacked by a fighter while on the bomb run, which caused a fire in the number 2 engine. The plane left the formation, nosed up slightly and then went down. Observers said three or four men got out. This was 1st Lt. Albert D. Byrne's crew. The plane was badly damaged. The bail out order was given and the crew made it out safely, although 2nd Lt. Ernest (NMI) Davis, reportedly had to be thrown out because of an arm wound. The entire crew survived, was interned and liberated.<sup>22</sup>

Of the 140 crew members who went down that day, 26 were killed, 1 died of wounds in a hospital and 1 one died in prison camp. The other 112 spent the rest of the war in prison camps and were repatriated after the war. Seventeen (17) out of the 87 B-17s that went to Steyr were lost, and 14 belonged to the 2nd Bomb Group. Fighters and flak inflicted severe damage on three other Group planes — 2 were repairable and 1 was not — and minor damage on another 11. Nine men were wounded among the returning crews and seven of these severely enough to require hospitalization at the 61st Station Hospital in Foggia:

- T/Sgt. Joseph B. Null, 20th Squadron, moderate wounds to right leg.
- S/Sgt. William E. Davis, 20th Squadron, moderate wounds to right leg.
- S/Sgt. John F. Coffey, 20th Squadron, severe wounds around right eye, and penetrating wound to left eye resulting in loss of sight.
- S/Sgt. Julius (NMI) Karp, 20th Squadron, moderate wounds to left leg and thigh.
- S/Sgt. Edward H. Armstrong, 20th Squadron, severe compound fracture of left arm.
- Sgt. Russell (NMI) Evanson, 20th Squadron, moderate wounds, possible right knee fracture.
- T/Sgt. Julius F. Bridges, 96th Squadron, slight wound to right thigh and left knee.

Maj. Walter F. Kutschera, Commander, 429th Squadron, and on his fiftieth mission, led the Group. The lead bombardier was 1st Lt. W. R. Kendall. The bombing results were extraordinary, considering the conditions in the air and a snow-covered target. The Machine and Assembly Shop, (building No. 22), received at least 12 direct hits and several near misses. The Foundry, (building No. 23), received 2 direct hits and several near misses. The Aircraft Component Parts Building, (No. 25), had at least six direct hits, and several probable damaging near misses. Other buildings damaged by direct hits were the Arms Shop, Small Arms Buildings, the Power House, and the Automatic Machine Tools Shop. Several other buildings in the northwest section of the plant area were damaged.<sup>23</sup>

It was a somber return to Amendola, and Big Week still had another day to go. Crews were given little time to lick their wounds, mourn their losses, or dwell on the tragic drama of the day. All possible crews and airplanes were pieced together for another maximum-effort mission by the Fifteenth Air Force the next day.

The Fifteenth was assigned the Messerschmitt

component plant at Regensburg-Prufening. The Eighth was assigned both the Messerschmitt factories at Regensburg and the Messerschmitt parent plant at Augsburg, among other targets.

The morning mission briefing had the same tone of urgency and priority as the Steyr mission the day before. The Prufening assembly plant produced approximately 250 Me-109s per month. Together with Regensburg Obertraubling Messerschmitt factory, it was thought the two plants produced at least one third of all German single-engine fighters and more than one half of all Me-109s. The Regensburg factory and the ball bearing plant at Schweinfurt had been the targets of the Eighth Air Force on August 17, 1943. That joint raid became known as Double Strike, and provoked one of the most vicious air battles of the war. Several hundred German fighters rose to challenge the bombers and knocked down 60 of their numbers.

The Fifteenth Air Force sent a combination of 46 B-17s and 103 B-24s to Regensburg. The 2nd could muster only 10 long-range B-17s, the remaining 36 coming primarily from the 301st. The escort came from 85 P-38s and 40 P-47s, but they didn't have the range to reach the further-most distance of the mission. It was hoped that the coordinated raid from the Eighth would split the defending forces. As further protection for the main force, two diversionary raids to Austria were part of the operations plan. For the same reasons as the day before, these raids never materialized.

Col. Rice led the puny Group formation of 10 airplanes, but fortunately, the 2nd led the wave of B-17s. The Luftwaffe wasted no time challenging the raiders. Perhaps emboldened by their success the day before, the fighters started the attack at 11:53, some fifteen miles east of Klagenfurt, Austria. This was the beginning of a battle that lasted one hour and twenty-seven minutes. The Germans used the same tactics as the day before that had served them so well. They attacked in groups of 50 to 75, then would break off, apparently to refuel, as another force of similar size came up to replace them. Again, the rear elements were the major target of their fury. The 2nd lost 1 airplane before reaching the target, while the 301st lost 11. The depleted force bore through an intense curtain of flak to set another example of precision bombing. The fighters did not chance attacking through their own flak as they had over Steyr.

The 301st Fort defenders claimed 31 enemy aircraft destroyed and the 2nd claimed 9. One of the 9 was bagged by Col. Elmer J. Rogers Jr., commander of a B-24 group that had just arrived in the theater. He was riding as an observer in the nose of the lead airplane.

The 20th lost its airplane over Moosdorf, Germany on the way to the target. 2nd Lt. Lloyd L. Withers Jr., and crew in aircraft number 42-31416, were attacked by fighters over the Alps. Three Me-109s swooped in from 12:00 o'clock high and made only one pass. Two of the three fighters pressed to within fifty yards and one passed barely ten feet over the top of the Fort. Its tracers could be seen going directly at the cockpit. After the pass, observers saw Lt. Withers fighting the fire that enveloped the cockpit. The airplane dove steeply for about 2,000 feet, leveled off, and the bombs were released. Witnesses counted four parachutes.



In a statement given after the war, Lt. Withers said that he, T/Sgt. John J. Verdi, ROG, and T/Sgt. Albert J. Segal, UTG, bailed out of the burning airplane before it exploded, and all survived. Capt. Robert E. Arnold, CP, was killed by shell fire at his position. The bodies of three men in the rear of the plane — Pfc. William B. Buchanan, RWG; S/Sgt. Robert W. Hiatt, LWG; and S/Sgt. John F. Ryan, TG; were found in the wreckage, and were buried near Moosdorf, according to German reports. They were believed to have been killed in the airplane. It is not known whether 2nd Lt. Furman M. Schneiderman, B, bailed out, but the Germans reported finding a body near the plane wreckage fitting his description, and it was buried near Moosdorf. Neither is it known whether S/Sgt. Dwight E. Heatwole, LTG, bailed out, but he was reported to be buried at Moosdorf. A German officer told Lt. Withers that 2nd Lt. Clyde J. Hayden, N, was taken to a German hospital. There was no report of his condition, but he was in the section of the airplane enveloped in fire. His may have been the fourth chute sighted, but he did not survive.

Another two planes were lost in a mid-air collision just eight minutes after the bombs were away. 20th Squadron airplane number 42-38070, piloted by 1st Lt. Henry M. O'Shea, in the left wing position of the lead element, had feathered the propeller on the number 1 engine. The plane began to lag and lose altitude, falling back towards the airplane in the left wing position of the second element below and directly behind. That was 1st Lt. Freeman D. Storm's airplane number 42-31679, of the 49th Squadron. The vertical stabilizer of Lt. Storm's plane collided with the nose of Lt. O'Shea's airplane, demolishing the tail of the one and knocking the nose off of the other. O'Shea's airplane also had an engine knocked off in the collision. Lt. Storm's airplane, minus its tail, did a wing-over and went down in a tight spiral. Lt. O'Shea's airplane lost altitude and appeared briefly to be under control, then it too went straight down. Witnesses counted 5 chutes from Storm's crew and 4 from O'Shea's.

Amazingly, 18 out of the 20 crew members in these two airplanes survived. Both casualties were on Lt. Storm's crew. According to S/Sgt. John L. Honis, RWG, he was helped out of the airplane by his crewmate, Sgt. Richard A. McDaniel, LWG. Sgt. McDaniel was all right at that time and he also bailed out. Later, after he was captured, S/Sgt. Honis helped to carry Sgt. McDaniel's body to a bus that took them to a building near Landshut, Germany, where Sgt. McDaniel's body was left. Crew members surmised that Sgt. McDaniel's chute failed. According to a German report, Sgt. McDaniel was buried February 26, 1944 in the Memorial Cemetery of Achdorf, District of Landshut, Germany.

The other fatality was S/Sgt. Victor L. Miller, ROG. He was seen to be all right just before the collision, but was never seen by the crew thereafter. A German report states that he was buried February 26, 1944, in a cemetery in Wartinschaun, north of Landshut.

The loss of Lt Storm's plane meant that the 49th Squadron lost every plane it sent to Steyr and Regensburg on February 24 and 25, except for those that returned early.

The Group sent its short-range B-17s on the diversionary raid to Klagenfurt, Austria, on Feb-

ruary 25. The mission soon began to fall apart. Several planes returned early and the lead group turned back. This shrunk the attacking formation to little more than squadron size, all of which were 2nd Bomb Group crews. The fighter escort did not arrive. The formation leader, Capt. Jacob W. Bigham Jr., Commander of the 49th Squadron, wisely chose to bomb an alternate — shipping and harbor installations at Zara, Yugoslavia. The bombing wasn't very successful and little of military significance was achieved.

It was a different story at Regensburg. There was wide-spread destruction to all of the buildings assigned to the 2nd and 301st Groups. The bombs set off secondary explosions and fires that could be seen many miles from the target.

Maj. Gen. Twining, Fifteenth Air Force Commander, and Col. Norman D. Frost, Chief of Staff, 5th Wing, were on hand for the debriefing of the Regensburg raid.<sup>24</sup>

Studies have been made and books written about ARGUMENT and Big Week. At best we can only record what the 2nd Bomb Group did, not isolate or measure its contribution to the results. Overall the bombings denied the enemy hundreds of aircraft at a time when they were badly needed and some would, in all probability, have been used against the Allied invasion of Europe. Secondly, Germany was forced to reorganize and disperse its entire aircraft industry at a critical point in the war. Big Week cost the Eighth Air Force 137 heavy bombers and the Fifteenth 89. A disproportionate number of those 89 came from the 2nd Bomb Group — a total of 18 over six days. Of the 180 crew members that were lost by the 2nd, 45 were killed in action, including the 10 that mysteriously disappeared on the first Regensburg raid, one, reportedly died in a German hospital of combat related wounds, and one died in a prison camp march. All of the remaining 133 became prisoners of war, survived, and were liberated.

Both the men who flew and those on the ground were shocked and dismayed by the Group's losses. Col. Rice met with all the crews in the Cave Theater, to help allay their concerns and praise their performance. The Group's performance did not go unnoticed. Accolades and recognitions poured in, including one that is unique in U.S. military aviation history. The 2nd Bombardment Group (H) received back-to-back Presidential Unit Citations for its performance on two successive days — the missions to Steyr and Regensburg. (See Appendix 5.)

Bad weather held the Fifteenth Air Force heavy bombers on the ground for the rest of February. This gave the 2nd much needed time to rest, recover, and replenish crews and airplanes for the heavy fighting ahead.

#### Endnotes:

<sup>1</sup> McCoid, *Group History*, 274

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid*, 279

<sup>3</sup> Robert Wallace, "The Italian Campaign," (World War II, Time Life Books, Inc., Alexandria, VA, 1978) 131-134, 138

<sup>4</sup> Richards, *Missing Crew Reports*

<sup>5</sup> McCoid, *Group History*, 298, 299

<sup>6</sup> Monte Cassino summary drawn from: Robert Wallace, "The Italian Campaign," 139, 144, 153-159, 164

James Parton, "Air Force Spoken Here, General Ira Eaker & Command of the Air," (Adler & Adler Publishers, Inc., Bethesda, MD, 1986) 361, 364

Craven & Cate, 355, 361-366

<sup>7</sup> McCoid, *Group History*, 284, 285

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid*, 302

<sup>9</sup> W. F. Craven & J. L. Cate, "The Army Air Forces in WW II, Vol III, Europe: Argument to V-E Day, January 1944 to May 1945," (Office of Air Force History, Washington DC, 1983) 30-35

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid*, 32

<sup>11</sup> McCoid, *Group History*, 305

<sup>12</sup> Craven & Cate, 35, 36

<sup>13</sup> McCoid, 305

<sup>14</sup> Craven & Cate, 36, 37

<sup>15</sup> McCoid, *Group History*, 306, 307

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid*, 307, 308

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid*, 308, 309

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid*, 309

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid*, 311

<sup>20</sup> *Mission Report*

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>22</sup> McCoid, *Group History*, 311-326

*Mission Report*

*Richards Missing Crew Reports*

<sup>23</sup> McCoid, *Group History*, 322, 326

<sup>24</sup> McCoid, *Group History*, 326, 332

*Mission Report*

*Richards Missing Crew Reports*

## MARCH 1944

The bad weather continued through March, greatly limiting operations against CBO priority targets. The Group was able to complete only one deep penetration mission assigned to it. It was diverted to targets in support of the Italian ground campaign, and was sent after German troop concentrations once, marshalling yards six times, airdromes twice, and the town of Cassino.

After the terrible losses in February, the Group was hard-pressed to launch more than twenty airplanes for a mission in the early part of March. On one occasion only sixteen airplanes got off. Replacement crews arrived, and by the end of the month formation sizes increased to 34. The German defenses were still formidable, causing the loss of ten airplanes and part or all of their crews. Three planes and crews were lost in mid-air collisions and one crew ditched in the Adriatic because of an engine fire of unknown origins.

### MISSION 153, MARCH 2, 1944

#### ANZIO, ITALY

#### ENEMY TROOP CONCENTRATIONS

A mission was briefed March 1 to bomb enemy troop concentrations at Anzio, but was canceled before assembly was completed. The same mission was scheduled early the next morning. The crews took off at 5:55 A.M. and dropped 30.23 tons of fragmentation bombs in the target area. Several buildings were hit and a fire started in a ravine. No enemy fighters were encountered, but flak downed one plane, damaged fourteen and wounded three men. Pilot, 2nd Lt. Thomas R. Degan and crew in airplane 42-5779, "Leakin' Lena," 96th Squadron, dropped their bombs over the target, but lost the two right engines to flak and the propellers would not feather. The nose was shot away and there were numerous holes in the right wing and waist area. Lt. Degan tried to reach Naples, but had difficulty controlling the airplane and maintaining altitude, and was forced to ditch in rough seas with ten to fifteen foot waves. The





Combat crew briefing at Amendola. Left, Maj. Norman E. Annich, Group Intelligence Officer; right, Col. Herbert E. Rice, Group Commander (Group Photo)

plane came down hard in the water between Ponza Island and the west coast of Italy, and sank within thirty seconds. All of the crew were able to get out and into life rafts except the right waist gunner, S/Sgt. William E. McNichol, who became separated about 100 yards from the rafts by the wind and waves. When he could not get to the rafts, the copilot, 2nd Lt. Benjamin E. Nabors Jr., took off his clothes to go to McNichol's rescue. The crew tried to dissuade Nabors because of heavy seas. Nabors dove into the water and swam to within fifty yards of McNichol, paused to rest and called out to him and heard no response. The strong wind pushed the rafts rapidly away from the two stranded men. After twenty minutes neither man could be seen nor heard. They both drowned. The others were picked up four hours later by an Air-Sea Rescue crash boat.<sup>1</sup>

This was the fiftieth mission for Lt. Degan, T/Sgt. Julius F. Bridges, ROG, and S/Sgt. Thomas M. Moriarity, LTG.<sup>2</sup>

Among the wounded that day was Col. Elmer J. Rogers Jr., Commander of the 465th Bomb Group, riding as an observer in Lt. Degan's airplane. Col. Rogers had the little toe on his left foot amputated by shrapnel.<sup>3</sup>

#### **MISSION 154, MARCH 3, 1944**

ROME, ITALY, LITTORIO MARSHALLING YARDS

#### **MISSION 155, MARCH 4, 1944**

BRESLAU, GERMANY, CITY

#### **MISSION 156, MARCH 7, 1944**

TOULON, FRANCE, SUBMARINE PENS

The raid on the Rome Littorio marshalling yards caused heavy damage to the tracks and rolling stock, started several large fires and spawned many explosions. The missions to Breslau and Toulon were not completed because of weather. The formation turned back fifty miles

from Toulon, causing a looser formation that eight enemy fighters took advantage of. Their attack damaged two airplanes and seriously wounded S/Sgt. William Bunting, TG, 429th, in the shoulder. Although seriously wounded, S/Sgt. Bunting stayed at his position during the fighter attack, and only reported his injury after the attack was over. He was credited with one of the three probables claimed by the gunners. The crew landed in Sardinia so S/Sgt. Bunting could be treated. The next day he was flown back to base and hospitalized in Foggia.<sup>4</sup>

#### **MISSION 157, MARCH 11, 1944** PADUA, ITALY, MARSHALLING YARDS

The Padua marshalling yards, twenty-two miles west of Venice, were one of the most important communications targets in northern Italy, handling supplies and reinforcements for the Balkans and the Vienna area. They had been hit by the Group on mission 109, December 16, 1943, but had been rebuilt. Confusion reigned as the Group approached the target. Another group came in underneath, so half of the 2nd crews were not able to drop their bombs on the first run. By the time they made a second run, enemy fighters, thirty-five to forty strong, were ready to join battle. Two Group bombers were shot down, while it's gunners shot down five of the enemy.<sup>5</sup>

Airplane number 42-5145, piloted by 2nd Lt. William F. Peters, Jr., 96th Squadron, was hit by a rocket on the first fighter pass. A large hole was punched in the left wing, the number two gas tank started spewing gasoline and later caught fire. The plane fell below and behind the formation. Several escorting P-47s circled the plane. The bomb bay doors opened and observers counted eight parachutes just before the flaming left wing crumpled, the plane went into a left dive and started a fiery disintegration. The

airplane went down in the water northeast of Ravenna, Italy. None of the crew survived.<sup>6</sup>

The fighter attack continued until the formation was out over the Adriatic on the return flight. After the fighters left, 2nd Lt. Joseph F. Senta, and crew of the 429th Squadron, flying airplane 42-31429, drifted away from the formation, and headed toward Yugoslavia with their airplane seemingly under control. The crew bailed out over Yugoslavia, and except for S/Sgt. Carl V. Anderson, T/G, who was killed on landing, they were picked up by Yugoslavian Partisans, evaded, and returned to the Group.<sup>7</sup>

Lt. Senta reported that the number 1 engine was shot out, number 2 had some damage, the right aileron was shot away and the interphone was dead. None of the crew was injured prior to bailout. The crew in the waist had difficulty jettisoning the waist door. Sgt. Anderson was afraid to go out through the tail gunner's hatch lest he get struck by the salvoed waist door. So he came forward to go out the waist door. The waist door was salvoed and the rest of the crew there bailed out. When Lt. Senta started to leave, he looked back through the airplane and saw Sgt. Anderson sitting in the waist doorway. Senta motioned for Anderson to jump, then Senta went out the nose hatch. After Senta's chute opened he saw Sgt. Anderson falling through space with his chute still not open. Sgt. Anderson fell on the other side of a mountain from the rest of the crew. The Partisans who found him reported that his chute was still completely intact and the ripcord had not been pulled. The crew concluded that Sgt. Anderson must have struck his head as he exited feet first, and didn't regain consciousness. The Partisans told the crew that Sgt. Anderson was identified by his dog tags. They took his body to a church in the village near where he fell for burial.<sup>8</sup> The crew, except for Sgt. Anderson, was returned to Italy on March 15.<sup>9</sup>

A new B-17 group, the 463rd, minus part of its ground echelon, arrived in the theater from the U.S. The Group's assigned base at Celone was not ready, so its four squadrons were each attached to one of the four B-17 groups of the 5th Wing for support and to get combat experience. On March 14, the 775th Squadron came to the 2nd, and its crews were divided among the four squadrons. These crews were interspersed with 2nd crews and commenced flying missions. Several members of the 775th were lost or wounded during their first or earliest missions.<sup>10</sup>

#### **MISSION 158, MARCH 15, 1944** CASSINO, ITALY, CITY

Several days of bad weather caused cancellation of missions until March 15 when the town of Cassino was reduced to rubble. The Allied armies were still unable to break through the German lines and the Fifteenth Air Force was called upon to bomb the town. A force of 263 Flying Fortresses and Liberators bombed first. They dropped 800 tons of demolition bombs, then the medium bombers of the 12th AF followed with another 300 tons. The Germans were not dislodged, however, and the stalemate continued along the Gustav line.<sup>11</sup>



### MISSION 159, MARCH 15, 1944

SAN GIORGIO, ITALY, CITY

### MISSION 160, MARCH 16, 1944

SAN GIORGIO, ITALY, CITY

A second mission was sent March 15 to the same area for the same purpose. San Giorgio was seven miles southeast of Cassino. Ten tenths cloud cover obscured the target, and no bombs were dropped. The effort was repeated the next day, March 16, with the same result.

Captain Chrismon, 20th Squadron Commanding Officer, led the Group on March 15 on what would have been his 50th and final mission, but no one received credit for the mission. Chaplain Allen, dubbed the "Fighting Parson," rode with Chrismon in the lead ship as an observer. Both men came back disappointed.<sup>12</sup>

### MISSION 161, MARCH 17, 1944

FISCHAMEND MARKET, AUSTRIA

AIRCRAFT FACTORY

The Fischamend Market Aircraft Factory, on the south bank of the Danube River, thirteen miles southeast of Vienna, Austria, was an important Fifteenth Air Force target, and this mission was planned for its destruction. The 5th Wing bombers got to within 60 miles of the target before weather closed in, and forced them to turn back. Half of the crews returned with their bombs, while the others jettisoned theirs at different places. The bombers became scattered, and twelve to twenty enemy fighters rose to attack. The fighters attacked in earnest, frequently using contrails for cover. Two airplanes were damaged, one minor and one severely. Sgt. Eldon Stanton, RWG, 96th Squadron had his right ear badly lacerated by 20 mm cannon shell fragments. S/Sgt. Edgar F. Stevens, ROG, 96th Squadron and Sgt. William S. Hardin, TG, 96th Squadron both suffered frost bite of their extremities. All three men were hospitalized. The 2nd lost no airplanes, and claimed one Me-109 destroyed, and one FW-190 probably destroyed.<sup>13</sup>

### MISSION 162, MARCH 18, 1944

VILLAORBA, ITALY, AIRDROME

The enemy fighters had been rising from this airdrome in northeastern Italy to oppose Fifteenth Air Force heavy bombers going to targets in Germany, Austria, and Hungary. Clustered fragmentation bombs were dropped, with good results. Of the 27 airplanes on the ground, 7 were destroyed and 6 damaged. Bombs covered the landing area, part of a dispersal area and damaged or destroyed several buildings and installations. Many fighters were in the air to protect this vital installation, however, and three Group airplanes were lost. The fighters started their attack thirty-three minutes before target time and continued until shortly after bombs were away. They shot down three airplanes, damaged another twenty-four and slightly wounded two crewmen. Four fighters were downed in the exchange.<sup>14</sup>

One observer stated that four Ju-88s attacked the 20th Squadron with rockets. They lined up 4



Getting 50 caliber machine guns ready in the Armament Shop at Amendola. Note ball turret mock-up. (Group Photo)



"Let's go a'hunting." The Armors. (Group Photo)

abreast about 600 yards out at 6:00 o'clock, and took turns firing their weapons. The third or fourth rocket destroyed the left horizontal stabilizer and most of the vertical stabilizer of 1st Lt. Williard O. Butler Jr.'s airplane, number 42-31749. The airplane nosed up sharply as if to do a chandelle then went into a falling leaf spin. No one saw any parachutes emerge. The bombardier, 2nd Lt. Adam J. Pyzyna was the only survivor, and no statement was taken from him.<sup>15</sup> He evaded with the help of the Yugoslavian Par-

tisans, joined other evaders, and was flown out forty-six days later with a group of 102 evaders.

1st Lt. Clifford E. Magnuson, and crew, flying "Sad Sack," airplane number 42-29584, 429th Squadron, were last seen headed toward the interior of Yugoslavia with 10 or 12 fighters attacking. Six parachutes were seen. Of Magnuson's crew, S/Sgt. Lawrence H. Meidl, LTG, was killed; navigator, 2nd Lt. Raymond E. Horne, Jr. and 2nd Lt. Raymond R. McKee, bombardier, became prisoners of war; the rest



evaded and returned to Allied control. Lts. Horne and McKee were members of the 775th Squadron as were two of the evaders, Sgt. Irl Parker Jr., TG, and Sgt. Vernon A. Jansen, ROG.

Lt. Magnuson reported that the first hit was in the right wing and the next in the cockpit, where a fire started in the oxygen and hydraulic systems. Magnuson slid out of the formation to jettison the bombs clear of other airplanes and gave the order to bail out. Crew members reported that Sgt. Meidl was the first one to the waist door, but for reasons that are not known, he did not immediately bail out. He and S/Sgt. Leo C. Rossi, LWG, were standing next to the door when what appeared to be 20mm shells hit the airplane at approximately their location.

Later Lt. Magnuson was told by Partisans that Sgt. Meidl was found dead in the vicinity of the airplane crash, and was buried at a village nearby. Also, that Sgt. Rossi was in a Partisan hospital with a severe arm injury. Magnuson passed close to where Rossi was, but was not allowed to see him because an offensive was underway in the area.

S/Sgt. Joe E. Ferguson, RWG, likewise, was told about Sgt. Meidl and was given Meidl's dog tags and some personal belongings. Ferguson was told that Sgt. Rossi's severely wounded arm had been amputated and that he was resting comfortably. Two days later when all the evaders were brought together by the Partisans, Ferguson turned Sgt. Meidl's personal effects over to Magnuson.<sup>16</sup> With the aid of the Partisans, the remainder of Magnuson's crew evaded for forty-six days and were part of 102 evaders brought back to Allied control. Lt. Magnuson turned over S/Sgt. Meidl's personal effects to Intelligence at Fifteenth Air Force Headquarters at Bari.

Airplane number 41-24435, "Yankee Do Dit", 429th Squadron, was also lost on this mission. At interrogation, no one in the Group was able to report on what happened to it. The pilot, 1st Lt. Theodore (NMI) Griffith, 2nd Lt. William S. Doyle, copilot, and Sgt. Stephen M. Murinchack, UTG, went down with the plane and were killed. Sgt. Murinchack was from the 775th Squadron. The rest of the crew bailed out safely. Five became POWs and two evaded. Three of the POWs were members of the 775th. Some of the surviving crew members stated they bailed out about 15 miles northeast of Trieste, Italy, at approximately 13,000 feet. They could give no conclusive reason why the pilot, copilot, and engineer, did not abandon the airplane, but S/Sgt. Edward A. Greenlaw, TG, offered a supposition. Lt. Griffith had been informed that a waist gunner had been hit and his parachute ruined. Lt. Griffith told the other waist gunner to put the spare chute on the injured man. Griffith had no way of knowing this had been done because by then the intercom was out of commission and the passageway to the flight deck was barred by fire. The supposition was that the crew on the flight deck — pilot, copilot and engineer — stayed with the airplane to attempt a crash landing believing that one or more crew members were still in the waist.

After S/Sgt. Greenlaw bailed out and was descending in his chute, he saw a plane very low, apparently under control, but trailing smoke and flame. Suddenly it nosed over and crashed to the ground.<sup>17</sup>



*This crew flew the durable "Wabash Cannon Ball," with 90 missions, 9 aerial victories and 4 ships to its credit. (Group Photo)*

### MISSION 163, MARCH 19, 1944 KLAGENFURT, AUSTRIA, AIRDROME

This mission began badly and turned worse. The primary target was the Ball Bearing Plant at Steyr, Austria, but the formation went to Klagenfurt because of cloud cover at Steyr.

Two planes were lost during assembly — one each from the 2nd and the 97th. The crew chief of airplane number 42-38143, M/Sgt. Earl M. Anderson, 429th Squadron, reported that the airplane started the take off roll in its normal position in the formation, then slowed, turned off the runway and returned to the ramp. The pilot, 2nd Lt. Keith M. Chambers, asked that the pitot tube cover be removed. This was done, and Lt. Chambers taxied out again, 15 minutes late. The 2nd Group was well ahead by then, so Lt. Chambers elected to join the 97th Bomb Group formation. A 97th Group tail gunner reported that in joining the formation, Lt. Chamber's airplane slid into a 97th plane and they both went down, crashing into the water about 3 miles off shore.

Flight Officer, J. Preston, Commanding Officer, Air-Sea Rescue, RAF, #172, reported that he received a call from the Navy Officer in Charge to proceed immediately to the scene of the wreckage. He arrived at the scene at 11:25 A.M. (the time of the collision was 10:35 A.M.), circled the area, and recovered 4 bodies. No one from either plane survived the crash. One of those who perished was 2nd Lt. Harold (NMI) Wolquitt, the navigator, who was from the 775th Squadron.<sup>18</sup>

Enemy opposition to the mission started

about fifty minutes before target time. The Luftwaffe attacked in two waves. The first wave of 25 to 30 fighters made one or two passes at the formation, then left to engage the friendly escort, while the second wave of 20 to 25 fighters took over the assault. First to go down was "Lil Pete," plane number 42-31446, from the 429th. The crew abandoned the plane about 50 miles southeast of Klagenfurt. Rockets burst under the left wing and punctured a gas tank. Pilot, 1st Lt. Jennings A. Marshall, pulled out of the formation and jettisoned his bombs. Fighters resumed the attack and this time they left a huge hole in the right wing and number 4 engine smoking. The crew abandoned the airplane. All ten got down safely, nine were captured, including three from the 775th, and one, Sgt. Paul F. Johnson, TG, also from the 775th, evaded with the aid of Partisans in the area, and returned to Allied control with the evading members of Lt. Magnuson's crew that went down on the Villaorba mission the day before.<sup>83</sup>

The last two planes, both from the 96th Squadron, went down at approximately the same time just after bombs away. One, aircraft number 42-38100, the Squadron lead, piloted by 2nd Lt. Clarence W. Southern, with Capt. Wilson E. Burrill, CP, of the 463rd Bomb Group, took a burst of flak that started a fire behind number 3 engine. The airplane pulled out of its lead position and dropped back and below the formation. It flew along below the formation for some time, then blew up. 2nd Lt. Harry S. LaSalle Jr., the



navigator and a survivor, reported after repatriation that the crew took an 88mm shell blast that knocked out number 3 and 4 engines and set the right wing on fire. After a 360 degree turn to the right, Lt. Southern recovered control of the aircraft and held it straight and level until the other nine crew members had bailed out. The plane exploded before Lt. Southern was able to leave. Six crew members were captured in approximately the same area and were all brought to the same collection point. The other three, T/Sgt. Russell W. Phillips, ROG, T/Sgt. Thomas W. Forbes, UTG, and S/Sgt. Ascension (NMI) Gonzales Jr., LTG, were picked up by the Partisans, who helped them get back to Allied control.<sup>19</sup>

T/Sgt. Forbes, landed about 20 miles south of Klagenfurt at the foot of a mountain range. He started up into the mountains and in about an hour he met four Partisans who were searching for him. He was taken to the Partisan commander high up in the mountains south of Klagenfurt, where he stayed for two days. Partisans took his GI shoes and gave him a old pair of hobnailed shoes to prevent the enemy from recognizing the distinctive American shoe print in the snow.

With the aid of Partisans he traveled south, crossing into Yugoslavia near Jesenice. Here he met the other two evaders from his crew. They continued to travel south and west toward Italy. He met several other evaders on the way. He traded American money for lira to purchase food and cigarettes. On April 18 he separated from Sgts. Phillips and Gonzales. Phillips had become ill and Gonzales decided to stay with him. One of his most difficult evasion tasks was crossing a rail line south of Zagreb in an area heavily patrolled by the Germans. He arrived at Petrovac, Yugoslavia on May 4 and was evacuated on May 8. T/Sgt. Forbes brought back considerable intelligence observations.<sup>20</sup>

The other 96th Squadron airplane, number

41-24405, piloted by 1st Lt. Herman S. Lavine, was flying Lt. Southern's right wing, and suffered a similar fate. Shortly after bombs were away, the plane came under fighter attack and the left wing was set afire. At least six chutes were seen but only two members of the crew survived — 2nd Lt. Louis M. Boehm, B, and S/Sgt. Kenneth C. Cook, LWG — who were both captured. There are no known statements available from the survivors as to what happened to the rest of the crew.<sup>21</sup>

Because only one camera took pictures, and because of smoke from bombs of the lead groups, no accurate assessment of mission results was possible. Group gunners did shoot down three FW-190s.

#### MISSION 164, MARCH 22, 1944

VERONA, ITALY, MARSHALLING YARDS

These marshalling yards were an important communications line from Germany through the Brenner Pass to Italy. The Germans worked hard to keep the line open despite previous successful bombing. The Group came back with no pictures, but visual observations and reports from 5th Wing Headquarters confirmed that, together with the other three B-17 Groups, a good job of bombing was done and several large explosions erupted.<sup>22</sup>

This mission was relatively easy for most of the Group, because the 6 to 10 enemy fighters sighted did not attack. One crew, however, did not have an easy day. Lt. John L. Cravath, 429th Squadron, had an engine fire on airplane 42-29579, "Baby," and had to ditch in the Adriatic 47 miles north of Foggia near the Tramiti Islands. The men were all able to get into the life rafts even though the airplane sank in one minute. They were picked up after one hour and returned to their squadron the next day.<sup>23</sup>

#### MISSION 165, MARCH 23, 1944

STEYR, AUSTRIA, BALL BEARING PLANT

#### MISSION 166, MARCH 24, 1944

STEYR, AUSTRIA, BALL BEARING PLANT

#### MISSION 167, MARCH 26, 1944

STEYR, AUSTRIA, MARSHALLING YARDS

Combat crews, no doubt, felt some trepidation when the Steyr missions were announced. Exactly a month before, the Group had experienced its great loss on the Steyr mission. Steyr was still very much a priority target area for mission planners, and three consecutive strikes were ordered against it. Because of bad weather, all three strikes were terminated before reaching the target. Lt. Col. John Ryan, the new Deputy Group Commander, led all of these missions. He was somewhat discouraged to have led his first three combat missions without the Group being able to drop a bomb on a target. His time would come.

#### MISSION 168, MARCH 28, 1944

VERONA, ITALY, MARSHALLING YARDS

#### MISSION 169, MARCH 29, 1944

TURIN, ITALY, MARSHALLING YARDS

As weather repeatedly foreclosed strategic targets, the heavy bombardment groups were diverted to interdiction targets in Italy. Lt. Col. Ryan was finally able to lead a mission to conclusion. Even though Verona was struck on March 22, Intelligence estimates were that over 1,000 cars passed over these lines every two days. Target coverage was good, with strikes on the tracks, rolling stock and sheds. Resistance was meager, and the escort took care of the few enemy fighters sighted.

The Turin yards and repair center were the largest in Italy, after Milan. On March 26, there were 500 wagons and 23 locomotives in the yards. The mission was to destroy the rolling stock and adjacent repair facilities. The 2nd led the 5th Wing and left a very good concentration of bombs on the target. Several large explosions were observed. The formation was about ten minutes early to the target and the rendezvous with the escort did not occur as planned. This accounted, in part, for the losses to enemy fighters. Flak over the target was intense and accurate, and damaged twenty-three airplanes. Six to ten fighters attacked the formation after the target. They mortally wounded one man — S/Sgt. James H. Taylor, UTG, 49th Squadron — injured another, and damaged three airplanes, two severely.

Airplane 42-97152, 20th Squadron, pilot, 1st Lt. Edward J. Wronkoski, was hit by flak over the target, one engine was feathered, the plane began to lag, and soon got the attention of the fighters. The plane lost speed and altitude and the crew started to bail out. When last seen it was 56 miles southeast of Turin entering a cloud bank. Seven or eight men were seen to bail out before the airplane disappeared.<sup>24</sup>

Wronkowski was to later report that the flak eventually disabled three engines. He couldn't keep up with the formation, and was losing altitude when the stricken plane was jumped by four fighters. The fighters started making head-



1st Lt. Edward J. Wronkoski and crew, in airplane No. 42-97152, reportedly shot down by an Italian fighter pilot, on mission 169, March 29, 1944, to Turin, Italy marshalling yards. Action observed by Giancarlo Garelo as a child. (Courtesy of G. Garelo)



on passes. By then 2 of the disabled engines were burning, and Wronkowski thought the airplane might explode, so he gave the order to bail out. The crew started abandoning the airplane at about 21,000 feet.

Wronkowski set the airplane on autopilot before bailing out. As he floated down, the fighters started to circle him. Terrorized that they might strafe him, he hung his head limply pretending to be dead. The fighter pilots exhibited only curiosity and left him to float down unhindered. He landed in a mountainous area, sprained both ankles and suffered a cut on his head. An Italian man, woman and child were walking along a mountain path near where Wronkowski came down. The Italians helped him to his feet, buried his parachute and took him to their house. They laid him on a bed, and massaged his sprained ankles. Later he was told he had to go because the Germans were coming. Wronkowski left by the back door and hid the best he could, but search dogs soon sniffed him out. He was jailed in Cairo a few miles away where he met seven members of his crew.

Copilot 2nd Lt. Francis A. Sanvito was found, unconscious, in the woods by a seventeen year old Italian. Sanvito was seriously injured and bleeding heavily. The Italian youth carried Sanvito to his home where the wounds were washed, but Sanvito was badly injured, and the Italians turned him over to the Germans so he could be taken to a hospital.

Nine members of the crew, including Sanvito, survived the war as POWs. One member, S/Sgt. Maurice R. LaRouche, UTG, was hidden for two months with the aid of friendly Italians, then turned over to Italian Partisans. He fought with the Partisans for several months before being taken to neutral Monaco.<sup>25</sup>

One eyewitness to the downing of this American crew was Giancarlo Garello, a 9 1/2 year-old youth living in Cairo. He recorded the events in his diary, witnessed capture of crew members, visited the airplane crash site, and started a life-long fascination with the event. He remembers seeing Wronkowski try to keep the bomber airborne, and seeing the parachutes pop open against a cloudy sky. He says the airmen were soon rounded up by the Germans and taken into captivity. They were piled into a truck, but were lively enough to exchange a few words with the crowd in broken Italian.

In spite of crew reports that the attacking aircraft were Me-109s, Giancarlo says that Capt. Giovanni Bonnet, flying an Italian G-55, shot the B-17 down. Bonnet and his flight of four scrambled from Venaria Reale Airfield on the outskirts of Turin. They attacked the lone bomber, and after the crew began to bail out, they held their fire. On his way back to base, Capt. Bonnet was intercepted by Maj. H. H. Green in a P-47 from the 325th Fighter Group, and was mortally wounded. When the P-47s of the 325th arrived on the scene, the outnumbered Italians broke for cover.

After a short stay in Giancarlo's home town of Cairo Montenotte, the captured crew members from 42-97152 was taken away to prison camps by the Germans. Later, Giancarlo learned that copilot, Sanvito, was severely wounded in the leg, and owed his life to a "nice old lady" who washed his wounds and stopped the hemorrhage.<sup>26</sup>

As a young man, Giancarlo attended the Italian Naval Academy, underwent naval pilot training at Pensacola, Florida, and eventually became an Al Italia airline captain flying 747's on international routes. While on such a trip, he made contact with a thoroughly startled Wronkowski in Chicago. Giancarlo arranged a reunion in November 1988 with the people of Cairo for a very skeptical Wronkowski. To Wronkowski's utter surprise he was greeted like a hero. At the reunion he had his second encounter with one of the Italian fighter pilots who was among the four interceptors that shot him down. After 44 years, Wronkowski finally could ask the question that had haunted him over the years. Why hadn't the Italian shot him coming down in his chute. Overcome with emotion, the Italian answered, "I could never do anything like that. I just wanted to see what you looked like."<sup>27</sup>

### MISSION 170, MARCH 30, 1944 SOFIA, BULGARIA, INDUSTRIAL CENTER

The Bulgarian government continued to waver about its decision to get out of the war. The Allies, particularly Russia, had pressured the Bulgarians to cease hostilities against them. The Russians were advancing rapidly toward Rumania. It was thought that a major strike at the industrial heart of the capital, Sofia, might reap both military and political benefits.

A force of 114 B-17s and 234 B-24s dropped 960 tons of bombs, many of them 500-pound incendiary clusters set to detonate at 6,000 feet over the target. The result was wide-spread destruction from the numerous fires and explosions.

A small force of about six Me-109s and FW-190s attacked the Group for ten minutes after the target, fatally injured one crewman, wounded four, and severely damaged two airplanes. One Me-109 was shot down. S/Sgt. Raymond C. Bringolf, UTG, 96th Squadron, was killed instantly by a shrapnel fragment. S/Sgt. Donald C. Gardner, TG, 429th Squadron was severely wounded in the right arm.

For the second time this month, two crews were struck down by perhaps the worst of all air crew calamities — a mid-air collision. 1st Lt. Fred O. Wickham pilot of aircraft number 42-31851 of the 20th Squadron, and one of the newly arrived pilots of the 775th Squadron, were flying the left wing in the second element of the 20th Squadron. 2nd Lt. Leroy P. Rigney and crew in aircraft number 42-31683, were flying in the slot, or "tail-end-Charlie" position in the same element, to the right, below, and behind Wickham. The 20th Squadron was in a tight formation for the bomb run, when the element leader made a sharp right turn at the initial point. Lt. Wickham, on the left wing and to the outside of the turn, was caught in his element leader's prop wash. Deprived of its lift in the rarified, high altitude atmosphere, Wickham's plane staggered and came crashing down on top of Lt. Rigney's airplane. Metal crunched against metal and powerful propellers dissected airframes. In moments, the air, that held the stately forms of two sleek airplanes, was strewn with the jagged debris of death and destruction. The two planes were torn apart, but there was no explosion or fire on impact, even though they carried 500-pound incendiaries. One whole tail section and

one whole wing were seen to fall away and only one parachute was seen to open.<sup>28</sup> The crews from both airplanes perished.<sup>29</sup>

Information was received from the Bulgarian Ministry of War on February 9, 1945 that two American bombers crashed at Kosbarevo on March 30, 1944. The people of Kosbarevo buried the men in their local cemetery. Their identifications were not recorded. When the graves were opened later, remains of twenty bodies were found. Only one body with identification was found, and that one had the identification tags of Sgt. Tony H. Morrish, TG, on Lt. Wickham's crew. Sgt. Morrish was perhaps the one whose parachute was reported coming from one of the airplanes.<sup>30</sup>

This was the sixth straight mission led by Lt. Col. Ryan.

March came to a beneficent end with a non-operational day and the arrival of a shipment of Coca Cola and beer at the Post Exchange. It was the first coke that most of the men had since leaving the U.S. a year before. There was other relief from work and the pervasive pre-occupation with combat. Movies were regularly available. The showing schedule was changed to Sunday, Wednesday and Friday and show times were reduced to twice a day from three times to conserve equipment. A rest camp had been established on the Isle of Capri, and about 20 officers and 24 enlisted men were sent each week for a week's stay. On March 21, the men were treated to what many judged to be the best stage show they had seen since coming overseas. The "name" actor headlining the stage production of "Yard-Birds," was Sterling Holloway. It was a variety show, complete with a 15-piece orchestra, a cast of 50 service men, all of whom were former professional entertainers, and all the paraphernalia necessary to support two hours of dancing, singing, juggling, impersonations, and instrumental numbers.

A steady stream of medal awards came in, most in response to citations submitted for approval several months previously.<sup>31</sup> Well-deserved recognitions, and the presentation ceremonies, always gave a boost to individual morale and added to the unit's esprit de corps.

#### Endnotes:

<sup>1</sup> History, 340-342

<sup>2</sup> Mission Report

<sup>3</sup> McCoid, Group History, 342

<sup>4</sup> Ibid, 352, 353

<sup>5</sup> Ibid, 356

<sup>6</sup> Richards Missing Crew Report

<sup>7</sup> 429th Squadron History, (AFHRA, Maxwell AFB, AL,) microfilm reel A0613, fr. 88

<sup>8</sup> Richards Missing Crew Report

<sup>9</sup> McCoid, Group History, 364

<sup>10</sup> Ibid, 362

<sup>11</sup> Rust, 10

<sup>12</sup> McCoid, Group History, 363, 364

<sup>13</sup> Ibid, 366, 367

<sup>14</sup> Ibid, 368, 369

<sup>15</sup> Richards Missing Crew Report

<sup>16</sup> Ibid

<sup>17</sup> Ibid

<sup>18</sup> Ibid

<sup>19</sup> Ibid

<sup>20</sup> Thomas W. Forbes, Escape Statement, May 11, 1944

<sup>21</sup> McCoid, Group History, 374-377

<sup>22</sup> Ibid, 380

<sup>23</sup> Ibid, 381

<sup>24</sup> Ibid, 897, 388



<sup>25</sup> *Elmira (Ohio) Star Gazette*, Dec 12, 1987 via Giancarlo Garelo

<sup>26</sup> Giancarlo Gorello, Letter, September 23, 1994

<sup>27</sup> *Elmira Star Gazette*, Nov 21, 1944, via Giancarlo Garelo

<sup>28</sup> McCoid, *Group History*, 392

<sup>29</sup> Richards, *Missing Crew Reports*

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>31</sup> McCoid, *Group History*, March 1944 Narrative

## APRIL 1944

Weather in April proved not much better than recent months. Six of the nineteen missions flown were unsuccessful because cloud cover prevented delivery of the bombs. The Group flew several missions in the CBO campaign, striking a ball bearing plant, aircraft factories, and French harbor installations. Seven marshalling yards were also bombed in an effort to limit enemy movement of troops and materiel to his front lines. The campaign to destroy the oil resources at Ploesti began.

Build-up of the Fifteenth Air Force was completed in April. Two B-17 groups joined the 5th Wing. The 463rd Bomb Group became operational on March 30, and the 483rd Bomb Group began operations on April 12. All of the B-24 groups assigned to the Fifteenth had also arrived, as had the P-51 fighter groups, giving the heavy bombers the long range escort they so badly needed. This brought the Fifteenth up to its final complement of 21 heavy bombardment groups, 7 fighter groups, and several reconnaissance and special service squadrons.

The Fifteenth Air Force had undergone a great deal of growing pains during build-up. In March, Lt. General Ira Eaker, Commander of the Mediterranean Allied Air Force (MAAF), reported that the Fifteenth was a "pretty disorganized mob," but he also pointed out there were some very good men in charge, and they were "perfecting the reorganization and training of their groups pretty rapidly." By April, Eaker reported the Fifteenth looked like a different organization. The benefits of lessons taken from the Eighth Air Force, insistence on high standards, and new and better qualified wing and group commanders all played a part in developing the Fifteenth into a good strategic air force. To substantiate that conclusion, Eaker reported that out of 10,000 heavy bomber sorties, 72% had been effective and nearly 500 enemy fighters had been destroyed. The U.S. fighters had flown 6,000 sorties and had destroyed 2.4 enemy aircraft for each loss they suffered.<sup>1</sup>

### MISSION 171, APRIL 2, 1944 STEYR, AUSTRIA, BALL BEARING PLANT

The crews were briefed for the fifth time in two weeks to bomb the ball bearing plant at Steyr. This time, they were able to get through and do the job. The Group sent 31 bombers over the target and struck it with 92.75 tons of incendiaries. The 2nd was to be the third group in the 5th Wing over the target, but dropped first because of confusion caused by a smoke screen put up by the enemy from smoke pots.

Some 50 to 100 enemy fighters were seen, but most of them were engaged by the escorting P-38s and P-47s. Some of the enemy made one pass through the Group formation. Others stood off to the rear, out of range of the bomber's guns and fired rockets. One of these exploded just



*T/Sgt. Joe B. Null being congratulated by Col. Rice after shooting down an Me-110, April 2, 1944. (Courtesy of J. Null)*

above the bombers, killing 20th Squadron navigator 2nd Lt. Robert H. O'Connor. Three others were wounded, one of whom, 2nd Lt. George J. Jost, CP, required hospitalization for a flak wound to his left thigh. A gunner in the 20th downed one Me-110.<sup>2</sup>

### MISSION 172, APRIL 3, 1944 BUDAPEST/TOKOL, HUNGARY AIRCRAFT FACTORY MISSION 173, APRIL 4, 1944 BUCHAREST, RUMANIA MARSHALLING YARDS

The Tokol factory produced 30 to 40 Me-410s per month and about 5 Daimler-Benz engines daily. The Group's specific target was one of the workshops. The Group missed the workshop but did considerable damage to other facilities and equipment. The mission was the subject of a congratulatory message from Gen. Twining. Lt. Col. Ryan, Deputy Group Commander, led the Group for the eighth straight time. Two fighter groups, one P-38 and one P-47 furnished penetration escort.<sup>3</sup>

49th Squadron pilot, 2nd Lt. Clair A. Carlson, and his crew in aircraft number 42-31465 were shot down by fighters and bailed out over Yugoslavia. Copilot, 2nd Lt. Robert M. Jones, and navigator, 2nd Lt. Michael A. Birbiglia were killed. Carlson and bombardier, 2nd Lt. John J. Czechowicz, evaded. All of the enlisted crew members were captured and imprisoned in a camp near Krems, Austria.

Interrogation of the evaders, indicated that the plane crashed and burned near Sarajevo, Yugoslavia. Lt. Birbiglia was killed instantly by 20mm shell fire from fighters, and he was in the airplane when it crashed. Copilot Jones, on his first mission, was also mortally wounded by fire from the fighters. He was still alive while in the airplane and was lifted out by Lt. Czechowicz and S/Sgt. Ralph E. Thacker, UTG, who pulled his ripcord and saw his chute open. The Partisans reported that Lt. Jones died shortly after they reached him. He was buried by the Yugoslavians.<sup>4</sup>

The Bucharest mission was the first one to Rumania. The marshalling yards were the largest in the country and were expected to be fully dedicated to war material. The bombing was fair to good. Half of the bombs fell in the target area and set off a series of explosions. Some enemy fighters were seen, but didn't attack with escort in the area. Flak was ineffective.

### MISSION 174, APRIL 5, 1944 PLOESTI, RUMANIA, MARSHALLING YARDS MISSION 175, APRIL 7, 1944 TREVISO, ITALY, MARSHALLING YARDS MISSION 176, APRIL 8, 1944 FISCHAMEND MARKET, AUSTRIA AIRCRAFT FACTORY MISSION 177, APRIL 12, 1944 FISCHAMEND MARKET, AUSTRIA AIRCRAFT FACTORY

The marshalling yards at Ploesti served both the refineries there and war materials for the German ground forces. The Group used incendiaries, which made it difficult to assess damage, but they fell in the target area and started several fires. There was virtually no opposition.

The Treviso yards were an important link in the German lines of communication from Vienna to Venice and through central Italy. Most of the bombs fell outside the target area. Other goods stores and small facilities were damaged. The flak was unexpectedly intense and accurate, inflicting minor damage on nineteen airplanes and severe damage on one.

The first try for the aircraft factory at Fischamend Market was recalled with all bombs aboard because of weather. 1st Lt. Millard F. Pedigo, 429th Squadron in 42-32031, "Mammy Yokum," belly landed at Amendola with the full loads of bombs. No one was injured, but the plane was salvaged. "The gear was not fully extended," was the terse comment without explanation as to why. The crew was given aircraft number 42-38078, which they named "Mammy Yokum II."



Four members of the crew finished their fiftieth mission in 078. The airplane was later re-named "Sweet Pea."<sup>5</sup>

The second try for Fischamend Market had to wait four days for favorable weather. With the recently successful missions against German aircraft production facilities at Steyr and Budapest, the greater Weider Neustadt complex was the remaining priority target in this category. A sizeable assault on targets in the Zagreb, Vienna, Bad Vöslau, and Weiner Neustadt area, including Fischamend Market, was laid on by Fifteenth Air Force. Bombing of the 2nd was fair. At least two direct hits were made on the work shops assigned to the Group. The remaining bombs fell partially in the central sector of the factory and the rest mostly outside the target in the adjoining residential area. There was little enemy resistance. Maj. Joseph S. Cunningham, newly assigned commander of the 429th Squadron, led his first mission.

## MISSION 178, APRIL 13, 1944

### GYOR, HUNGARY

#### WAGON WORKS/AIRCRAFT FACTORY

The Hungarian Railroad Car and Foundry Works in Győr was manufacturing 50 Me-109 aircraft a month. Because production at many of the other aircraft manufacturing plants had been stopped or greatly reduced, the supposition was, backed by intelligence sources, that more manufacturing activity would be moved to this location. The 5th Wing was ordered to destroy the factory, and on April 13, 163 B-17s dropped 386 tons of bombs on the Works doing severe damage. The 500-pound incendiaries started fires in the armament work, the alcohol refinery and the gas works.<sup>6</sup>

The 2nd, with Col. Rice in command, led the Wing. Flak was slight, but German fighters attacked fiercely to defend their diminishing aircraft manufacturing facilities. Twenty to thirty Me-109s and FW-190s opposed the Group while it was on the bomb run, and two of them were shot down by Group gunners. Before making their passes, the fighters lobbed rockets at the formation from 800 to 1,000 yards out, then came in ten and twelve, line abreast, firing at the tail of the second wave. They passed under the second wave, then pulled up and repeated the same tactics against the tail of the first wave. As they passed under the first wave, they were engaged by the arriving P-38 escort. The combination of rockets and shell fire damaged four B-17s so badly, they had to be abandoned.

2nd Lt. Willie W. German, was flying airplane number 42-31837 in the 20th Squadron. The plane was hit by a rocket that set engines 2 and 3 on fire. The airplane dove away, in an apparent attempt to blow out the fire. The number 2 engine fire went out but number 1 continued to blaze. Six chutes were seen, two of which were reported to be on fire. The plane fell to approximately 17,000 feet, then there was an explosion, and the plane broke apart at the ball turret.<sup>7</sup> Five of the crew, including Lt. German were killed, while the others became POWs. Crew members, returning after liberation, believed that none of those killed were able to get out of the airplane before it crashed.<sup>8</sup>

A second airplane from the 20th Squadron, 42-97346, was shot down during the battle. The

plane was flown by 2nd Lt. Earl W. Martin. Just as the Squadron turned away from the target after dropping bombs, 42-97346 was attacked from six o'clock by five fighters. The tail gunner's position and waist area were severely damaged, as was the right wing. Number 4 engine was knocked out and feathered, while number 3 was damaged, but was not feathered. Several 20mm cannon shell holes were made in the right wing, and one fuel tank, near the fuselage, was punctured and spilling gas into the slipstream. The airplane could not keep up with the Group, and was trailing but still in sight when fire started in the gas stream from the right wing. The crew was ordered to bail out when Yugoslavia was reached, and all ten men landed safely. Lt. Martin, tail gunner, Sgt. Russell (NMI) Durfee, and waist gunner, Sgt. Frank J. Pyzanowski, were captured and turned over to Germans to become POWs. Sgt. Durfee's leg was amputated at the knee, due to severe wounds, and he was repatriated to the U.S. in a prisoner exchange. The other seven crew members, 2nd Lts. George J. Jost, CP; Robert C. Clark, N; and Lowell W. Hamm, B; S/Sgt. Raymond R. Howarth, UTG; and Sgts. David M. Cuniff Jr., LTG; Franklin H. Gowans, RWG; and Thomas B. Watkins, ROG, were picked up by the Partisans, and returned to Amendola in May.<sup>9</sup>

Sgt. Watkins tells the story of those who evaded. "I landed near a small village of 8 or 10 houses in a side hill stubble field. The women and children ran out at the same time a rifle man reached me. They fingered the nylon with great interest. They might not have seen nylon before. The man with the gun said something which sounded like 'Englesk.' I said, 'No, I'm American.' He extended his right hand and we shook. He was a communist Partisan wearing a cloth red star as their sign.

We ran immediately for the woods where we found the navigator (2nd Lt. Clark) laying at the base of a tall tree where his chute was caught. Howarth, (S/Sgt. Raymond C. Howarth, engineer) and another Partisan joined us. The navigator was too weak to walk, so one of the Partisans left and soon returned with a two-wheeled cart pulled by a cow. We then left the woods, the navigator in the cart, and proceeded openly on the road.

We soon met a group of Partisans, one of whom dressed the navigator's shoulder, and gave him and me tetanus shots. My wound was very minimal. Before night, we were in a fairly good-sized town with two story homes and business buildings. We apparently were in a Partisan stronghold, since we entered openly.

We left the next morning with a guard of 20 armed Partisans, both male and female, mostly young, 18 to 50. One man spoke fluent English, having spent 8 years in the U.S.A. He remained with us for the duration of our stay. We met English-speaking people almost every day, some having lived in the U.S.A., and some taught in the schools.

I had broken open my escape kit, using some money to buy tobacco and cigarette papers. I produced a map of Yugoslavia and asked our guide where we were. He examined the map, refolded it and returned it to me, telling me I did not need to know, that the Germans knew we were there due to collaborators. We might fall into German hands, our knowledge then being

to the detriment of the Partisan effort. So we never did know where we were.

The navigator recovered his strength in a day or two, and we continued to walk, sometimes openly, sometimes in the woods.

We came to a small village with a Catholic Church, a school, and a few houses. There we found a Russian officer with two or three enlisted men, also an English lieutenant, and two enlisted men who operated a radio station. The Russian officer addressed us that evening. The interpretation given was that the female Partisans were to be seen only as soldiers and not as women.

The number of airmen in our party grew almost daily, including an entire B-24 crew that had landed after losing too many engines. Others were picked up as singles, and I remember one, Sgt. Forbes, had come all the way from Austria and had been traveling for three months. (T/Sgt. Thomas W. Forbes, UTG, on Lt. Southern's crew shot down March 19.)

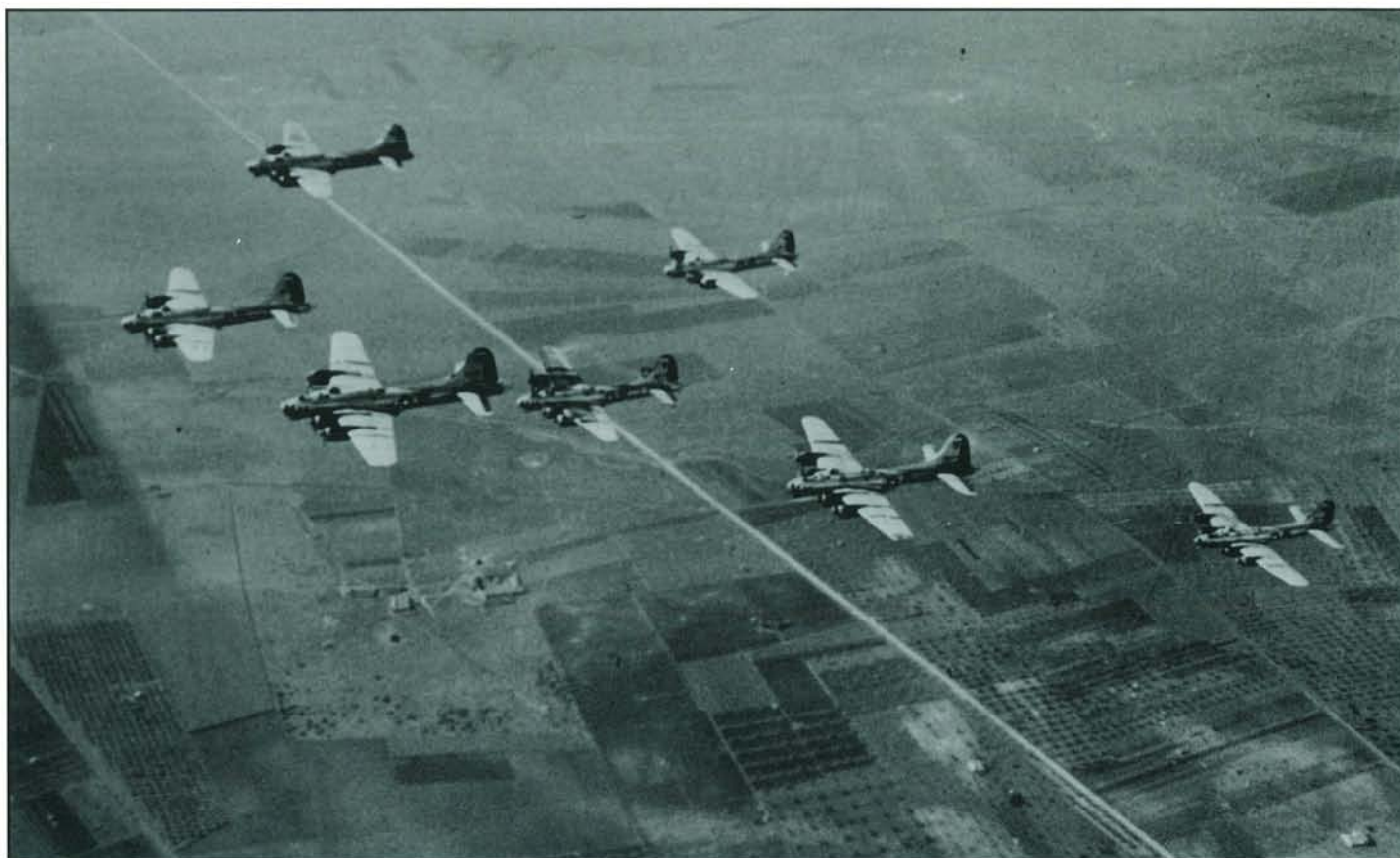
We finally reached a mountain top clearing where the Partisans said we would be picked up. I rolled up in my blanket and went to sleep. I was awakened about midnight and a C-47 was there waiting to take us out."<sup>10</sup>

The 96th Squadron also lost two airplanes to the aggressive attacks of the enemy fighters. They were 42-31506 piloted by 2nd Lt. Donald W. Applegate, and 42-32058 flown by 2nd Lt. Kendrick U. Reeves.

Applegate's copilot, 2nd Lt. John A. Finn was killed. All the rest of the crew became prisoners of the Germans. Some of the crew members were told that Lt. Finn was killed by irate Hungarian civilians, and they feared they would also have been killed if they had not been taken from the civilians by German soldiers.

Eyewitness accounts from the airplane flying Lt. Reeves left wing said that his airplane was in trouble from flak and fighters just after he dropped his bombs. A rocket hit high on the vertical stabilizer of Lt. Reeve's airplane, setting the fabric on fire. The fire soon fizzled out, then a fire started in number 3 engine. The crew began abandoning the airplane. Observers saw four or five bodies hurl past. A total of seven parachutes was counted. Just after the last chute opened, the airplane blew up.<sup>11</sup> In a personal account, S/Sgt. Jarrel A. Clendenin, RWG, said his plane was hit by both flak and fighters. He was firing his gun at a Me-109 that was coming straight for him. He pressed his trigger again, and nothing happened. The fighter had passed in the meantime. He charged his gun, just in time to see an FW-190, also coming straight at him. The pilot was so close, Clendenin could see his face. The close, head-on attack made the fighter a perfect target. Clendenin took aim, pulled the trigger and again nothing happened. In a flash, the fighter dropped his nose, went under the bomber, and disappeared. Only then did Clendenin realize that a fighter salvo had blown away part of the fuselage along the waist, together with his ammo belt. At that point, Lt. Reeves gave the bail out order and the crew started leaving the airplane. S/Sgt. Marshall W. Feltner, LTG, who was a bit too big for the turret, was struggling to get out of the turret. Clendenin reached for Feltner's hand and helped snake him out. Feltner proceeded to bailout. Clendenin didn't have his chute snapped on. He





*The 429th Squadron forms-up over Italy on the way to Southern Europe. (Group Photo)*

had apparently lost his oxygen in the fracas, and was beginning to feel weak. He got one snap of his chute fastened with some difficulty, but didn't have the strength to fasten the other. He finally got it snapped by pressing the chute against the side of the airplane. He believes this delay caused him to be the last out of the airplane.

As he descended in his chute, he saw several chutes below him. Some were being strafed by the fighters. As they got closer to the ground, they were raked by ground fire, from what he later learned were members of the Hungarian Home Guard. He likewise was strafed and fired on, but wasn't hit. He took cover, in what he thought was an irrigation ditch, to avoid machine gun fire. He surrendered when a German officer ordered the shooting to stop. He saw one of his crewmen laying inert on the ground. It was S/Sgt. Cornelius W. Stinson, his fellow waist gunner. S/Sgt. Stinson was apparently mortally wounded by his angry attackers. He was the only member of the crew that did not survive. Clendenin was herded together with other captives and taken to jail in Budapest. Eventually he was imprisoned at Stalag Luft III. When the Russians advanced into the area, he was among those marched to Stalag VII-A at Moosburg. He was liberated by elements of Patton's Third Army.<sup>12</sup>

#### **MISSION 179, APRIL 15, 1944** **PLOESTI, RUMANIA, INDUSTRIAL AREA**

A mission to the Ploesti marshalling yards was briefed on April 14, then canceled because of weather. The mission was rescheduled on the fifteenth, but the target was completely overcast. The Group then

bombed the industrial area as the alternate using PFF for the first time, but was not able to photograph results. Later photo reconnaissance showed that three medium and four small storage tanks were destroyed at a pumping station, and one large and three small storage tanks and one small building were destroyed at one refinery. There was negligible other damage or opposition.<sup>13</sup>

#### **MISSION 180, APRIL 16, 1944** **BRASOV, RUMANIA, AIRCRAFT FACTORY**

Brasov is eighty-seven miles north-northwest of Bucharest. The aircraft factory was thought to be the most modern in eastern Europe, and was reported to be the largest producer of aircraft in Rumania. It's pre-war capacity was 30 aircraft per month, 700 to 800 engines per year, plus a large quantity of engine parts. Given the destruction to other aircraft production facilities, and the fact that Brasov was the only major facility yet to be attacked, the Germans were sure to have increased their reliance on it. The Group got to within 135 miles of Brasov, ran into a weather front, and after several unsuccessful attempts to penetrate it, was forced to turn back. No doubt a return mission would be scheduled.

One plane and crew were lost on this largely unopposed mission. After the Group made the last circle in the weather penetration effort, and started home, aircraft 42-97581, 96th Squadron, dropped out of the formation and started to lag. The plane was seen to be flying with its bomb bay doors part way open. The formation slowed and made "s" turns to let the lagger catch up. The crew salvoed the bombs, but never closed

the gap. Eyewitnesses reported no visible evidence of trouble with the plane, and it was last seen entering the clouds about 38 miles northwest of Belgrade, Yugoslavia. No one was seen to bail out before the plane disappeared.<sup>14</sup>

The crew bailed out over Yugoslavia. The pilot, 2nd Lt. Robert C. Voss, was captured, but all other crew members evaded and returned. T/Sgt. John D. Vinson, radio operator, was one of the evaders, and he made the following report: "Before arriving at the target, number 3 engine went out due to mechanical failure. The engine was feathered, and since the pilot could not keep up, he decided to return. While passing over the Romanian border, we were hit by flak and the electrical system and number 1 engine were shot out. The plane was losing altitude and the pilot gave the order to bail out. Everyone bailed out successfully. I bailed out at 9,500 feet, and landed east of Nicolae. I saw the pilot captured by the Germans. Myself and the other crew members were evacuated together."<sup>15</sup>

#### **MISSION 181, APRIL 17, 1944** **BELGRADE, YUGOSLAVIA**

**SAVA MARSHALLING YARDS**

#### **MISSION 182, APRIL 20, 1944**

**CASTLEFRANCO, ITALY**

**MARSHALLING YARDS**

#### **MISSION 183, APRIL 21, 1944**

**PLOESTI, RUMANIA, MARSHALLING YARDS**

The marshalling yards in Belgrade became an important target because they were adjacent to the



Danube and Sava rivers and thus served both rail and river boat and barge traffic. The yards were over-flowing with supplies badly needed by the German ground forces opposing the Russian army pushing down from the north. On April 15, 1,200 wagons were present in the yards and several trains were shown on the move. This was the first mission to Belgrade. No enemy fighters were encountered. Flak did some damage and inflicted a moderately severe wound to the right elbow of S/Sgt. Floyd W. Dalton, RWG, 96th Squadron.

Bombing was fair and not what one might wish with such a lucrative target. Still, the target opportunities in the area were wide-spread and even those bombs that fell outside the specifically designated target area, did very considerable damage. Barges, barge terminal, adjacent small warehouses, stacked stores, rail sidings, and rolling stock were all damaged or destroyed. Two small gasoline and oil fires and explosions were observed. A six-gun flak battery near the terminal received direct hits and was believed destroyed.

On return to the base, 2nd Lt. Arley L. Atwell, 20th Squadron, in airplane 42-38088, could not get the main gear down. He made a perfect gear-up, belly landing, damaging the airplane extensively, but the crew was uninjured. Maj. Charles H. Hillhouse, Commander of the 96th Squadron led the mission.<sup>16</sup>

The Castelfranco mission was nullified by weather and all planes returned with their bombs. The fact that the 97th Group did the same was the cause of some excitement just before dark. A 97th Group B-17 caught fire on the line and blew up, bombs and all. When the fire was noticed, two other close-by B-17s were taxied away. A short circuit was thought to have been the cause. There were no casualties or injuries.<sup>17</sup>

The 5th Wing sent its five B-17 Groups after targets in the Ploesti area on April 21. The 2nd dispatched 35 airplanes under the leadership of Lt. Col. Ryan. The planes were loaded with 500 pound RDX bombs for the Ploesti marshalling yards. The formation was recalled by the Wing, supposedly because of weather, approximately 50 miles inland over Yugoslavia, despite having Pathfinder aircraft. No attempt was made to strike the first alternate, also in the Ploesti area or the second alternate, the marshalling yards at Turnul Severin, Rumania. The Group returned with its bombs still intact.<sup>18</sup>

### **MISSION 184, APRIL 23, 1944** **WIENER NEUSTADT, AUSTRIA** **AIRCRAFT FACTORY**

The mission had to be aborted short of the target because of ten tenths cloud cover, and the formation returned to base with their bombs.<sup>19</sup>

### **MISSION 185, APRIL 24, 1944** **PLOESTI, RUMANIA** **SOUTH MARSHALLING YARDS**

In contrast to the previous day, the mission to Ploesti was very successful. This crowded rail junction was an increasingly important target because in late March, the Russian armies in the



*Crossing the Alps on the way to Wiener Neustadt, Austria, on mission 184, April 23, 1944. (Group Photo/L. Moore)*



*S/Sgt. John E. Clark, lower turret gunner, 20th Squadron, shot down Me-109 on mission 185 to Ploesti, April 24, 1944. (Group Photo)*

Ukraine had broken through the German lines on a wide front. By early April, the Crimea was retaken, Odessa captured, and Russian troops were at or over the Rumanian border at all points.<sup>20</sup>

Five groups of the 5th Wing participated, and did a good job of bombing. The rail lines were cut in many places, buildings and shops damaged, and rolling stock destroyed accompanied by several explosions. Defense of the target was shown to be important when a forty minute fighter attack began as the Group reached the initial point. Twenty to thirty Me-109s, FW-190s and French designed DW-520s came after the formation from every point of the compass, for forty minutes. The score at the end of the fire fight was one man slightly wounded, five bombers damaged,

three fighters destroyed, three probably destroyed and one damaged. The relatively favorable results were perhaps due to the fact the attackers didn't use rockets.

The flak was both tracking and barrage types, with black, white and red smoke shell bursts. The crews said there were flak guns all over the city, and all of them seemed to be firing. "Window" was dispersed, and seemed to help considerably.<sup>21</sup>

### **MISSION 186, APRIL 25, 1944** **VICENZA, ITALY, MARSHALLING YARDS**

This mission was briefed twice before the crews were sent out, but to no avail. The formation hunted an hour for a path through the clouds before giving up and returning to base.<sup>22</sup>





*Ploesti strike photo, April 24, 1944. (Group Photo)*



*49th Squadron Pathfinder dropping bombs. Note radar dome below fuselage just aft of the wings. (Group Photo)*

### **MISSION 187, APRIL 28, 1944**

**PIOMBINO, ITALY, CITY**

### **MISSION 188, APRIL 29, 1944**

**TOULON, FRANCE, HARBOR INSTALLATIONS**

Allied bombing of the ground transportation network in northern Italy forced the Germans to resort to use of coastal shipping to resupply their forces opposing the Anzio beachhead. The town of Piombino, on the west coast of Italy 45 miles down the coast from Leghorn, had become a

trans-shipment point. The Group joined the other B-17 Groups in bombing the town. The raid left extensive damage to the industrial section, the power station, and coal storage, among many other facilities and areas.<sup>23</sup>

Toulon was proving to be a jinx to the Group. On four previous missions, two were foiled by weather and in one of the two remaining, only one wave bombed. This mission was hardly any better. The enemy put up an effective smoke screen that made accurate bombing and assessment of results difficult. The groups got out of

bombing sequence (the 97th going over the target ahead, instead of behind, the 2nd) adding more confusion to the mission. Submarines in dry dock were the 2nd's specific targets. Strike photos left considerable doubt whether the targets were hit. One string of bombs could be seen going through the barracks area and some repair shops.<sup>24</sup>

### **MISSION 189, APRIL 30, 1944**

**REGGIO EMILIA, ITALY, AIRDROME**

The 2nd followed the 97th Bomb Group on this mission to an important enemy airfield. Fifty-three aircraft were on the ground at the time of the bombing, and the Group dropped 20-pound fragmentation bombs. The bombing accuracy was not very good, however, with most of the bombs falling outside of the assigned area. Photos showed that one twin engine and 11 single engine airplanes were destroyed and 6 single engine, one twin and one multi-engine plane were damaged. No resistance of any kind was offered by the enemy, and the combat crews returned with broad smiles — a good way to end combat for the month.<sup>25</sup>

A technological innovation was used for the first time by the Group in April that would, in part, overcome the mission-inhibiting effects of weather. This innovation was radar bombing, or so-called "blind bombing." The enabling device was the H2X radar system, commonly called "Mickey." The H2X was a self-contained radar device that transmitted a beam which scanned the ground and produced a map-like picture of the terrain on a cathode ray tube. The British had been experimenting with and using radar for some time, but could hardly produce enough units for their own need. The Eighth Air Force had shared in these efforts, but realized it had to turn to American sources to meet its needs. Within a few months the Radiation Laboratory of MIT produced an American version of the British device — the H2X. On November 2, 1943, the Eighth Air Force flew its first mission using the H2X. By April 1944 the system was being introduced in the Fifteenth Air Force. Radar bombing could be employed by an individual airplane, or a radar-equipped bomber could fly the lead position in a formation and the other non-radar-equipped bombers would drop their bombs when the leader did. The leader was commonly called the "pathfinder," and this bombing technique was referred to as bombing by PFF or "Pathfinder Force."<sup>26</sup> Use of radar required a specially trained crew and particularly a radar navigator, referred to as the Mickey operator. Several Group pilots, bombardiers and navigators had already completed Pathfinder school by April 10.<sup>27</sup>

Employed by properly trained crews, radar could produce reasonably accurate bombing. The ability to bomb through overcasts and smoke screens could substantially increase bombing sorties, and bombing accuracy. Bombing through clouds also reduced the opposition from flak and from fighters grounded by the same weather that the radar could "see through."<sup>28</sup>

A sixty mile-per-hour wind swept through the camp area April 1, that took a corner off the roof of the new officer's club and mess. Workers were in the midst of final touches for the grand open-





*Officer's Club, Amendola. (Group Photo)*



*"The Schnozz," Jimmy Durante entertains as part of a USO-sponsored show. (Group Photo)*

ing scheduled two days later. The roof was replaced and the club was finished for the opening.<sup>29</sup> Although completed March 17, the official opening and dedication celebration was April 3. It was a grand opening with a banquet, dance and entertainment. Several dignitaries attended. Capt. James A. Clark, 20th Squadron Intelligence Officer, and club president, was the master of ceremonies. He acknowledged all those who had worked so hard to make the club a reality and introduced the dignitaries. Maj. Gen. Nathan Twining, Commander, Fifteenth Air Force, made a few timely remarks and praised the Group for its splendid record. Other VIPs present were Brig. Gen. Joseph H. Atkinson, Deputy Commander of the Fifteenth, and Col. Charles W. Lawrence, Commander of the 5th Wing. Sorely missed at this festive occasion was the 2nd Bomb Group Commander, Col. Herbert Rice, who had gone to England a week before and had not returned. A goodly number of the fairer sex was on hand, which made the party a greater success. Two bands, the 2nd and the 99th, played continuously for dancing and for the two night-club acts. Dancing continued until the early morning for some, but combat crews tempered their stay knowing they faced an early morning briefing and a bombing sortie the next day.<sup>30</sup>

As the camp became more settled, facilities improved, amenities and non-work activities were added. Regular church services were held in the Cave Chapel, movies were shown on a regular schedule, USO shows were welcomed when in the area, and new mess hall buildings were constructed for each of the squadrons. The Capri rest camp was in full operation, and the personnel were able to go there on a rotating schedule. Group unit softball teams were organized in April, and sports competition began.

One of the major new amenities was the opening of the new 12-head hot shower house. It was a stone building, with a water heating unit, constructed by Italian laborers under the supervision of Capt. Sidney Peterson, Group Supply Officer. The facility was used by officers and enlisted men on alternate days. It certainly beat being trucked to Foggia or relying on the steel helmet.



*L to R, facing: Gen. Twining, Gen. Eaker, Col. Rice, have dinner at the Amendola Officers Club the night before leading the shuttle mission to Russia on June 2, 1944. (Group Photo)*



#### Endnotes:

- <sup>1</sup> Rust, 21
- <sup>2</sup> Mission Report
- <sup>3</sup> Craven & Cate, 401, 402
- <sup>4</sup> Richards Missing Crew Report
- <sup>5</sup> William E. Aeschbacher, crew ROG, letter to R.F. Amos, February 6, 1996
- <sup>6</sup> Rust, 21; Craven & Cate, 417-422
- <sup>7</sup> McCoid, Group History, 418; Mission Report
- <sup>8</sup> Richards Missing Crew Report
- <sup>9</sup> Earl W. Martin, personal account, 1994
- <sup>10</sup> Thomas Watkins, letter, 1991
- <sup>11</sup> Mission Report
- <sup>12</sup> Jarrel A. Clendenin, personal account, February 7, 1992
- <sup>13</sup> Missing Crew Report
- <sup>14</sup> McCoid, Group History, 422, 423
- <sup>15</sup> Ibid, 425; Mission Report
- <sup>16</sup> Richards Missing Crew Report
- <sup>17</sup> McCoid, Group History, 426-428
- <sup>18</sup> Ibid, 431, 432
- <sup>19</sup> Ibid, 432, 433
- <sup>20</sup> Ibid, 434
- <sup>21</sup> Rust, 20
- <sup>22</sup> McCoid Group History, 435-437
- <sup>23</sup> Ibid, 438
- <sup>24</sup> Ibid, 441, 442
- <sup>25</sup> Ibid., 442, 443
- <sup>26</sup> Ibid, 445
- <sup>27</sup> Craven & Cate, Vol II, 692-694
- <sup>28</sup> McCoid, Group History, 429
- <sup>29</sup> "Impact," Vol 2, No. 1, January 1944
- <sup>30</sup> Ibid, 397
- <sup>31</sup> Ibid, 404, 405

## MAY 1944

The Fifteenth Air Force continued to attack the oil resources of the Third Reich, as well as aircraft production facilities, and transportation systems during the month of May. The strength of the Fifteenth had grown to the point where it could mount its first ever 1,000 plane sortie. On May 12, 1,143 aircraft were dispatched, and dropped 1,912 tons of bombs. That was quite an improvement over January, when little more than 100 heavy bombers were available to drop perhaps 300 tons on any one day.<sup>1</sup>

The 2nd took part in 20 missions during May, and the weather treated the crews better than during the previous month. Only 3 of the 20 times they took off, did they have to return their bombs to the base. The missions ranged over the territory of five different nations — Italy, Romania, Austria, Yugoslavia, and France.

No crews were lost to enemy fighter attacks during the month, and while heartening, this was more the exception than the rule. The absence of loss did indicate that the three-pronged effort against the GAF — destroying enemy aircraft in the air and on the ground, destroying enemy aircraft production facilities, and the availability of long-range friendly fighter escort — was having a cumulative beneficial effect. The fact that the P-38s and P-51s could escort the heavy bombers almost anywhere they roamed over German-occupied Europe, was most reassuring to the combat crews. Some of the fighter groups were re-equipped with P-51s, adding range to their escort capability.

On May 3 the Group sponsored a big party at the Officer's Club, and invited the 1st Fighter Group as guests in a gesture of appreciation for the "Little Friends." This gesture was repeated on May 10 with the 14th Fighter Group as guests,

on May 24 for the 82nd Fighter Group, and on May 31 for the 325th Fighter Group.

May opened with bad weather that kept the Group on the ground. These non-operational days were frequently used to catch up on much needed orientation and training.

New crews were briefed on escape and evasion procedures. Lectures were given on ways used to aid airmen downed behind enemy lines, but among underground forces and native populations eager to help them escape and evade. Crews were instructed about conduct and cooperation, particularly how to avoid endangering the lives of those giving such aid. An aircraft identification class was held for a British antiaircraft artillery unit and for some Group personnel. A British crew gave the Group a demonstration of the Bofors 40mm antiaircraft gun. When weather permitted, mock missions were flown. Crews practiced dinghy drills, gunners took turret practice, and instruction was given in small arms firing.<sup>2</sup>

### MISSION 190, MAY 2, 1944

BOLZANO, ITALY, RAILROAD BRIDGE

### MISSION 191, MAY 4, 1944

PLOESTI, ROMANIA, PUMPING STATION

### MISSION 192, MAY 5, 1944

PLOESTI, ROMANIA

SOUTHEAST INDUSTRIAL SECTION

The weather prevented the Group from reaching the targets on May 2 and 4, and all the planes returned to base with their bombs. The Ploesti pumping station was immediately rescheduled for the next day, but that specific target was obscured by clouds and smoke, so Lt. Col Ryan elected to bomb the industrial section by PFF. The formation had to brave heavy flak to get to the target. Thirty-three of the thirty-six airplanes in the formation were "holed" by flak. None were lost, but one damaged airplane, with two engines out, was joined by four other planes that dropped out of the formation to give protection, and together they staved off two passes by two Me-109s, one of

which was shot down. Four men were wounded, two of whom were taken to the hospital. 2nd Lt. Albert J. Ravid, N, 96th Squadron had a severe wound to his right leg. 2nd Lt. Arthur (NMI) Kotlen, N, also of the 96th, suffered a severe flak fragment wound to his right eye.<sup>3</sup>

### MISSION 193, MAY 6, 1944

BRASOV, ROMANIA, AIRCRAFT FACTORY

This same target was spared by weather on mission 180, April 16, but not on this date. Thirty-three aircraft scored good coverage of the target. One FW-190 made a tepid one-pass attack on the last airplane in the formation, without effect. One airplane was lost to flak. Pilot, 2nd Lt. Robert E. Weiss, 96th Squadron, flying airplane 43-32022, "Lonesome Polecat", failed to return to base. Observers reported that number 3 engine was feathered, number 4 was throwing oil, and the crew was not able to coax the bomber over the Yugoslavian mountains. They threw out all of the equipment they could, but when they still were not able to climb, all ten men bailed out near the town of Voskavina, Yugoslavia.<sup>4</sup> Lt. Weiss and six others evaded. The navigator, copilot, and upper turret gunner were captured. The two officers, 2nd Lts. Neil J. Coady, CP, and Edwin R. Bentley, N, were imprisoned in Stalag Luft III while T/Sgt. Roy E. Ford, UTG, was in Stalag Luft IV.

Upon his return, tailgunner T/Sgt. Ivan H. Foster, stated that after the bomb run, the engines were hit by flak; 3 and 4 were dead, 3 windmilling and could not be feathered. Number 2 was tearing itself off the wing. The order was given to bail out, which he did at 1,500 feet. He counted 9 chutes besides his own.<sup>5</sup>

### MISSION 194, MAY 7, 1944

BUCHAREST, ROMANIA

MARSHALLING YARDS

An excellent job of bombing the marshalling yards severely damaged tracks, destroyed



"Little Friend" P-51 from the 325th Fighter Group (Group Photo)





Capt. Jonas B. Weiss, standing right, 20th Squadron Armament Officer, examines flak helmet he developed. 2nd Lt. Robert L. Kehn, standing left, was wearing the helmet on mission 191 to Ploesti, May 4, 1944, when it was struck by a piece of flak. The helmet no doubt saved the pilot's life. (Group Photo)

rolling stock and hit important installations such as two locomotive depots, warehouses, shops and a fuel storage tank. The strike added to the woes of the Wehrmacht hard-pressed by the on-coming Russians. Opposition was light to moderate. Eight to ten fighters made some attacks before being driven away by the escort. Group gunners destroyed one and probably destroyed another FW-190.<sup>6</sup>

### MISSION 195, MAY 10, 1944 WIENER NEUSTADT, AUSTRIA AIRCRAFT FACTORY

Although previous raids had cut production of Me-109s considerably, the Germans were still showing remarkable recovery capability. Production was back to that of the Regensburg plant. The Fifteenth Air Force sent combined wings of B-17s and B-24s on this mission. Bombs had to be aimed and dropped through smoke-filled skies, making evaluation of results difficult. Available information showed a good concentration of the bombs and the 2nd's target area was judged to have been severely damaged.

The defensive flak batteries had been relocated since the last raid and the foe used them with intensity and accuracy. Every plane in the formation received some flak damage and four were badly hit, but none were brought down. Two men were slightly wounded and one severely.





2nd Lt. Benjamin H. Putschkoff, B, 96th Squadron, suffered a compound fracture of the upper right leg and a fracture of the fourth right rib.

A maximum of six Me-109s and FW-190s succeeded in getting to the formation. The outcome favored the Fortress guns. Two Me-109s were knocked down and one probably destroyed. Five fighter groups furnished escort which probably accounted for the poor showing of the Luftwaffe.<sup>7</sup>

### **MISSION 196, MAY 12, 1944**

CIVITAVECCHIA, ITALY, CHEMICAL FACTORY

### **MISSION 197, MAY 12, 1944**

MASSA D'ALBE, ITALY

GERMAN ARMY HEADQUARTERS

Word spread around the camp on May 11 that the bomb load for the 12th was two 2,000-pound and two 1,000-pound bombs. Excitement and anticipation rose over the portent for a very special mission. The excitement intensified when the crews learned at the 4:00 A.M. briefing they were to be given the rare privilege of bombing the German Army Headquarters, Italy, located in tunnels at Monte Sorate. The rare privilege evaporated. As one observer described it, the target was buried under a 12/10ths cloud cover from 3,000 to 15,000 feet. With one British and three U.S. correspondents along, Col Rice made a valiant effort to find a hole in the clouds, to no avail. He led the Group to the alternate at Civitavecchia where it dumped the heavy ordnance on the city and the chemical factory.

During the debriefing, the crews were informed that they would be briefed at 12:12 P.M. to try again. The second mission was very successful. Col Rice, leading again, found a hole in the clouds directly over the target, and the Group poured the blockbusters down the hole, scoring hits on the tunnel entrance, on shacks along the road to the entrance and on the mountain just above the shacks.<sup>8</sup>

The Intelligence Annex issued by 5th Wing the next day stated that the German Army Headquarters appeared to be seriously damaged if not destroyed.<sup>9</sup>

### **MISSION 198, MAY 13, 1944**

BOLZANO, ITALY, RAILROAD BRIDGE

### **MISSION 199, MAY 14, 1944**

FERRARA, ITALY, MARSHALLING YARDS

The brief concentration on Italian targets continued on May 13 and 14. The stalemates at Anzio and Cassino were destined to last for a few more days. On May 12 the Eighth Army made a very modest advance at Cassino following a heavy artillery barrage. The two northern Italy transportation targets were struck to inhibit resupply of German forces to the south. The objective at Bolzano was to drop the railroad bridge into the Iscaro river south of the marshalling yards. That didn't happen. A good string of bombs fell on the tracks, including a choke point, and a highway bridge adjacent to the railroad bridge was destroyed.<sup>10</sup>

There were 275 goods wagons in the main yards at Ferrara, and another 300 scattered in adjoining yards. The Group laid down a good pattern of bombs in the target area.<sup>11</sup> There was no noteworthy opposition on either of these missions.

On May 14, the Group received a commendation from Col. Lawrence, Commander, 5th Wing, for the fine work of the line crews for "keeping them flying," by the speed that battle-damaged airplanes were being returned to combat status.

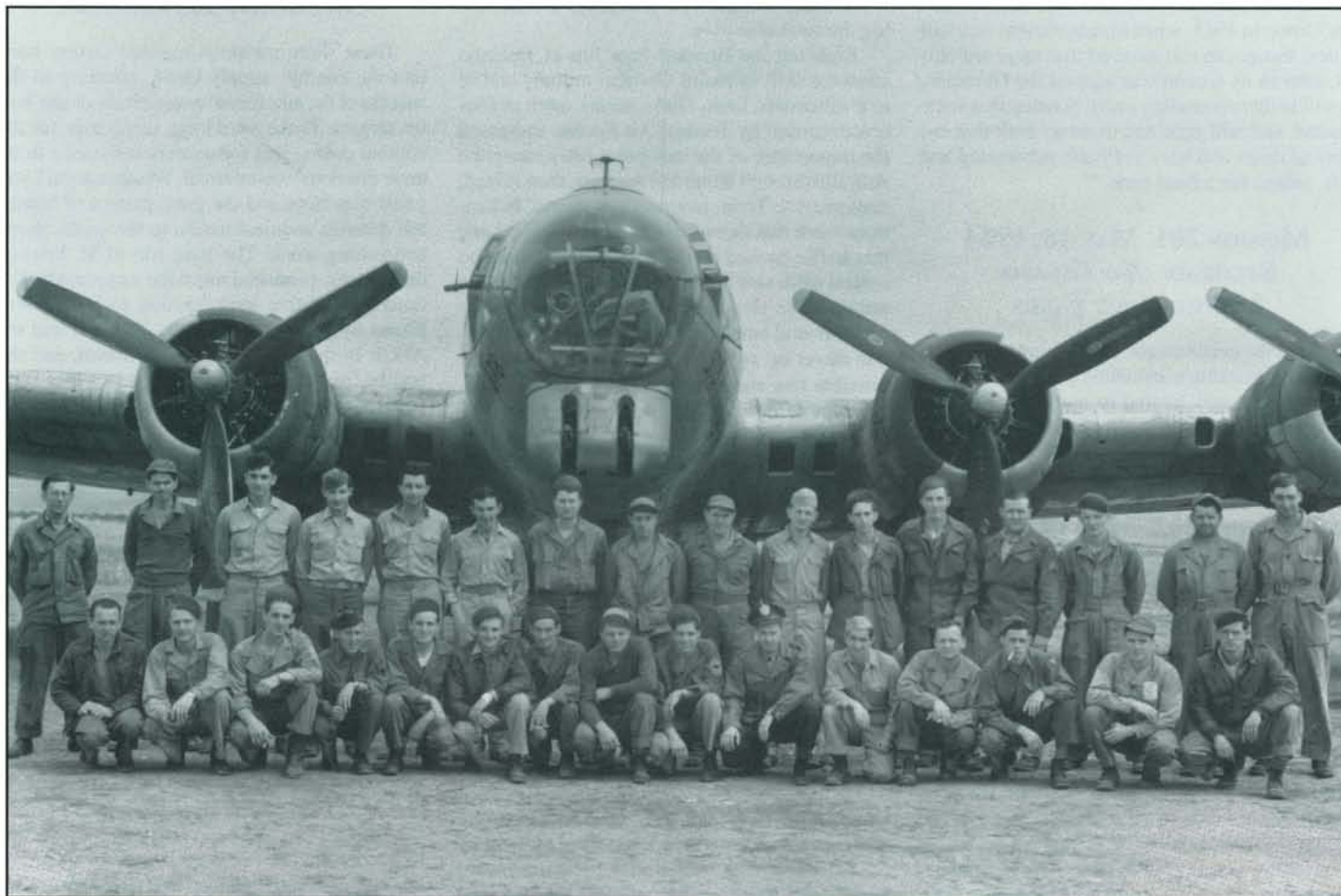
### **MISSION 200, MAY 17, 1944**

BIHAC, YUGOSLAVIA

GERMAN ARMY HEADQUARTERS

A landmark mission — the 200th for the Group since entering combat a little more than a year earlier. Once again, the target was a German Army Headquarters for their forces operating in Yugoslavia. The target, though undefended, was blanketed by 9/10ths cloud cover from 2,000 to 20,000 feet. Col. Rice circled the area and made two target runs before finding a "peep hole," into which the Group dropped its bombs with unobserved results. After interrogation, pictures were taken of all who participated in the mission.

The Group Historian recorded the passage of this milestone by writing, "From the campaign in North Africa, through Sicily, and up into Italy, this Group has dropped more than 12,500 tons



*Some of the men that "Kept 'em Flyin." (Group Photo)*





Refreshments all around at Red Cross coffee and doughnut "shop" after mission 200 to German Army Headquarters, Bihac, Yugoslavia, May 17, 1944. (Group Photo)

of bombs on enemy territory, and the gunners have accounted for 470 enemy aircraft, while the missions piled up from the novice first one to the veteran 200th. So the men who first formed the Group in 1918, when bombardment was still a new thing, can rest assured that their old outfit, now in its second war against the Germans, is still in there pounding away, blasting that same enemy, and will continue to do so until that enemy of theirs and ours, is finally pummeled and left beaten for a final time."<sup>12</sup>

### **MISSION 201, MAY 18, 1944** BELGRADE, YUGOSLAVIA MARSHALLING YARDS

After the celebrations, the Group was back at the job of attacking marshalling yards the next day. This mission was briefed to bomb the Romano American oil refinery at Ploesti, but the troublesome clouds could not be penetrated, so the marshalling yards at Belgrade were bombed by PFF.<sup>13</sup>

### **MISSION 202, MAY 19, 1944** RIMINI, ITALY, RAILROAD BRIDGES **MISSION 203, MAY 22, 1944** AVEZZANO, ITALY ENEMY TROOP CONCENTRATIONS **MISSION 204, MAY, 23, 1944** FERENTINO, ITALY, ROAD

After a grim stalemate of several months, Cassino fell to the Allies on May 18, and the Polish Volunteers raised their flag over the abbey ruins. Indications were that Allied forces would soon penetrate the Hitler and Gustav defense lines north of Cassino. The Anzio beachhead was inactive except for sporadic shelling.

These three missions were to further disrupt the enemy's lines of communication, beleaguer troop reinforcements and cut a main withdrawal route from Cassino. Results were meager, considering the total objective.

Breaking the Brenner Pass line at Bolzano caused a shift of major German military traffic to northeastern lines. Dislocations south of Florence, caused by Tactical Air Forces, increased the importance of the east coast lines along the Adriatic through Rimini to Ancona, then inland, southwest to Terni, just north of Rome. Indications were that these lines had been opened and that traffic backed up in the Italian northern and central yards was now being pushed through. The targets were clear and the Group unloaded its 1,000-pound bombs in the target area. There was one direct hit on the edge of one bridge, other possible hits and near misses on both bridges. Also some bombs fell directly on a highway bridge north of the railroad bridges. The enemy was also bombed with words as 100,000 leaflets were dropped.

Avezzano is in central Italy, east of Rome and on the road and railroad line between Rome and Sulmona. The opportunity to make a timely strike against enemy forces and to aid Allied forces battling the enemy along the Cassino front to the south, was taken away by dark cloud cover. Maj. James G. Ellis, Commander, 20th Squadron, and the Group lead, made several runs over the target, all in vain, except that 10,000 propaganda leaflets were dropped. Of the 36 airplanes on the mission, 32 returned their bombs to base. Three joined the 97th Bomb Group and dropped their bombs, with unobserved results. One other plane bombed a highway at Pescara, Italy.<sup>14</sup>

Ferentino was on the main route northward used by the Axis to withdraw from Cassino. The formation spent forty minutes in a fruitless search

for an opportunity to bomb the target before giving in to the inevitable and returning to base. The Group did continue the war of words as 54,000 leaflets (Luftpost Number Four) and packets of I-1 Mese, a digest style magazine, were released.<sup>15</sup>

### **MISSION 205, MAY 24, 1944** ATZGERDORF, AUSTRIA, AIRCRAFT FACTORY

This factory was one of the "musts" on the target list, after Weiner Neustadt was stricken from the priority list, following the success of the latest strikes. The main activity at Atzgerdorf was aircraft spare parts and repairs, which had shown much increase in activity. The plant was about six miles from the center of Vienna. PFF was used and observation through three holes in clouds indicated that bombs dropped slightly to the left of target. Fifteen to twenty enemy fighters were sighted, but the P-51 escort kept them away from the bombers. Flak struck 19 of the 32 planes and slightly wounded four men.<sup>16</sup>

### **MISSION 206, MAY 25, 1944** LYON, FRANCE VENISSIEUX MARSHALLING YARDS **MISSION 207, MAY 26, 1944** ST. ETIENNE, FRANCE MARSHALLING YARDS **MISSION 208, MAY 27, 1944** AVIGNON, FRANCE LOCOMOTIVE REPAIR SHOPS

These three missions reached farther back into the enemy supply chain, attesting to the success of the air offensive against the closer Italian targets. These were long, tiring trips for the combat crews, and fortunately resistance to all three missions was minimal. Weather at the Lyon yards was clear and the good pattern of bombs left damage and destruction to the yards, shops and rolling stock. The long trip to St. Etienne the next day produced much the same result. The third consecutive long mission to France was jinxed by mechanical failure. The PDI and the AFCE in the lead ship malfunctioned, and the bombs from three squadrons fell in a nice tight pattern — off target! One squadron did get part of its bombs on target.<sup>17</sup>

On mission 207, airplane 42-39999, piloted by 2nd Lt. Frederick L. Tompkins, 429th Squadron, left the formation and did not return to base. Tompkins told what happened: "On the mission to St. Etienne, France, we were approximately 60 to 70 miles inland on course to the target, when an instantaneous explosion completely set the cabin on fire. We turned away from the formation immediately. The heat was so intense that it appeared we must leave the plane. The copilot asked me if he could, I told him to go, and the other three men followed him out. (Note: The three others were the bombardier, navigator, and upper turret gunner, all in the forward part of the plane.) I then picked up a reciprocal heading for Corsica. The plane was filled with smoke and flying debris. The fire was apparently caused by an explosion of oxygen, oil and electrical sparks. The boys emptied two CO-2 bottles on the fire



before they bailed out, but that did no apparent good. The fire was spreading, and I switched the plane on automatic pilot, then threw out burning flak suits and cushions. The cartridge belts were exploding and throwing tracers, incendiaries, and powder all over the cockpit and cabin. The smoke was so thick at times that I could not see the instrument panel, and I had all four cockpit windows open as well as holding my oxygen hose out the window so I could breathe. Up to this time, it had been impossible to establish contact with the boys in the waist, since my interphone was burned up. When 125 miles from Corsica, I attempted to establish contact by VHF radio. The radio operator had his jackbox switched to command, and he told me they were back there. Up to that time, I thought I was alone. The radio operator then set up an interphone system through the liaison transmitter and receiver, and I was able to contact the men in the waist. He then came forward and extinguished part of the blaze on the walls of the cabin and floor with his canteen of water and another bottle of CO-2. My windows were completely covered with cordite smoke from exploding cartridges and I could not see unless I stuck my head out the window into the slipstream. By this time, the radio operator, S/Sgt. Elmer R. Cutsinger, was in the cockpit with me, and was helping maintain a steady contact with the radar station on Corsica. When approximately 10 minutes from Corsica, the fire, which had burned for 45 to 50 minutes, was finally completely out. When the fire started, we were at 21,000 feet, and my oxygen system went out. We dove the plane to 17,000 feet and maintained that altitude until we left the coast of France, at which time I descended to 12,000 feet as rapidly as possible since I was nearly unconscious from lack of oxygen. That is when I switched the plane to automatic pilot, and got down on the catwalk to throw out what burning articles I could, among which were flak suits, cushions, and clothing. The radio operator had then come forward to help me as much as possible. Without his help, I doubt I could have brought the ship in. We reached Corsica and made an approach for landing. Due to the fact I could not see very well, I over-shot my landing, and when I did land my hydraulic system was out and I had no brakes, so to keep from running into a 30 foot ditch, I ground looped the plane at 65 or 70 MPH. That was the end of it all, and we all got out of the ship. I think that my crew deserves great recognition for the fact that they did not bail out when they saw the other chutes open."<sup>18</sup>

Those who bailed out over southern France were: 2nd Lt. Earl E. Rodenburg, CP, who became a POW; 2nd Lt. Fred E. Letz, N, who was returned; 2nd Lt. Paul H. Smith, B, listed as KIA; and S/Sgt. Harold L. Bolick, UTG, who evaded and returned.

Those who stayed with the airplane along with Tomkins and Cutsinger, were: Sgt. Robert C. Framm, LTG; Sgt. Carl F. Merkle, RWG; Sgt. Robert O. Butts, Jr., LWG; and Sgt. Joseph A. Jordan, TG. One of the returned crew members was told by the Partisans that Lt. Smith was found dead. Presumably, his chute did not open properly. A report from the Mediterranean Theater of Operations, Graves Registration Command, dated September 26, 1946, states that Lt.

Smith was interred in the U.S. Military cemetery, Mirandola, Italy, and that he was positively identified by one dog tag found on the body.<sup>19</sup>

S/Sgt. Harold L. Bolick evaded and fought with the Italian Partisans for over eleven months. The fire aboard the airplane started the ammunition supply for the upper turret to exploding, and shell fragments wounded one of Bolick's hands. The leg of his coveralls was also smoldering when he bailed out. Bolick describes what happened to him after bailout: "My greasy overalls had caught a spark on one leg, and the cloth was smoking. After my parachute opened, I beat out the sparks. After landing, I washed my face in the snow to remove blood and used the first aid kit to bandage my hand, where the exploding 50 cal. shell had hit me with a fragment. In about four hours friendly Italians arrived, fed me and took me to where I met the navigator, Fred E. Letz. After dark we were taken to the Partisans. We stayed there eleven days, while one of the Partisans went to the American mission in France to get instructions. He brought back word . . . we were to stay where we were, as there was no evacuation from southern France at the time. We were then transferred (by walking 13 hours) to another Partisan band, where we could sleep in a house and get medical attention. There a doctor removed the bullet fragment from my hand.

We stayed there three months. The Partisans organized a band of 2,000, took over the towns in the valley of (illegible, but in the Turin area), and held or raided the surrounding country. After the invasion of southern France, Germans wanted to open a road in full force and with full equipment, through the Partisan-held area between northern Italy and southern France, promising they would go through quietly without attacking. The Partisans refused. The Germans then attacked, and the Partisans held the line for four days. Then the Germans broke through and the Partisans, and I, retreated three days into the mountains. The Germans burned out the valley and opened the road, allowing their trapped units (25,000 men) in south France to retreat east. In the fighting 356 Germans were killed and 100 Italians and 15 French Partisans killed. All of this time I was one of the Partisans. For three weeks the Partisans laid low. The frontier was mined, and Germans patrolling with binoculars, were all around. I then went to a place where I had heard of an English mission. The next day Lt. Letz followed, being crowded close by a patrol. Lt. Letz and I stayed with the mission for ten days, the officer in charge was killed in an auto wreck and 2 others arrived to run the mission. Several other American and British escapers and evaders joined. After several weeks, another British mission (Captain Irving-Bell) arrived. Partisans had built up a strength of 1,500 by this time. The British mission was warned to go up into the mountains, as the drop (mission was parachuted in) had been in daylight. They left at midnight. I wanted some British clothes (I was in civilian clothes) and the British captain (Irving-Bell) wanted to destroy some radio equipment, so the two of us stayed and started up to the dropping ground. (They heard rifle fire behind them) . . . , as the Germans advanced and the Partisans retreated. We got to the dropping ground, accomplished our business, and went on

around to Fontana, where we were to meet the rest of the mission. (Bolick did not see Lt. Letz again.) Fontana was occupied by Republicans and Germans, who saw us, and chased us on skis, keeping us moving for two weeks. We then got back to Fontana, as no alternate meeting place had been set up. We found that the mission, a total of 12 British, had been captured. The Amerians has been sent away just previously. We went to another mission, picked up a radio operator, and went to the Captain's mission. Here they organized four Partisan bands and armed 22,000 men. During that time, the Captain (Irving-Bell) was captured and taken to Turin. I tried, through the operator (radio), to get another officer, in the meantime (2 1/2 months) running the mission myself. During this time there were three attempts by the Germans and the Republicans to clean-up, but the Partisans kept them away. The Major (V. R. Johnson, British) arrived . . . When orders arrived from Gen. Clark, the partisans captured the entire region, from the French frontier to the 5th Army front."

Bolick then went to Savona, which was the Partisan Headquarters and was there when the American Fifth Army advance party arrived. He returned to Fifteenth Air Force Headquarters at Bari through military channels May 6, 1945. He had bailed out May 26, 1944.

Major V. R. Johnson, British Military Mission, Western Liguria, wrote in part about S/Sgt. Bolick: " . . . he rendered himself invaluable to the British Mission with which he served. Several times he attempted to cross the French frontier, but failed, he therefore decided to continue his duty by fighting side by side with Italian Partisan formations. . . he . . . remained with Captain Irving-Bell, No. 1 Special Force, for over three months. On my arrival . . . he was practically running the mission and offered his services which were accepted very gladly. He . . . accompanied me in all my travels, during an ambush he behaved splendidly and soon put the enemy to flight."

"I sincerely hope that the American Army will recognize his service, and give him a well-deserved reward."<sup>20</sup> S/Sgt. Bolick was among those awarded the Distinguished Flying Cross in June, 1944, after he started his long ordeal with the Italian partisans.

## MISSION 209, MAY 29, 1944 WOLLERSDORF, AUSTRIA, AIRDROME

This airdrome served as the departure point for newly assembled fighters from the Weiner Neustadt complex. Wollersdorf also had excellent facilities for aircraft salvage and repair and was being used for refitting Ju-88s. The whole Wiener Neustadt area was blasted by the Fifteenth Air Force, with the 2nd being assigned the airdrome. Incendiaries were used. The target was fairly well covered, but incendiaries always created their own impairment to observation, so exact results were difficult to determine. Several fires were started.<sup>21</sup>

Group personnel were entertained during the month in the Cave Theater by regular movies, a USO show, and an Italian stage show of singing, dancing, and juggling. A band from the all-negro 907th Air Base Security Company enter-





Generals pose with ladies from USO show. From left, General Born, Mary Brian, Betty Eaton, General Twining. Lieutenant Colonel Ryan grins in the background. (Group Photo)



A squadron mess hall at Amendola. (Group Photo)

tained at the NCO Club. Saturday night parties and dances were a recurring feature at the Officers Club.

On May 28, Special Services ushered in a new service called "Bus to the Beach." A truckload of swimmers was taken to the beach at Manfredonia in what was hoped to be a regular summer activity. The excursionists reported the water was a little chilly and bemoaned the lack of bathing beauties.

The 2nd also endured an invasion during the month of May. Not by armed troops, but by hordes of grasshoppers. They were not the U.S. hopping, flying variety. Rather they were small brown creatures that tended to stay close to the ground and devoured everything in their path. Battles raged throughout the area against the pests, until near the end of the month, when they were finally defeated.

New and crew replacement personnel arrived steadily during the month.

The Group was commended as a result of the Medical Corps' annual sanitation inspection of mess halls, kitchens, garbage areas, latrines, campsite, water disposal and general policing around mess facilities. The commendation stated that the Group "... ranks foremost among all Groups of the Wing. . . ." <sup>22</sup>

#### Endnotes:

<sup>1</sup> Rust, 23

<sup>2</sup> McCoid, *Group History*, 447, 448, 451-459, 471, 476, 486

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 451, 452

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 453, 454

<sup>5</sup> Richards, *Missing Crew Report*

<sup>6</sup> McCoid, 455, 456

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 457-459

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 460, 461

<sup>9</sup> *Mission Report*

<sup>10</sup> McCoid, *Group History*, 462, 463

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 464

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 467

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 468

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 473

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 474

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 475; *Mission Report*

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 476-478; *Mission Report*

<sup>18</sup> 429th Squadron History, (AFHRA, Maxwell AFB, AL) microfilm reel, A0613, fr. 139-141

<sup>19</sup> Richards *Missing Crew Report*

<sup>20</sup> Harold L. Bolick, *Escape Statement*, May 12, 1945

<sup>21</sup> McCoid, *Group History*, 481; *Mission Report*

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, *May History Narrative*

## JUNE 1944

The last of May and the first week in June 1944 were momentous days in the liberation of Europe from the Nazis. In Italy, the Allies breached the German defenses at Cassino on May 18, broke out of the Anzio beachhead May 23rd, and with the German 10th Army in retreat, triumphantly entered the open city of Rome on June 4. Two days later the world's attention was riveted to the news of the greatest invasion in military history—the Allied landings at Normandy. Operation OVERLORD set in motion the forces that would bring the war in Europe to a close. The men of the 2nd Bomb Group were cheered and heartened by this news. Although OVERLORD over-shadowed the war news, a notable event in the annals of the 2nd Bomb Group was about to unfold.

While most other heavy bomber groups of the Fifteenth Air Force were out on sorties during the last two days in May, the 2nd stood down in perfectly good weather. Unexplained official and unofficial meetings took place. Rumors were rife and speculation spread through the camp like wildfire.

## OPERATION FRANTIC

Army Air Force leaders had long been attracted to the idea of using shuttle missions to reach distant targets. As Germany relocated more of its industry in eastern Europe, the idea of reaching these targets by shuttling to and from bases in Russia became more appealing. The proposal had other justification and benefits. The American air commanders were anxious to show off the prowess of strategic bombing to the Soviets and to demonstrate commitment to a co-operative war effort. Longer range, American leaders saw shuttle missions in the European war as a stepping stone to use of Siberian bases in the war against Japan.

In October 1943, General Arnold secured CCS approval for inclusion of the shuttle-bombing proposal as one objective of the new U.S. military mission being established in Moscow. The proposal found Soviet military officials initially unresponsive. Later, Russian Foreign Minister V. M. Molotov made known Soviet approval in principle. Even that and Stalin's apparent assent at the Tehran Conference in December with Roosevelt and Churchill didn't translate into prompt action. Finally, on February 2, 1944, Ambassador Averill Harriman got Stalin's approval for six bases for shuttle missions. That number later dwindled down to three: Poltava, Mirgorod, and Piryatin, all near Kiev in the Ukraine. They were farther east than U.S. air commanders preferred.<sup>1</sup>

Work went ahead to prepare and stockpile the bases. Supplies and materials had to be brought over long distances by convoy through Murmansk, and the Persian Gulf Command. The





Americans were frustrated over the ponderous Soviet bureaucracy, and differences arose over the number of support personnel that could be brought in, who would control operations communications, and target selection. By the end of May the bases were at last operational. The Eighth Air Force was busy with preparations for OVERLORD, so the Fifteenth was given the nod for the first shuttle missions. The operation was code named FRANTIC.<sup>2</sup>

On May 3, 1944, the following notification was sent from General Spaatz to General Twining:

Subject: Shuttle Bombing Operations to Russia.

To: Commanding General, 15th Air Force, APO 520 US Army (Thru Commanding General MAAF)

1. You have been provided with a letter from the US Strategic Air Forces in Europe, subject "Shuttle Bombing Operation Utilizing Bases in Russia" date 28 April, 1944. This letter outlines the planned installations and logistic support for those operations.

2. Although paragraph 6 of this letter indicates that the initial operation will be made from the U.K., I believe that the OVERLORD situation may make it essential that the first operation be conducted by a combat wing of the 15th Air Force.

3. In accordance with our conversations on this subject, I wish you would make plans to move a combat wing of approximately 150 heavy bombers and one group of fighters to the Russian bases early in June. The actual timing of this operation will depend upon the state of completion of the air bases in Russia, and your own local commitments.

4. Upon arrival at the Russian bases, desire that the combat wing be prepared to make several attacks against the German aircraft industry in the Posen area. It is assumed that the 15th Air Force has complete target folders covering these targets. If not, send to this headquarters a request that they may be provided to you.

5. I will obtain from the Russian Government their desires as to the targets to be hit en route to Russia.

6. The necessity for the full utilization of the Russian facilities provided is well known to you, as well as the necessity for fullest cooperation with the Russians during FRANTIC operations to assist them by attacking targets of their selection. To achieve this end, at least one additional strategic target should be selected by the Russians in addition to their selection of the target for the first shuttle operation.

7. This headquarters will keep you fully informed as to the status of arrangements in

Russia, to include command setup at Poltava area, our headquarters setup in Moscow, and all further developments in our negotiations and preparations.

Carl Spaatz  
Lieutenant General USA  
Commanding<sup>3</sup>

As could be expected in an organization of high morale, every commander, every combat crew member, and every fighter pilot in the Fifteenth Air Force wanted to be selected to go on the "secret mission" as it came to be called. They all knew that something big was in the works, but very few knew what it was. The secret was well-kept.

Gen. Twining decided to use B-17s of the 5th Wing for the job, and four groups were selected for FRANTIC: the 2nd, 97th, 99th, and one of the new groups, the 483rd. These four groups would provide 130 B-17s. The 325th Fighter Group would provide 70 P-51s for escort. A total of 200 airplanes would fly the 1,200 mile mission, bomb a target on the way, and land at airfields in the Ukraine some distance behind the German-Russian front. Two groups of B-17s would land at Poltava, and the other two B-17 groups, including the 2nd, at Mirgorod. The P-51s were directed to land at Piryatin. The three fields were in a line 50 miles apart east of the Dnieper River. Each bomber carried extra people





*Russian Shuttle Mission Group Lead Crew. Standing L to R: S/Sgt. J.W. McCrary, RWG; Col. H.E. Rice; T/Sgt. J.W. Edwards, ROG; S/Sgt. V.H. Brady, TG; T/Sgt. J.B. Null, UTG. Front L to R: Lt. R.N. Burks, CP; Lt. J.S. Stewart, N; Lt. Joseph Shuber, B; and Lt. S.W. Beerli, Radar N. (Courtesy of J. Stewart)*



*Chow line at Mirgorod. Russian female soldiers do the serving. Crews were billeted in old girl's school. (Courtesy of J. Stewart)*

on the trip to the Russian bases — staff personnel, including intelligence, medical and weather people, and B-17 and P-51 ground maintenance crew chiefs. Crew chiefs for the P-51s were brought to the bomber bases the day before the mission, not knowing until the next morning, the purpose for this unusual move. These ground men would be going on a combat mission for the first time. Several Allied war correspondents and newsreel photographers wanted to be included, and some were.

Further, the bombers had to transport baggage, tools, spare parts and quite a large number of external wing tanks for the P-51s to use on flights from Russian territory. The bomb load were reduced to ten 500-pounders to accommodate the extra cargo.

### THE RECONNAISSANCE MISSIONS

On May 24, two F-5 aircraft (P-38s with all guns, and all excess weight removed and cam-

eras installed) departed from England and flew the first mission to Russia to take target pictures. The pilot leading this flight was Colonel Paul T. Cullen, later to become commander of the 2nd. He and his wing man flew over the targets to be bombed on the shuttle missions, and flew once from the Russian base for the same purpose. The two pilots, in their light, powerful planes, had no trouble keeping away from the German fighters, but soon after they penetrated Russian air space, all radio contact with them was lost, which caused great worry to General Spaatz's headquarters until a message was received May 26 that they had arrived safely.<sup>4</sup>

### MISSION 210, JUNE 2, 1944

DEBRECEN, HUNGARY, MARSHALLING YARDS

Great secrecy surrounded Operation FRANTIC up to the last moment. Secret meetings had been held, with armed guards at the doors. Combat crews going on the mission had been partially briefed, but instructed to talk to no one about what they had been told. Gens. Eaker and Twining, and Col. Lawrence dined at the officer's club the night before the mission. The mission briefing started at 03:00 the morning of June 2. The crews learned that the target was the Debrecen marshalling yards and the name of the field where they would land and stay for several days in Russia. Col. Rice, led the Group's 33 airplanes. No early returns on this one. The Group rendezvoused with the other three B-17 groups, and headed northeastward.<sup>5</sup> Gens. Eaker and Twining led the bomber force. General Eaker flew with the 97th Bomb Group. He had led the 97th on the first American heavy bomber attack from England against the enemy almost two years before.<sup>6</sup>

The P-51 escort rendezvoused on schedule, and the bomber force struck the target with good coverage, then flew east to their landing places. Although they encountered bad weather about fifty miles from their destinations, all planes landed safely. When the 2nd landed at Mirgorod, it was greeted by Russians with flowers and none other than Lt. Col. John Ryan, Deputy Group Commander, and Lt. Kelly, a bombardier. These two had been mysteriously missing from Amendola, and had been in Russia for a week. After interrogation, the crews were transported to their quarters and their ten-day sojourn in Russia began.

Lt. Johnson, of the 96th Squadron was found to need emergency surgery, and Major Beal, Group Flight Surgeon performed what was probably the first appendectomy on an American officer on Russian soil.

Col. Rice was invited to dinner with the Russian General. Upon returning, he reported that the food was excellent - roast goose and plenty of vodka. In the meantime, pleasant Russian women served GI rations to the other officers and enlisted men. These men were more taken by their buxom servers than by the food.

### A MEMORY

James S. (JEB) Stewart was 2nd Bomb Group lead navigator during the Russian shuttle missions and he relates some of his memories from



that time. "On the mission over, each crew carried one ground person. We had the weather man. In weather briefings, he often closed with the phrase 'there will be nothing to interfere.' This he did in the briefing for the shuttle mission. As we approached Russia, the clouds got thicker and lower. We finally got under the clouds a few hundred feet off the ground and found our way to Mirgorod. We enjoyed pointing out to the weather man that this was the 'nothing to interfere' that he was always forecasting.

The crews were repeatedly warned to be on good behavior, and stay away from vodka. The Group officers were billeted in a room in an old girl's school in which had been placed a large vase of peonies. The Colonel and a few other senior officers were invited to a reception by the Russian Commanding General. About daylight, I turned over and my cheek hit something wet. I raised up and looked all around the room. All of the others lay with their arms crossed and a big peony stuck between their hands. The Colonel had come in after too many vodka toasts and decided we were all not long for this world, so he wanted us properly 'laid out.' Incidentally, we didn't hear any more about drinking vodka after that.

We were met at the plane with big bunches of peonies. Such an embarrassed bunch of GIs, standing around with an arm full of flowers being photographed for the news media.

The Russians had fresh potatoes, and were they good after months of dried food! Two GIs were half-heartedly trying to pick up a big can of boiled potatoes, when a big Russian WAC shouldered them out of the way, picked up the can and set it on the table like it was a four quart boiler. You didn't get smart with those Russian women.

They put up a temporary shower by the river. It was enclosed on three sides, but left open on the side facing the path. It was amazing how many Russian women had business along that path while the boys were showering.

We were scheduled to fly at least one mission in support of the Russian forces before returning to Italy. However, we sat on the ground for a couple of pretty days because the target was cloud-covered, then when the target opened up, the weather was bad at Mirgorod, and we were able to fly the mission. The Russians thought we were nuts to sit on the ground in pretty weather, then fly when it was bad.

While on the mission to Galatz from Mirgorod, we heard over the BBC that it was D-day."

June 3, 4, and 5 were non-operational days. The absence of operations allowed time to establish and maintain the daily routine. The Operations, Intelligence and Personnel Sections set up offices in a tent. M/Sgt. Donald Smith, S/Sgt. Joseph Wilder, S/Sgt. George Schmeelk and Sgt. Robert Stout typed procedures for operations in the future. Electric lights and a telephone were installed. For desks they had to barrow tables from the mess hall. The Group Photo Officer, Capt. Paul Collins was sent to Poltava, where Gens. Eaker and Twining were located, to arrange for development of mission strike photos. Cols. Rice and Burton, Commander of the 483rd Group, flew to Poltava to consult with the Gen-



*This Fort found a soft spot at Mirgorod. An unplanned maintenance task. (Courtesy of J. Stewart)*



*Russian soldiers unload 500 pound demolition bombs during Russian shuttle mission to Mirgorod, the Ukraine, June 1944. (Group Photo)*



*Col. Rice listens closely to Russian "Girl Friday," interpreter. She said anything we could do, she or some other Russian, could do better. (Courtesy of J. Stewart)*

erals about operations. This attention to operating routine was preparation, in part, for the Eighth Air Force shuttle missions yet to be flown from England.

On June 4 Gen. Eaker and a group of newspaper men and photographers visited the quarters, hospital, and mess hall used by the 2nd

Bomb Group. Col. Rice accompanied Gen. Eaker back to Poltava to get the Operations Order for the next day's mission. At 6:00 P.M. the first mission briefing on Russian soil was held with Russian officers and their interpreters in attendance. The briefing made a favorable impression on the Russian hosts.





Conference in front of Group lead airplane. L to R: Reynolds Packard, War Correspondent; Lt. J.S. Stewart, lead navigator; Col. Rice. Officers to right not identified. (Courtesy of J. Stewart)

Foreign correspondents representing British, American and Russian newspapers flew in from Moscow and stopped briefly with the Group. One of the correspondents, Eddie Gilmore, of the Associated Press, declared, "Your visit to Russia is the biggest single event that has happened during the entire war." It was an event that had great potential, but it didn't grow into the potential envisioned, or fulfill the lofty acclaim attributed to it by Gilmore. At least one event to bolster the importance of the visit was delayed when a teletype was received at 07:30 canceling the mission for the next day. This gave the men time to rest, see the sights, and write letters home from Russia. Many went to town, and were soon strolling arm in arm with fair Russian maidens through the parks and along the creek banks. There appeared to be three women for every man because so many of the Russian men were away at war. The Russian women commonly performed tasks considered man's work by the Americans, and for this reason, they tended to be sturdy, and plain, and for unknown reasons, uncommonly buxom. Following the experience on the shuttle mission, crew references to the Russian front frequently took on a double meaning.

On June 5, the third non-operational day, orders were received that the return trip to Italy would be made the next day. Bags were packed and loaded on the planes. The mission briefing was held and formal good-byes made, only to have the mission canceled. In place of a return mission it was decided that a mission would be flown from the Russian bases with the return to the same bases.

### MISSION 211, JUNE 6, 1944 GALATZ, RUMANIA, AIRDROME

Col. Rice led the Group. All went well, and all crews returned to their base at Mirgorod. Strike photos showed a good concentration of bombs on the target, which was particularly important because of the Russian's keen interest in the results. The administrative sections worked feverishly to complete all the records of the mission. That evening several Group officers attended a Russian pageant at the community municipal theater. There was much jubilation when word was received of the Normandy landings and the long-awaited opening of the second front.

Weather took supremacy over operations for several more days and crews became bored over the lack of mission activity. There were some diversions and the Russians took every opportunity to be gracious hosts. Several officers accompanied Russian officers on a inspection tour of Russian fighter planes. While living standards for most Ukrainians were primitive compared to those of the U.S., the aircraft the officers examined — the IL-2, the Stormovik, the Yaf-7 and the LA-5 — were refined in design and construction.

Russian officers flew in from Moscow to inspect the 2nd's base. One day Capt. Walter H. Simmons and Russell H. Bradshaw, Assistant Group Intelligence Officers, boarded the Russian courier plane for Poltava, and experienced the Russian approach to takeoffs. Little time was wasted on preliminaries, like engine warm up and check out. As soon as the two men were aboard the C-47, the Russian pilot made a rolling turn onto the runway, and without further ado, took off. At Poltava they met former 2nd Bomb Group Commander, Col. Lauer, who was now Commander of the 99th Bomb Group.

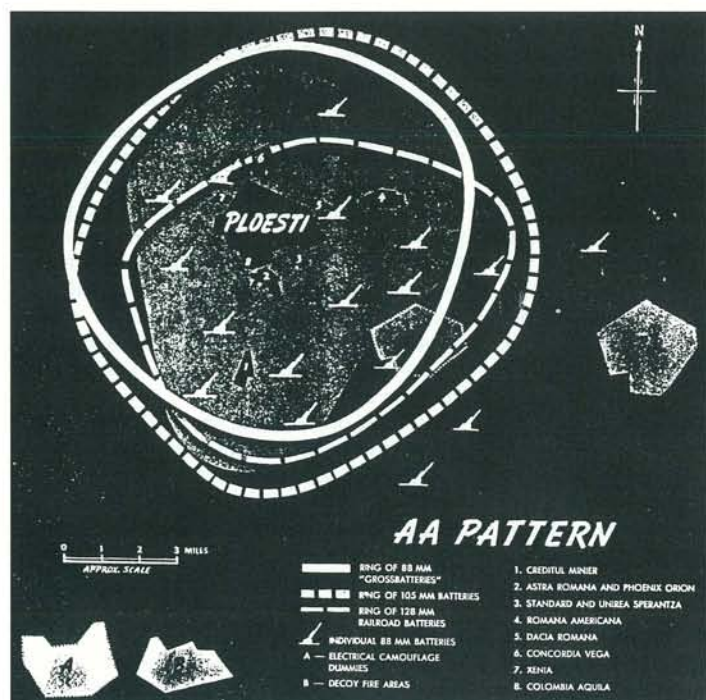
At one point the men of the 2nd challenged the 483rd to a softball game and were trounced 6 to 0. Some Russians watched the game with amusement.

Despite the American-Russian camaraderie, M/Sgt. Bernie Cohen, 20th Squadron line chief, was suspicious of the "guards" assigned by the Russians, one to each B-17. He found they knew much more about engineering than a guard should. He suspected they were planted to find out as much as possible about the big planes.

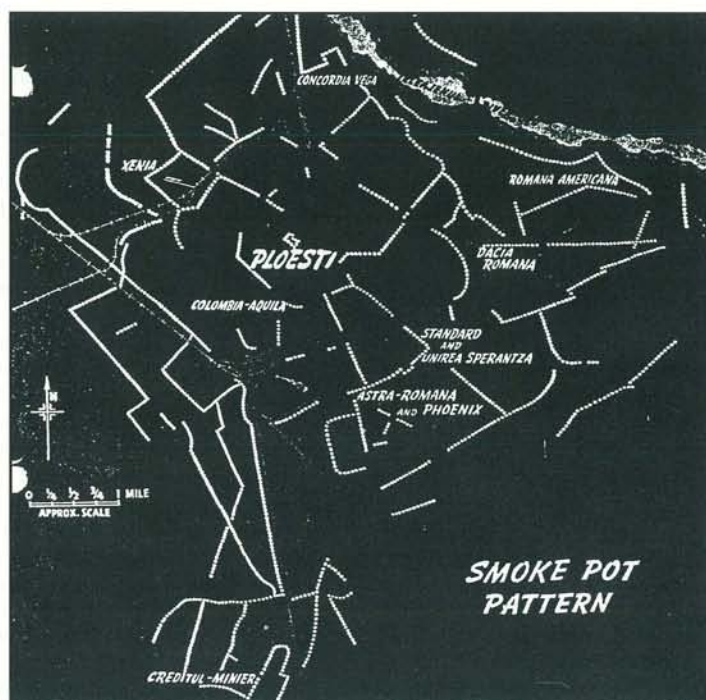
The extra days off afforded time to get acquainted with the town of Mirgorod. Before the war it was noted for its mineral springs and a modern sanitarium, which had been built in the middle of a wooded park. During the German occupation, a German commandant made his headquarters in the sanitarium. When the Germans retreated, they demolished the structure. Outside, in the park, there was a brick wall with a gaping hole in the center. It was here that some captured Germans were executed after the Russians re-took the town. A Russian hospital on the main street of the town was filled with wounded Russian soldiers evacuated from the front. A huge situation map was mounted in the center of town where the Russian army front line was kept up-to-date. One afternoon the Russians put on a special performance in the community theater for the benefit of the Americans. At 4:00 P.M., the theater was filled. Several Russian officers occupied the front row. Before each scene a Russian would explain what was to follow, and an American sergeant, who spoke Russian, translated. The program included singing, dancing, dramatic skits, and even a 64-year-old slack wire aerialist. The Russian chorus, of about 30 men and women, was especially fine. They sang native Ukrainian songs and performed the acrobatic dances in their colorful native costumes. Lt. Col. Ainsworth expressed appreciation on behalf of the assembled Americans.

On June 10 the order was received for the return shuttle mission to Italy. The mission briefing was held at 08:00 P.M. Again, Russian of-





AA Pattern map shows the relationship of main Ploesti defenses to approximate bomb release line. Source: Impact, Vol. 2, No. 12, Dec. 1944, P. 53.



Each dot on the Smoke Pot Pattern map is a separate smoke generator consisting of pressure tank, smoke tank, nozzle. Source: Impact, Vol. 2, No. 12, Dec. 1944, P. 51.

ficers attended, and Maia, an attractive Russian female soldier and interpreter from Moscow, interpreted the proceedings, as she had done throughout the stay. The planes were loaded that night for the early morning departure.

### MISSION 212, JUNE 11, 1944 FOCSANI, RUMANIA, AIRDROME

#### RETURN TO AMENDOLA

Wake up call came at 04:15 for the return shuttle mission. The 2nd Bomb Group led the 5th Wing Task Force against the Focsani airdrome near Bucharest, then on the return leg to Italy. Bombs were away at 10:15 but accuracy was fifty-fifty — half the bombs on the target and half over. Flak at the target was both of the tracking and barrage type. It was heavy, light in intensity and fairly accurate. Twelve airplanes received damage, four severe. Six to ten Me-109s and FW-190s were seen, but the P-51 escort, riding shotgun, kept them away from the 2nd. One B-17 from the 97th straggled with an engine out, was attacked by 3 to 5 Me-109s and went down at 08:40 from 19,000 feet. Four chutes were seen. One P-51 pilot was seen to bailout over the Adriatic at 11:50, from 10,000 feet. The Group arrived safely back at Amendola at 02:00 P.M., except for Lt. Col. Ainsworth, flying the deputy group lead. He had engine trouble, and returned to Mirgorod. After the airplane was repaired, he had to take the long way home through Cairo.<sup>8</sup>

With intelligence and other staff officers aboard as observers, the mission yielded considerable visual intelligence about marshalling yards, movement of rolling stock, barge traffic on the Danube, and airdromes. Smoke pots were observed in operation at Ploesti and Bucharest.<sup>9</sup>

### SHUTTLE DISASTER

Although the Fifteenth Air Force FRANTIC I Task Force had a good reception, and a rather pleasant stay in Russia, the Eighth Air Force met with catastrophe when it flew to the same Russian bases June 21 on its first shuttle mission. The shuttle task force included 114 B-17s and 70 P-51s. Unknown to the Americans, a German He-177 followed the Fortresses to Poltava. Shortly after midnight a large force of German bombers and fighters attacked Poltava. They illuminated the field with flares, exposing the vulnerable B-17s and proceeded to wreak havoc with the American bombers, the field and supplies. They dropped 110 tons of demolition, incendiary, and fragmentation bombs, and the fighters made low level strafing runs and scattered deadly antipersonnel bombs. Forty-three B-17s were destroyed and twenty-six damaged. Fifteen P-51s and miscellaneous Russian airplanes were also destroyed. The American ammunition dump was set ablaze as was 450,000 gallons of fuel that had been so laboriously brought in. Only one American was killed, but the Russians, who refused to let the Americans risk their lives, insisted on fighting the fires alone, and suffered 25 fatalities. Not a single German attacker was shot down.

The GAF returned the following night to attack Mirgorod and Piryatin. They couldn't locate the latter and the B-17's had been flown out of Mirgorod before the raid. The Americans and Russians were careful not to engage in recriminations, and worked hard to repair the damage, and shore up defenses. A few other shuttle missions were flown in July, and August, but none by Fifteenth heavy bombers. The last shuttle mission was flown by the Eighth to Russia September 11, with the return mission on September 13. The shuttle concept never recovered from the disaster of June 21/22.<sup>10</sup>

While most of the Group combat crews were away, those at the base were able to catch up on much needed rest and recuperation. Many were sent to rest camps, and others were able to leave the confines of the camp for a few days on passes. They were ready to welcome the returning crews, and get back into the busy routine of hastening the end to the war.

The assault against enemy oil resources was resumed and was given impetus by Gen. Spaatz's order of June 8, making it the priority strategic target. The Group flew 9 missions during the remainder of June — 6 to oil refineries and storage facilities, 2 against marshalling yards, and one to an airdrome.

### PLOESTI AND THE SUMMER OIL CAMPAIGN

General Spaatz had long held the view that destruction of the German oil supply should have a very high priority in the strategic bombing campaign. He was supported in this view by General Arnold and many of the other decision-makers. The view was opposed by the RAF and General Eisenhower, who wanted no let up in the attack on transportation targets. Attacks on transportation were thought to provide more immediate benefits than attacks on oil. In March, Arnold notified Spaatz that the Combined Chiefs of Staff had no objection to attacking Ploesti, but thought it wise to begin by bombing the many transportation targets in the vicinity. Such raids would satisfy the desire to concentrate on transportation, and serve the dual purpose of a strategic oil campaign by disrupting movement of oil products and cause incidental damage to adjacent oil refineries.<sup>11</sup>

During April and May, the 2nd, as part of the Fifteenth's oil and transportation campaign, attacked marshalling yards 5 times at Ploesti and Bucharest, the Ploesti industrial area once and a Ploesti pumping station once. The combined



success of the Eighth and Fifteenth Air Force's campaign against oil targets and especially against Ploesti served to overcome the RAF's opposition to the oil campaign.

On June 8, Spaatz issued an historic order to the Eighth and Fifteenth Air Forces that henceforth their primary strategic aim was to deny oil to the enemy's armed forces. His order remained in effect until the strategic air war ended. In general, the Fifteenth was assigned responsibility for the crude oil refineries around Ploesti, Vienna and Budapest and the synthetic plants in Silesia, Poland and Sudetenland, such as Brux, Oswiecim, Blechhammer North and South and Odertal. The Eighth was assigned plants in Germany.

For the Fifteenth the order was confirmation to continue a campaign already begun. Ploesti, the premiere oil target on the continent had long been familiar to the strategic air forces in the Mediterranean. By the time the summer oil campaign was over, Ploesti would be reduced to near impotence and would be in Allied hands. It had been a long and costly campaign.<sup>12</sup>

Rumania had fallen into the lap of the Germans early in the war, and the oil production complex around Ploesti was providing them with a third of their liquid fuel, and more importantly, a third of their gasoline. The Ploesti complex was the largest producer of oil in the part of Europe controlled by the Axis. Two conclusions flowed from this fact — Ploesti must be attacked, and the area would be well defended.

Army Air Force planners knew the strategic importance of Ploesti to the German war machine, particularly to their eastern front. General Arnold felt that the Nazis could be denied Ploesti oil without having to invade the Balkans as favored for this and other reasons, by Churchill. A successful strike would also render immediate assistance to the Russians. These considerations led to the famous raid of August 1, 1943 on Ploesti by B-24s. That first mission to Ploesti was planned as a one-punch affair, to be made at minimum altitude, with complete surprise. No preliminary reconnaissance was even allowed. The target was too far away for the heavy bombers in England, so three groups of B-24s were temporarily moved from the Eighth Air Force to North Africa to join in the raid with the two groups of B-24s from the 9th Air Force, the 98th and the 376th. The B-24s were equipped with auxiliary wing tanks plus one bomb bay tank giving them a total of 3,200 gallons of fuel. A great deal of planning and training went into the effort before the attacking force of 178 Liberators and their crews were judged ready for the longest strategic bomber mission to that date. Despite intensive planning and preparation and the effort to preserve the element of surprise, the mission was ill-starred from the beginning. One heavily laden B-24 crashed and burned on takeoff killing the entire crew. The intricately devised attack plan called for low-level, multi-axis attacks with staggered target times and different bomb fusing delays — all carefully synchronized so the raiders avoided one another, and the consequences of their own exploding bombs, while surprising and confusing enemy defenses. The plan's complexity was its vulnerability, and it started to unravel long before target time. Crews began to lose contact with their forma-

tions in weather across Albania and Yugoslavia. One wave of 46 planes broke up into smaller formations. Part of one wave turned early at the wrong IP. The effects of weather, coupled with mechanical failures, and navigational errors, destroyed the unity of the formation and the attack plan disintegrated. With no hope of executing the mission as planned, success now depended on individual initiative. The crews bore courageously on, some into the explosions, fires, and debris of their own bombs, and all into the phalanx of alerted enemy defenses. It was learned later that the Germans had intercepted some routine radio talk and were ready and waiting.

Ploesti oil was such a vital resource, Hitler assigned its defense to highly regarded Gen. Furstenburg. There were 120 88mm antiaircraft guns around the vast oil complex, 3 Luftwaffe fighter squadrons, and barrage balloons to thwart low-level attacks. The raiders roared into the targets at treetop level and were decimated by deadly antiaircraft fire and furious fighter attacks.

It was a costly mission that fell short of expectations. Fifty-four airplanes were lost, 41 of them in action, and with them went 532 airmen, dead, missing, prisoners or interned. Against this loss, the raiders took out 42% of Ploesti's total refining capacity, another 40% of the cracking capacity was probably knocked out for 4 to 6 months, and the production of lubricating oils was considerably reduced. As significant as these results were, they were not decisive and the Germans were able to make up for the losses by reserve capacity. No follow-on raids were planned to take advantage of the gains already achieved on this singular mission. Ploesti went untouched by Allied strategic air forces until late spring 1944.<sup>13</sup>

The first successor mission was made by the Fifteenth Air Force on April 5, 1944. That was the Second's 174th mission when the Group attacked the marshalling yards at Ploesti.

After the April 5 mission, the Fifteenth kept up a sustained campaign against the complex for four months, flying a total of 19 heavy bomber missions. The 2nd went on 13 of these, although one was recalled because of weather after the Group passed the sortie line.

The Germans were determined to protect the source of one-third of their oil supply. The U.S. planners reasoned that the defense would be rusty and lax so deep behind the front lines in 1943, however, they found that a determined defense was there even at that early date. As the high altitude, heavy bomber assault began in the Spring of 1944, the combat crews saw that with each mission the protection of the oil fields and refineries increased. The enemy fighters aggressively opposed the bombers, and the flak batteries seemed to throw more exploding shells into the bomber formations each time they were over the targets. By June, Ploesti was the third-best defended target on the continent after second-place Vienna, and first-place Berlin.

Raiders could always depend on heavy, intense and accurate flak. The enemy continued to add gun batteries to the defense as the campaign progressed, even until the last mission was flown on August 19. The normal complement of 88mm guns was supplemented with 105mm artillery, and a mobile train with 128mm guns roamed the perimeter of Ploesti to throw their huge shells into the bomber formations.<sup>14</sup>

Initially, fighter defenses were equally spirited and effective. Fighter opposition was gradually overcome by the increasing availability of long-range fighter escort starting in the Spring of 1944. After many fierce dog fights in the target area, the P-51s and P-38s gained control, and the bombers were largely left alone after that.

In addition, the defenders became expert at passive smoke screen defense. Smoke pots were started as soon as their radar picked up the American formations coming out of Italy. As time passed, the Germans added more of these devices until the entire area was frequently covered with a blanket of smoke by the time the bombers approached.<sup>15</sup>

Because of the smoke, the bombardiers, navigators, and pilots were unable, at times, to pick out their individual refinery targets. This impediment was substantially defeated when the lead crews became proficient in the H2X pathfinder bombing method. Although not as precise as visual bombing, the pathfinders could locate the targets and lead the groups to the bomb release points.

During the campaign, Fifteenth heavies dropped 13,469 tons of bombs on the Ploesti targets, using 5,479 individual sorties. The B-17 and B-24 groups lost 223 crews and airplanes. On June 23 the Fifteenth mounted a force of 761 bombers against Ploesti, but the greatest loss occurred on the July 22 raid when 24 were shot down out of an attacking force of approximately 500 bombers.<sup>16</sup> The average loss was 10.6 planes for each of the 21 participating heavy bomber groups. The 2nd was a fortunate exception to the average, losing only two airplanes out of its 13 Ploesti missions.

In addition to heavy bomber high altitude missions, a dive bombing attack was made by P-38s of the 82nd Fighter Group on June 10, 1944. Forty-six Lightnings went to the target with 1,000 pound bombs under their wings. They were escorted by forty-eight P-38s of the 1st Fighter Group. The belief was that they could sneak into the area and bomb vital targets before the defenders could establish their smoke screens, which had been a problem for the big plane's bombardiers. They did get their bombs on the targets, but due to intense, low-level anti-aircraft fire and the fierce air battles, twenty-two P-38s were lost.<sup>17</sup>

After each assault by the Fifteenth, workers at Ploesti labored to get some of the production capacity operating again. This became a losing battle, and production dropped steadily as the attacks continued. At the time of the first attack on Ploesti in 1943, the refineries were capable of handling 757,000 tons of crude oil a month. By the time the Russians marched in in mid-August, 1944, the capacity was down to ten percent of that figure. At that time only five of the eleven refineries were operating, and one of these, Astra Romano, was supplying half of that output.<sup>18</sup>

Of interest, is the reaction of the Russians when they captured Ploesti. They were surprised that American forces had virtually destroyed the American owned Romano/American oil refinery, the fourth largest in Rumania. It had escaped damage during the August, 1943 raid. This happenstance also fooled the local citizens. They fled there during the bombings in belief that Ameri-



can interests would spare it. Their trust in this belief was shattered in May and June, 1944, when the place was struck repeatedly. By August 1944, production at Romano/Americano was down to 12,000 tons compared to 109,000 tons in August the year before.<sup>19</sup>

By June, enemy total oil output had been cut in half, and by September, production had been reduced to one fourth of normal. While the Fifteenth was destroying the main source of oil in the Ploesti area, the Eighth was working especially hard on the destruction of the German Synthetic oil plants. Out of 24 such plants, the Eighth had blasted all but a few. After the Ploesti complex fell into the hands of the Russians in August, the Fifteenth switched attention to synthetic oil refineries during the remainder of 1944 and 1945.

### **MISSION 213, JUNE 13, 1944**

OBERPFAFFENHOFFEN, GERMANY, AIRDROME

The airdrome was located 15 miles southwest of Munich. Recent photos showed 112 Do-217's and 20 Me-410s on the field. Such a target assumed greater importance since the invasion of France. Allied air forces kept striking at the Luftwaffe's ability to retaliate and recuperate from the strikes. The enemy aircraft were dispersed in a heavy growth of trees and others were in front of a factory assembly building. The Group covered the target well and came away unharmed.<sup>20</sup>

### **MISSION 214, JUNE 14, 1944**

BUDAPEST, HUNGARY

KOOLAZ & FANTE OIL REFINERIES

### **MISSION 215, JUNE 16, 1944**

FLORISDORFER, AUSTRIA, OIL REFINERY

On each of these missions the Group was attacked by fighters and flak, and lost a crew on each mission.<sup>21</sup>

The Koolaz plant was the largest crude oil distillation plant in Hungary with a estimated annual capacity of 150,000 tons. It was the fifth largest Axis refinery outside of Rumania. Destruction was estimated to reduce Hungary's refining capacity by 40 to 50%. The Fante plant had a capacity of 50,000 tons/year. The target area was covered by accumulated smoke from previous bombs, and the 2nd's 27 aircraft bombed into the smoke area.<sup>22</sup>

Returning crewmen reported that B-17 number 42-31527, "Brown Nose" flown by the crew of 1st Lt. Charles M. Britten, 429th Squadron, was attacked by 11 Me-410s, was hit in the left wing, and number 1 engine was feathered. It began smoking, and a few minutes later caught fire. Ten chutes were seen to open, and the airplane blew up in midair with pieces still burning upon hitting the ground. None of the crew was injured. They abandoned the burning plane exactly as diagramed in the flight manual. The pilot and 4 others evaded and returned to Allied control, while the others were captured. One Me-410 was destroyed.<sup>23</sup>

On the Florisdorf mission, cloud coverage directly over the target prevented definitive observation of results, but it was believed that a good portion of the bombs were in the target area and some fell beyond the target into the adjoining

marshalling yards. Eight to twelve enemy aircraft attacked, making several passes at the rear of the 49th Squadron for a period of an hour before target time. S/Sgt. V.J. Sodaro, TG, in aircraft 655, 429th Squadron, sighted two single-engine, black-painted, airplanes flying about 2,000 yards away at the 4:00 o'clock position. They were being trailed by seven P-38s. He called out the fighters and several of his crewmates trained their guns on them. The fighters flew formation with the Group for several minutes. The gunners did not fire thinking they were P-51s, except the gunners could not understand the fighter's markings. One fighter rolled his wings in a manner similar to that used by friendly fighter escort. Then one of the fighters peeled up slightly, slid behind the Group formation, and at that instant he lowered the nose, fired his weapons, then pulled away and disappeared. That single burst started a fire in the radio room of 655, but the crew returned safely to base.<sup>24</sup>

Returning crew members reported that airplane 42-38089, 49th Squadron, pilot 1st Lt. Shelby F. Vaughn, was hit by flak, and with an engine feathered, and another damaged, fell back until it was out of sight. It did not return to base. All of the crew evaded. S/Sgt. Joseph E. Sallings, RWG, reported on his return, that the crew did not bail out, but crash landed 100 km east of Zagreb, Yugoslavia. There were no casualties, and all returned to Italy together July 2, 1944.

Flak damaged 15 aircraft, one severely and slightly wounded one crewman. The fighters did minor damage to 2 airplanes, and one gunner claimed one fighter probably destroyed.<sup>25</sup>

### **MISSION 216, JUNE 22, 1944**

PARMA, ITALY, MARSHALLING YARDS

Weather preempted operations until June 22, when the Group flew an interdiction mission to deny retreating German ground forces in Italy a source of re-supply. Twenty-seven airplanes bombed with good results and suffered no damage.

### **MISSION 217, JUNE 23, 1944**

PLOESTI, RUMANIA, CITY

### **MISSION 218, JUNE 25, 1944**

SETE, FRANCE, OIL STORAGE

### **MISSION 219, JUNE 26, 1944**

VIENNA, AUSTRIA

SCHWECHAT OIL REFINERY

The Group was unable to locate the primary target at Ploesti, the Dacia Romano Oil Refinery, because of an effective smoke screen, so the city installations were bombed. At Sete a few bombs were beyond the target but the rest covered the target well. There was some flak, but no fighters and no damage or injuries. The next day, the 2nd was part of a force of 550 heavy bombers that ranged over Hungary and Austria. The first squadron's bombs fell to the right of the refinery, but those of the other three squadrons were in the target area. The 2nd had no encounters and the flak was inaccurate.<sup>26</sup> Other groups were attacked by fighters in the Vienna area and claimed 44 victories.<sup>27</sup>

## **MISSION 220, JUNE 27, 1944**

BUDAPEST, HUNGARY, CITY CENTER

An attack was planned to strike the marshalling yards which served German front lines, but the target was covered by clouds, so four squadrons bombed Budapest center by PFF. The number five squadron bombed the northeast part of Budapest visually, and the number six squadron bombed the main target area visually.

Twenty-five to forty Me-109s, Me-110s, Me-210s, Me-410s and FW-190s pounced on the formation just before bombs away and immediately following. They then attacked one of the lagging squadrons. The enemy fighter pilots were unusually aggressive, making head-on attacks, firing cannon from 400 yards out and going right through the formation. Incredibly, only three B-17s received minor damage from the fighters. The Fortress gunners downed 9 of the attackers and one probable. The Group's two losses were to flak. Sgt. Eugene F. Fawls, LWG, 96th Squadron, was killed by flak. One Fort was the victim of flak and there were only two survivors from the crew.

B-17 number 42-32053, 49th Squadron, under the command of 1st Lt. Richard A. Korb, escaped one barrage of flak over the target only to be hit by the second. A burst of flak hit the number 2 engine and it caught fire. The plane peeled out of the formation to the right and two chutes were seen to leave the plane immediately. Three more men left the plane and made delayed jumps. The plane went into a steep dive, then spiraled down and exploded at approximately 18,000 feet. The wreckage fell about 30 miles southwest of Budapest.<sup>28</sup>

Upper turret gunner T/Sgt. Malcolm M. Treadway, and radio operator T/Sgt. Burl K. Kessel, were the only survivors. Sgt. Treadway was blown from the plane. He believed that the copilot, 1st Lt. Alf L. Larsen and all of the enlisted men bailed out. Treadway said Lt. Larsen passed him on the way to the bomb bay when fire was discovered there just after the target. Hungarian soldiers told Treadway later that Larsen's chute caught fire and burned on the way down. That was hearsay information and Treadway never saw Lt. Larsen after leaving the airplane. When Treadway was captured, the soldiers took him to the wreckage of the plane, where he identified 1st Lt. Richard A. Korb, the pilot, still at what would have been the flight controls. He also saw the bodies of 2nd Lts. Casimir L. Blaska, N, and James E. Fleming, B, still in the nose of the airplane.

T/Sgt. Kessel, ROG, was the first to bail out and was captured immediately. A Hungarian officer, who spoke English, took charge of him until he was turned over to the Germans some five hours later. The Hungarian officer told him that he was the first man out of the plane, and that five chutes followed, one of which was on fire. The officer pointed to smoke which he said was from the plane wreckage and told Kessel the correct tail number of the airplane. Kessel said he knew nothing about the rest of the crew, except what he learned from Treadway after they met as captives, and that S/Sgt. Thaddeus G. Thomas, RWG, came to Kessel's aid after Kessel was struck by shell fire just prior to bailing out. Sgt. Thomas was all right at that time and was preparing to bail out. It is believed that all the



other enlisted crew members perished — S/Sgt. William C. Bair, LTG; S/Sgt. Thaddeus G. Thomas, RWG; Sgt. Henry (NMI) Rappe, LWG; and Sgt. Thaddeus T. Krent, TG. The only German documents in the missing crew report lists these four enlisted men as missing, Lt. Korb as deceased, and Treadway and Kessel as prisoners. The American crew lists Sgts. Treadway and Kessel as "returned", and no disposition of the remaining crew members.<sup>29</sup>

## MISSION 221, JUNE 30, 1944

BLECHHAMMER, GERMANY  
NORTH OIL REFINERY

The last mission of the month was ineffective. Briefed for a long mission to bomb the oil refinery, the crews took off early. The weather became so bad the Group could not penetrate past Lake Balaton, Hungary, so they turned back and jettisoned their bombs into the Adriatic.<sup>30</sup>

In the latter part of June the Group was visited by Maj. Gen. Salinas, Chief, Mexican Air Force, Maj. Gen. Guy V. Henry and Brig. Gen. A. E. Hall from Headquarters, AAF, Washington D. C. They were accompanied by Brig. Gen. Born of Fifteenth Air Force. The visiting dignitaries were particularly interested in Group operations.<sup>31</sup>

### Endnotes:

<sup>1</sup> Craven & Cate, Vol III, 308-311

<sup>2</sup> Glenn B. Infield, "The Poltava Affair," (MacMillan Publishing Co. 1973) 14

<sup>3</sup> Ibid, 52

<sup>4</sup> Ibid, 55

<sup>5</sup> McCoid, Group History, June 2, 1944

<sup>6</sup> Infield, 69

<sup>7</sup> James C. Stewart, Col. USAF (Ret), Letter October 11, 1993

<sup>8</sup> Drawn from FRANTIC summary by Capt. Walter H. Simmons and Russell H. Bradshaw, Assist. Group Operations Officers in June 1944 Group History

<sup>9</sup> Mission Report

<sup>10</sup> Infield, 226, 240; Craven & Cate, 313-316

<sup>11</sup> Craven & Cate, 174

<sup>12</sup> Ibid, 280, 281

<sup>13</sup> Ibid, 477, 482-483

<sup>14</sup> "Impact", vol 2, No. 12, December 1944, p 51

<sup>15</sup> Ibid, 51; Craven & Cate, 283

<sup>16</sup> "Impact", vol 2, No. 10, October 1944, p 31

<sup>17</sup> Craven & Cate, 283

<sup>18</sup> "Impact", vol 2, No. 12, December 1944, p 36

<sup>19</sup> Ibid, 42

<sup>20</sup> Mission Report

<sup>21</sup> Group History, (AFHRA, Maxwell AFB, AL) microfilm reel, B0043, fr. 1194

<sup>22</sup> Mission Report

<sup>23</sup> Richards Missing Crew Report

<sup>24</sup> Mission Report

<sup>25</sup> Mission Report; Richards Missing Crew Report

<sup>26</sup> Mission Reports

<sup>27</sup> Craven & Cate, 283

<sup>28</sup> Mission Report

<sup>29</sup> Richards Missing Crew Report

<sup>30</sup> Mission Report

<sup>31</sup> McCoid Group Narrative History, June, 1944

## JULY 1944

With the advent of good summer weather, the Group logged twenty-two missions during July. Ten (10) of these were directed at oil refineries and storage, 5 at marshalling yards, 3 at air-dromes and 4 others at engineering, ordnance,



Visiting dignitaries. L to R: Maj. Gen. Salinas, Chief, Mexican Air Force; Brig. Gen. A.E. Hall, AAF, Washington DC; Brig. Gen. Born; Col. Rice; and Maj. Gen. Guy V. Henry, AAF, Washington DC. (Group Photo)

armament and tank works. The attention devoted to oil facilities was to further curtail the supply of this vital resource so badly need by German ground and air forces. The Group lost 12 airplanes and 11 crews. Nine of these were lost to the defenses of the oil facilities, as conclusive evidence of the importance which Germany attached to its oil supply. Of those crews downed by the German defenders, 41 airmen perished and another 4 died in prison camp. Returning airplanes brought back to base 1 dead and 41 wounded.<sup>1</sup> It was another of those months that manifested the indomitable courage of the air crews.

The mission briefed for July 1 was canceled, but on each non-operational day in July practice missions were scheduled. The day was thought to be the warmest the men had endured in Italy. They were happy to receive a ration of four cans of beer each, even though it was rather weak and came sans ice. Lister Bags (drinking water containers) were emptied early.<sup>2</sup>

## MISSION 222, JULY 2, 1944

GYOR, HUNGARY, RAILROAD FACILITIES

The mission was briefed to bomb an oil storage facility at Amas Fuzito, Hungary, but upon reaching the target, the Group found it closed in by weather. They changed course and bombed the marshalling yards and installations at Gyor. The target was well covered, one large and several small explosions were observed, but some bombs fell beyond the marshalling yards. One early return airplane bombed the docks and railroad siding at Vukovar, Yugoslavia.<sup>3</sup>

## MISSION 223, JULY 3, 1944

ARAD, RUMANIA, CAR REPAIR SHOPS

Most of the 75 tons of 500 pound bombs were in the target area. Flak en route was heavy, slight intensity and fair accuracy. One airplane didn't make it back to base. 1st Lt. James H. Twibell, 49th Squadron, turned back because of flak damage just before reaching the target, and ditched his B-17, number 42-137162, in the Adriatic sixty-five miles east of Manfredonia.

He landed in sight of two U.S. Navy subchasers and the crew was soon picked up from their life rafts. The subchaser crew, commanded by Lt. (JG) Bass, was welcomed to a party back at the Amendola base.

## MISSION 224, JULY 4, 1944

BRASOV, RUMANIA, PHOTOGEN OIL REFINERY

The Group started Independence Day early with the mission briefing at 4:45 A.M. The crews did a good job, dropping their loads into a smoky target, and returned to base at 2:35 P.M. After the returning crews had settled in, everything was quiet around the camp until about 10:00 P.M., when it seemed that every gun in camp was fired into the air in celebration. This continued until the commanding officer ordered a cease fire over the loud speaker system. No casualties were reported, but a neighboring wheat field was set on fire by a flare fired from the camp.<sup>4</sup>

A celebration of a different sort was held at the Officer's Club the evening of July 5. Col. Rice had received orders transferring him back to the U.S. He had commanded the Group since September 3, 1943, and had led it on 52 missions. The men presented him with a silver cigarette lighter adorned with the Group and Squadron insignias. Col. Rice relinquished his command to Lt. Col. Ryan on July 8.

## MISSION 225, JULY 5, 1944

MONTPELLIER, FRANCE

MARSHALLING YARDS

## MISSION 226, JULY 6, 1944

VERONA, ITALY, MARSHALLING YARDS

The Montpellier mission was part of a coordinated effort of the Fifteenth and Eighth Air Forces to give immediate assistance to the Allied Expeditionary Force in France. It was reported that two German divisions were entraining between Montpellier and the Spanish border for transfer to the Western Front. Units of the two Air Forces were sent to destroy five bridges crossing rail lines north and west of the entraining points and to attack related marshal-





U.S. Navy Lt. Bass poses in front of Lt. James H. Twibell and crew aboard the Navy sub-chaser that rescued the 49th Squadron crew on July 3, 1944 after they ditched in the Adriatic. (Group Photo / W. Greenhalgh)

ling yards. The mission could have another benefit — give some advance preparation for Operation DRAGOON, the invasion of southern France on August 15. The Group left the yards at Montpellier with considerable damage and destruction.

Verona was on the main line carrying supplies from Germany through the Brenner Pass to German forces in Italy and the Balkans. The line and yards had been attacked before but had been repaired. All 28 airplanes that took off bombed the target with 500-pound general purpose bombs. Except for a few that fell short, the bombs were on the target.

Airplane number 42-31848, was in the last position of the rear squadron on the Verona raid. The pilot was 2nd Lt. William A Runyan, 429th Squadron. The airplane was seen to have engine trouble and was lagging behind the formation, when it was attacked by one Me-109 of three that approached. The fighter made only one pass at the crippled bomber, and immediately thereafter the bomber made a 360 degree turn, then started straight down. At about 14,000 feet it blew up. Eye witnesses reported that two or three men were blown from the airplane and when their chutes opened, one was on fire. The navigator and the radio operator were the only survivors.

Navigator, 2nd Lt. William L. McIlhargie, and radio operator S/Sgt. Paul (NMI) Olexo, Jr., were captured, and gave the following statements after their release. McIlhargie: "I was blown out of the plane unconscious. Came to the following Saturday afternoon. (Note: He was shot down Thursday, July 6.) I have no knowledge of the others. I saw Sgt. Alexo, the radio man, last. He had a flak wound in his leg and it didn't look so good. There wasn't time to give him first aid. I had just arrived there for that reason, when the ship blew up and that is all I remember. The last conversation I had with Lt. Runyan was to ask permission to go back and give first aid to the radio operator."

Alexo: "I was blown out of the plane with two others when the plane blew up. Sgt. Smith,

(Clarence F., TG), had received a 20mm wound in the chest and was blown out. He died on the ground. I saw him in the hospital, dead. Lt. Runyan did not get out. Sgt. Goulet, (Clarence R., RWG), was killed by a 20mm shell and was last seen lying on the floor of the plane. Sgt. Brouwer-Ancher, (Charles J., LWG), was killed by a 20mm shell in the back and was lying on the floor, dead. S/Sgt. Miller, (George B., UTG), was last seen at his guns when the ship exploded."<sup>5</sup>

### MISSION 227, JULY 7, 1944 BLECHHAMMER, GERMANY SOUTH OIL REFINERY

The Blechhammer south refinery, a synthetic oil plant, was still under construction, but was producing 500,000 tons of oil per year, making it the third largest in production. The gas generators were the primary targets. If they were destroyed, the plant would be inoperative for six months or more.<sup>6</sup> Blechhammer was located in southeastern Germany, almost 750 miles due north of Foggia. Its importance to Germany was obvious and it was a deep penetration target — a combination that cost the Group dearly. The 2nd had made the long flight to Blechhammer on June 30, only to be turned away by cloud cover. Following that aborted mission, the Group was sent back to Blechhammer every month for the next six months, twelve times in all, including 5 missions in December 1944, at a cost of twelve crews and airplanes. On this first time over the target the enemy put up a fierce defense with flak and fighters, and four B-17s went down.

Ground security forces put up such an effective smoke screen, visual observation of bombing results was impossible. Judging from the rate and course set up on the bomb run and land marks, it was thought that bombs were in the target area, but later intelligence disclosed disappointing results. The flak was heavy, intense and accurate.

Forty to sixty Me-109s, FW-190s and Me-

210s were sighted. Six to twelve started their attacks on the Group 34 minutes before target time. They fired rockets from 1,000 to 1,200 yards away, then by twos and threes came in firing their cannons, some boldly closing to within 50 yards. According to eye witnesses it was such an attack that felled 1st Lt. Harold T. Tomlinson and his crew in airplane number 42-97351. A lone Me-109 fired four or five bursts at Tomlinson's plane at very close range. Shells were seen entering the tail section. The plane went out of control, fell off to the left in a flat spin, hit the ground and exploded. The plane crashed 1-1/2 miles north of the Danube River, near Gyor, Hungary. Only one chute was seen.<sup>7</sup>

Surviving crew members said they were the victims of two attacks. The first tore up the tail section, as the eye witnesses reported, killing the tail gunner, Cpl. Joseph B. Cash Jr., who was on his first mission, and the lower turret gunner, Sgt. Philip J. McQuade. The second attack brought a combination of cannon shells and rockets into the mid-section of the airplane, killing the two waist gunners, S/Sgt. Henry W. Garnett, and Sgt. Robert S Wolfe, and the radio gunner, S/Sgt. Henry F. O'Neill, and knocking T/Sgt. Martino (NMI) Cardone, UTG, out of his gun mount and destroying his guns. He was stunned, recovered and bailed out. Thus everyone aft of the bomb bay was killed in the fighter attacks. Sgt. Cardone, who spoke Italian, was used by his captors to identify four of the bodies recovered from the plane wreckage. Sgt. Wolfe's body was not among them, but when Sgt. Cardone went back to salvo the bombs after the plane was on fire from the second attack, he saw Sgt. Wolfe lying on the waist floor, apparently dead. Sgt. Wolfe did not bail out.

Everyone forward of the bomb bay escaped injury from the attack and successfully exited the airplane. The first to leave was the bombardier, 2nd Lt. Michael R. Miller. He was uninjured and made a safe exit. He was never seen again by the surviving crew, and there are no known reports from German sources as to what happened to him. 2nd Lt. Frank P. Fleming Jr., N, came down in a parachute with one burned corner and he cracked some ribs near the vertebrae on landing. He couldn't walk, was captured and hospitalized the next day at Budapest Hospital No. 11, where he stayed until recovered.

The copilot, 1st Lt. Reese N. Burks helped Lt. Tomlinson into his parachute and they both bailed out. The two met the next day at a POW detention house. Lts. Fleming and Burks were together at Stalag Luft III, when Lt. Burks died of infection following an ear operation in a French Hospital at Sagan, Germany. He was buried at the POW cemetery there.<sup>8</sup>

The next plane to go down was that of 1st Lt. Driscoll B. Horton, number 42-31470, "Old Shep," of the 429th Squadron. About fifteen minutes before the IP, the plane was seen opening its bomb bay doors and salvoing the bombs. Immediately, number 2 engine was feathered. The plane began to lose altitude and trail the formation, then number 4 engine was feathered, and the plane made a 180 degree turn as if returning to base.<sup>9</sup> The crew flew toward Yugoslavia on two engines for about half an hour. They tossed out loose weight, but were still losing altitude



when they ran into flak in the Graz, Austria area. The propeller on one of the good engines ran away and the pilot gave orders to bail out. Eight crew members, all except the pilot and copilot, bailed out the waist door and were captured near St. Michael, Austria. The bombardier, 2nd Lt. John W. Schmitthener, injured his back on landing and was temporarily paralyzed. S/Sgt. Raymond T. Murphy, RWG, broke his leg which wasn't set properly for several weeks. T/Sgt. Robert C. Stewart, ROG, had dysentery for a few days after capture. Later, while in the transient prison camp at Dulug Luft, Wetzler, Germany, he died from an infection. The other seven members who bailed out together survived as POWs.<sup>10</sup>

Sometime after the rest bailed out, Lt. Horton and 2nd Lt. Peter B. Beers, CP, got out of the plane okay, evaded, and were returned to Allied control. The plane blew up over St. Michael, Austria.<sup>11</sup>

Also, before reaching the target, plane number 42-97183, piloted by 1st Lt. Ira B. Corpening, 96th Squadron, was damaged in the fighter attacks, and one shot the cowling off an engine on the right side. Corpening turned away from the formation, salvoed the bombs, and headed south. Three Me-109s followed 183, and six escorting P-51s turned to follow the Me-109s. The B-17 disappeared going south and no chutes were seen.<sup>12</sup>

According to T/Sgt. Norton D. Skinner, UTG, the crew bailed out at about the same place in western Slovakia. The only one he saw after that was trail gunner, S/Sgt. Samuel L. Strode. The two of them were together at an evader camp in Bratislavia, Czechoslovakia. They successfully evaded. The rest of the crew became guests of the German POW system for the duration.<sup>13</sup>

The crew of 2nd Lt. William (NMI) Nabinger, 20th Squadron, flying airplane 42-38231, went down over the target. Flak blew the nose off the airplane back to the cockpit. The plane stalled, then nose dived straight down and was seen to hit the ground and explode. Some eye witnesses saw no chutes. Others saw three. Regardless, no one survived. German records state the airplane crashed near the town of Friederau, Province of Casal. The bodies of 2nd Lt. Nabinger, copilot 2nd Lt. Owen E. Rice Jr., navigator F/O Ralph T. Mooney, and radio gunner S/Sgt. Wesley (NMI) Frinsco, were reported to be buried in a cemetery in Friederau. A second German report shows that the bodies of six airmen from this aircraft were buried in a cemetery in the village of Reinschdorf. The body of S/Sgt. Dwight C. Wheeler, TG, was the only one identified.<sup>14</sup>

### MISSION 228, JULY 8, 1944

VIENNA, AUSTRIA, VOSENDORF OIL REFINERY

### MISSION 229, JULY 9, 1944

PLOESTI, RUMANIA, XENIA OIL REFINERY

Vosendorf, also known as the Fanto Oil Refinery, was just one of several refineries in the Vienna area. To protect these resources, Vienna had become the second-best defended target on the continent, with 318 heavy guns of which 212 could train on a bomber formation. The Luftwaffe could put up 125 single engine and 100 twin engine fighters. Interception was probable from the Zagreb, Yugoslavia area on the route into the target. Fighters could also be drawn from the Udine area of Italy.<sup>15</sup> The defenders put up a

very effective smoke screen, so the Group made a second run on the target, to give the smoke screen time to start dissipating. The Group, together with the rest of the Fifteenth, struck effective blows to the oil refineries, oil storage depots, and airdromes on this raid. Some 100 fighters opposed the bomber force, but fortunately, none challenged the 2nd. The flak was heavy, intense and accurate. Of the 27 Forts the 2nd put over the target, 25 received some flak damage, 8 of which were severe. Five crewmen were wounded. 2nd Lt. William Torske, bombardier, 96th Squadron, was severely wounded in the right leg calf.<sup>16</sup>

The 5th Wing was sent to destroy the Ploesti Xenia oil refinery and found the defenses effective and formidable. Ploesti was the third-best defended target on the continent after Vienna. PFF was used by all lead units. The target was well covered and several fires were observed. Six Me-109s concentrated their attack on one B-17 which had fallen behind because its superchargers had gone out. The Fort successfully dueling the attackers until the escort came to the rescue. Flak was another matter. Twenty-two of the 26 bombers in the formation were damaged and ten men were wounded, only two seriously — S/Sgt. J. H. Winston, LTG, and Sgt. C. C. Watson, LWG, both of the 20th Squadron. Gunners confirmed two Me-109s destroyed.<sup>17</sup>

### MISSION 230, JULY 13, 1944

VERONA, ITALY, EAST MARSHALLING YARDS

When the Group next flew, the target was the Latsans rail bridge, in Italy. That target was found to be covered with clouds, so twenty-seven of

the twenty-eight (one was an early return) bombed the secondary target — the Verona marshalling yards. The bombing accuracy was fair, and not up to Group standards. What would otherwise have been a routine mission was marred by flak. Forty to forty-five guns were plotted in the target area, and one of those snuffed out the life of S/Sgt. Chester W. Smith a waist gunner in the 96th Squadron.<sup>18</sup>

### MISSION 231, JULY 14, 1944

BUDAPEST, HUNGARY, FANTO OIL REFINERY

### MISSION 232, JULY 15, 1944

PLOESTI, RUMANIA

ROMANO-AMERICANO OIL REFINERY

### MISSION 233, JULY 16, 1944

VIENNA, AUSTRIA

WINTERHAFEN OIL STORAGE FACILITY

After four days of weather interruption, the campaign against oil resumed. Twenty-eight B-17s were sent to each of these three oil targets, and all of them bombed save two early returns. A good portion of the bombs were in the target area at the Fanto refinery, enough to start several fires and cause some explosions.

The Ploesti target was completely cloud-covered and PFF was used with unobserved results. Captured records later revealed that most of the refineries had sustained damage.<sup>19</sup> Flak severely damaged 11 airplanes and wounded eight men. 2nd Lt. Phillip N. Brown, B, 49th Squadron was seriously wounded and hospitalized.

The Winterhafen storage facility was considered to be the most important oil target in the



1st Lt. Frederick L. Tompkins, P, left, looks over piece of flak that creased his copilot's, 2nd Lt. Juan J. Dyer, helmet on mission 231 to Budapest, Hungary, July 14, 1944. Lt. Dyer's luck ran out when he was KIA over Munich, Germany, October 4, 1944, on his 50th mission! (Group Photo)



Vienna area. Destruction would immediately deprive the enemy of 175,000 tons of oil. It was located six miles southeast of Vienna on the banks of the Danube River. The bombing and assessment of results were thwarted by cloud cover, and PFF had to be used.

The 2nd had no encounters with fighters because they chose to battle other elements of the Fifteenth. The Fifteenth claimed half of the ninety fighters that contested the bomber force. Over all, eleven bombers were lost, including two from the 2nd that were victims of the ever-intense flak over Vienna targets.

The crew of 1st Lt. Robert R. O'Brien in airplane 42-38205, "Winged Fury", was leading the 49th Squadron, when it was hit by flak over the target. The plane pulled out of formation with number 3 engine on fire. It started down, rolled over on its back, then recovered to a normal position. After a descent to about 18,000 feet, the right wing came off. The fatal blast was concentrated in the nose and cockpit areas. 2nd Lt. Earl L. Jorgensen, B, was knocked off his bombardier's stool and suffered a broken leg. He told his crewmate, navigator 2nd Lt. Robert G. Morlan, that he was hit. Before Morlan could come to his aid, the plane went into its violent roll maneuver, the two men were thrown about the nose section and Lt. Morlan was knocked unconscious, and left lying on his back near the nose hatch. Jorgensen tried to reach him, but couldn't because of his broken leg and the steep, inclined position of the airplane. During this time, Jorgensen briefly saw copilot 2nd Lt. Norine O. Ostgulen, ease down to the nose to exit through the nose hatch, then didn't see him any more. Jorgensen got out through the broken plexiglass nose at 4,000 feet and watched the airplane crash to the ground. Lt. Morlan never got out. Jorgensen believes Lt. O'Brien was killed instantly because the airplane went out of control and O'Brien never gave a bail out order.

The crew, other than Lts. O'Brien and Morlan, got out of the airplane and were captured. S/Sgt. Fay W. Bryner, LWG, was shown the burned identification bracelet of Lt. O'Brien by his German captors.

S/Sgt. James H. Kelly, UTG, is believed to have died on a forced evacuation of the Stalag Luft IV D prison as the Russians advanced on the camp.<sup>20</sup>

The other airplane lost on the mission was 42-102932, 96th Squadron, flown by 1st Lt. John N. Harrington. The plane received a direct hit in the nose section by flak over the target. The nose area was blown apart, the bombardier, 2nd Lt. Arthur E. Cox was killed, and an ammunition box in the nose was set afire. Number 3 engine was on fire and flames were seen coming from the bomb bay. The airplane left the formation, lost altitude, then turned over on its back before going straight down. Three chutes were seen before the plane went into a cloud. All of the crew, except Cox, did parachute, and all were captured to spend the rest of the war in Nazi prison camps.<sup>21</sup>

### **MISSION 234, JULY 18, 1944**

#### **MEMMINGEN, GERMANY, AIRDROME**

Memmingen, 70 miles west of Munich, was observed to have 70 to 75 Me-110s and 410s on the field that were not well dispersed. The air-

drome installations were used for major repair and probably for assembly of aircraft. In favorable weather, the Luftwaffe was capable of putting up 125 single engine and 115-125 twin engine fighters in the target area. The crews did a good job, putting most of the bombs on the target. The 2nd was spared any opposition, while the defenders chose other more inviting formations. One of those was the 483rd Bomb Group.

The 483rd became separated from the rest of the 5th Wing and the fighter escort because of adverse weather, and was badly mauled by a force of 200 enemy fighters. That Group lost fourteen B-17s and claimed 66 enemy fighters destroyed or damaged in the fierce fracas. In spite of its losses, the 483rd bored through the opposition and bombed the target.<sup>22</sup>

Meanwhile, 1st Lt. Millard F. Pedigo, and his crew of the 429th Squadron, flying airplane 42-31889, "Mammy Yokum III," were having engine trouble. About 15 minutes before reaching the IP, the number 3 and 4 engines began throwing oil. Pedigo left the formation and headed for home base. The number 2 engine began vibrating excessively above 30 inches manifold pressure. The oxygen system was out and engine numbers 3 and 4 could not be feathered. The gas supply was running short, so Pedigo decided Switzerland was his best alternative. They salvaged the bombs on a village south of Munich and threw out the bombsight, radio and other gear over the Swiss Alps. As they penetrated Swiss air space, 3 Swiss fighters approached and escorted them to a safe but forced landing at Dubendorf, Switzerland. Number 3 engine caught fire on the final approach. The Swiss put out the fire. They later told Lt. Pedigo they found sand in the engine oil. The crew was interned.<sup>23</sup>

The crew was billeted at Dubendorf in the officer's barracks the first night. The next day they were moved to Adelboden where they were handed over to American authorities. On July 22 the officers were moved to Rhatia Hotel at Davos, while the enlisted men remained at Adelboden. After three weeks of quarantine, the officers were given the "run of the city," except for a 11:00 P.M. curfew.

Toward the end of September, Lt. Pedigo and two other officers made arrangements with a waiter at the hotel to guide them on an escape. They left Davos on September 30 and using a combination of walking, trains and other public transit, they arrived at Sachet, Switzerland and walked across the Swiss-French border. The waiter carried the changes of clothing they needed — civilian clothes, mountaineering pack, and uniforms. They changed into their uniforms just before crossing into France. There were no guards along that part of the border.

They walked southwest and soon made contact with the French underground — the French Forces of the Interior, (FFI) — who gave them transport to American troops. Lt. Pedigo returned to duty October 3.<sup>24</sup>

T/Sgt. William T. Poplawski, the upper turret gunner on Lt. Pedigo's crew, was billeted, with the other enlisted men, in the Regina Hotel in Adelboden. The enlisted crew was quarantined for 21 days and had poor food. About August 1, Poplawski, and others, were transferred to Wengan to another Hotel Regina, to relieve congestion at Adelboden. A month later British

internees began leaving under a repatriation arrangement. About 100 Americans went out with them by wearing British uniforms.

On September 7, Poplawski made arrangements with a hotel waiter to escape. He was caught in Lausanne, thrown in jail for two days without food, then returned to Wengan, and given one day of solitary confinement.

He later joined with a sergeant from the Eighth Air Force in another escape attempt with the aid of a Swiss waiter. They left December 14, wearing civilian clothes under their military uniforms and coats. They walked through the mountains to where the waiter purchased train tickets to Bern for them. They contacted the American Legation in Bern, were met and taken there for two days. Then with the aid of a Russian guide and contact men they were led to Lausanne, were rowed across Lake Geneva and entered France. The Russian guide made contact with U.S. military authorities who sent transportation. They rode to Lyon, France and from there T/Sgt. Poplawski was flown to Marseille, then Naples, and finally to Fifteenth Air Force Headquarters at Bari, arriving December 22, 1944.<sup>25</sup>

According the S/Sgt. Eugene (NMI) Eisner, TG, in a statement after his return, the crew was shaken up a bit on the landing at Dubendorf but there were no serious injuries. After internment, S/Sgt. Samuel (NMI) Byer, LWG, made an escape attempt, was caught, and put in prison. He was later released with other internees in February 1945. 1st Lt. Sidney (NMI) Hurwitz, B, escaped and evaded from Switzerland in November, and made his way back to the Group. He and Sgt. Eisner sailed from Naples December 10 and arrived in New York December 23, 1944.<sup>26</sup>

### **MISSION 235, JULY 19 1944**

#### **MUNICH, GERMANY**

#### **MILBERTSHOVEN ORDNANCE DEPOT**

The Group came away from Munich unscathed while other Groups met serious opposition. The bombing was poor, with only one squadron's bombs in the target area and bombs from the other three falling short. One early return airplane bombed the alternate — oil storage tanks at Trieste, Italy, with apparent considerable success. Several tanks blew up with resulting fires and explosions.<sup>27</sup>

### **MISSION 236, JULY 20, 1944**

#### **MEMMINGEN, GERMANY, AIRDROME**

For the third successive time the Group's good fortune held as it completed another mission into Germany without either flak of any consequence or fighter encounters.<sup>28</sup> The two missions to Memmingen, combined with the work of other 5th Wing Groups, resulted in the estimated destruction of 350 aircraft on the ground.<sup>29</sup>

### **MISSION 237, JULY 21, 1944**

#### **BRUX, CZECHOSLOVAKIA**

#### **SYNTHETIC OIL REFINERY**

Annual output of this plant was 1,250,000 tons or approximately 22 percent of Germany's



total synthetic oil production. Destruction of the key gas generators would stop production for at least six months and possibly longer. Defenses were expected to be extensive and vigorous, including smoke screen, possible paint camouflage to give appearance of bomb damage, and of course the flak and fighters which had come to be expected at these vital targets.<sup>30</sup>

Twenty-eight aircraft started, but early returns, aborts and loss of two on the way, reduced the formation to only 19 at time of the bomb run. The intelligence estimate proved to be accurate. The target was covered by a heavy, intense and effective smoke screen, and the Group had to rely on PFF. While the bombs landed in the smoke area, the results were uncertain. The fighter defense was as predicted. Thirty to sixty Me-109s and FW-190s, plus some twin engine fighters were seen and twelve to twenty commenced attacking the formation at 11:00, some 40 minutes before target time. They came in waves of 4, while some engaged the escort, leaving others to continue forays at the formation. The gunners were credited with shooting down one Me-109, probably destroying three, and damaging one.

During the battle, airplane 42-31789, piloted by 2nd Lt. John R. MacKenzie, 20th Squadron, received a direct hit in the tail, and the tail wheel was shot off. The right wing was also hit and looked as if it was about to fall off. The plane then made a tight circle and seconds later, went into a dive, crashed into a mountain side, and burned.<sup>31</sup> Five were able to bail out — Sgt. Billy B. Owen, LWG; S/Sgt. George H. Suratt, ROG; S/Sgt. Reece (NMI) Stephenson, UTG; 2nd Lt. Loren C. Rice, N; and 2nd Lt. Wylie T. Hartsfield, B — and became POWs. Lt. Rice had a broken arm and S/Sgt. Stephenson was injured, but both recovered. The rest of the enlisted crew were killed by fighter shells and the pilot and copilot were believed trapped in the plane. The Germans told the survivors that those who perished were buried at the scene of the crash.<sup>32</sup>

The crew of 1st Lt. James E. Wagner, 49th Squadron, in airplane number 42-107101, was last seen after a fighter attack with number 3 engine on fire and gasoline leaking from the right wing. It was headed toward the base losing altitude when it disappeared into a cloud. The right waist gunner, S/Sgt. Nicholas R. Gross was the only survivor. He became a POW.<sup>33</sup>

### MISSION 238, JULY 22, 1944

PLOESTI, RUMANIA

ROMANO-AMERICANO OIL REFINERY

The Fifteenth put almost 500 bombers over Ploesti with less than successful results because of the smoke screen.<sup>34</sup> Flak damaged 12 Group airplanes, wounded 2 men and downed the first of two planes the Group would lose over Ploesti in 13 trips. Three B-17s were seen to go down from other Groups.

The crew of 2nd Lt. Norman D. Austin, in airplane 42-31452, "Fifty Packin Mama", 20th Squadron, feathered number 3 engine, solved the bombs and turned right, away from the formation, just before the I.P. The airplane was under control when it disappeared into the clouds. The crew members interviewed after liberation, stated that they left the formation short of the

target, and all bailed out before the airplane exploded at about 10,000 feet. The radio operator, T/Sgt. Carl C. Jones, Jr., was found dead with his chute unopened. Since he was unharmed at time of bail out, the crew could only speculate as to the cause of death — chute failure, failure to pull ripcord in time after free fall, or, according to some of the visible wounds, T/Sgt. Jones was wounded after he left the airplane. All other members of the crew were captured.<sup>35</sup>

### MISSION 239, JULY 25, 1944

LINZ, AUSTRIA

HERMANN GOERING TANK WORKS

### MISSION 240, JULY 26, 1944

WIENER NEUDORF, AUSTRIA

AIRCRAFT FACTORY

### MISSION 241, JULY 27, 1944

BUDAPEST, HUNGARY

MANFRED WEISS ARMAMENT WORKS

The Group was given a brief diversion from the oil campaign. July 25 was a perfect day for bombing the Hermann Goering Works, but this mission may have resulted in the worst bombing job the Group did during the war. Due to a malfunction in the lead plane, all the bombs were dropped between the IP and the target. The mission summary report stated, "bombs dropped on lead ship short of the target in vicinity of 48-23N, 14-38E, 15 miles before the target — nothing hit." To the crews it was an arduous trip for naught. To the mission analysts it was bombs wasted on meaningless, impersonal coordinates in the middle of Austria. Whether from 5 miles in the air or from 475 miles away, both were oblivious to other than the military consequences. To the innocents below it was an interminable two minutes of totally unexpected terror.

Berta Kurz was a twenty-one year old Austrian living with her parents on a small farm in a beautiful, serene valley of farms and villages near Pregarten. That morning she had milked the cows, fed the animals and done other chores. Later she was going near the forest to pick blueberries. But her mother sent her to Pregarten with a hand cart to buy feed for the chickens. She was leaving a shop in town about 11:00 A.M. when the air raid siren started wailing. She wasn't frightened. She had seen the bombers overhead many times before, always going elsewhere. Then she heard the awful and unmistakable KABOOM! KABOOM! of bombs exploding, felt the earth tremble, and heard windows rattling. She ran back into the shop as the bombs rained down the valley, through the villages and the farms. The noonday light of a cloudless sky darkened to a twilight. Then it was over and Berta dashed for home, not daring to think what she might find. As the sound of the bombers faded, an eerie silence replaced it. No birds sang, and there were no people about. The windows and doors of Berta's home had been blasted inward, and the roof heavily damaged, but her parents were uninjured. Mrs. Karlinger, a neighbor, was killed when her house was demolished. Farther up the valley, the infant life of Johann Rammel was snuffed out.

Later, 97 bomb strikes were plotted along their indiscriminate, and random course through the valley.<sup>36</sup> The incident was a tiny microcosm of the total, unintended but inevitable cruelties that forever haunt the periphery of war. Bomber crews, five miles in the air, were spared the conscience-wrenching knowledge of the havoc that their stray bombs caused even when loosed in pursuit of honorable goals. It was a seven hour mission, but the crews did not get credit for it. The propaganda war did go on, though, and 49 packets of "nickels" were dropped.<sup>37</sup>



Mission 240, returning from Wiener Neudorf Aircraft Factory, Austria, July 26, 1944. Lonely B-24 taking cover with the formation. (Courtesy of C. Hollenberg)





Leaving Ploesti burning, mission 242, July 28, 1944. (Group Photo)

The Group had to contend with a good smoke screen over the Weiner Neudorf aircraft factory, and made two passes at the target before dropping the bombs through the smoke. Four men were wounded by flak.

Some bombs were short, some were over, but most were in the target area at the Manfred Weiss Works. Flak gave minor damage to 17 and severe damage to 5 planes out of the formation of 25. Five men were wounded, two seriously. S/Sgt. Elmer C. Rossbach, TG, 96th Squadron was hospitalized with wounds to right leg and right eye, as was 2nd Lt. Robert C. Watson, N, 49th Squadron, with unspecified serious injuries.<sup>38</sup>

### MISSION 242, JULY 28, 1944

PLOESTI, RUMANIA

ASTRA-ROMANO OIL REFINERY

### MISSION 243, JULY 31, 1944

PLOESTI, RUMANIA, XENIA, OIL REFINERY

The last two missions in July produced better results than other recent raids on Ploesti. One innovation was the use of a weather reconnaissance airplane in advance of the main bomber force to report where the smoke screen was thickest over the target. While individual raids might not produce conspicuous results, the cumulative effect was a steady disruption of this key source of oil for the Axis.<sup>39</sup>

The raid on the Astra-Romano Refinery brought clearly visible results when smoke from the fires could be seen from 225 miles.

The defenders put up a particularly good smoke screen around the Xenia Refinery, but the bombing was still effective. The flak was also more effective, damaging several airplanes and wounding four crewmen. There were no losses or encounters with fighters.<sup>40</sup>

Morale slipped a bit during the month because of loss of crews, the dead and wounded brought back and some slips in bombing perfor-

mance accuracy. The mail was more spasmodic than usual, perhaps because of attention being diverted to opening of the second front. Offsetting these adverse effects were such morale boosters as three movies a week, four stage shows, including the favorite, "This Is The Army," good Post Exchange rations, some athletic activity, opening of rest camps in Rome, Villaggio Mancuso, and San Spirito, and finally, the opening of the ice cream factory.

The month of July at Amendola had been mostly dry, hot and dusty, with only a couple decent rains. On July 19, members of the 20th Squadron were amazed to have ice cream served with their evening meal. Col. Ryan and the mess officer for the Officer's Club were visiting Manfredonia and learned that an ice cream factory there had been run by the Fascists, but had been closed since they fell from power and left. Col. Ryan wondered to the mess officer how soon the plant could be opened. Which proved not to be very long. Later, other agencies took over the plant and produced ice cream for all the adjacent military units.<sup>41</sup>

### RETURN OF A NATIVE

On July 12, S/Sgt. George H. Tucker reported in to the 96th Squadron. Sgt. Tucker was the tail gunner on 1st Lt. Vincent J. McIntyre's crew that was shot down July 14, 1943 on a mission to bomb the marshalling yards at Messina, Sicily. Sgt. Tucker had parachuted into the Straits of Messina, and had been picked up by an Italian motor launch, together with three other enlisted men and the copilot of his crew. He became a prisoner of the Italians, but after the surrender of the Badoglio Government in September, 1943, the prison camp guards became lax and he was able to escape. He lived in the mountains in central Italy and tried to make his way through the front lines, but was recaptured and

taken to a prison camp near Florence. He escaped again, and while trying to work his way south, was captured a third time. He escaped a third time, and went into hiding until Allied Armies had worked their way past his hiding place. He had been missing two days short of a year.<sup>42</sup>

#### Endnotes:

- <sup>1</sup> McCoid, *Group History*, July 1944, Narrative
- <sup>2</sup> 20th Bomb Squadron History, ( AFHRA Maxwell AFB, AL ) microfilm reel A0542, fr. 1531
- <sup>3</sup> Mission Report
- <sup>4</sup> 20th Bomb Squadron History, microfilm fr. 1531
- <sup>5</sup> Richards Missing Crew Report
- <sup>6</sup> Mission Report, Intelligence Annex
- <sup>7</sup> Ibid
- <sup>8</sup> Richards Missing Crew Report
- <sup>9</sup> Mission report
- <sup>10</sup> Richards Missing Crew Report
- <sup>11</sup> Ibid
- <sup>12</sup> Mission Report
- <sup>13</sup> Richards Missing Crew Report
- <sup>14</sup> Ibid
- <sup>15</sup> Mission Report, Intelligence Annex; Craven & Cate, 283
- <sup>16</sup> Mission Report
- <sup>17</sup> Ibid
- <sup>18</sup> Ibid
- <sup>19</sup> Craven & Cate, 291
- <sup>20</sup> Richards Missing Crew Report
- <sup>21</sup> Ibid
- <sup>22</sup> Rust, 31
- <sup>23</sup> Hans Henri Stapfer and Gino Kunzle, "Strangers in a Strange Land," (Squadron Signal Publications, 1992) 49
- <sup>24</sup> Lt. Millard F. Pedigo, *Escape Statement*, October 3, 1944
- <sup>25</sup> T/Sgt. William T. Poplawski, *Escape Statement*, December 23, 1944
- <sup>26</sup> Richards Missing Crew Report
- <sup>27</sup> Mission Report
- <sup>28</sup> Ibid
- <sup>29</sup> Craven & Cate, 292
- <sup>30</sup> Mission Report, Intelligence Annex
- <sup>31</sup> Mission Report
- <sup>32</sup> Richards Missing Crew Report
- <sup>33</sup> Ibid
- <sup>34</sup> Craven & Cate, 292
- <sup>35</sup> Richards Missing Crew Report
- <sup>36</sup> Berta (Kurz) Bauer via Karl Offenzeller Friestadt, Austria letter to C. Richards, March 23, 1996
- <sup>37</sup> Mission Report. "Nickels" was the term the British gave to propaganda leaflets, and "nickeling" was the process of dropping the leaflets.
- <sup>38</sup> Mission Reports
- <sup>39</sup> Craven & Cate, 292
- <sup>40</sup> Mission Reports
- <sup>41</sup> McCoid, *Group History Narrative*, July 1944
- <sup>42</sup> 96th Squadron History, microfilm reel A0573, fr. 590

### AUGUST 1944

The Group was tasked for 21 missions in August. Concentration on the strategic objectives of the oil campaign and enemy aircraft continued with a brief interlude in support of Operation ANVIL (DRAGOON after August 1) the invasion of southern France on August 15. The Group lost 15 airplanes during the month, 9 on a single disastrous mission.

### MISSION 244, AUGUST 2, 1944

PORTES LES VALENCES, FRANCE  
MARSHALLING YARDS

This was a near ideal mission. All twenty-eight airplanes scheduled took off, all attacked



the target with good coverage, and all returned — no flak, no fighters and no losses.<sup>1</sup>

### **MISSION 245, AUGUST 3, 1944**

**FRIEDRICHSCAHFEN, GERMANY  
OBER RADERACH CHEMICAL WORKS**

This was the Group's first mission to this target. The first wave of 13 planes dropped its bombs 1,500 to 2,000 feet long because the bomb racks malfunctioned in the lead airplane. The second wave, also of 13 planes, bombed a highway bridge in northern Italy as a target of opportunity. They scored a few hits on the bridge and several near misses. No fighters opposed but flak caused the loss of one airplane.

Airplane number 42-31655, "Wanita," flown by 2nd Lt. James E. Heintz and his crew of the 429th Squadron, was damaged by flak over the target. Number 1 engine could not be feathered causing excessive drag and vibration. Heintz called Lt. Col. Ryan, the Group leader, saying he could not make it back to base, and was heading for Switzerland. After crossing the Swiss border, the crew was subjected to antiaircraft fire which ended when they lowered the landing gear and fired flares. Navigator, 2nd Lt. James F. Mahon located the Dudendorf airport, and the damaged airplane was landed. The landing was long, and the plane rolled across the airport boundary and into the main street of the town, ripping off the landing gear. Luckily, only three crew members were slightly injured.<sup>2</sup>

The crew was interned. 2nd Lt. George W. Eilers, CP, attempted to escape from the Davos internment camp, was captured and imprisoned in a Swiss civilian prison. Eilers was later repatriated on February 17, 1945 and turned over to Allied Military Government control. T/Sgt. James Howard, UTG, escaped from the internment camp at Newchatel, but was apprehended. He escaped the second time in January 1945 and returned to the 19th Replacement Depot, Caserta, Italy and then was sent back to his 429th Squadron. Shortly after that he was shipped back to the U.S. All of the crew were eventually repatriated.<sup>3</sup>

### **MISSION 246, AUGUST 6, 1944**

**LE POUZIN, FRANCE, OIL STORAGE**

The trip to Le Pouzin was completed without incident — negligible flak, good escort, and no enemy fighters — but the bombing was well below standard. Several runs were made on the target but only about 20% of the ordnance fell within the assigned area. The remainder fell to the left.<sup>4</sup>

### **MISSION 247, AUGUST 7, 1944**

**BLECHHAMMER, GERMANY  
SOUTH SYNTHETIC OIL REFINERY**

Blechhammer was the type of target the crews did not relish. It was about 635 miles away, through some heavily defended areas, and both passive and vigorous active defenses could be expected at the target itself. Neither the trip in nor out offered much opportunity to relax and the prospects for survival of laggards and cripples were bleak. The Group had left four airplanes

and crews strewn around the target area during the last trip on July 7.

The briefing was at 04:30, take off at 06:17, and 26, of the 28 airplanes scheduled, made it to the target and dropped 67.5 tons of bombs between 11:25 and 11:28. PFF synchronous bombing was used in an effort to defeat heavy smoke over the target.<sup>5</sup>

The Group was among 365 Fifteenth bombers that attacked the north and south refineries. Although the raid damaged the plants, it did not destroy them and production was stopped only temporarily.<sup>6</sup>

The escort limited fighter encounters to one inconsequential Me-109 attack, but flak over the target claimed one 2nd Bomb Group airplane. 1st Lt. Dwight F. Hastings, in airplane number 44-6176, the 49th Squadron lead, was hit by flak as he turned off the target. Number 2 engine was set on fire and gas leaking out on the wing caught fire. Lt. Hastings immediately ordered his crew out. Seven to ten parachutes were observed before the plane exploded. All of the crew survived except S/Sgt. Howard J. Kidney, LTG. There were conflicting reports and speculation but none of the crew knew how he died. S/Sgt. Kidney was uninjured when he bailed out. Some of the crew were fired on by civilians while descending in their chutes. Another was attacked and injured by civilians after landing. A German guard told one member of the crew that S/Sgt. Kidney had been shot while coming down in his chute. Two crewmen were held for three days in a Russian prisoner work camp. They were told by the Russians that Kidney was hiding in the woods and they were feeding him. The Russians said they planned to kill their German guards, escape, and take Kidney with them. A German report stated that an antiaircraft unit at Blechhammer, found S/Sgt. Kidney's body, identified it by his dog tags, and two non-commissioned officers from a nearby air base, buried him near Blechhammer.<sup>7</sup>

### **MISSION 248, AUGUST 9, 1944**

**GYOR, HUNGARY**

**AIRDROME/AIRCRAFT ASSEMBLY PLANT**

The Plant produced Me-109s. It had been damaged in previous raids but was coming back into production. Originally, production was 50 planes a month, but it was believed this capacity had been increased. Bombs of the first wave were on target, but those of the second wave were just to the left. Twenty-four airplanes bombed. Two early returns bombed targets of opportunity — a railroad bridge at Prigidor, Yugoslavia, and the town of Nagystad, Hungary.<sup>8</sup>

### **OPERATION ANVIL/DRAGOON**

#### **MISSION 249, AUGUST 12, 1944**

**SAVONA, ITALY, GUN POSITIONS**

#### **MISSION 250, AUGUST 13, 1944**

**GENOA, ITALY, GUN POSITIONS**

#### **MISSION 251, AUGUST 14, 1944**

**TOULON, FRANCE, GUN POSITIONS**

#### **MISSION 252, AUGUST 15, 1944**

**ST. TROPEZ, FRANCE, LANDING BEACH 261**

#### **MISSION 253, AUGUST 16, 1944**

**ST. VALLIER, FRANCE, RAILROAD BRIDGE**

Months of indecision preceded the invasion of southern France while authorities debated the

next, best strategy to hasten defeat of the Nazis. Advancing into the Balkans through Greece or Albania, or through northeast Italy and into Austria, or invasion of southern France, all had their ardent proponents. When the theater commanders and the Combined Chiefs of Staff, (CCS), could not agree, the decision was pushed up to the President and the Prime Minister. On July 1, Churchill reluctantly agreed to ANVIL. The CCS then directed that ANVIL be launched at the earliest possible moment and that every effort be made to meet a target date of August 15. Fortunately, in-theater planning for ANVIL had continued over the months while the debate ensued.

Planning and preparations using lessons learned during the several amphibious operations in the Mediterranean; the highly successful interdiction program in southern France; thorough pounding of coastal defenses; defending forces weakened by transfers to the Normandy front; successful decoy assaults away from the intended landing zones; and the long counter-air campaign that yielded the Allies air supremacy over the area; all combined to make the invasion eminently successful. So much so that the strategic bomber forces were only briefly diverted to invasion support. Within a month of the landings, Allied forces had swept up the Rhone valley and linked up with Patton's Third Army.<sup>9</sup>

The five missions flown in support of ANVIL/DRAGOON had no losses and little damage. The Luftwaffe offered no resistance whatever, and the flak on the Genoa and Toulon missions did slight damage and lightly wounded one crewman. The invasion was kept secret from the crews until the mission briefing during the wee hours the morning of the invasion. So crews were not told the ultimate purpose of their three missions against the gun positions.

Savona area guns were one of three such targets attacked by the heavies of MAAF on August 12. Three-hundred-seven (307) B-17s and B-24s unloaded on gun positions at Genoa and Savona, Italy and Marseille.<sup>10</sup> The 2nd bombed with 27 airplanes from 16,000 to 18,500 feet and the pattern looked good.<sup>11</sup>

The next day 306 B-17s and 292 B-24s dropped 1,100 tons of bombs on 21 gun positions with fair to good results.<sup>12</sup> The 2nd was sent to Genoa and bombed with a good pattern, and encountered flak that lightly wounded a bombardier.<sup>13</sup>

On August 14, gun positions were attacked for the third consecutive day. Three-hundred-six (306) B-17s and B-24s put 14 of 36 positions completely out of commission.<sup>14</sup> The 2nd's target was at Marseille. The formation encountered some flak, but the losses were nil.<sup>15</sup>

On D-day, August 15, the crews barely had time to get to sleep before being roused for the mission briefing at 02:00 — their first night takeoff and assembly for a mission. It was hardly the preparation one would desire for the conditions, timing and precision demanded of the mission. The bombing of landing beach # 261 along the Cote d'Azur was to be minutes before the invasion forces began pouring ashore. The Group, composed of four squadrons of six planes each, was to assemble and depart the Foggia area no later than 03:30. The Fifteenth Air Force heavy bombers were to attack assigned beach areas between 07:00 and 07:30. Rendezvous times,





429th Squadron staff. Standing L to R: Capts. Edward J. Baburek; Robert P. Canavan; Joseph M. McCoid; Lt. Col. J.S. Cunningham; Maj. W. Randall Bedgood; Capt. Fred W. Siebott; and Lt. Allen B. Dry. Front L to R: Lts. Warman; Pettit; Merritt; R.B. Donovan; Capt. Moore; Lts. Charles V. Roe; and John G. Hofmann. McCoid and Canavan were Group historians. Lt. Donovan perished on mission 282 to Munich, October 4, 1944. Lt. Hofmann was the Group's last casualty of WW II.

locations, and bomber wave routes were to be strictly adhered to. Aircraft off course would be subject to anti-aircraft fire from friendly surface vessels. Due to proximity of friendly aircraft and surface vessels in the area in unprecedented numbers, crews were not to fire their guns, for testing or any reason other than actual engagement by enemy fighters. There was to be no bombing of other than designated targets. No bombs were to be jettisoned in the sea between France and Italy. Bombs not dropped on target were to be returned to base or, if necessary, jettisoned in the Adriatic. If doubtful of a good bomb run, leaders were not to drop bombs, but circle and make another run, provided it could be accomplished before 07:30. All bombing operations were to cease at 07:30.<sup>16</sup>

Early attacks on some of the beaches had to be aborted because of heavy fog and haze, but the final bombardment, of which the 2nd was a part, was successful. Underwater obstacles and beach defenses were destroyed or damaged, defending troops disorganized, and a number of coastal guns previously missed, were covered.<sup>17</sup>

Allied landing casualties were very light. The GAF was largely absent and ineffective against Allied air cover. The enemy was unable to bring in reinforcements because of interdiction of roads, railroads and bridges, and the threat of Allied air patrols that roamed the area. MAAF mounted the greatest one-day air effort in the Mediterranean. By the end of D-day, all beach-heads were secure.<sup>18</sup>

T/Sgt. S.C. Bushy, UTG, 429th Squadron, describes the mission and his bird's eye view of the invasion: "On the night of August 14, most of the combat crews had gone to bed in anticipation of the next day's mission. At 2200 (10:00 P.M.), we were all awakened by the whistle, and the call 'briefing at 2345' (11:45). Most of us could not believe it, but after confirmation, we ate chow, and went to the line to get our flying clothes and prepare our ship and guns for the mission. We all had the same idea, 'Invasion of Southern France,' because we had been bombing that region for several days in the softening up process, along with the night practice flying we had been doing. A lot of us had flown the

day before and were tired, so we lay around until our pilots and navigators came to brief us. At 02:45 we were briefed and the navigator said, 'Well gentlemen, we are going to start an invasion of Southern France.' He then went on to explain our route over southern Italy, and our rendezvous point over Corsica. We were to fly squadron formation to Corsica, then rendezvous into groups, go in over the target at 13,000 feet, and drop our bombs from 07:00 until 07:30 as the amphibious forces were to land at 07:30.

Ours was the lead ship, a pathfinder, flown by Lt. Col. Cunningham, Squadron Commander. We took off at 03:30 and circled the field until we had our squadron formed, then went off on course. We had all taken Benzedrine tablets to keep us awake, but were still tired, so we rested while we were cruising over Italy. When we left the coast of Italy, we were all at our stations ready for any fighters, and also looking for other groups in the sky as it was still night. I was in the top turret, and could see other squadrons coming in to complete the Group formations. At Corsica, the sky was filled with planes no matter where you looked. The entire 15th Air Force was out that morning. It seemed as if each group had a different means of signaling because one would be using flares and another wing lights. It was a beautiful sight, something like the Fourth of July. We arrived at the key point on time, 06:12. Our Group was nowhere in sight, so rather than get mixed up looking for them, we tailed into another group that was going out on course. As we neared the target, which was Beach # 261, the sky was filled with planes and an under-cast had formed so we would have to bomb by pathfinder. Because of the darkness and clouds, we were unable to see anything going to the target, but as we neared the target, the Mickey operator said, 'I see hundreds of ships in my scope,' so he had picked up the first wave of invasion craft.

We dropped our bombs by pathfinder at 07:08 and turned off the target. There was no flak and no enemy fighters, so not a gun on our ship was fired. Underneath us the sky was filled with medium bombers of the 12th Air Force and fighter planes of all descriptions, P-51, P-38, P-47, and many types of Navy fighters that were

from the 14 aircraft carriers of the invasion fleet. We dropped thirty-eight, 100 pound bombs from each airplane, and from later reports, our Squadron hit the target squarely.

On return to the base, we passed over the second wave of the invasion fleet and it seemed like there were thousands of ships of every description with many of them carrying barrage balloons. Just off the coast of Corsica, the 3rd wave was waiting. These were all larger craft, and there were many of them also. After we crossed the coast of Italy, we all relaxed and were happy that we had a chance to do our bit for the invasion, probably the last one in the European Theater. I was especially glad for the chance to fly that mission, because it was my birthday, and I will always be able to remember the occasion better.

We landed at 09:30 and went to interrogation to tell what we had seen. Our ground crew men were all anxious to know where we had been, and were all as glad as we were that another invasion had started, which would probably mean that the war would end a little sooner and we could all go home to our loved ones."<sup>19</sup>

What T/Sgt. Bushy had witnessed was the prelude to assault of the Cote d'Azur beaches by the 7th Army. On the night of August 14-15, paratroopers landed on the French Riviera near Le Muy. As soon as the aerial bombardment ceased at 07:30, elements of the 7th Army's invasion force of 3 American and 7 French divisions started going ashore. The fleet had sailed from Oran, Naples, Taranto, and Brindisi, and although it had taken five days to assemble, the weakness of the GAF had become so pronounced, and most specifically its reconnaissance, the fleet had gone undetected. Before D-day was over the ground forces had linked up with the paratroopers.<sup>20</sup>

On August 16, the Group was part of a post-invasion heavy bomber force of 108 sent to bomb four rail bridges in the upper Rhone River Valley. While the Group reported a good concentration of its bombs around the St. Vallier bridge, the overall results of the strike were disappointing. Nevertheless, that lack of desired success didn't appear to impede the 7th Army. It swept so swiftly into the area, it left supplies behind and had to be re-supplied by air drop of rations, gasoline and ammunition.<sup>21</sup>

The invasion interlude was over. The 2nd, and other diverted Strategic Air Force units, were free to resume the oil campaign.

## MISSION 254, AUGUST 18, 1944

PLOESTI, RUMANIA

ROMANO-AMERICANO OIL REFINERY

## MISSION 255, AUGUST 20, 1944

OSWIECIM, POLAND

SYNTHETIC OIL & RUBBER WORKS

## MISSION 256, AUGUST 22, 1944

ODERTAL, GERMANY, OIL REFINERY

The Fifteenth Air Force mounted large assaults against Ploesti on three successive days, August 17, 18, and 19. The RAF augmented these with one night attack. These assaults brought production down to 10% of original capacity. On August 20, the Russians started an



offensive into Rumania, the Rumanian divisions opposing them were quickly overrun, and on August 23, Rumania capitulated. Without Rumanian support the German front collapsed and Russian motorized columns swept into the Ploesti oil fields before the retreating Germans had time to destroy them. In a rare instance of cooperation, the Russians allowed American survey parties to examine Ploesti wreckage and the records. Gen. Eaker accompanied by Gen. Twining, flew to Ploesti to give the study his personal attention. The records did not provide detail about the effects of specific missions. It was clear, however, that the Fifteenth's campaign against Ploesti's production capacity was nearly complete and that the key to the campaign's success was its sustained character. According to the Fifteenth's own records, if the repeat performance of many crews is not included, 59,834 airmen had flown against Ploesti. A total of 13,469 tons of bombs were dropped, and 350 heavy bombers were lost.<sup>22</sup>

One of the last of those planes to be lost was from the 2nd. The Group flew the last of its 13 trips to Ploesti on August 18, with gratifying bombing results, but at the cost of three lives and one airplane. F/O Robert H. Rogers, 20th Squadron in airplane 44-6275, had to abandon the airplane after being hit by flak. The surviving crew members said that a fire developed in number 4 engine. F/O Rogers dove the airplane in an unsuccessful attempt to blow out the fire. When the plane was at 7,000 feet, the crew noticed that the fire had burned completely through the right wing. Rogers ordered bail out and all ten crew members jumped safely. They all landed in the water about 75 miles from the port of Trieste, Italy. The airplane exploded when it hit the water. Three B-17s with red tails circled the men in the water, dropping individual life rafts to them. A B-26 circled the crew and dropped a 7-man dinghy, but the Co-2 bottles were torn from it in the fall. The crew was still in the process of blowing up the dinghy by mouth when a PBY came to their rescue. Three crew members were not among those rescued. The pilot, copilot, and left waist gunner perished in the water for reasons unknown to the survivors. Besides F/O Rogers, they were 2nd Lt. Howard I. Seanson, and S/Sgt. John J. Bradley.<sup>23</sup>

With Ploesti no longer on the target list, more attention could be given to Germany's remaining oil resources. On August 20 nearly 500 B-17s and B-24s bombed synthetic oil refineries in Poland and Czechoslovakia. The 2nd went to Oswiecim, Poland, another deep penetration mission of approximately 760 miles. With the loss of Ploesti, and a greatly weakened Luftwaffe, the Germans had to rely more and more on added flak batteries and smoke screen generators to protect the yield of their synthetic plants. But these were protective, not preventive measures, and the bombing through the smoke was still effective.

Just after the formation left the target, aircraft number 42-102908, "Silver Streak," pilot, 1st Lt. Robert N. Lambert, 96th Squadron, began to lag. The Group made two wide turns in hopes the lagger could catch up. But it fell farther and farther behind and was attacked by two Me-109s. After the attack, one Me-109 was seen heading straight for the ground and the Fortress

began losing altitude rapidly, until it passed from sight. Two crewmen were wounded aboard the airplane, one broke an ankle upon landing, and two others were injured by attacks from civilian captors, but all got out of the airplane, were captured and survived.<sup>24</sup>

On August 22, the Fifteenth sent an even larger force than on the 20th, to widely scattered targets, with the major concentration on the oil refineries at Odertal and Blechhammer, Germany. The 2nd made two passes over Odertal before bombing into a partially effective smoke screen. The bombs were thought to have fallen in the target area. The flak was heavy, intense and accurate, and downed one airplane, while fighters successfully attacked another straggler.<sup>25</sup>

Both of the lost planes were from the 96th Squadron. The first was airplane number 44-8103 flown by 2nd Lt. Kay R. Cutler and crew. It was hit by flak over the target that set number 1 engine on fire. The engine was feathered, the plane began to fall behind, and was last seen southwest of Blechhammer, Germany. No chutes were seen. A German report from a headquarters in the area of Klammerburg noted the capture of the crew. Although 2nd Lt. Fredric M. Rosemore, N, S/Sgts. John (NMI), DeSoto, LTG, Raymond J. Morton, TG, and Gerald L. Kinchloe, LWG, were hospitalized with injuries suffered in their downed aircraft, all the crew survived, and were liberated.<sup>26</sup>

With one engine out and another running very rough, Lt. Cutler and crew lagged out of sight of the formation. As a straggler, they became a ready target for Luftwaffe fighters that habitually lurked along mission return flight paths for crippled airplanes. Four fighters attacked the struggling Fortress forcing the crew to abandon the airplane. 1st Lt. Donald L. Stillman, B, on his 42nd mission, was substituting in this relatively new crew because the regular bombardier, F/O David J. Eiseman, was recovering from flying plexiglass wounds to his face from a recent mission. Lt. Stillman bailed out safely, as did the rest of the crew. Stillman was fired on during his descent and could see people on the ground running toward his apparent touch-down point. He landed, uninjured, in a field, quickly gathered his chute and ran behind a small hay stack and was bending over to release his chute and remove the harness, when he was whacked over the back and head by the flat side of a shovel. As he keeled over from the blow, he partially dodged a boot heel to the chin, by his assailant, that stunned him and chipped a tooth. He was captured by the Hungarians and turned over to the Germans.

Navigator, 2nd Lt. Rosemore, broke an ankle on landing. He was taken by his Hungarian captors, tied behind a cart, and forced to march through the village on his broken ankle, while being pelted by various missiles, including rocks and horse manure. He was taken to a hospital for treatment of the broken ankle, but after it started to heal, it was deliberately broken again in an act of cruelty, that left Rosemore with a life-time limp.<sup>27</sup>

Somewhere east of Nagykanizsa, Hungary, others in the Group last saw airplane number 42-38069, "Big Twidget," piloted by 1st Lt. Charles M. Duncan. It was lagging a half mile behind

the formation when eight Me-109s attacked. Three chutes were seen to come out during the fighter attacks.<sup>28</sup> Two men were killed, and the rest were captured. S/Sgt. Charles W. Willett, TG, was killed at his position by 20mm fire from the fighters. Survivors were told by Hungarian sources that S/Sgt. Teddy V. Tomasik, LWG, was killed when his chute did not open even though the rip cord had been pulled. The Hungarians recovered his body and produced his identification tags.<sup>29</sup>

### **MISSION 257, AUGUST 23, 1944**

VIENNA, AUSTRIA, WIENER NEUDORF

AIRCRAFT ENGINE FACTORY

### **MISSION 258, AUGUST 24, 1944**

PARDUBICE, CZECHOSLOVAKIA

AIRDROME INSTALLATIONS/

AIRCRAFT DISPERSAL AREA

### **MISSION 259, AUGUST 25, 1944**

BRNO, CZECHOSLOVAKIA

LISEN AIRCRAFT FACTORY

The German aircraft industry had shown extraordinary recuperative power. Production increased during the summer of 1944 despite repeated bombardment of factories. Albert Speer, the German Minister of Armaments and War Production, was able to steadily increase production of single engine fighters to a remarkable degree by drafting more than 100,000 workers to repair or rebuild factories elsewhere, simplifying production and specializing in the manufacture of Me-109s and FW-190s. See below:

|       |       |                    |
|-------|-------|--------------------|
| March | April | May                |
| 1,050 | 1,345 | 1,523              |
| June  | July  | August             |
| 1,677 | 2,001 | 2036 <sup>30</sup> |

This production success did not translate into a comparable increase in Luftwaffe capability because of fuel shortages, inadequate pilot training, and losses from all causes that exceeded production. But the effort could not be ignored, and the key to rendering the Luftwaffe ineffective, in addition to depriving it of fuel, was a sustained assault against aircraft production whenever it showed signs of recovery and against the Luftwaffe wherever it could be found in the air or on the ground.

The Fifteenth carried out a well-executed operation in the Vienna area against refineries, aircraft production and railways on August 23. The 2nd joined with other 5th Wing heavies in an attack on the Wiener Neudorf Engine Factory. Results could not be observed because of smoke. Flak was heavy, moderate and accurate, slightly wounding one man. There were no losses or fighter encounters.<sup>31</sup>

The Group made two runs on Pardubice Air-drome and covered the assigned target with bombs. A small number of FW-190s made passes at the formation, wounding two men, one, T/Sgt. M. J. Cotton, 49th Squadron, UTG, seriously. Fort defenders downed one of the FW-190s.

Some bombs landed past the Brno Lisen aircraft factory, but the rest were well concentrated



on the target. The flak was inaccurate and there were no losses, injuries or encounters.<sup>32</sup>

### MISSION 260, AUGUST 26, 1944 VENZONE, ITALY, RAILROAD VIADUCT

A good pattern of bombs covered both the viaduct and bridge in the target area. The opposition was nil.<sup>33</sup>

### MISSION 261, AUGUST 27, 1944

BLECHHAMMER, GERMANY

NORTH OIL REFINERY

### MISSION 262, AUGUST 28, 1944

MOOSBIERBAUM, AUSTRIA

NORTH OIL REFINERY

### MISSION 263, AUGUST 29, 1944

MORAVSKA OSTRAVA, CZECHOSLOVAKIA

PRIVOSER OIL REFINERY

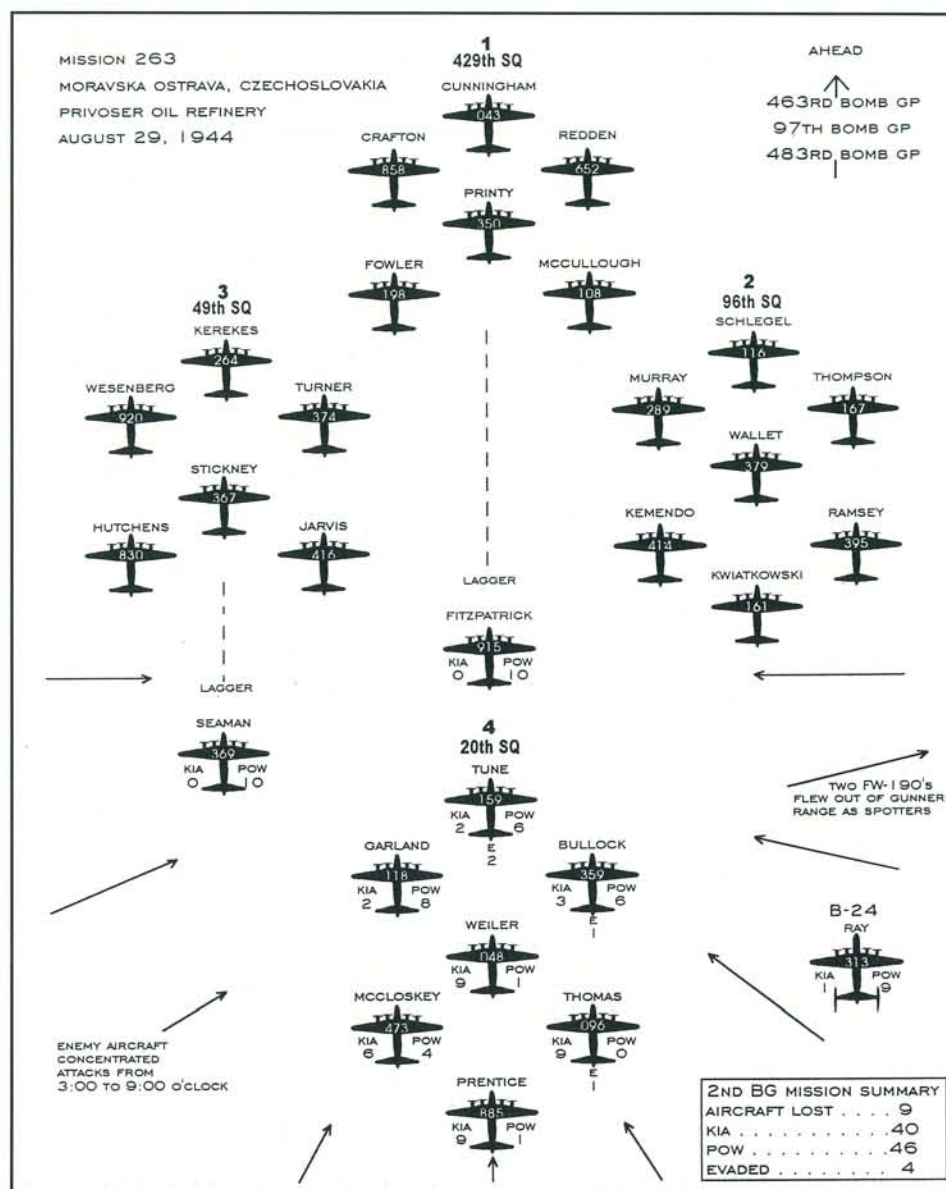
The Fifteenth Air Force brought to a close its summer oil campaign against the Blechhammers, the main Austrian refineries, and Privoser. For the 2nd, the opposition increased with each of these missions and reached an awful peak on Privoser. Privoser was the last mission during WW II where the Luftwaffe mustered the capability and found the opportunity to overwhelm a unit of the 2nd with devastating results.

Twenty-seven airplanes made the long trip to Blechhammer and bombed with good results. Many bombs were in the target area, and some to the right. The next day 5th Wing reported that the raid had put both north and south refineries out operation for some time.

The flak was as expected — heavy, moderate and accurate. Several airplanes were damaged and four men, all of from the 96th Squadron were seriously wounded — S/Sgt. J. C. Dempsey, RWG; S/Sgt. M. C. Hicks, LTG; T/Sgt. J. L. White, TG; and 2nd Lt. G. T. Georges, B. The next day, twenty-five airplanes went to Moosbierbaum, dropped a good pattern of bombs on the target, and came away with some flak damage, three wounded and one victim of a heart attack. T/Sgt. Marino P. Malatesta, UTG, 429th Squadron suffered a fatal heart attack on the mission. S/Sgt. Elmer Barfield Jr., RWG was seriously wounded as was Sgt. J. J. Hudson, ROG, both of the 49th Squadron.<sup>34</sup>

### AUGUST 29, 1944, THE DARKEST DAY — A SQUADRON LOST

By the ultimate measure of sacrifice, August 29, 1944, was the darkest day in the history of the 2nd Bombardment Group/Wing. On that day the Group sent out 28 crews, and in a one-sided, nineteen-minute, blistering attack, the Luftwaffe blasted 9 Fortress from the sky, snuffing out 40 lives of the 90 crewmen who went down. This number of casualties was far higher than those suffered on the other two most disastrous missions in the Group's history. More than the 29 lives lost on mission 57 to Foggia on August 19, 1943 when 5 airplanes went down, and more even than the 27 lost on the famous Steyr, Austria mission of February 24, 1944 when 14



airplanes never returned. The Privoser tragedy is magnified by the loss of a B-24, from the 737th Bomb Squadron, 454th Group, 304th Wing, going to the Ostrava south marshalling yards, when it straggled far behind its parent Group, and sought cover with the 2nd. It went down in the same attack and in the same vicinity, but survivors said it succumbed to engine loss, and resultant wing fire, caused by mechanical failure or flak damage.

The 2nd's specific target was the small Privoser Oil Refinery at Moravska Ostrava, Czechoslovakia. Ostrava is in north central Czechoslovakia, almost to the Polish border. It was a deep penetration mission, past Klagenfurt, Steyr, Weiner Neustadt and Vienna, Austria, and Gyor, Hungary, and uncomfortably close to Blechhammer, Germany. All major oil installations within range of Fifteenth Air Force bombers, with the possible exception of Brux in northwest Czechoslovakia, appeared immobilized. The raid was intended to "clean up" the bulk of the remaining Czech production. A diversionary raid to Szeged, Hungary, with a feints toward Budapest and Vienna to flush GAF fighters, was designed to divert possible opposition away from the force

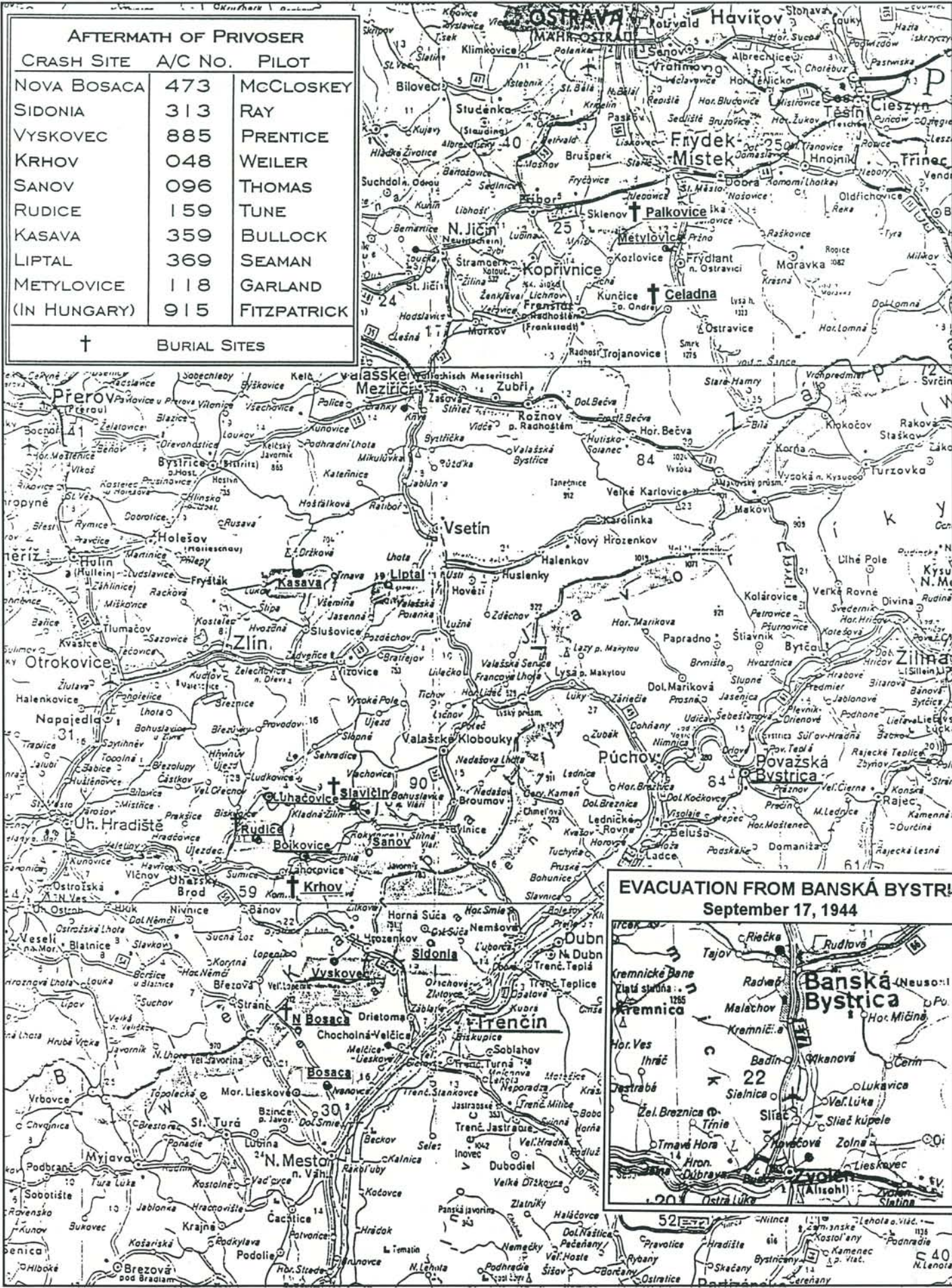
going to Ostrava. Those bombers not attacking oil refineries, were sent after marshalling yards. The Fifteenth's air order of battle for its heavies in the area was as in chart on page 249.

In the mind of the 20th Squadron leader, 1st Lt. William S. Tune, the mission started on a note of foreboding. It was the 20th's turn to fly the fourth squadron position — tail-end-Charlie — the last position in the last group in the bomber stream. Lt. Tune didn't like leading the Squadron in this very vulnerable position. He had a premonition that something was going to happen.<sup>36</sup>

Takeoff was at 06:14. The 2nd was following the 97th. Tune's copilot for that mission was 1st Lt. Francis W. Flynn. Lt. Flynn's regular crew had all been killed by a directed burst of flak over Blechhammer on July 7, while Flynn was in the hospital with the flu. Since then Flynn had been flying as a sort of roving copilot. This was his first mission with Tune. After the formation crossed the Adriatic, Flynn said he thought the 2nd was falling too far behind the other groups. Tune agreed. Flynn sensed trouble.<sup>37</sup>

Conditions deteriorated as the formation en-





### AFTERMATH OF PRIVOSER

| CRASH SITE   | A/C No. | PILOT       |
|--------------|---------|-------------|
| NOVA BOSACA  | 473     | MCCLOSKEY   |
| SIDONIA      | 313     | RAY         |
| VYSKOVEC     | 885     | PRENTICE    |
| KRHOV        | 048     | WEILER      |
| SANOV        | 096     | THOMAS      |
| RUDICE       | 159     | TUNE        |
| KASAVA       | 359     | BULLOCK     |
| LIPTAL       | 369     | SEAMAN      |
| METYLOVICE   | 118     | GARLAND     |
| (IN HUNGARY) | 915     | FITZPATRICK |

† BURIAL SITES

### EVACUATION FROM BANSKÁ BYSTRICA September 17, 1944





| Unit             | Target                                 | Target Time            |
|------------------|--|------------------------|
| 55th Wg (B-24s)  | Moravska Ostrava, Czechoslovakia       | Both bombed ahead of   |
|                  | South Marshalling Yards                | 5th Wg. Dust/smoke     |
| 304th Wg (B-24s) | Same                                   | already in target area |
|                  |  | when 2nd bombed        |
| 97th BG (B-17s)  | Bohumin, Czechoslovakia (Near Ostrava) |                        |
|                  | Fanto Oil Refinery                     | 10:55 — 10:56          |
| 463rd BG (B-17s) | Same                                   | 10:55 — 10:56          |
| 483rd BG (B-17s) | Moravska Ostrava, Czechoslovakia       | 11:00                  |
|                  | Main Marshalling Yards                 |                        |
| 2nd BG (B-17s)   | Moravska Ostrava, Czechoslovakia       | 11:12 — 11:14          |
|                  | Privoser Oil Refinery                  |                        |
| 99th BG (B-17s)  | Szolnok, Hungary, Marshalling Yards    | 11:52                  |
| 301st BG (B-17s) | Czegled, Hungary, Marshalling Yards    | 11:55                  |
| 49th Wg (B-24s)  | Szeged, Hungary, Marshalling Yards     | UNK <sup>35</sup>      |

tered Czech airspace. Airplane number 42-97915, "Wolf Pack", the seventh airplane in the 429th lead squadron, piloted by 2nd Lt. John F. Fitzpatrick, and the seventh airplane from the 49th Squadron, number 44-6369, piloted by F/O Duane B. Seaman, . . . "were lagging far behind their respective squadrons,"<sup>38</sup> (no precise time, cause or reason given,) which put them in the 20th's area. The B-24, in trouble and losing fuel had also sought refuge with the 20th. Eyewitnesses in the forward squadrons reported that the 20th was lagging 1,000 to 2,000 feet below and 500 to 2,000 yards behind the Group formation.<sup>39</sup> Even the weather conspired against the 2nd that day. The formation was flying below a thin layer of clouds. Further, the P-51 fighter escort was scheduled to rendezvous prior to target time. Intercom conversations among some crews indicate that arrival of the friendly escort was expected momentarily. (In its post-mission report, the 97th Bomb Group described the escort as good.<sup>40</sup>) It was a common practice, for the escort to fly ahead to "clean the air" of enemy aircraft as the bomber stream approached the target. Regardless, the 2nd was alone and without fighter escort and that's when it happened.

The Luftwaffe did not bite on the diversionary raid to Szeged or the feints toward Vienna and Budapest. The Luftwaffe had also observed the escort practice of leaving the bomber force to "clean the air" over the target. Colonel Gottard Hardick, Commander of the 8th German Fighter Division, had amassed an interceptor fleet of 65 Me-109Gs and 24 armor-plated FW-190As, some from as far away as the Berlin area. Two spotter FW-190s, flying out of range, kept the battle commander informed of the formation's progress. The GAF battle plan was for a two-pronged assault. One force approached the Group from the rear while the other force lurked out of sight behind the clouds. The fighters to the rear were spotted, dimly through the haze, but their appearance coincided with the expected arrival of the fighter escort, and they were flying the formation commonly used by the P-51s. The head-on profile of the Me-109 closely resembled that of the P-51. The collective effect of timing, formation and profile that aided the friendly escort, deceived the defenders just long enough for the Luftwaffe to swarm in on the Group largely

unchallenged. Almost immediately, the second force burst out of the clouds to the attack. The combined force of 89 fighters came swooping down on their startled victims with such suddenness and in such overwhelming numbers that some Fortresses were already maimed before their gunners had fired a shot in self-defense. The attackers launched rockets, then converged on the formation from 3:00 to 9:00 o'clock in waves of 4 to 10, line abreast, and in "V" formations of 10 to 20, firing 20mm cannons and machine guns, and brazenly flying through the formation as they completed their passes. These tactics quickly dispersed the 20th's formation. The Luftwaffe used tactics borrowed from the primal instincts of a hunter pack. They sought to separate the prey, one by one, from the anonymity and protection of the herd, and turn the hapless quarry into a singular target of a pack. As soon as a plane was crippled or forced out of the formation, it was set upon by a pack of fighters. Once so isolated, the elemental battle for survival of the fittest was fought to the finish. Against insurmountable odds, no isolated bomber was allowed to escape, except "Wolf Pack," and it only temporarily.

The frenzied milieu of the battle created such confusion that the mission investigating officer was forced to conclude . . . "that coherent accounts as to specific detail of just how any one or more of the planes in this squadron (the 20th) were lost is unobtainable."<sup>41</sup> This conclusion applies equally to "Wolf Pack," Lt. John F. Fitzpatrick and crew. Their story confirms how difficult it is to achieve coherency.

"Wolf Pack" was reported to be lagging from the seventh position in the lead squadron well before target time. It is not clear whether the lagging preceded or was the result of the enemy fighter attack, but personal accounts from the surviving crew, tend to confirm the latter. Tail gunner, Sgt. James J. Delutes Jr., reported planes approaching from the rear. Bombardier, 2nd Lt. Paul E. Sumner, whose job it was to call for oxygen checks and keep tabs on the gunners, told Delutes the approaching planes were probably the P-51 escort, but to keep a close watch. Then Delutes reported with alarm that the planes were firing at them! The fighters made a single pass at "Wolf Pack." At very much the same time, some of the "Wolf Pack" crew were horrified to see friendly fire coming from

1st Lt. McCullough's crew in plane 108, above and to the right. The fire was variously reported as coming from the waist gunner tracking an enemy fighter or from the tail gunner firing erratically apparently because of damage inflicted on his position by the attackers. This combination of enemy and friendly fire left "Wolf Pack" without engines 3 and 4, and their loss was compounded when number 3 propeller would not feather. "Wolf Pack" was now limping and lagging.

At one point "Wolf Pack" was directly over the 20th Squadron, giving Lt. Tune grave concern that should something happen the plane could fall through the 20th formation. The fighter attack diverted Tune's attention. Fitzpatrick's plane disappeared and Tune did not see what happened to it.<sup>42</sup>

At the mission debriefing, 2nd Lt. S. W. Johnson, CP on number 198, 429th Squadron, stated that, "Three or four minutes after the fighters left, I heard No. 915 call Col. Cunningham, leader of the Group formation and said he had been hit and to send escort. No reply was heard."

1st Lt. Charles E. Crafton, P, and S/Sgt. E. E. McClish, TG, on number 858, 429th Squadron, reported, "B-17 No. 915 was attacked by fighters and soon after dropped over towards 9 o'clock with white smoke streaming out of number three engine. Was losing altitude but the plane was under control. Later at 12:30 this aircraft was calling for escort protection and gave his position as approximately 35 miles Northeast of Lake Balaton. No chutes were seen."<sup>43</sup>

Lt. Fitzpatrick, turned southward toward base and began trading altitude for speed and distance, with the hope of at least getting to friendly territory. It was about this time that he called for fighter escort. None came. The crew salvaged the bombs and when they were no longer in the aerial battlefield, Fitzpatrick ordered the crew to jettison everything except parachutes, and escape and survival gear, to lighten the load and conserve fuel. The crew dropped the ball turret, after some difficulty, and tossed guns, ammunition, some radio equipment, armor plating, and anything that was loose, overboard. The crew members shedding their electrically heated flight suits were warned not to forget to put their shoes on because they might be in for a long walk.

Fitzpatrick nursed the airplane along on two engines. Defenseless, and fearing enemy fighters that often lay in ambush for stragglers along bomber return routes, Fitzpatrick called, gave his position as 35 miles northeast of Lake Balaton, and again ask for escort protection. None came and fortunately neither did any fighters. They did fly over a flak field and received fire. Fitzpatrick dove the airplane to hastened an exit from the area and there was no damage.

An earlier crew check disclosed that none had been injured. With no prospect of getting back to base, Fitzpatrick now considered a crash landing, hopefully in friendly territory. He gave the crew the option of bailing out or riding the airplane down. The crew decided to stay with the ship. They followed the ditching procedure, with everyone, except the pilot and copilot, gathered in the radio room — some with their backs to the radio room forward bulkhead and the others seated, between their legs. The overhead radio hatch was jettisoned for an escape route. Fitzpatrick picked a level field, and except for



the left wing clipping a tree top, made a very successful wheels-up landing. The ball turret cavity, with the force and weight of the airplane behind it, became a huge scoop in the soft earth, throwing dirt forward with such force it caved in the aft radio compartment door and filled the compartment with black dust and dirt. The crew groped in darkness as they scrambled out the hatch. Lt. Sumner, who was seated with his back to the forward bulkhead wall, was the last man out and he went out through the waist. He went to the front of the plane, expecting to join the crew in burning the airplane by releasing oxygen or fuel and setting it ablaze with a signal flare. But he was alone. He watched as the rest of the crew raced to escape — some toward a friendly beckoning native near a farmhouse. Other natives appeared looking more threatening, so Sumner ran and hid in a nearby corn field. When no one pursued him, he ventured back to the edge of the field, to watch developments from his hiding vantage point. He watched natives gather at the plane and pilfer some items, until military guards came and took over.

He sensed that the military might come looking for him, so he went deeper into the field and hid. He soon saw a young soldier coming down the row he was hiding in. Sumner moved quietly three rows over and laid down. The young soldier, looking as frightened as Sumner was, came cautiously down the corn row, gun at the ready, and where Sumner could plainly see him. The soldier, without looking in Sumner's direction, turned and left the field. Sumner decided it was prudent to bury his .45 caliber pistol.

Sumner stayed in the field all that day and the next, observing what went on around the plane. After dark on the second day, and suffering from thirst and mosquito bites, he started walking toward Yugoslavia, using a map and the compass from his escape kit. Just after dawn he risk seeking aid from an elderly man driving his horse and wagon down a secluded country road. After recovering from the shock of the meeting, the old man appeared to want to help. He took Sumner to the young Burgermeister of the nearby village. While the young man's wife fixed breakfast for Sumner, he watched through the window as the two men engaged in a heated argument outside. The old man drove angrily away. The young Burgermeister returned, and on promise of finding English-speaking help, confirmed Sumner's fears by turning him in to the gendarmes. He was taken on a long, uncomfortable wagon ride to Szekesfeharvar, about 40 miles northeast of Lake Balaton, where he spent the night in an army barracks under guard. The next day he was moved to a building occupied by Hungarian officers, who interrogated him and said he was to be tried and later be hanged. This threat was avoided when a German officer, stormed in and took Sumner to the train station. He was taken by train to Budapest, and with other downed flyers he was put in solitary confinement in what was dubbed Budapest Sing Sing. Later he was interrogated by the same German officer who brought him to Budapest. Following that he was put in a large room where he was soon joined by Fitzpatrick; 2nd Lt. Charles H. McGhee CP; and 2nd Lt. Richard M. Hausler, N; from the downed crew.

The rest of the crew was captured within the

hour of scrambling out of the airplane. They were taken by truck to Tata, Hungary, which is about 37 miles west-northwest of Budapest. They were confined in an armory, interrogated — some roughly — and kept for two days. Early on the third morning they were taken by train to Budapest and eventually put in solitary confinement for as much as two weeks, in Budapest Sing Sing. Later they were transported in box cars to Germany. The four officers were sent to Stalag Luft III, and the six enlisted men to Stalag Luft IV POW camps. All survived and were liberated at the end of the war. Fitzpatrick crash landed "Wolf Pack" at 46-33N and 18-35E which is 30 miles southeast of Lake Balaton and 75 miles south of Tata.<sup>44</sup>

The first to go down from the 20th was 2nd Lt. Robert O. McCloskey, in aircraft number 42-31473, "My Baby." His copilot that day was 2nd Lt. Harold W. Helveston Jr., on his second mission. The regular copilot was ill in the hospital. Instead of the regular navigator, Sgt. John J. Curran rode as a nose gunner.

The first that McCloskey knew something was wrong was when his top turret gunner and aerial engineer, S/Sgt. James A. Jones fell down at the base of his turret and didn't move. Then everything seemed to happen at once — tracers passing, shells popping, engines burning, instrument panel burning, and a flash oxygen fire. F/O Willard P. Netzley, the bombardier, tried to salvo the bombs but the system was out and there was a fire in the bomb bay. Most systems were out, including the autopilot, and 3 engines, and McCloskey had limited manual control. The only thing that seemed to be working was the intercom. The situation seemed hopeless so he gave the order to bail out. Sgt. Curran, F/O Netzley, and Lt. Helveston all went out the nose hatch. All those aft of the bomb bay perished. When McCloskey released the flight controls, and got out of the pilot's seat, the airplane went into a flat spin. McCloskey tried to move S/Sgt. Jones, but because of the spin and his own injuries, he couldn't, so he left the airplane. He landed in some trees, about 40 feet above the ground and somehow managed to get down. Only then did he realize the extent of his injuries — face, hands and most of his hair burned, severe left wrist wound, scalp and shoulder wounds, and right side numb and not working right.

Looking up he saw two men, with guns, coming down the hill towards him. He stepped out from behind a tree and waved to them. They approached, but not in a threatening manner, and showed concern for his injuries. They helped him to the top of the hill, laid him down, while someone brought a ladder from the valley below. A crude stretcher was fashioned out of the ladder by wrapping a deflated dinghy around it. McCloskey was carried down to the valley. By then several people had gathered. McCloskey was sure that had he been able, they would have helped him evade. Instead, he was loaded into a two-wheel cart pulled by a yoke of oxen. He was hauled for several hours to where the Germans were waiting with a truck to take him to a hospital. All during that ox cart ride, a young teenage girl walked beside the cart holding a tree branch to shade the burned and injured McCloskey from the hot sun. McCloskey recalls being in several hospitals during the first few days. At one of

these he was together with Lt. Helveston, who was unconscious. They were taken by ambulance to a hospital at Brno, where Lt. Helveston died. Doctors told McCloskey that Helveston had a skull fracture near his spine. McCloskey did not know where Lt. Helveston's body was taken.<sup>45</sup> According to Czech sources, McCloskey was taken initially to the hospital at Kromeriz. From there he and Lt. Helveston were transferred to the hospital in Brno, where Helveston died on September 2.<sup>46</sup> In a statement after liberation, an unidentified member of Lt. Tune's crew reported that he saw Lt. Tune in the hospital at Brno, and that Lt. Helveston was in the same hospital. Further, that Lt. Helveston died, shortly after admittance, of a broken neck and punctured lung and was buried in Brno by the Germans.<sup>47</sup>

Lt. McCloskey spent about 30 days in the hospital at Brno, then he and another POW were taken, under guard, to Frankfurt, then Wiesbaden, Germany, then to another hospital and finally to Stalag Luft III. In January 1945, as the Russians continued their advance, he was hurriedly marched out of Stalag Luft III with other prisoners and eventually got to Moosberg, about 25 miles north of Munich. He was liberated March 29 by an element of Patton's Third Army.<sup>48</sup>

S/Sgt. Jones, left in the airplane, recovered consciousness, snapped on his parachute, and the next thing he knew he was floating through the air in the midst of airplane debris. Though burned and wounded, he wandered in the woods for two days, before being captured by the Germans in Slovakia and taken to a hospital in Bratislava. He managed to escape, was captured again and put in the internment camp near Bratislava.<sup>49</sup>

Sgt. Curran and F/O Netzley were captured. S/Sgt. Harold (NMI) Schirmer, LWG. Sgt. Elmer J. Pruitt Jr., TG, S/ Sgt. Edwin R. Everett, ROG, and Sgt. Charles A. Munden, RWG, were all buried in Nova Bosaca, Slovakia.<sup>50</sup> It is not known whether they bailed out or were blown out. Czechs reported that the parachutes of the first three were partially burned. S/Sgt. Jones was shown the dog tags of Sgts. Schirmer and Pruitt by Czech natives. Before the attack, Sgt. Everett had told Lt. McCloskey that he had forgotten his dog tags. Natives said one unidentified body was buried with Sgts. Schirmer and Pruitt, and that was believed to be Everett.<sup>51</sup>

Sgt. Luther L. Durette, LTG, apparently did not bail out. Sgt. Curran saw Durette's dog tags in the possession of German guards, and was led to believe they were recovered from the plane wreckage.<sup>52</sup> Sgt. Durette was buried at Slavcin, Moravia.<sup>53</sup>

The orphaned Liberator, number 42-52313, from the 737th Squadron of the 454th Bomb Group, crashed in the forest near Sidonia, Slovakia. The area still shows remaining effects of its path through the trees. The crew was a victim of engine mechanical failure or was knocked out by flak and resultant fire. The pilot, 1st Lt. Billy G. Wray and T/Sgt. James B. Garrett, UTG, were injured in bail out. They both hit trees and fell hard to the ground. Lt. Wray broke his back and one leg. Sgt. Garrett broke a foot. They were captured, and taken to a hospital in Trencin, Slovakia. T/Sgt. Robert H. Reid Jr., WG, was captured immediately. Six other crew members, 1st Lt. Carnot J. Nisely, CP; 1st Lt. Louis Stromp, N; 1st Lt. Louis F. Leon, B; S/Sgt. Ferris K.