Into the Wild Blue Yonder

The Crew - Casper, Wyoming, 1944

Photo Credit: unknown

Back Row: PFC Edwin Rossillon (nose gunner), Corporal Albert Turk (armament), Corporal Bert Silliman, PFC Bill Rude (tail gunner), Corporal Eugene Karpi (flight engineer), PFG Jim Cox (ball turret gunner)
Front Row: Flight Officer Jim Nixon (airplane commander), 2nd Lt. Joe Lawson (navigator), Flight Officer Otto Doville (copilot), Flight Officer Gilce Richardson (bombardier)

By Edwin "Rosie" Rossillon

INTO THE WILD BLUE YONDER

I first became aware that parts of the world were at war or going to war in 1939 when I was 13 years old. I had previously heard Mom and Dad talk about the German army joining Dictator Franco in the Spanish Civil War in 1936-38. Dad was always keenly interested in world affairs and news about the possibility of a war. I suppose having five sons who might be called into military service weighed on his mind. Although Dad was not in the service during WWI, he was well aware of the havoc that the war had on families who lost or had sons severely wounded during the war. I remember asking my mother what was wrong with a sickly-looking man that attended our church. She told me that he had been exposed to poison gas during the war. I was frightened when she told me that.

Dad was always reading newspapers and listening to our old battery-operated radio; we didn't have electricity. Dad would always employ us kids to keep quiet so he could hear the news. I never could figure out how he could hear anything on the radio; the kids were always noisy, and the radio had a lot of static, low volume and an occasional squeal. I remember we were having a 4-H club meeting and party at our house on the day that Germany invaded Poland in September 1939. Some of the older boys were saying that we would all be in the army before this war was over. I was too young to comprehend the gravity of the situation, but how right they were.

I began taking an interest in the Air Corps when I was a senior in high school. The big bombers flying out of Forbes Air Force Base in Topeka would fly over our farm at very low altitudes. I thought I would like to fly like that. When the planes flew over very low I would wave to the crewmembers and they would wave back. I started thinking that maybe I could enlist in the Army Air Corps instead of being drafted, and then maybe I could be a pilot.

Several of the boys in our senior class took a written test to see if we could qualify for Air Corps training after we got out of high school. Two of the guys got letters notifying them that they passed and others were notified

that they had failed. I didn't hear anything. I was really disappointed, as I was sure I was as smart as the two guys that passed. The application that followed required a picture and the only place to get a picture taken was in Emporia. I didn't know what to do. I hadn't gotten a rejection; should I get a picture or not? My mother told me I had better get a picture, as she was sure I must have passed the test and there was some mix-up with my approval letter. The three of us drove to Burlington, caught a train to Emporia, had our pictures taken, and returned home the same day. About three days later, my approval letter arrived. Never doubt your mother's intuition. The three of us traveled to Kansas City to take our physical exam. We all failed. They thought I had a heart murmur, one of the other guys had an overbite, and the third failed the eye test. They were quite picky.

When I graduated from high school in May of 1943, I was seventeen years old and restless to do something besides staying on the farm until I would be drafted in January of 1944. I wanted to travel to western Kansas and work in the wheat harvest but my parents vetoed that grand scheme. They suggested that I work in the airplane factories in Wichita. Vic was in Wichita working at Cessna and got me a job there. Prior to this time, Norbert, who worked at Beechcraft, joined the Navy Air Corps at the urging of my Uncle Jerome, and Laurens, who worked at Boeing, was drafted into the Navy. At different times, Norbert, Laurens, Skip and I all stayed at a rooming house in Wichita that was run by two old maids who were very conservative: no liquor, no cigarettes, no cussing, and no girls. That's why they liked the Rossillon boys. Skip also fit that mold.

In the fall of 1943, my destiny with the draft board was approaching. I just had to do something to avoid the draft and the army infantry. I still remembered that sickly man in church that had been exposed to poison gas. There was already a lot of news about the impending Allied invasion of France from England, later called D-day. The timing looked bad for me. There would be just time enough to be drafted into the army infantry and getting my feet wet in the English Channel shortly after. Since my mother didn't raise no dummy, I decided to try enlisting in the Air Corps one more time. I visited Wichita University and talked to a nattily dressed Air Corps

captain about joining up. I still had visions of greatness and thought that maybe I could be an officer like the captain. I got the necessary paperwork completed along with a consent form signed by my parents since I was only 17 years old. I took and passed the written examination. In early December 1943 I was notified to report to Strother Field near Winfield, Kansas for my physical. Since I had no car, I took a bus to Winfield, arriving at about 4:00 in the morning. I waited around the bus station until 8:00 for the bus to the airfield. What a way to prepare for my physical, up all night, tired, and nervous about the whole ordeal. The physical examination took up most of the day. My blood pressure was a little high and when I had to extend my arms straight out, my fingers were trembling, like Dolly. I was sure I was going to flunk the physical once again. The flight surgeon took me into his office and talked to me. He said that if I had been 21 years old with this nervousness he would have flunked me, but since I was only 17 years old, I would probably get over my problem. Much to my relief, he passed me and I was on my way to becoming an Army Air Corps cadet. I was now eligible to train as a pilot, navigator or bombardier and become an officer. How naive I was. On January 21, I got my notice to report to Fort Leavenworth, Kansas on January 26, 1944. I quit my job, told the old maids goodbye, and took off for home.

My very first indoctrination into military life was at Fort Leavenworth, 8:00 in the morning of January 26, 1944. When I checked in, they wondered why I was so early as I didn't need to report until 5:00 in the evening. I was assigned to a barrack to await the arrival of the rest of my group. There were four sergeants playing poker in the barrack where I was assigned so I spent most of the day watching them play, as I knew next to nothing about poker. During one hotly contested poker hand, one of the sergeants asked me to lend him two dollars, which he promptly lost. All he had to say was. "Sorry kid." I was out two bucks but learned a lesson about army life: be suspicious of everything and everybody, as there will always be someone trying to take advantage of you. One of the sergeants was very kind to me. While we were sitting around he taught me how to salute, stand at attention, stand at ease, and best of all, how to make up an army cot as per army regulations. The blanket, sheets, and pillow must be positioned just so, the

hospital folds just right, and the top blanket stretched tight enough so that a half dollar coin would bounce when dropped on the blanket. Very useful information I later found out. My first three days of military service were spent taking written tests, a physical examination, shots, x-rays and the oath as a cadet with a salary of $26.00 a month. We were issued army clothing and packed our civilian clothes for shipment home. Uniforms included both winter and summer clothes. We got dress olive drab (OD) winter uniforms, which consisted of two wool shirts, two pairs of wool trousers, a jacket with brass buttons referred to as a blouse, a heavy wool overcoat, and a campaign cap. Summer uniforms included two cotton khaki shirts, two pairs of khaki trousers, and a khaki campaign cap. We also got OD underwear and socks, a pair of brown boots, two khaki ties, a web belt with brass buckle and a duffel bag to carry the clothing. Work uniforms were two pairs of green coveralls called fatigues, a green-billed cap, and a hip length jacket. We were also given our dog tags. Dog tags were two pieces of stainless steel about 1-1/2 inches long and 1 inch wide. A beaded necklace held the tags around our neck. The tags were embossed with our name, serial number, blood type, and religion. My tags read Edwin C. Rossillon, [redacted], O and C. On the fourth day we were loaded on a troop train, destination Jefferson Barracks, located at St. Louis, Missouri. Another thing I learned early in my military life was that there were always going to be a lot of rumors, some true and most untrue. One such rumor was that if you got through basic training at Jefferson Barracks without catching pneumonia you could survive any combat. The rumor was partially true as a sizeable number of the recruits did develop respiratory problems.

Jefferson Barracks was my first real exposure to what a military base was like. The base was located on the river bottom adjacent to the Mississippi River, but I never did see the river, too many trees. The place must have been several thousand acres enclosed by a fence with access gates manned by Military Police (MP's) who checked credentials of all passing through the gates. The terrain was generally flat with a few rolling hills and many trees. Barracks, training buildings, and various other outbuildings were constructed of wood and were scattered about in areas cleared of trees. The permanent personnel at the base lived in barracks for the enlisted men and bachelor

quarters for the officers. Each barracks housed about 30 men and the Bachelor Office Quarters (BOQ's) were standard barracks divided into rooms, housing two officers per room. The recruits, meaning my friends and me, were not so fortunate. We lived in pyramidal tarpaper huts, eight men to a hut. The huts were about 16 feet square with wooden floors about three feet above the ground set on pedestals. That was to keep the floor from getting wet from all the rain runoff. The walls and roof were open spaced 2x4 boards covered with tarpaper. There were three windows and one door, all loose fitting. A cast iron pot-bellied coal-fired stove that sat in the middle of the hut provided heat. Furniture consisted of double deck cots and a wooden footlocker for each recruit. Besides the wet, cold and damp weather, we had to put up with coal smoke and soot. The assembly area and the area around our huts were gravel surfaced. The gravel kept us out of the mud most of the time. We were there in February and March, so there was a lot of rain and some snow.

Our troop train arrived at a siding on the base about 1:00 in the morning. I was beginning to notice that everywhere I went we always arrived at our destination in the middle of the night. We were greeted by several drill sergeants each with a roster of names for the recruits that they would be training and browbeating for the next couple of months. We were taken to a supply depot where we were issued more equipment: two sheets, one pillow case, two OD wool army blankets, a couple of towels and washcloths, equipment belt, canteen, mess kit, raincoat, helmet liner, canvas leggings and a gas mask. This equipment was to supplement the clothing issued to us previously. We packed all of our clothes and equipment in a big duffel bag when moving from base to base.

Our next stop was at our living quarters. It was then about 3:00 in the morning. Seven of my buddies and I quickly entered our hut, selected our bunks, and made up our bunks so we could get to bed. All the while we were speculating that we would surely be permitted to sleep a little later than normal as we had been up most of the night. Reveille sounded promptly at 5:00 in the morning along with information of the day. We were told what the uniform of the day was to be, and to be dressed, groomed, and ready to

fall in at the assembly area at 5:30 A.M. The routine wasn't so bad after a few days, but the first couple of days were hectic. We didn't know how to dress, make up our cots, assemble, or march. The drill sergeants were having fun. Lucky for me, the kind sergeant at Fort Leavenworth had warned me about what was going to happen so I was more prepared than most. The most amusing thing that happened the first day was putting on our leggings. The leggings were designed to cover the top part of the boot and the lower part of the pant legs to just above the mid-calf of your leg. To put them on, you need to put your booted foot through a stirrup and then lace up the side of the legging over the hooks with a shoestring. You have to realize that we were under pressure. Time was short and none of us had ever done this before. We were frantically trying to get the leggings on before the call to assemble. Some of the guys got it right, including me, thanks to my kind sergeant. Some had then on backwards, that is with the laces on the inside of the leg and others missed hooks when lacing so their leggings had gaposis. Those with the hooks on the inside kept tripping because the hooks kept catching on each other. Talk about a ragtag outfit. Even the drill sergeant couldn't keep from laughing as we went to the mess hall in disarray. We learned early that there was a right way, a wrong way, and the army way of doing things and you can guess which way it had better be done.

Jefferson Barracks was a basic training camp where we were taught how to be soldiers. This required that the squadron have discipline. We were to follow orders no matter what they might be. We learned how to dress, salute, officer courtesy, the use of various types of guns, physical conditioning, and most of all how to march. Every day it was marching, only they called it close order drill. You had to learn to march so that the squadron could get from one place to another without looking like an unruly mob. We would always assemble in two rows with one row directly in front of the other, with the tallest guys on the right and the shortest guys on the left end. We would then make a right face and away we would go. The problem was, the long legged guys were in the front and they would set the pace. We shorties in the rear always had trouble keeping up.

A typical day started with the bugler sounding reveille at 5:00 A.M., dress per the uniform-of-the day directive, fall into formation at 5:30 A.M. and march off to the mess hall for breakfast. Back to our huts by 6:15, make up cot, clean hut, and be ready to fall in for training at 7:00. The day's training ended about 7:00 P.M. We were on our own from 7:00 to 9:00 when taps sounded, which meant lights out. We trained six days a week with Sundays off although we were confined to the base. I spent Sundays going to church then maybe to the PX for candy and soda. Other time was spent writing letters, polishing shoes, brass buckles and buttons. Sometimes I'd go to the recreation hall and watch the infamous poker games. In all my time in the service, I never played poker, but I learned how the game was played.

Saturday mornings were inspection time. We were to be ready for an inspection of our hut at 9:00 A.M. sharp. You had better be ready and if anyone of the eight men in the hut screwed up, we were all in deep trouble. Trouble included guard duty, latrine cleaning, or KP duty. Lucky for me we had a pretty good group. We got caught once for dust on top of the ceiling joist in our hut. That meant guard duty for four hours on Sunday, which was supposed to be our day off. We always had this cocky little 2nd lieutenant wearing white gloves inspect our quarters. Sergeants conducted similar inspections daily, but they were never as strict. For the Saturday inspections, the cots had to be made just right so the 50-cent piece would bounce and all of our personal items in our footlockers must be in place and uniforms hung properly. Not one speck of dust or soot was tolerated. That was difficult to achieve since we heated the hut with a coal-burning stove. We also had to be spic and span in our dress uniform, polished shoes, shiny brass, haircut, and clean-shaven. In addition we were required to stand at attention beside our bunks during the inspection, which sometimes lasted for ten minutes.

Another duty besides training was to take our turn at KP, which was doing kitchen work in the mess hall. It took me a while to figure out that when you were on KP duty, it was best to volunteer for the more cushy jobs or you would be stuck with washing dishes, especially pots and pans, which was a killer job. It became readily apparent that a stupid farm boy was no match

for the street-wise city guys. I always ended up doing pots and pans. Once in a while, we would have KP duty at the officer mess. I liked that because the work wasn't as intense and the food was much better.

Mess halls were pretty bad for enlisted men. Food all over the floors, tables, and chairs. Table manners were atrocious. When we went to eat at the mess hall you took a tray and were given food cafeteria-style. The problem was that the people serving the food were disgruntled guys just like us doing KP duty. They would slop the food on your tray so that it splashed over the rest of the food and often times on you. If you were a picky eater, that was tough luck. Then trying to find a table that was clean enough to sit at was a problem. We all got numbed to the situation after a while and the mess hall ceased to bother us. At least the name of the place was appropriate.

Nearly everyone in our squadron except me smoked, which meant there were many cigarette butts around. Several times a week we would be required to police the area. This meant picking up trash from the drill field, the assembly area and around our hut. Smokers were supposed to field strip their cigarette butts before they were thrown away. That meant they should tear up the butt, scatter tobacco, and wad up the paper in a ball before pitching it. In addition to cigarette butts, there were always candy wrappers and other miscellaneous papers scattered around the area.

When we were having outdoor training such as close order drill, shooting range, or the obstacle course, we would occasionally get a break. The drill sergeant would stop whatever activity we were doing by saying, "At ease, smoke 'em if you got 'em." Everybody would light up except for me, smoke and throw the butts on the ground. That's why policing the area was an ongoing duty.

We spent a lot of time marching. I suspect we marched at least five miles a day just getting from one training area to the next. While we were marching we always had to sing. Most of the tunes weren't so bad, but sometimes they would come up with lyrics that were very vulgar. I remember the songs

got so bad that headquarters sent a directive down to cool such songs. All the marching and obstacle course training was relatively easy for me because having been raised on a farm I was in good physical condition. Learning to shoot and care for guns was also old hat as we had guns at home on the farm. One time we went on a bivouac, which required us to hike 25 miles away from home base, stay two nights, and then hike 25 miles back. Most of us made it back ok but with many blisters on our feet. About every two weeks we would have a poison gas drill. They used tear gas for such training. If they had used poison gas, we would have all been dead. For this training exercise, we were put in a room then they would turn on the gas and yell gas attack. The objective was to get your gas mask on before you took the next breath. This required that you hold your breath, close your eyes, get your mask out of its carrying case and over your face before taking the next breath. If you opened your eyes or took a breath before your mask was in place, your eyes, throat, and lungs would really burn.

One Sunday I got a 4-hour pass to be off base while I was at Jefferson Barracks, so several of us went into St. Louis to see the sites. Must not have been too exciting as the only thing I remember was riding the streetcars for free and going to the USO for a short time. We didn't spend much time in town because we had only four hours and there would be hell to pay if we weren't back on time.

When we first arrived at Jefferson Barracks we were to take basic training for three months then go into cadet training as pilots, navigators, or bombardiers, and then become officers in the Army Air Corps. After six weeks of basic training the word came down that they were running out of aircrews overseas and there was a desperate need for aerial gunners. With a stroke of the pen, we were no longer Air Corps cadets but buck privates and on our way to aerial gunnery school. But first, we had to have shots and take another physical examination.

My next stop was to be Kingman Air Force Base near Kingman, Arizona. About a 150 of us buck privates, which is the lowest rank there is, boarded the train at St. Louis and headed for our new destination. The trip took two

nights and a day. They had a crude mess hall in one of the cars for our food but there was no place to sleep. By the second night, everyone was so tired that they were lying all over the seats and aisle floor. We were a pretty motley group, dirty and unshaven, and didn't smell too good. It was around March 15th, 1944 when we arrived in Kingman and it was already hot, dry, and dusty. In addition, none of us has the foggiest idea where Kingman, Arizona was.

Kingman Air Base turned out to be much nicer than Jefferson Barracks. The drill sergeants weren't as mean. We still had to maintain the usual army discipline but the sergeants weren't out to get us just for the fun of it. I guess I would consider it more business-like. We were taught everything there was to know about three different weapons, the 30-caliber carbine, the Colt 45 pistol, and the 50-caliber machine gun. We trained until we were able to disassemble and reassemble the machine gun blindfolded. The reasoning for that drill was that we needed to be able to fix our guns in the dark of night if necessary. I must have taken the 50-caliber machine gun apart and put it back together several hundred times.

We had to become proficient in the use of these three weapons. Becoming a marksman with the carbine was easy as I was used to firing a rifle around the farm. The machine gun wasn't difficult because if you sprayed enough bullets around, you could eventually hit a stationary target. Now hitting a moving target was something else, but that came later. Learning to hit the target with a 45-caliber pistol was another matter. It looked easy but it wasn't for me. The first few times I tried it, I couldn't hit a four-foot diameter target at 50 feet. I could have thrown the gun and hit that size of target. The way we were taught to fire the pistol was to hold the gun out at arm's length, aim, and pull the trigger. When the gun fired, the spent shell casing was automatically ejected to the side, backwards, and out of the way. That worked great for right-handed people, but for left-handers, the shell casing was ejected very close to your face. They convinced me that although the shell would pass close to my head, it wasn't supposed to hit me. What a vote of confidence that was. After many practices, I still couldn't shoot the

pistol well, but because they needed aerial gunners, they weren't about to wash me out for a little thing like that.

We spent many hours on the machine gun firing range. Generally we were out at the range two or three times a week. We worked in pairs at the range. First we would go to the armory, pick up our machine gun and ammunition. The machine gun weighed about 75 pounds and 1000 rounds of 50-caliber cartridges weighed over 100 pounds. At the range we mounted the guns on pedestals that were positioned in a row about 20 feet apart. One of the team members fired the gun while the other team member fed the ammunition belt into the gun while standing beside the gun. Those guns were very loud. When you were standing behind and firing the gun it wasn't too loud, but standing beside the gun was something else. In addition we didn't have earplugs. We took turns shooting until we had each fired 500 rounds. We were continually cautioned to shoot in short bursts or we would burn out the barrel of the gun. The barrels were air-cooled so overheating the barrel was not much of a problem when firing from a moving airplane, but sitting still on the ground was different.

We were next exposed to the decompression chamber that was designed to simulate flight in an airplane. We learned that when we went up in an airplane our ears would pop and we were taught how to swallow or hold our nose and blow to equalize the pressure in our ears. We also learned that as we flew high in the air, we would pass out if we didn't have oxygen. To demonstrate what would happen, the instructor had all of us put on our oxygen masks except for one man. The instructor then slowly reduced the pressure in the chamber, which also reduced the oxygen. As the supply of oxygen was reduced, the guy without the mask started to act like he was drunk. The instructor asked the guy to write his name. He started writing and pretty soon he dropped the pencil and slumped over. He was quickly given oxygen and was ok in a few seconds but didn't remember anything that happened. The lesson learned was that without oxygen, you could easily lose your life without realizing what was happening.

Another training exercise was learning to identify airplanes. They would flash silhouettes of airplanes on a screen and we would have to identify them and decide whether they were friend or foe. This was a drill that we would repeat many times before we went overseas.

After about two months of training, we were temporarily transferred to Yucca Air Base in Arizona, where we were to get our first ride in an airplane. We were divided into groups of five with an instructor and taken up in a Boeing B-17 bomber, a four-engine plane, to practice the things we had learned in our past two months of training. We took turns firing a machine gun at targets on the ground. We found out that it was much harder to hit a target when shooting from an airplane. The instructor cautioned us against shooting off the end of the wings of our own plane. After our shooting exercise, the pilot told us to put on our oxygen masks as he was going to take us for a ride. We went up to 30,000 feet and then back down rather quickly to demonstrate how our ears would react to a rapid descent. After we landed, I thought oh boy, on my first airplane ride I flew 30,000 feet high. That was great; I was really excited. We flew four or five similar flights then it was back to Kingman Air Base.

We trained at Kingman Air Base for another week then it was graduation time. On the big day, we put on our dress uniforms, groomed ourselves, and marched to the parade grounds. Things were all spit and polish. Each of us was presented with our silver aerial gunner wings and a promotion to private 1st class, a one striper. I don't remember, but I think we got a two or three dollar a month raise in pay. After another physical, some shots, and x-rays, we boarded a troop train for parts unknown. We were at Kingman Air Base for almost three months and I never got to visit the town of Kingman.

There was one incident at Kingman that demonstrates how little things can change the path that people take. My buddy at Jefferson Barracks and Kingman took the exact same training that I did. About three days before graduation he and I were walking down a road at the base. There was nothing but sand at the base, so the roads were defined by a row of boulders on each side of the road. We were hopping from one boulder to the

next when my buddy tripped and broke his big toe. He ended up in the infirmary, missed graduation, and spent the rest of the war in Miami Beach, Florida, while I had to dodge shrapnel. Sometimes life doesn't seem to be fair.

This troop train was of better quality than those used in the past. We had makeshift bunks and seats for lounging during the day. There was no mess hall on the train, so at mealtime we would stop the train at a town and eat in a restaurant. One day we stopped in Chama, New Mexico and ate at a Harvey House. As I remember, we also stopped in Dodge City, Kansas. We still didn't know where we were going, but we were headed northeast.

After a two-day trip, we arrived at Lincoln Air Base in Lincoln, Nebraska. They finally told us that this was the place where the aircrews were assembled. Aside from meeting my crewmembers for the first time, the one thing I remembered about Lincoln was the humidity. We had traveled from a very hot extremely dry climate, to a very hot and humid climate. When I got out of bed and slipped on my fatigues, I thought someone has soaked them in a bucket of water.

We arrived in Lincoln about June 10, 1944 and took our usual physicals and x-rays. I should have died long ago if x-rays made you susceptible to lung cancer. In addition, my blood pressure was high, as it always had been during my time in the army. The next order of business was to assemble in a big theater-like hall to obtain our crew assignments. This process was somewhat nerve wracking because these guys were the people that you were going to live and fly with until who knows when. The Major in charge would call out the airplane commander's name and then his crewmembers. Our crewmembers were:
Jim Nixon, Airplane Commander - Rank, Flight Officer
Otto Doville - Copilot - Rank, Flight Officer
Gilce Richardson - Bombardier - Rank, Flight Officer
Joe Lawson - Navigator - Rank, 2nd Lieutenant (joined us later)
Eugene Korpi - Flight Engineer - Rank, Corporal
Bert Silliman - Radio Operator - Rank, Corporal

Albert Turk - Armament Non-Com - Rank, Corporal
Jim Cox - Gunner - Rank, PFC
Bill Rude - Gunner - Rank, PFC
Edwin Rossillon - Gunner - Rank, PFC

Jim Nixon held up a placard with his name on it and all the crewmembers gathered around and introduced ourselves to each other. Nixon then wanted to know where we all fit into the crew. Everyone with their particular training had certain duties on the plane except the gunners. Bill Rude piped up and said he wanted to be tail gunner, Jim Cox said he would take the ball turret since he was the smallest, that left the nose gunner position for me. Jim Nixon agreed, so those were the positions we maintained throughout the war. After a while, the officers and enlisted men split off into separate groups to get acquainted. I'll never forget the first thing Bill Rude said when we were out of earshot of the officers. I quote, "Jesus Christ, we're stuck with three flight officers." It was common practice that when candidates for officers training were not as good as expected, they were commissioned as flight officers instead of 2nd lieutenants. We were off to a roaring start. Jim Nixon told us he was a B-24 pilot, but none of the rest of the crew had ever been on a B-24 bomber.

Our crewmembers turned out to be an interesting lot. Nixon was 21 years old, came from Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, had some college training and had a steady girlfriend. Doville was 20 years old, came from Forth Smith, Arkansas, and had a steady girlfriend. Richardson was 20 years old, came from Menomonee Falls, Wisconsin, and had a steady girlfriend. Lawson was 27 years old, came from Boston, and had a wife and two kids. Korpi was 22 years old, came from Hurley, Wisconsin, and had a wife and two kids. Silliman was 19 years old, came from Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, and had a steady girlfriend. Turk was 23 years old, came from Blackwell, Oklahoma, and had a wife. Cox was 21 years old, came from Marshal, Missouri, and had a steady girlfriend. Rude was 18 years old, came from Upper Darby, Pennsylvania, and had a steady girlfriend. Then there was me, 18 years old and the baby of the crew, came from Gridley, Kansas, and had NO regular girlfriend. Interestingly all of the guys married their steady girlfriends

after the war was over. See, that shows you that I was the cagey one for not having a steady girlfriend. After a couple of more days we boarded another troop train for parts unknown, except we knew it would be at an air base with B-24 bombers.

After one day and a night on the troop train, we arrived at our new home, Casper, Wyoming. We were trucked to Casper Air Base located about 10 miles from town; it was June 15, 1944. We took another physical and my blood pressure was still a little high for being on an aircrew. Conditions were much better at Casper, especially for bomber crews. We seldom had barrack inspections, no KP, and no close order drill. The mess hall was open 24 hours a day, and aircrew members could eat as often as they cared to. We also got some additions to our wardrobe, down filled flight jacket and pants, leather flying helmet, goggles, and an oxygen mask. This equipment was with us until we returned home from overseas.

On the second day after our arrival at Casper, we began our bomber crew training. We trained five days then had one day off. The pilot, copilot, radio operator, and flight engineer flew almost everyday. The full crew flew together about every other day. We gunners spent lots of time on the gunnery range perfecting our skills with a 50-caliber machine gun. During this time I finally qualified as a marksman with a Colt 45 pistol. A gunnery sergeant spent about an hour teaching me all the tricks to firing a pistol. After his help, I could hit the bull's eye nearly every shot.

All of the enlisted men on our crew were proficient at hitting a stationary target with a machine gun. But, could we hit a moving target? To polish our skill, they took us out to the gunnery range, took our bullets away and mounted movie cameras on our guns. They would fly a small plane around and we were supposed to get the plane in your sight with the proper lead. This information would all be on film. We participated in this exercise eight or ten times. One time when we were practicing, the plane dived at us and the propeller came off of the plane. The pilot was able to land the plane safely. The instructor laughingly asked who had shot him down.

Another training exercise was to learn how to hit a moving target while the gun was also moving. We would ride in the back of a moving truck and shoot at clay pigeons with shotguns. Next we would fly in an airplane and shoot at targets towed by another plane. They would put different colors of paint on our bullets so that when they looked at the target later, the colors told the tale. We all got pretty good after a while. We also had tracer bullets in our ammunition so that we could see the trajectory of our bullets.

After about two months of training, we developed into a great crew. Even though we were a mixture of officers and enlisted men, came from diverse backgrounds, and had different lifestyles and values, we genuinely liked each other. Nixon was a great pilot and leader. He was fun to be around but was all business when we were flying. We always knew he was in charge. Pretty good for a 21-year-old. I remember he told us that we were in a dangerous game and we had better be attentive to every detail when we were flying. Doville was a happy-go-lucky guy and also developed into a good bomber pilot. He was an interesting guy; when we were flying, he was always quite somber, but once on the ground, he was the kind of guy you would never want to fly with. He would come to our barracks to visit. Military courtesy required enlisted men to stand at attention and salute an officer when they entered the room. When Doville entered we would casually get to our feet. He would tell us he was an officer and we were nothing but lazy enlisted men (EM). He called us EM because he thought it would make us mad. Anyway, he would go through the usual routine, and then he would laugh and sit down for a visit. We would never have treated Nixon that way. When he came around, we snapped to. Richardson was a quiet easy going guy and an accurate bombardier. Lawson was a typical Boston Irishman with lots of jokes to tell. He was an excellent navigator and very somber when flying. He was older and wiser and realized the dangers ahead. Most of us were too young to figure that out. Korpi was an iron miner and strong as an ox. He was also older than most of us and was genuinely fearful of what was ahead. Silliman was a street -wise city guy and my best buddy. Turk was a rich Indian and very easy going. Cox was a carouser; spent all his time chasing women and getting drunk. It was a full time job keeping him out of trouble, both on and off the base. We excused him because he had to go down into the ball

turret. You had to be a little bit crazy to do that on every flight. Rude was a street-wise city kid. He was probably a gang member back in Philadelphia. There wasn't much he was afraid to do, which came in handy once we were overseas. Then there was me. I was the stupid clean-cut country bumpkin. But all the crewmembers liked me that way.

The EM didn't socialize much with the officers on our days off. Sometimes we would run into them at one of the bars in town. On our days off we would play games such as touch football, basketball or softball in the morning but in the afternoon and evenings, it was off to downtown Casper. The one thing that stands out in my mind about Casper was the number of bars. Four out of five businesses were bars. We would frequently go to the Crystal Bar; it had a big crystal chandelier. The place would be wall to wall with GIs and maybe a dozen women. Coming from Kansas, which was a dry state, I was impressed. The Crystal Bar was the place where I first drank alcohol. My mother probably would not have been pleased. She might have said that those guys in the army are corrupting my son. Most times we would hang around the bars until about 10:00 P.M., then catch a bus to the base. Sometimes Otto, Bill, Bert, and Cox would come dragging in anytime from midnight until 6:00 A.M. The bars generally closed for a couple of hours in the morning to drag out the drunk GIs, sweep out the place, and get ready for the next day's crowd. My quota was usually one drink. I hung out at the bar because that's where my friends were.

Often times we would be scheduled to fly the day after our day off when half of the guys had hangovers, which wasn't good. They would ask each crewmember how much sleep they had the night before. If it was less than four hours, you were grounded. One time, they asked Otto how much sleep he had and he answered 30 minutes. Naturally he was grounded. Jim, our pilot, was very upset with Otto. Jim was always very careful and would never drink nor fail to get a good night's sleep before we flew. We often said how lucky we were to have Jim as a pilot. He was the guy that got us through the war unscathed. Jim was an excellent pilot, a real gentleman, and mature for his young age.

A significant number of flyers suffered from airsickness, me included. Jim was concerned about me, as I would get sick almost every time we flew. I always told him that I would get over it. I was reasonably sure that the foul odor in the planes was my problem. All I had to do was walk out to the plane, stick my head into the bombay, take one breath and I was ready to throw up before I had one foot off the ground. There's nothing like a mixture of vomit, high-octane gasoline, and a temperature of 90 degrees to make your stomach churn.

The food at the mess hall was generally good. There was enough variety, except for the meat, to keep everyone happy. Everyday it was mutton. We must have eaten mutton fixed 40 different ways and it all tasted bad. As I mentioned earlier, the mess halls were open 24 hours a day for flight crews. Sometimes we would have to fly at night but usually not with a full crew. Bert and I had an agreement, if either of us flew at night and landed late at night, we would always check the mess hall to see what was being served. Bert and I were the chowhounds of our crew. Sometimes they would serve ham instead of mutton, but only at night. I can remember many times I would be sleeping and along about midnight Bert would come in from flying and awaken me. He'd say, "Get up Rosie, they're serving ham in the mess hall." I would get dressed and the two of us would be off to the mess hall for a ham dinner. The rest of the crewmembers thought we were nuts.

Sometimes we would go on a training mission and fly at low altitude, about 300 feet above the ground. We most often flew at about 15,000 feet when we were practicing bombing runs. When we flew low, the gunner would practice ground strafing, which was fun. I remember one such mission when a colonel from the base decided to fly with us. We had developed into a good crew so the big wigs liked to fly with us. The colonel was flying pilot and Jim was copilot and I was in my nose turret. I was in the groove that day as I hit every target I shot at and the colonel was observing my shooting from the cockpit. He announced over the intercom, "Great shooting nose gunner." I was pleased.

It wasn't always fun and games, however. During the 2-½ months of training we had two planes fly into the mountains and 20 people were killed. Nothing like a plane crash to sober you up.

Each week an aircrew would be honored for their skills as a crew. About two weeks before we completed our training, our crew was selected as crew of the week. It was quite a big deal as we were selected No. 1 out of about 50 crews. We got our picture taken and were written up in the local newspaper. The military was always doing things like that to keep you pumped up.

On September 1, 1944 our crew training was over and our next assignment would be overseas. We were given a 10-day furlough to go home, get our personal lives in order and say our good-byes. I will always remember when my parents took me to the bus. My mother cried and Dad had tears in his eyes. I had never seen my dad like that. When we got back to Casper, they shipped us to Forbes Air Base in Topeka, Kansas, which was a staging area. We were there about a week so I went home and visited my parents one more time. We took another physical at Casper before being shipped to Topeka. As usual, my blood pressure was high. The flight surgeon said I should probably be grounded. I talked him out of it as I felt there was no way I was going to abandon my crewmembers at this late date.

Our next adventure was to board a troop train once again for parts unknown. Our first stop was Chicago. When we pulled into the train station we figured out we were heading east so we must be going to Europe. The war was beginning to get too close. At the train station we talked to some aircrews that were returning to the States from duty in England. They told us all the horror stories and how high the casualty rates were for aircrews. About that time we all started to get that knot in our stomach that was to be with us until the end of the war.

Our next stop was Camp Patrick Henry located on the east coast of Virginia. Here we got one more physicals, x-rays, and more shots. We even had a dental checkup. An interesting event for the EM occurred at Camp Patrick Henry. This was the last base before leaving for our overseas assignment.

Consequently there were quite a number of GI's going absent without leave (AWOL). When these guys were caught they ended up in the guardhouse. The six EM of our crew and other crews were detailed to be guards at the guardhouse one night. We were instructed to patrol between the double fences that enclosed the compound. We were given loaded 30-caliber carbines and ordered to shoot any prisoner who got over the inside fence. Lucky for us, no one tried to escape, as I am not sure I would have shot an American GI. The day before we left Camp Patrick Henry we were issued a steel helmet, a 45-caliber pistol, two ammunition clips with six cartridges in each, and a shoulder holster. We surmised that they waited until the last moment to give us the pistols so there would be less likelihood that we would shoot ourselves or some innocent bystander.

On a Saturday night orders came down that we should be packed and ready to move out at 8 o'clock Sunday morning. I remember I had just enough time to eat breakfast, run to church and be back and ready to go by 8:00 A.M. We carried our overstuffed duffel bags and various other pieces of equipment and boarded our last troop train for the short trip to Newport News, Virginia. We left the train on the harbor pier and boarded our ship at 10:30 A.M, October 1, 1944. Our ship was a Liberty ship, a cargo vessel converted to a troop transport, named the USAT Felix Grundy. Thousand of these Liberty ships were built during the war to carry men and war supplies to Europe and the South Pacific. I had never seen the ocean until then and had never sailed the high seas. A short time after boarding, it was anchors away and we were sailing. We stood on deck and watched the shore slowly fade away. That strange feeling in the pit of my stomach was more intensive as I now realized that I was really leaving home and country.

Our Liberty ship had three main cargo holes; one hole was filled with bunks and was to be our sleeping quarters, another hole housed the kitchen, mess halls and showers, the third hole was for cargo, which included our personal equipment. Our next adventure was to go below deck into our living quarters and receive bunk assignments. Our duffel bags with our clothes and equipment were stored as cargo so the clothes on our backs and one change of fatigues, underwear, mess kit, and canteen were the only things we kept

with us. The bunks were metal frames about $2\frac{1}{2}$ feet by 6 feet with a sheet of canvas laced inside the frame. The bunks were six high with about two feet of vertical distance between each bunk. Aisles between the bunks were about three feet wide. Each man and his equipment, including a blanket and life preserver, had a 2 by $2\frac{1}{2}$ by 6 foot space as his own. While in your bunk it was difficult to move without digging a knee into the guy above. Ventilation was poor and the odor of sweat, mildew and diesel fuel was enough to make you throw up; some did. We now had to contend with seasickness. A sailor told me to go up on deck and to keep looking at the horizon and to not look at anything else. After about four hours of following his directive, I was no longer seasick nor was I ever airsick after that. What a relief for me and our pilot, Jim.

Come dawn of the second day out, we saw many ships around us. There must have been a hundred ships in our convoy, all sailing in rows with about a quarter of a mile between ships. Many of the ships were Liberty ships, most for cargo and some as troop carriers. The cargo and troop ships had Merchant Marine crews with Navy gun crews. There were also several oil tankers. But most of all there were about ten Navy destroyer escorts. These little ships appeared to be about 250 feet long and bristled with guns and depth chargers. They would flit around between the big ships at high speeds always on the lookout for enemy submarines. I could never understand how the sailors could walk on the decks of those ships as they bobbed like corks. The convoy traveled at about 10 knots per hour, that's navy talk, as we could only travel as fast as the slowest ship.

We spent most of our time up on deck. It was cooler outside and we could entertain ourselves by watching the flying fish and porpoise play. The flying fish like to exit from one swell and then fly to the next swell. It looked nonproductive to me but the fish seemed to enjoy it. The porpoise had their own game. They would position themselves several hundred yards away from the ships, swim very fast straight at the ship, and then veer off at the last instant to avoid a collision. Then they would go back and do it all over again. The first time we saw them playing their game we thought it was a torpedo heading straight for us. To kill time some of the guys would play poker for

money but most of us played a card game called casino. There was no money involved but almost everyone played it.

We had no regular duty while on board. We slept, ate, and hung out on deck. The food was adequate. The only bathing facilities were salt-water showers. Most of us tried it once. We found out that soap didn't work with salt water. During our entire stay on the ship I took one shower and changed my clothes once. There were no laundry facilities on the ship so some of the guys would tie their clothes to long ropes and hang them over the side. That didn't work well as sometimes the rope would break. We were a very grungy group of soldiers by the time we got off the ship.

We still didn't know where we were heading. We assumed it was England but no one in the know was talking. On the night of October 14th I was in my bunk when we heard this loud explosion. We all piled out of bed, grabbed our life jackets, and went up on deck. The tanker next to us was on fire; it had been torpedoed. We then heard two more explosions and two other ships, quite a distance away, were ablaze. Our ship just kept plugging along, but the destroyer escorts were darting around everywhere. Soon we could hear the explosions of the depth chargers. We never did hear if they sank the submarine, but needless to say we didn't sleep any more that night. One other time we had a scary moment. Our ship developed engine trouble and we were left behind with no escort. Luckily the engine was fixed and we caught up to the convoy after a day's time.

On the morning of October 18th, 1944 we sighted the Rock of Gibraltar. We were entering the Mediterranean Sea and were probably going to Italy. We stopped at Sicily for a few hours while they rearranged the convoy and were then off sailing again. On October 26th, 1944 at 12:00 noon we set our feet on the ground at Bari, Italy. We had been on board our ship for 26 days. We were warned to be very careful around Bari and at the location of our new base. At that time Italy had surrendered, but Fascism was still strong with the civilian population and they didn't have any love for allied soldiers, except for their money.

On October 26th, 1944 we were moved by truck to our new home about 10 miles from Cerignola, Italy. Cerignola was a town of 30,000 poor people about 25 miles from the Adriatic Sea coastline and a few miles south of the spur of the boot that make the shape of the country of Italy. As we moved by truck from Bari to Cerignola, there were several times that civilians would throw rocks at us. Somewhat unsettling to a bunch of newcomers.

We were assigned to the 15th Air Force, 304th Bombardment Wing, 454th Bombardment Group, 738th Squadron and the name of our air base was San Giovanni Airfield. We were finished with our training, and had taken a nice boat ride, and were now in sunny Italy. We began to realize that the fun and good times were over and pretty soon things were going to get ugly.

We did get one nice surprise; we were all promoted to the next higher rank. Our flight officers were now 2nd lieutenants, the three sergeants were now staff sergeants and the rest of us were buck sergeants, three stripes. My pay was $38.00 a month and in addition flight crews got 1.5 times the base pay. So I was making big bucks, $57.00 a month.

When we arrived at San Giovanni, they were expecting us. The supply sergeant met us and issued us some more stuff. The four officers would be living together and the six EM would live together. The area where we were to live was in an olive tree grove, which was a nice setting. The officers got a 16-foot by 16-foot pyramid tent, center pole, four iron stakes, four army cots, and a vacant area in the officers' area to erect their tent. The EM got a similar 16-foot by 16-foot pyramid tent, center pole, four iron stakes, and a vacant area in the EM area, which was about one block from the officers' location. There was a shortage of army cots, so we EM got wooden bunks to sleep on. They were built similar to a changing table, but only about one foot off the ground. We each got a wool army blanket to sleep on, no mattress; we were in a war zone. We kept thinking, "Will we be able to sleep on these things?" They turned out to be pretty nice after we got accustomed to such a hard bed. In addition, the bunks were better than army cots for sitting. The sergeants told us to scavenge for anything else we thought we might need. We had noticed that all of the existing tents had stoves, a stack, and

a fuel tank. Our streetwise guys Bert and Bill said they would look into the heating system while the rest of us put up the tent. After about an hour, we had the tent up and the scavengers were back with a stove and fuel tank. We didn't ask how or where they had gotten the stuff. They didn't have a smokestack but they had spotted one along another road about two blocks away. In short order they were back with the stack. We had just finished getting our heating system erected when three other EM stopped at our tent and asked if we had taken their stack. I thought, "Now we're in real trouble," but not so. With a straight face, Bill told them that we got the stack as per the supply sergeant's order, see our name is on it. Apparently Bill has attached a tag to the stack with Nixon's crew written on it. I don't know whether they believed us or not, but they went away. Bill and Bert came in pretty useful at other times also.

After we were fairly well settled in, we decided to check on the officers. They had just barely started so we helped them. All the time we told them that if we hadn't come to help them, they would have never gotten their place in livable condition. Bill didn't have to steal a stove for them as the supply sergeant had given them equipment for a heating unit. The only lights we had were candles and flashlights. Although, a couple of months before the war was over, they got a diesel engine generator. Each tent was allowed to have one 25-watt bulb. That was because the generator had a limited supply of current. As you might expect, we and others would cheat and use several bulbs. The corporal in charge of the generator, kind of a Barney Fife type, would always roam the area trying to catch us using more than one bulb. We took pleasure in playing cat and mouse with the guy. Sometimes we would put a trip wire outside our door so that we would know when he was checking light bulbs.

Our stove was a ten-gallon drum with a hole on the top for a stack and a 6 by 6 inch hole on the side near the bottom of the drum for air and fuel. Our fuel tank was an old auxiliary wing tank from a fighter plane. The fuel line from the tank, which sat outside our tent, to the stove was a small diameter piece of airplane tubing with a petcock valve just outside the stove. Our fuel was 100-octane aviation gasoline, the same fuel the planes used. When

we needed a fire we turned on the valve, threw in a lighted match, and "bang", we had a fire. I suspect our heating system violated several modern safety regulations, but what the heck, you've got to make do. Turk's bunk was nearest the stove so he was the designated fire starter. He singed the hair on his arms and eyebrows more than once when he miscalculated the amount of gasoline in the stove prior to lighting. Once in a while the soot in the stack would catch fire and set fire to our tent top. We always had a bucket of water handy for such emergencies. There was a bad tent fire at one of the nearby squadrons where one guy lost his life and several others were badly burned. Turk was also our official mouse killer. He generally did the vermin in with his machete.

Shortly after we moved into our tent, we decided it was too small so we built an addition. We appropriated some boards and built the addition. Bert and I used to go out nearly every night and scavenge for building supplies. Anything that wasn't tied down, we took. Such supplies were called moonlight acquisitions. We rationalized that such acts were not stealing because everything belonged to the government and we were merely relocating things. We also managed to relocate some sand and cement and put a concrete floor in our tent.

The airplane we trained with in the USA and flew during our tour in Italy was a B-24 heavy bomber called the Liberator. Early in the war, after Germany had captured most of Western Europe and was bombing England, the United States had the B-17 bomber as the only big bomber in the Army Air Corps. After the USA entered the war in 1941, the Allies concluded that they needed to retaliate against the enemy by bombing targets across the English Channel in France, Holland, Belgium, and the north coast of Germany. Targets were fairly close to the airfields in England, so the B-17 bomber was suitable for this effort. The B-17 carried a relatively large bomb load and had sufficient range to reach nearby targets. The plane had four engines, and a long wide wing that made it stable and airworthy. It turned out to be an excellent plane for aircraft based in England.

The generals were thinking down the road when they would need heavy bombers that could fly a long range both in southern Europe and the South Pacific war area. To address this need, the B-24 heavy bomber was conceived. Because of time constraints, the plane was never really designed, it was more like clobbered together and it looked that way. It was designed by the Consolidated Aircraft Company located in Fort Worth, Texas. The planes we flew in Italy were manufactured by the Ford Motor Company in a plant located at Willow Run, Michigan. The B-24 had a box-like fuselage, four engines with three-blade variable pitch propellers, a long narrow wing mounted near the top of the fuselage, twin tail rudders and tricycle landing gears. Many flight crews fondly called it the flying coffin because it kind of looked like a coffin and there was a good chance that you were going to be dead in one of those things.

The B-24 could fly longer distances, fly faster, and carry a bigger bomb load than the B-17. More than 23,000 B-24 bombers were built during the war years. B-24 flight crews were disgruntled and jealous by all the attention and publicity given to the B-17. Our comments were that the B-24's did all the dirty work and the B-17's got all the glory. These comments were at least partially true as the B-24 was bigger, faster, and flew deeper into enemy territory. There was also another gripe, the B-17 could withstand more damage from enemy action because it had that long wide wing and could fly like a bird, while the B-24 with its long narrow wing, when damaged, flew like the proverbial coffin.

The B-24 Liberator had little in common with the planes of today. It was constructed with some kind of aluminum alloy frame and had a thin aluminum sheet skin. The plane was about 66 feet long, 17 feet high, and had a wingspan of about 110 feet. The wing was called the Davis wing, which was narrow and relatively thin. Fuel tanks were built into the wings. It was just the bare minimum inside the fuselage, no trim, insulation, or armor plating. The only thing between you and the bullets and shrapnel was a thin piece of sheet metal. A comforting thought when things got sticky. We normally carried twelve 500-pound bombs.

There were two bulkheads that separated the fuselage into three compartments. The front section contained an upper level, or flight deck, and cockpit where the pilot, co-pilot, engineer, and radio operator were positioned. The lower level and further toward the nose was where the navigator, bombardier, and me, the nose gunner, hung out. The center compartment was the bombay area where the bombs were carried. This compartment was an open area about 20 feet long, seven to eight feet wide and about seven feet high. The bottom of this compartment was closed in by two sets of roller doors similar to roll top desk covers. A 12-inch wide catwalk through the bombay area provided access to the rear compartment. The bomb racks were supported on each side of the catwalk from the top of the fuselage. The rear compartment was longer but smaller in diameter. This area housed the ball turret when it was in the stowed position, two 3-foot by 3-foot windows with machine gun positions, and escape hatch at the bottom of the fuselage, and the tail gun turret. Four aerial gunners occupied this compartment. There was also a larger hydraulic hoist used to lower and raise the ball turret. The ball turret had to be in the up position during takeoff and landings to prevent the turret from dragging on the ground.

Throughout the interior of the fuselage, numerous exposed hydraulic tubing, control cables, electrical wire, oxygen tanks and piping, intercom cables, and of course, several relief tubes for No. 1 only. For No. 2, forget it. Since all that piping and wiring was exposed, crewmembers needed to watch where they stepped and what they grabbed hold of. Early in the war the planes carried small oxygen tanks under high pressure, but through some bad experiences that changed. The high-pressure tanks would explode like bombs if hit by a bullet or shrapnel. Our planes were equipped with much larger oxygen tanks with low pressures.

All of the bombers overseas were marked and identified by painted symbols. USA planes were marked with a large star and a horizontal bar on either side of the star. The symbols were painted white with a dark background. This was how we determined friend from foe. The twin rudders were also painted to identify which Group the plane was attached. Most of the new

planes were unpainted and were shiny aluminum, but the older planes were painted camouflage colors so that they wouldn't be readily seen when parked on the ground. That didn't help much when you were flying as there we were before God and everyone else. Each bomb group seemed to have an artist, so most of the planes had names, some sort of figure, mostly pinups, and pictures of bombs to identify how many missions the planes had been flown. Some of the more famous planes in our group were named: Dragon Lady, Easy Take-Off, Miss American, Club 400, Dinah-mite, and Buzz-Job. Our crew flew many of our missions in Buzz-Job. We liked the plane because we thought it was a lucky plane. By the end for the war Buzz-Job had gone on 126 missions and only Miss America with 131 had more missions. Most planes didn't last for very long, so it was nice to fly in the ones with the long records.

Shortly after we were assigned to the 454th Bombardment Group in Italy, our crew participated in several indoctrination meetings to inform us how the base was operated, where things were, such as mess hall, latrines, chapel, infirmary, security at the base and how to interact with civilian population. Another item discussed was how to conduct ourselves should we be shot down over enemy territory.

Facilities at the base were a Group headquarters building, an infirmary staffed with a flight surgeon and several medical technicians, a chapel with both Catholic and Protestant chaplains, a shower facility, and an officers club. Each of the four squadrons had an operations office, a supply building, an equipment shed, a mess hall for the officers, and a separate mess hall for the EM. Some of the squadrons had EM clubs, but our squadron did not until about six weeks before the war was over.

The infirmary was not equipped to handle severely wounded airmen. They provided ambulance service and care for day-to-day illnesses. If someone was ill, it was up to the flight surgeon to determine if the airman was fit to fly. The rumors were that when a tough mission was coming up, a lot of guys got sick. I believe that was another unfounded army rumor although there were probably a few such cases. During the time we were in Italy, there

were several airmen grounded because they couldn't stand the incessant pounding from flak during nearly every mission. We called those casualties flak happy. Badly wounded were taken by ambulance to a military hospital in Cerignola or on to Bari for the worse cases. There was also a military cemetery in Bari where those killed were buried.

The Group had a very nice chapel. It was constructed of tufa-block, a man-made block used for most buildings in southern Italy. There were rows of benches instead of pews, and openings for doors and windows, but no doors or window glass. Of course there was no heat either and the winter temperatures were very cold. Sunday mass was well attended and Lenten services were also well attended. I was the only Catholic on our crew and some of the guys used to razz me about going to church all the time. It never bothered me as I figured the good Lord was looking out for us even if some of the other guys didn't think so. A number of GI's from the Group were permitted to go to midnight mass at Christmas in the large Cathedral in Cerignola. There were no pews in the church so everyone stood. It was wall to wall with the Italians and a few GI's. That was the first time I saw a Catholic Church without pews. The Group flew a bombing mission on Christmas Day; I was glad our crew didn't have to go.

The group shower was located at a former rubber plantation a little over a mile from our tent. The shower facility was in an open barn about 30 feet square where there were approximately 20 showerheads. The floor was made of wooden slats constructed about 6 inches above the ground so that you wouldn't be standing in the mud while taking a shower. Showers were taken few and far between. It was easier to stay dirty than to trudge a mile over and a mile back, especially during the cold, wind and snow of winter. The officer's club was located in a building close by the shower facility. Some of the higher ranking staff officers had Jeeps and would park their vehicles outside the officers club while they went inside for card games or drinks. Our crew EM's usually went together to take showers because we all stunk and shared the same close living quarters. If one person stunk up the place we all had to suffer. Anyway, one evening as we were leaving the shower facilities during a cold rainy day, Bill Rude our streetwise tailgunner,

spotted an officer's Jeep with the keys in it. He says, "Come on, I'll drive," and we all had a free ride home. Bill parked the Jeep behind the squadron headquarters and we wandered back to the tent. The next day a directive came out that someone had stolen the C.O. Jeep and the perpetrators had better step forward. We knew they couldn't connect us to the crime, so we stood pat and the incident went away. Needless to say we didn't try that again. In the spring of 1945 the weather was nice and warm but the trip to the shower was not getting any shorter. One day Bert and I, we were now the chief appropriators of our crew, appropriated an abandoned fuel wing tank that fighter planes often times used. We hauled it back to our tent and put it up in an olive tree located behind our tent. Our personal shower consisted of a water tank, some aircraft tubing, a can with holes in the bottom, and some black paint on the tank to aid in collecting the sun's heat. After installing our shower we became a well-groomed bunch of guys. We would even let our officers use our shower, as those guys would have never figured out one for themselves.

There was a lot of activity around our air base and similar bases nearby in preparation for a bombing mission. Reconnaissance planes were constantly out flying over possible targets, taking pictures so that intelligence people could assess which targets to bomb, number of anti-aircraft guns, enemy fighters, and check points to help flight crews find the targets. The big wigs at Wing and Group headquarter decided which targets to bomb, what kind of bombs, and how many planes. Our group, the 454th Bomb Group was generally required to provide 28 planes, 7 planes from each of the four squadrons. Sometimes when they decided that maximum effort was desirable, each group needed to provide 35 planes. Finding that many planes that were airworthy was often times difficult.

Targets to be bombed were generally chosen several days in advance. However, security was high and the next day's destination was unknown to most. Instructions were given to the ground crews as to what kind and how many bombs, how much fuel, and how much ammunition, were to be loaded and onto which planes. Next it was the responsibility of the squadron operations officer to decide which crews would fly and which planes were to

be used. Our pilot, Jim Nixon, flew several missions as a co-pilot to get the feel of things before we could fly with him. The squadron commander recognized very early that Nixon was a good pilot so we generally got to pick our plane. Jim would pick the plane, but because of his leadership skills, he always sought our concurrence. We always chose Buzz-Job, an old plane that had already been on over 80 missions. Seemed like a lucky plane to us, and the ground crew was very talented. I remember the Crew Chief was a devout Catholic. He took care of Buzz-Job like it was his very own and worried about his plane and us during every mission. He was like a proud father with his plane and our crew. When we returned from a mission he was always there to assess the damage and anxious to patch it up so it would be ready for the next mission.

During the evening before the next day's mission, squadron headquarters would post the crews that would be flying. Nixon would get the word and stop by our tent to give us the bad news. We didn't know what target, just that we were flying and in which plane. Fortunately the evening meal was always over before we got the message. Once we got the word, the knot in the stomach came back and we would become very edgy, all the while deeply engrossed in our private thoughts wondering whether tomorrow was the time we were to meet our maker. After much tossing and turning and little sleep, a corporal would come by our tent about 5 a.m. telling it was time to be up and at-em. We were always awake anyway so he was wasting his time. During the night, I did a lot of praying; I don't know what the other guys were thinking.

Once we were up and dressed the day's activities began. There were two important things that must be done before we fly, visit the latrine and shave. If you had to go in the plane, facilities were limited and close shave was necessary so that your oxygen mask has a good fit. Once breakfast was over, no one ever ate much, it was off to the briefing room for the officers and to the equipment shed for the EM.

The 454th Group Headquarter was housed in an existing farmhouse. It was a rather large house, one story with a walk in basement, constructed of man

made block with stucco on the outside and plaster on the inside. The ground floor was used for the Commanding Officer's offices and the basement was the briefing room. The briefing room was quite large as there could be as many as 150 crewmembers at briefings. At the front of the room was a long table and against the wall behind the table was a bulletin board covered by a drape. The rest of the room contained rows of metal stools where the crew officers sat during briefing. One interesting sidelight - some members of the 454th Group visited the site of the airfield after 50 years. Everything was gone except the farmhouse that served as Group headquarters. The briefing room was just as we left it, row after row of metal stools, the table and draped bulletin board.

The briefing began when the commanding officer and his aids arrived which was usually about 5:45 a.m. The first order of business was to remove the drape to divulge the target of the day. If the target was lightly defended, that was considered to be a "milk run" and there would be a sigh of relief, but if the targets were Ploseti, Munich, or Vienna, which were heavily fortified hot spots, there would be a chorus of groans. After the initial shock, other information was discussed such as take-off time, rendezvous point after take-off, direction of flight, time at the initial point (I.P.), time at target, which way to rally, expected ground and air opposition, flight elevation, weather conditions, and if, where, and when we could expect fighter escort. Finally it was time to set their watches "0555 and 56, 57, 58, 59, - Hack". Exact time, flight elevation, and direct of flight over the target were paramount as there could be ten or twelve other groups bombing the same target during the same day.

Most our flying gear was stored in the equipment shed when it was a non-fly day. Our personal equipment was stored in a larger canvas bag, similar to a sports bag, called a B-4 bag. Personal equipment included: an electric suit with slippers and gloves, fleece lined flying boots, synthetic down filled pants, jacket and gloves, leather helmet, goggles, oxygen mask with intercom mike, parachute harness, May West, first aid kit, canteen, and 45-caliber pistol with shoulder holster and twelve cartridges. Other equipment that each member of the crew checked out was a parachute, flack suit, and flack

helmet. The flack suits were made of spring steel slats covered with canvas. They generally came in three pieces, which could be snapped together. The suit offered protection to your back, down to the waist, the chest and down to mid thigh. Many guys worried about the lack of protection on the bottom side while we were sitting in our turrets, a valid concern. Flack suits were very heavy, perhaps fifty pounds, so were not put on until we were near the target. The parachutes we used were called chest packs or backpacks. Because the pilot and co-pilot sat all of the time during flight, they wore the backpack chute all of the time. The ball turret gunner also wore a backpack chute because there was no room for a chest pack in the turret. If it became necessary to abandon ship the ball turret gunner could simply open the turret hatch, unlatch his safety belt and fall out. Not as easy as it sounds. The rest of the crew had chest packs. We never wore them during flight, but carried them with us when we moved about the plane. There were two heavy safety hooks on the front of our parachute harness for securing the chute to the harness.

For our lunch while flying home from the target we were each given a box of K rations. These rations were in a box about 10x5x2 inches. They were color-coded indicating breakfast, lunch or dinner. Each carton had a can of cheese or mystery meat about the size of a tuna can, several crackers, and three zagnut cookies. Most of the mystery meat tasted bad. Since the EM picked up the rations we always took what we wanted and whatever was left, we gave to the officers. However, none of the rations were very good. There is nothing like a frozen hunk of meat or cheese and tasteless cookies for a snack. Sometimes we would bring candy bars from our PX ration to supplement our delicious lunch. Toward the end of the war we had a little electrical oven on our plane so we could have hot lunches. By the time we were ready for lunch our canteens were frozen, so we would place them inside our jacket for a little thawing.

Once we had gathered our equipment we would pile into a waiting truck, tell the driver we were Nixon's crew so the he would take us to the correct plane. Sometime we would pick up the equipment for the officers, but generally it was every man for himself. Once we arrived at the revetment

where our plane was parked, most of the time it was old No. 967 - Buzz-Job, it was time to get busy. We would stow our parachutes and flak suits near our positions. When the officers arrived, Nixon would give us the good or bad news depending on the target. Then the pilot, co-pilot, flight engineer, and ground crew chief would examine the plane from nose to tail to confirm that all the pieces were in place. The crew chief and pilot would discuss and review any previous problems with the plane. Meanwhile the bombardier was checking the bombsight, the navigator was checking his maps, compass and sextant, the gunners were checking their turrets and machine guns, and the armament EM was inspecting the bombs. It was extremely important that the bomb safety features were in place. When the ordnance crew placed the bombs in the plane's bomb rack, the detonation fuse had a safety pin in the fuse to guard against an explosion should the bomb be inadvertently dropped during loading. Once the bombs were safely stowed in the racks, short wires firmly attached to the plane were also threaded through the fuse. Safety features on the bombs were a great comfort as they, at least in theory, would prevent the bombs from exploding if the plane crashed or a bomb was dropped during takeoff.

Once our inspections were completed, it was time to dress for the flight. Unless it was very cold we dressed outside beside the plane. By this time we had lost all concerns for modesty. We could not have cared less if someone saw us with our bare rear end sticking out. Dressing was a time consuming exercise. We generally came to the plane dressed in our skivvies, long underwear and coveralls. Off came the combat boots and coveralls, then the electric suit was put on over the long underwear. The electric suit, a nylon jump suit with electric wire embedded in the fiber, similar to an electric blanket. The coveralls came next, then the down filled pants, but no jacket yet. Next came a pair of socks, the electric slippers, and the fleece lined flying boots. Once the shoulder holster and pistol were in place it was time for the down filled jacket. The May West was now slipped over the head and secured at the waist. The next piece of equipment was the parachute harness, which was rigged over everything. The two straps of the harness that came from the back through the crotch area and snapped in front were the last thing we did before boarding the plane. This was because these two

straps had to be very tight, which, when secured, made walking awkward. If it became necessary to bail out, the result of the chute opening would yank the harness upward. Any slack in the straps in the crotch could potentially prove to be sensational. Gloves, helmet and oxygen mask were not put on until we were in the air. We always tied our combat boots on the backside of our chute harness so that they could be used for walking in case of a bailout. We were cautioned to not fasten the boots on the front of the harness, as they would probably hit our face when the chute opened.

Once we boarded the plane, the pilot would shortly get the order to start the engines. The engines were four 1200 horsepower Pratt and Whitney 14-cylinder engines with electric starters. Each plane had a small 2-cycle gasoline engine generator set used to supply the power for starting the engines. We called the engine generator set the putt-putt. As each one of the engines catches, sputters, then churns the air, the plane wrenches and shakes. Next comes the instrument check in the cockpit and all crewmembers get in their positions for take off. The pilot and co-pilot were settled in the cockpit with safety belts the rest of us usually sat down anywhere we could find a flat place. I always sat on the catwalk in the bombay; it was just me and the bombs. We were all fairly nonchalant about where we sat except that no one was permitted to sit in the tail section. The flare signals from the control tower notified us that it was time to takeoff. Each plane moves along the taxiway toward the runway in the order that they were to be flying in formation. Thus seven planes in each squadron took off one after the other. The planes took off at about one-minute intervals. The runways were short and the planes were heavy with a full load of fuel and bombs. To get off the ground, the pilots would pull up to the end of the runway, set the brakes, crank up the engines to near full throttle then release the brakes and away we go. There was a five or six foot high hedgerow at the end to the runway. Many planes that took off ended up with hedge twigs caught in their landing gear. Fortunately I was settling back with my bombs so didn't witness the close calls. Every week or so there would be a plane that would crash off of the end of the runway, always with disastrous affects. Once we were in the air, landing gears were raised and locked. Our pilot always insisted that we conduct a visual examination of our

landing gears. The crew in the tail section checked the main gears which folded into the under side of the wings and I checked the nose wheel which was right behind me during takeoff.

Once in the air we headed for the rendezvous point, which was usually a small village, easy to spot from low altitude. The first planes up would have to circle as they waited for the later take-offs to catch up. It was relatively easy to spot your squadron and group planes from their tail markings. If there was a cloud cover the planes had to fly above the clouds and there were no landmarks for reference, which complicated the situation. Then we milled around and talked the group together by radio. During these times, things would get testy as the longer it took to get into formation the more fuel was used and the time table would be out of sync. Once the planes were in loose formation, it was off to the target.

The Group generally sent up 28 planes, 7 planes from each of the four squadrons. Plane positions in each squadron formation looking down at them were: the lead plane (No. 1 - Able), plane (No. 2 - Baker) to the right, slightly behind and at the same elevation as the lead plane, plane (No. 3 - Charlie) opposite No. 2 on the left side of No. 1, plane (No. 4 - Dog) flew directly behind No. 1 but slightly lower, plane (No. 5 - Easy) was to the right slightly behind and at the same elevation as No. 4, plane (No. 6 - Fox) was opposite No. 5, plane (No. 7 - George) completed the box by flying behind and slightly below No. 4. The four squadrons got together and formed a box. The idea behind this formation was to protect each other during enemy fighter attack. At least in theory this was a flying fortress with 280 machine guns. The problem was, some planes couldn't keep up with the leader so the formations became scattered, which was bad. The planes were positioned so that the pilots could readily see the planes around them but would not be flying in the slipstream of the plane ahead. We most often flew in the Charlie position, which was a position many pilots didn't like because the pilots sat in the left seat and would have to look across the co-pilot to see the lead plane. Jim didn't mind and Otto loved it because when he was flying, he had a good view and would always try to see just how close he could fly to

the lead plane. We often times accused Otto of trying to poke our wingtip into the adjacent plane's window.

We always flew over the Adriatic Sea on our way to the targets. Once we were over the water we armed the bombs by removing the safety pins from the bomb fuses. The short wire was still threaded through the fuse so a bump would still not detonate the bombs. Once the bombs were released the safety wire was jerked out of the fuse and the bombs were armed to go off on impact. Once we reached an altitude of 10,000 feet it was time to put on our gloves, helmets, goggles and oxygen masks. For our hands we wore nylon gloves, then electric gloves, then down filled gloves. Once we put on our helmet, goggles, oxygen mask there was no exposed skin. All we had to do was plug in the electric suit, oxygen supply, intercom wiring, and we were ready. The next order of business was to test fire our machine guns. The formation would spread apart so there was room to test fire without shooting our own planes down. Our pilot would give the order to test first and add, "Don't shoot the wings off of our plane." After we had test fired our guns, each gun position had to confirm test results over the intercom to the pilot. The tests were nearly always successful except for the ball turret gunner; he never seemed to get it right. Our pilot would get very upset with him. After such happening, he would tell the rest of us to give the guy some help. Now we were back in formation, in our turrets or other assigned positions. Every 15 minutes the co-pilot would call for an oxygen check. This check required each crewmember to acknowledge that he was still breathing. Our pilot was adamant about this check, as men from other crews had died from lack of oxygen because their mask had become disconnected or frozen up and no one had checked on them. We flew many of our missions during the winter, which added to the extreme cold at 25,000 feet. Most times we had to contend with temperatures between 50 and 60 degrees below zero. Thank goodness for our electric suits.

By the time we reached the west coast of Yugoslavia, we were usually above 20,000 feet so avoiding larger city flak was not a significant problem. The gunner's job was to watch out for enemy fighters. By the time we were flying our missions, the Germans had few fighter planes left. We

occasionally saw them around but they would never take on a group of bombers. They would wait around for straggler or crippled bombers, then watch out. The two most feared German fighters were the Messerschmidts 109 (ME-109) and the Folke-Wolfes 190 (FW-190). Fortunately neither plane ever directly attacked our bomber, so I never fired a shot at an enemy fighter.

As we approached the target we could see bomber formations ahead of us being pummeled by flak and puffs of black smoke dotted the sky. The Germans anti-aircraft guns were the 88 and 105 millimeters, which were fondly called 88's and 105's. As we approached the I. P., that's the point where we turn to make our straight and level run over the target, the flak gets intense. To confuse the enemy radar, our waist gunners would throw out gobs of lead foil which we called chaff. It looked just like the foil icicles that we used to decorate Christmas trees. Anyway, the enemy radar had difficulty distinguishing planes from chaff. The bombay doors were opened and the Norden Bomb sight, similar to automatic pilot, controlled the plane's flight. When the bombardier announces "Bombs Away", it was time to rally away from the flak. We could always tell when the flak bursts were close as we could hear the explosion, see the orange flame, and the plane would bounce around like a cork. We would also be able to hear shrapnel hit our plane. Next it was time for an oxygen check and also the well being of all the crewmembers. The only member of our crew injured was our navigator who had a piece of shrapnel go through his thigh very close to you know what. Afterwards we would kid him, "You should have been sitting on your flak suit Joe." When he was wounded he was flying with another crew. We all felt bad about that as he was with a bunch of strangers in his hour of need. The only good thing about it was that he got to sit out the last couple of months of the war.

As we headed for home, we usually took a straight shot. With no bombs, less fuel and flying downhill we could fly up to 260 miles per hour. Once we were away from the range of enemy fighters and below 10,000 feet in altitude it was time to break out the K rations. If we had just come through a rough mission we were still too tense to relax. With our home field in sight

we circled for a landing, crippled planes first then the rest one by one. As was usual the crew chief was awaiting us at our hard stand. Once the engines were quiet, it was the reverse procedure from the morning process. Pack our gear in the B-4 bags and back to the equipment shed. But first we inspected the plane for damage. Most often there were flak holes, minor equipment failure and engine problems. The ground crews were usually given two nights and a day to restore the plane to safe flying condition.

Our next stop after landing was the briefing room, only now it was a de-briefing. Each crew met with intelligence officer who listened to our version of the mission. Some of their questions were: did you see the bombs hit, were there any enemy fighters, how heavy and accurate was the flak, and were the bomber formations in each other's way? I guess they pull all such information together in preparation for the next time the target was bombed. After our de-briefing every flight crewmember received a shot of whiskey. That was to calm our nerves. I didn't drink the stuff, but I was very popular with my crewmates. I was slowly beginning to wise up, so I always traded my shot of whiskey for a candy bar or cookies. After the whiskey, the Red Cross lady passed out coffee and a donut. I always ate my donut. Then it was back to our tent for some much-needed rest.

On most of our missions we were in the air for 7 to 8 hours. This was a long time to be on oxygen, extreme cold, and under a lot of stress. Obviously the few minutes over the target were the most stressful, but the rest of the flight was no piece of cake. The B-24 was a great plane for its time, but compared to today's planes, it was a piece of junk. Any number of things could go wrong, and often did, during flight. It was not uncommon to lose one engine at least 25% of the time and on several occasions we lost two engines. In addition to the threat of enemy fighters, especially when we were alone, there was the danger of running out of fuel or not being able to find the home base landing strip due to cloud cover.

By the time the United States entered the war in Europe in December 1941, most of Europe and most of North Africa was under the domination of the AXIS powers, Germany and Italy. England was under an intense assault by

the German Air Force, and Spain, Portugal, and Switzerland were neutral. Switzerland was surrounded by land occupied by the AXIS powers. Although Switzerland was somewhat sympathetic to Germany, it strongly maintained its neutrality. When we arrived in Italy, the Allied Forces had invaded France and had driven the Germans out of North Africa and roughly the southern half of Italy. When our targets were in Northern Italy or Austria, we were cautioned to stay away from Switzerland. Since the Swiss were neutral there was always the temptation to fly to Switzerland if your plane was crippled to avoid crashing or parachuting into enemy territory. The Swiss didn't like this because it would threaten their neutrality with Germany. Any plane that strayed over Switzerland was immediately fired upon. We often speculated that maybe if we were in danger of crashing we would head for Switzerland. Once there we would be captured and could spend the rest of the war lounging in the Swiss Alps. That opportunity never presented itself.

Aircrews were generally required to fly from two to three times per week. Because we were in Italy during the winter months, weather conditions were not conducive to flying. Nevertheless, we were always assigned missions on a regular schedule. Every couple of days we would go through the sleepless nights, preparing for a mission only to be cancelled minutes before takeoff or being recalled while well on the way to the target. During the months of December, January, and February, we were probably scheduled for two cancelled missions for every mission we accomplished. None of these aborted missions counted toward our required 35 missions.

After we had been at San Giovanni for a few weeks and became acquainted with some of the other crews, we began to hear of all the horror stories about what it was like on missions. You had to worry about enemy fighters before arriving at the target, heavy flak over the target, then enemy fighters picking off the cripples on the way home. Plus there was other things that could happen such as crashing during take off and landing, getting lost in foul weather, and running out of fuel. This was not encouraging news for a green crew. Our pilot Jim flew three missions as co-pilot with a veteran crew before we all flew as a crew. He told us that on

the three missions he had been on they had not encountered any enemy fighters but the flak was intensive. Obviously we were very apprehensive about our first mission. Fortunately our first mission turned out to be a milk run, that's a target with 25 antiaircraft guns or fewer, so we were subjected to minimum flak and no enemy fighters. With our first mission successfully completed we developed a degree of confidence. That confidence turned out to be short. Our next few missions were to Munich, Germany and to Linz and Vienna, Austria where the reception was downright hostile. On each of these missions our Group lost several planes and we picked up numerous flak holes. There's nothing like seeing a wing shot off a plane to sober you up. We learned a few things on those missions. One, if your plane gets a point blank hit, you're dead; there is no way of getting out of a plane going straight down. Two, our chance of surviving 35 missions was not good. All we had to do was a little math; losing two planes out of 28 on each mission was not going to cut it. We would need some divine intervention if we were to survive. The third thing we learned was that the Blue Danube River was really blue. Our crew kept flying mission after mission and kept getting back in one piece, more or less.

Our 10th mission was an oil refinery at Moosebierbaum, Austria. Things didn't go well from the beginning. We were late taking off and had to fly into strong headwinds. Consequently we were late to the target, got shot at by lots of guns, and used up a lot of our fuel. Long before we were anywhere near home base, the pilot, flight engineer, and navigator concluded that we had enough fuel to take us to about the middle of the Adriatic Sea where we would be forced to ditch into the water. No one was enthusiastic about that alternative as we were well aware that surviving a B-24 ditching was somewhere between zero and none, although we did have our May Wests.

Remember, we were on mission No. 10 and not yet experienced with the local geography. While the pilot was contemplating our fate, Joe our navigator pipes up over the intercom saying that during one of the previous mission briefings someone had mentioned that there was a small island in the Adriatic Sea a short distance from the mainland of Yugoslavia that had a short airstrip maintained by Allied forces. I must insert here that

Yugoslavia was occupied by German forces except for this tiny island called Vis. Tito the dictator of Yugoslavia was fanatical about fighting the Germans that occupied his country. There was a large contingent of partisans on the mainland and this island of Vis was his stronghold and not under German control. Our pilot decided this was our best alternative. If we couldn't find the island we could fly over Yugoslavia, bail out and hope the partisans would find us before the Germans. We turned around and Joe gave the pilot a heading for the island. Meanwhile Bert, our radio operator, was able to contact the airstrip by radio and we were soon in business, much to the relief of all on board.

As we approached the island we observed that it was small, perhaps 5 by 15 miles in size. To add to our woe, the airstrip was short and there was a relatively high hill on each end of the landing strip. But good old Jim sat Buzz-Job down picture perfect. All of our crew commented many times that if it hadn't been for Jim we would have been killed long ago. It turned out that we weren't the only crew with fuel problems as six or eight other B-24 bombers were already there. There were dozens of wrecked bombers around the airstrip as many planes had previously crashed while landing because of the short runway. Several of us were wandering around the base looking at all of the wrecked planes, when a soldier stopped by and commented that the B-24 could not fly with three engines feathered. He went on to say that a couple of weeks earlier a B-24 had tried to land with only one engine. The plane crashed killing all on board. He said one crewmember bailed out shortly before the plane crashed but his parachute hadn't opened in time and he was killed. He showed us the spot where the airman had hit the ground. It was a mess; there were still bits of bone fragments and hair embedded into the ground. This tiny isolated base had no facilities to care for such matters in a dignified way. Anyhow that incident sobered us up.

There was no place for us to stay at the tiny base and with eight or ten other uninvited bomber crews, there was very little to eat. We took our gear out of our plane and walked to a small nearby village where we found an old barn as shelter for the night. It was a long night trying to sleep on a

cold stone floor. Lucky for us we had our heavy flying gear to keep us warm. Mean while back at home base we were listed as Missing in Action (MIA). I secretly prayed that we would get home before they notified my parents that I was missing. During the night we heard a big commotion in the village near the docks. Upon investigation, we saw that a group of partisans were loading a boat with guns and supplies to go raise havoc with the Germans on the mainland. We were warned by the local GI's to not wander off the roads because the terrain was laced with thousands of land mines. I wondered why the Germans hadn't occupied the island. I guess they had more important problems elsewhere.

We were notified the next day that we would have to stay one more day until some additional gasoline was brought in to fuel the many planes that had landed the previous day. We spent most of the day hanging around the airstrip examining the wrecks. Whenever a plane crashed and was beyond repair, someone would always come along and remove the clock and compass from the cockpit, as these instruments were valuable and prized. We had no luck with our search; the instruments had all been taken from the wrecks. In the afternoon we were loafing around the airstrip when we heard what we thought was a group of bombers pass overhead at low altitude. We looked up in the sky and saw this lone B-24 attempting to land with only one engine operating. That engine was at full throttle and then some. Naturally we all scattered because we remembered the story of the previous plane that had tried to land with one engine. The plane came in very fast and very steep. It hit the ground, bounced up in the air, hit the ground again, the landing gears collapsed, and it came to a screeching stop. Well all rushed toward the plane and by the time we got there, all of the crew were out and walking around. It was miraculous that all of the crew had survived that ordeal. Now we could report back at home base that indeed a B-24 could fly with one engine.

Following another cold and sleepless night, we fueled our plane and prepared to take off for home. We removed all the machine guns, ammunition, flak suits, and about every thing else from the plane to give us a better chance of getting off the ground and clearing the hill at the end of the runway. To

make a long story short, we cleared the hill and were on our way to home base. The crew chief was so happy to see his beloved Buzz-Job and us too, to a lesser degree. When we got back to our tent there was someone staying in our tent. We found out that the squadron commander always sent someone to live in the tents of missing crews to prevent others from stealing personal belongings. They hadn't notified our relatives that we were missing, which was good.

The day following a mission, it was the gunner's responsibility to clean and lubricated his machine guns. Our living quarters were about a mile from where the planes were parked. We would gather our cleaning equipment and ramble over to the planes; no truck rides for this job. This was a nasty job especially when it was cold and snowy. Cleaning required removing the guns from the turrets, breaking them down, cleaning, lubricating, and putting them back in the turret. The job took about three hours and we complained about it all the time we were working. One time we conspired to avoid the job. We hadn't fired our guns at enemy fighters yet, so decided not to test fire our guns during our next mission. When the order came to test, all the gunners reported "guns ok" without test firing. Now get this, here I was sitting in the nose turret right in front of the pilot's sight of vision. He knew I hadn't fired my guns. Did we ever get in trouble over that little gem, consequently we never tried that stunt again. I blamed it on those streetwise crewmembers from the east for talking me into such a hair-brained idea. It's a good thing we had a responsible pilot around.

Shortly after arriving at San Giovonni, we were instructed on what to do if we were forced to parachute into enemy occupied territory. After landing we were to hide our chute and move away from the landing area, as it wouldn't be long before a German patrol would be looking for us. We were to stay hidden as long as possible so that hopefully the partisans would pick us up. In Yugoslavia there were two partisan groups operating. The problem was, one group of partisans would help us and the other group wouldn't. Another problem was that the whole countryside of Yugoslavia was laced with land mines. We also had to worry about wolves attacking us. That's what the 45-caliber pistol was for. Don't try using the pistol on the enemy,

as they would kill us. We were advised never to give ourselves up to civilians. It was much better to be captured by a soldier. Civilians were very unhappy about the bombing and loved to kill captured airmen. The only information we were to give the enemy was name, rank and serial number, nothing else.

After our 16th mission our nerves were getting pretty frayed. One day Jim came to tell us that we were scheduled for some Rest and Recreation (R&R) and would be going to the Isle of Capri for a week. Our trip to the Isle of Capri was the most pleasant time I had in Italy. When we found out we were going to get some leave, we took showers, got our hair cut, packed our dress uniforms and were ready. But first we visited the crew next door and borrowed their leather jackets. Each member of an aircrew was normally issued a brown leather jacket, but the jacket supply was depleted when we shipped out for Italy. We thought we were cool, all slicked up with our leather jackets, white scarves, and garrison caps. Early the next day we piled into the back of a truck and were off to Naples. After bouncing around in the back of a truck for about six hours we arrived at Naples. The town was in shambles as it had been in the middle of some intense ground battles. The harbor was literally filled with sunken and wrecked ships. Many of the ships belonged to the Italian Navy and had been scuttled to avoid capture. We boarded a ferry/barge for the 20 miles to the island. When I stepped on shore I was really excited. The Isle of Capri was quite a move up for a Kansas farm boy. The island is small, about 4 miles by 1.5 miles and has sheer cliffs on all sides. The town of Capri is high above sea level and can be reached from the dock by a narrow winding road or by a cable car called a Funicular. We took the Funicular to the town and nearby hotels where we were to stay for five days. The EM were housed in different hotels than the officers. Our hotel was the Morgano, a very upscale place. We thought we had died and gone to heaven. Breakfast and lunch at the hotel was informal but dinner was something else. Dinnertime was all spit and polish. There were tables for eight, linen table clothes, napkins, real china and silverware.

Each table had a young Italian woman as hostess. For one of our dinners we drew the prettiest hostess. Her name was Adriana and she was a real

knockout, and knew it. After dinner they cleared the tables away and had dancing with a live band. We never danced, as there were at least a dozen GIs for each girl. It was fun watching and drinking a little Vino. The next four days were spent visiting sites and spending our evenings watching Adriana. We visited the famous blue and green grottos, went squid fishing, and took a number of tours by a two-wheel cart, drawn by horses. One such trip was high in a mountain to a villa that overlooked Naples. The place was impressive; they served us tea and cookies. Capri was a beautiful place and the natives were very friendly, probably because Americans spent lots of money. Street vendors were always hawking their wares. The most popular items were the little silver lucky bells of Capri, and unmounted Cameos. Like everyone, I bought several of each. On the fifth day it was time to pack up and reverse our trip. We had had a fun time, but it was time to go back to home base and start flying those dastardly missions once again.

Personnel at San Giovanni Airfield were about equal numbers of ground personnel and aircrews. Aircrews were treated much better than ground personnel. We had higher ranks, got flight pay, had more free time, and had nicer R&R locations. I'm sure some of the ground personnel resented the disparagement but we needed each other so we got along fairly well. Some of the ground personnel would call us flyboys and we called them ground pounders. The ground crews had already been there two years while the aircrews were there for four or five months then gone. That is if they survived.

We had quite a bit of free time that we could do what we pleased. We played touch football, basketball and softball. There was a tent theater with a new film about once a month. About a month before the war was over, someone obtained a bulldozer and dug a big pond, which was filled with water for swimming. Naturally the water became very muddy after a couple of days. The flight surgeon took one look at the water and closed the place. After that we managed to bum rides to the seashore a couple of times and swam in the Adriatic Sea. Another new adventure for this farm boy from Kansas.

Meals at the base were interesting. Each squadron had a mess hall for the officers and another for the EM. The officers' mess was fairly nice. They had the same menu as the EM but ate off of cheap china and of course did not have to wash their dishes. The EM mess hall was a mess. It was way too small, so often we had to stand and eat. No easy feat trying to balance a mess kit and cup, and have a free hand for eating. The mess halls were open 5 to 7 A.M., 11 A.M. to 1 P.M., and 4 to 6 P.M. If you weren't there at those hours you didn't eat. There were no fast food restaurants in Cerignola. The menu seldom varied, for breakfast there was oatmeal, powdered eggs, powdered milk, burnt toast with orange marmalade, and coffee that was barely drinkable. The noon and evening meal menu was the same, Spam and/or Vienna sausage, powdered potatoes, hard bread, some more good coffee and maybe a couple of stale cookies. I never knew there were so many ways to fix Spam and Vienna sausages. After a while it seemed like everything tasted the same. Once in a while we would get a piece of fresh fruit. When not flying we usually skipped breakfast, but about every six weeks they would have fresh eggs for breakfast so it was necessary to send a daily scouting party to the mess hall. Usually either Bert or I did the scouting, as we were the chowhounds of the crew. There were two 55-gallon drums of hot water that we used to wash our mess kits. The first drum was for washing and the second for rinsing. Washing involved putting the mess kit, cup and utensils in the water shake them around a bit and pull them out, then do the rinse the same way. You couldn't take much time as there always a couple dozen guys right behind. The procedure worked great except for the last people in line. By that time the water was thick with crud and washing was an exercise in futility. I suppose dying from food poisoning was not much worse than a piece of flak. I was waiting in line after our noon meal to wash my mess kit when they announced that President Roosevelt had died.

Payday was always a popular time at San Giovanni. We were paid once a month. I don't remember whether it was the last or first day of the month. On payday everyone had to be there in person to get paid, so everyone generally showed up. The paymaster along with two MP's would show up outside squadron headquarters, set up a table, place a colt 45 pistol and the

payroll on the table. A payroll clerk would read names in alphabetical order. We were paid with paper money called Allied Military Currency. In Italy we were paid in Italian lira, one hundred lira was the same as a one-dollar greenback. American dollars were not legal because they were worth many times over a dollar on the black market. My pay, with flight pay was about $60 per month. I had $50 taken out of my pay and sent home which left me 1000 lira a month to spend. That was enough since I didn't gamble or drink. Cox our ball turret gunner usually blew his money within a few days after payday. We always made excuses for him, as we understood it was difficult to keep your sanity flying in the ball turret.

Most of our crewmembers spent their money at the local PX, for haircuts in town and for a few trinkets that were found in Cerignola. Shops in town were bare. I really felt sorry for the Italians; they had nothing. The PX was open once a week and each person from the squadron could buy a specific set of items. Weekly rations consisted of two bottles of beer, one carton of cigarettes, two bars of soap, four candy bars, razor blades and toothpaste. I didn't smoke or drink, but beer and cigarettes were great for bartering. Some of my crewmates are peeved to this day about my bartering techniques. I'd end up with most of the candy from our crew EM as they wanted my beer and cigarettes.

There was an Italian man that hung around our squadron living area. For cigarettes he would haul our water and gasoline. His wife would do our laundry for a bar of soap and a pack of cigarettes. I'm sure he sold the cigarettes on the black-market. The soap was used to wash the clothes and what was left over they used. There was no soap for the native Italians, so any soap they got from us was valued. Vince our handyman was a very friendly person. He had been an officer in the Italian area until the Germans took over. His home was in Milan in northern Italy, but he had moved his wife and several children south to get away from the war. One time we felt especially sorry for him, he told us his youngest daughter just passed away from appendicitis. There had been no doctor available to operate on her. Sometimes we would save some of our food from the mess hall to give to him so that he could feed his family. We later speculated

that he is probably a millionaire now with all the loot he collected during the war.

Mail call was usually about once a week. The mail clerk would read the name off the letters and packages and each soldier would walk up and collect his mail. We were so lazy, we would generally send up one of our crewmembers to collect for all of us. Mail was always much appreciated as it kept us informed about the goings on at the home front. Mom used to write me at least a couple of times a week and Mary Ann, my part-time girl friend, would write occasionally. Once in a while someone would get a food package from home. The recipient was popular for a while. When EM wrote letters home they had to be read by our officers and censor for sensitive military information. We made a pact with our officers that we wouldn't write about military matters so they wouldn't need to read our personal letters.

The 454th Bomb Group was just a tiny part of the war that was going on around the world. For all we knew, we could have been losing the war. All we knew was we flew up north someplace, dropped some bombs, got shot at, then did it all over again three days later. To keep us informed, the military published a newspaper called "The Stars and Stripes". It came out about once a week. That's how we found out we were winning the war. It had news from the home front, the war in the Pacific, and of course, our war. They wrote about our targets, how many planes we lost and all the sensitive stuff that we couldn't write home about. That criticism aside, it was a very informative newspaper and we all looked forward to reading it. When we were able to get electricity to our tent, Evelyn Korpi sent us a tiny radio which we often times used to listen to Axis Sally, Germany's propaganda broadcaster. She was always reminding us that we were losing the war and that the 4-F guys at home were stealing our wives and girlfriends.

About once a month they would have medal ceremonies. All medal recipients would put on their dress uniforms, assemble in formation at squadron headquarters and receive medals. All airmen that survived ten missions were awarded the Air Medal, for every ten additional successful missions they were awarded an oak leaf cluster to the Air Medal. All of our crew ended up

with the Air Medal and two oak leaf clusters. Jim, our pilot, was also awarded the Distinguished Flying Cross, which was a nice honor. We were also awarded battle ribbons and stars, and a group citation. These were supposed to make you feel proud, and they did to a certain extent. In addition, they did add a bit of color to an otherwise rather drab uniform.

Late in the war we were on a milk run mission and the flak was light, however we had to shut one engine down and feather the prop. Feathering the prop meant turning the propeller blades with the edge forward so that would not turn like a windmill. With three engines we fell behind formation and were on our own. We were a little worried about enemy fighters, since we were alone. No fighters, friend or foe, appeared so we relaxed. Joe our navigator suggested that we do a little sight seeing. Venice was only a short distance out of our way and he suggested we fly over the city for a look-see. Besides the city was of no military value thus, no flak guns. Wrong again. We were enjoying the sites when we hear this bang, bang, bang and three puffs of black smoke a short distance off our wing tip. So much for tourism, but we did get to see Venice.

Flying in the B-24 bomber was an experience and something life-threatening, at least by today's standards, on nearly every mission. Obviously enemy flak was the most troublesome, but other things could and did happen to us. Mechanical failures, inclement weather conditions, fuel problems, and idiot pilots flying in formation all contributed to situations that were dangerous to our health. Engine failure was quite common. Flying great distances, up to four hours on three engines was bad enough, but we also had to fly great distances with two engines on two different occasions. Add to that, two engines out on the same side was worse and made our pilots really earn their money. We often times had supercharger, autopilot, fuel transfer, and land gear problems. On one mission just after taking off, we hear a loud bang. Loud bangs are not good. The flight engineer and myself, I was the assistant flight engineer, searched everywhere for damage. We finally realized that the nose wheel tire was flat. Apparently we had had a blowout just as we lifted off the ground. We flew our 7 or 8 hour mission then it was time to figure out how we were going to land safely. We notified the tower that we

had problems; they cleared the runway and assembled the emergency vehicles. We came in for a routine landing except Jim kept the nose wheel off of the ground. At Jim's signal six of us hurried to the tail of the plane so the nose wheel stayed off the ground as we skittered along on our tail. Turned out to be a routine landing. The tail of the plane was only slightly damaged but the crew was safe. Another close call was when two planes, one was ours, landed on the same runway at the same time. Crippled planes always had priority. As we were landing the plane directly behind us, unbeknown to us, had lost his radio and was out of fuel. He came right over the top of us and touched down about 200 feet in front of us. We came very close to a major crash. Another time the plane landing in front of us had one of its main landing gear collapse while landing. Another major crash, but luckily no one was killed.

The most frightening mission that our crew participated in occurred on March 23, 1945, on our 22nd mission. The target was a tank manufacturing plant at St. Valentin, Austria. The Germans had a Valentine for us. As we flew more missions, our crew was getting more nervous. We had completed 21 missions without a mishap, which was against all odds. The target was reported to be protected by 150 anti-aircraft guns, which was considered to be about average. It was a crisp winter day without a cloud in the sky. We were flying at about 24,000 feet and could clearly see the target. The trouble was, the Germans could clearly see us. We were flying deputy lead, which placed us to the left and slightly behind the Group leader. As we reached the I.P. and turned to make our bomb run, all hell broke loose. I should point out that the Germans had an uncanny ability to place their flak bursts at the exact elevation we were flying. Many times they would be shooting ahead, behind, or to the side of us, but nearly always at our elevation. I was perched in my nose gun turret searching the sky for enemy fighter planes and had a box seat for the coming event.

It all started with the first burst of flak, it was right at our elevation and I estimate about 100 feet ahead of us, and me. It sounded like a base drum and there was orange flame, a huge cloud of black smoke and I could hear the shrapnel hit our plane and the plexiglass cover of my turret. During

these times there is no place to hide. That was the most frightening moment of my life and I immediately started saying my prayers. After that first burst the sky lit up around us with black smoke puffs everywhere. Soon the intercom came on and Rude announced number seven plane took a direct hit and someone else said the plane beside us took a burst. All of the action was behind our plane, but back to my box seat. After the first burst right in front of us, I thought the next burst is going to get us as I was sure they had our plane in the cross hairs. The second burst came about 10 seconds later and it also exploded about 100 feet in front of us, as did the 3rd, 4th and 5th bursts. I don't know what happened but I wasn't afraid after about the 5th burst. It was as if God put his hand on my shoulder and was giving me a pass. After about 2 minutes we had dropped our bombs and rallied away from the guns and considered ourselves to be home free. Our plane sustained numerous holes from shrapnel and we had to shut down one engine. None of our crewmembers were hit. One piece of shrapnel came through the side of our plane and bounced at the feet of our flight engineer. Luckily it missed him. My turret cover was cracked and badly pitted from shrapnel. It was reported that our Group lost a large number of planes, two from our squadron.

When we returned to our home base the ground crews were anxious as they had had advanced information that things had not gone well. I remember how relieved our ground crew chief was when we came taxiing into our revetment, and how thankful we were to be there, too.

One of our more noteworthy incidents happened on a mission when we never reached the target. It was a miserable day with thick low-lying clouds. The weather forecast called for clearing later in the day and clear over the target area. Our target was somewhere in Yugoslavia. We finally all got off the ground through the clouds into formation and began our climb. From my perch in the nose turret I saw a huge cloudbank ahead. The clouds became thicker and thicker, then we hit the dense clouds. You can imagine the feeling we had when 28 bombers in tight formation fly into the clouds so thick that you couldn't see the plane next to you. Over the radio we heard the Group leader order, "Break formation." At that moment the planes

scattered. We were flying completely blind. I could feel we were diving because I sort of rose off of my seat. After what seemed about 30 seconds we were abruptly pulling out of our dive and I couldn't move. The force of gravity froze me in place. When we leveled off we were out of the clouds and just a few thousand feet above the Adriatic Sea. We couldn't find the rest of the bomb group so we dumped our bombs at sea and went home. After we landed the pilot explained to us what happened. When we broke formation our pilot experienced vertigo. That's where you become disoriented and lose all sense of direction. Fortunately for us the co-pilot, Otto, recognized the problem because he was watching the instruments. He pulled Jim's hands away from the controls and pulled the plane out of the dive and in all likelihood saved our necks. We were also lucky that the wings hadn't come off, as we were way beyond the red line for airspeed when we pulled out of our dive. Afterwards we asked Jim if he thought he was flying a dive-bomber. To add insult to injury we didn't receive credit for flying a mission.

Because our crew had the reputation as being one of the hotshot crews, we were sometimes given added duties. All squadrons had a photographer for taking pictures of bomb drops. When we flew the photographer flew with us. When the squadron got radar-jamming equipment it was on our plane. To improve relations between the flyboys and the ground troop, our crew was chosen to take an infantry officer on a mission. In late March the brass decided they could enhance intelligence-gathering capabilities if we could monitor what the enemy was saying during our bombing missions. The rigged up some sort of radio listening devise, and found a GI who knew German whose name was Max Kumpf. Guess what? They chose our crew to babysit good old Max and he flew with us on seven or eight missions. This guy was a German Jew from New York and was a cook in the army. The poor guy had never flown in an airplane and was understandably afraid of flying. He was somewhat of an orphan because he had transferred into our group and didn't know a soul. I don't know where he stayed, but he hung around our tent most of the time and since he flew with us, we more or less looked out for him. We would kid him that if we ever got shot down, he was going to have to bail out with the rest of us even though he didn't have a clue as to how a

parachute worked. Besides he was a Jew and we would always remind him what Germans were doing to Jews. Max was a funny guy and we liked to have him fly with us.

During the time that the Allied Forces were bombing the Axis forces, the Americans bombed by day and the English bombed at night. The reasons for bombing were two-fold: to raise havoc with the enemy's war machine, but also to harass the civilian population. The Allies decided the best way to harass the natives was to bomb around the clock. They didn't have enough bombers to cover the large areas at night so the Allies would send out a lone bomber over many targets during the night. Wouldn't you know it, they chose us for that job. We flew several training missions at night, night vision goggles and all. It was rather risky flying as our runways had no lights worth mentioning. We flew about three training missions, then they called the whole thing off because the war was winding down.

In late April, rumors began to circulate that the war would soon be over. We flew our last mission April 24, 1945. Jim, our pilot, had already completed his 35 missions and had been sent home. We flew our last few missions with the squadron commander, which was ok because he was an excellent pilot. About noon on May 8, 1945 it was announced that the war in Europe was over. They broke out the food, beer and everything else and the Group had a big celebration. But my problems were still not over.

In late April and early May new crews were still arriving at San Giovonni and they would go on training missions. I had to get at least four hours of flying time in May so that I could collect flight pay. I asked one of the new crews if I could go with them on a training mission. They agreed and away we went. When it came time to land, the nose wheel would not lower. I thought, I've been there, done that already; do we have to do it again? The pilot asked over the intercom if anyone had any ideas, no one did. I didn't say anything, because I wasn't a crewmember. Finally, I volunteered that I thought I might be able to lower the gear because Korpi and I had done it once during our training. Between the flight engineer and myself we got the gear down

and saved a lots of wear and tear on the nerves. I took that flight for a lousy 19 bucks.

Our Missions

November 22, 1944	Villach, Austria	Marshalling Yards
November 25, 1944	Munich, Germany	Marshalling Yards
December 6, 1944	Gratz, Austria	Marshalling Yards
December 9, 1944	Linz, Austria	Industrial Area
December 11, 1944	Vienna, Austria	Goods Yards
December 15, 1944	Linz, Austria	Freight Yards
December 27, 1944	Bruck, Austria	Marshalling Yards
January 4, 1945	Verona, Italy	Marshalling Yards
January 19, 1945	Brod, Yugoslavia	Road Bridge
January 31, 1945	Moosbierbaum, Austria	Oil Refinery
February 5, 1945	Regensburg, Germany	Oil Storage Depot
February 7, 1945	Moosbierbaum, Austria	Oil Refinery
February 13, 1945	Bruck, Austria	Marshalling Yards
February 15, 1945	Vienna, Austria	Oil Refinery
February 17, 1945	Amstand, Austria	Marshalling Yards
February 19, 1945	Pola, Italy	Shipyards
March 4, 1945	WienerNeustadt, Germany	Marshalling Yards
March 9, 1945	Gratz, Austria	Marshalling Yards
March 13, 1945	Regensburg, Germany	Marshalling Yards
March 19, 1945	Muhldorf, Germany	Marshalling Yards
March 21, 1945	Neuburg, Germany	Airdrome
March 23, 1945	St. Valentin, Austria	Tank works
March 26, 1945	Szombathely, Hungary	Marshalling Yards
April 5, 1945	Alessandria, Italy	Marshalling Yards
April 7, 1945	Brennerpass, Italy	Bridge
April 11, 1945	Brennerpass, Italy	Bridge
April 15, 1945	Bologna, Italy	Troop Concentration
April 16, 1945	Battle Lines, Italy	Troop Concentration
April 18, 1945	Bologna, Italy	Troop Concentration
April 19, 1945	Klagenfurt, Austria	Marshalling Yards
April 23, 1945	Padua, Italy	Road Bridge
April 24, 1945	Bassano, Italy	Road Bridge

From May 8th to June 4th we hung around our living area keeping out of sight as much as possible. We had no assigned duties except that we had to stand guard duty a few times to keep the natives from stealing everything from the Airfield before we pulled out. One by one my crewmembers got orders to pack up and leave until Turk and I were the only ones left. After a couple of days and no orders, we inquired about our status. We apparently had been overlooked and they didn't know what to do with us. The squadron commander suggested we hitch a ride down to Joya, Italy where there was an airbase that was ferrying a B-24 bomber back to the USA. He said we should be able to hitch a ride home from there. After a couple of days we secured temporary orders, hitched hiked to Joya, and were told to check the bulletin board for crews that would be flying planes back to the USA. Bombers were restricted to carrying 12 members, 10 crewmembers and two freeloaders. After a couple of days wait, Turk and I secured a ride. Lucky for us we tagged on with a first class crew. On the morning on June 8th, 1945 we left Italy.

Our thoughts as we lifted off the runway in Joya, Italy were that we had survived the war, now if we could survive the trip home, we would have it made. The trip home was planned so that each leg of the trip would require about 7 hours of flying time and we would fly below 10,000 feet. That meant we would not have to be on oxygen. As was usual, nothing seemed to go as planned. Our first stop was to be Casablanca, Morocco, but when we arrived there was a major sandstorm that obscured the airfield. We eventually landed at Marrakech, Morocco about 100 miles farther.

We were disappointed about not going to Casablanca. We had seen the movie "Casablanca" and were eager to visit the Casaba. The second day we flew to Dakar, French West Africa. What a desolate spot, at least at the air base. Nothing but sand as far as the eye could see. Turk and I didn't get to see the city and I suppose we didn't miss much. Because of vandalism and thievery, it was recommended that the plane not be left unguarded. So Turk and I had to stay with the plane because of our outsider status. We still had our trusty 45 caliber pistols. There was also a member of the French

Foreign Legion standing guard. He was nothing but spit and polish. He spoke French, which we couldn't understand, but was quite friendly. I was fascinated by his smile. He was a tall black man with pearly white teeth. What was different was that his four top front teeth had been filed to points. I'd never seen anything like that before.

The next day started off wrong also. When we got out of the plane we noticed that a tire on the main landing gear was about half flat. The pilot summoned a maintenance crew who quickly repaired the tire, however when they were lowering the plane down the jack slipped and poked a hole in the flap. Things were not going well. The next leg of our journey was across the Atlantic Ocean to Natal, Brazil, which was a long 8-hour flight. If we didn't get off the ground soon we would have to wait a day. An inspection of the flap revealed that it had minimal damage, something like a flak hole, which we were used to, so away we went. As we approached Natal it was getting dark and becoming very cloudy. This made things very difficult for the pilot. Darkness was setting in, the ceiling was low, it was a strange airfield and we were low on fuel. Our pilot hung in there and we landed smooth as silk. It turned out that we were the last plane to land that night as they closed the airstrip immediately after we landed because a tropical storm was moving in. The one thing different about that leg of the trip was that I crossed the equator for the first time. I thought that was neat.

We had to hang around Natal for a day until the weather cleared, so we had time to look around a bit. I saw my first banana plant and picked a banana off the plant and ate it right there. We also got to shop in a real PX once again. I remember I bought a wristwatch and some silk hose for Mom and JoAnn. After I got home, I found out that those items were not available in the USA. The rest of our trip was uneventful. We stopped in British Guiana and San Juan, Puerto Rico.

The final leg of our journey was to Savannah, Georgia. We landed in the afternoon of June 15, 1945. Back to friendly surrounding after an absence of 8½ months. After we had stowed our gear we were taken to a huge mess hall where all returning airmen were served a big steak dinner with all the

trimmings. What was interesting about this mess hall experience was we were served by German prisoners of war. We had been fighting Germans during our tour in Italy and I came face to face with my first German soldier here at home after the war was over. That's how impersonal an air war can be. The next day it was by train to Fort Leavenworth, Kansas.

I spent a couple of days at Fort Leavenworth waiting for some paperwork to be complete and to receive orders for my next assignment. But most important I got a 30-day furlough. I immediately caught a train for home. It suddenly dawned on me that my parents had no idea where I was, as I had no way of contacting them for the past 6 weeks. At 1:30 A.M. in the darkness of the night I was unceremoniously dumped off at the train depot in LeRoy, Kansas. LeRoy was a small town of about 300 people located about 12 miles from home. Now what do I do? Fortunately at about that time the depot superintendent showed up to meet a mail train that was expected shortly. He was very surprised to see me as hardly anyone ever arrives by train in the middle of the night in LeRoy. When he found out I was a soldier just returning home from the war, he was so excited and couldn't do enough for me. He took me and my baggage into the depot, got me some coffee and made sure I was comfortable. Then he called my parents and told them that their son was home from the war and was at the LeRoy train depot. He had to make the call long distance as official train business to avoid the red tape. Within the hour my mother and dad were there with many hugs and tears. The next day I went out to survey our home and farm. It was so good to be home.

The 30 days went fast, and then it was time to head for Sioux Falls Airfield in Sioux Falls, South Dakota. This was about July 20, 1945. I was sent there to join another aircrew to begin training in the B-29 bomber that was being used in the Pacific War. Lucky me, I was being assigned to a brand new bomber crew. As I remember they announced the war was over at the base in the afternoon of August 14, 1945. They opened the gates to the airfield and almost everyone headed for town. Sioux Falls was a city of about 30,000 people and there were 35,000 GI's at the base. Turk, my crewmate in Italy, and I decided to celebrate on base where it wasn't so

crowded. We went to the PX and ate ice cream. What a couple of stick-in-the-muds, but still chowhounds.

Now that the war was over, everyone was speculating when we would be discharged. Up to that time I never really thought much about getting out of the army; it just seemed like the war was going to last forever. A point system was established to determine the order of discharges. Each military person was given one point for each month they had served, one additional point for each month overseas, and five points for each medal, oak leaf cluster and battle star. Anyone with over 85 points was to be discharged first. As I remember I had 58 points, which meant that I was way down the list.

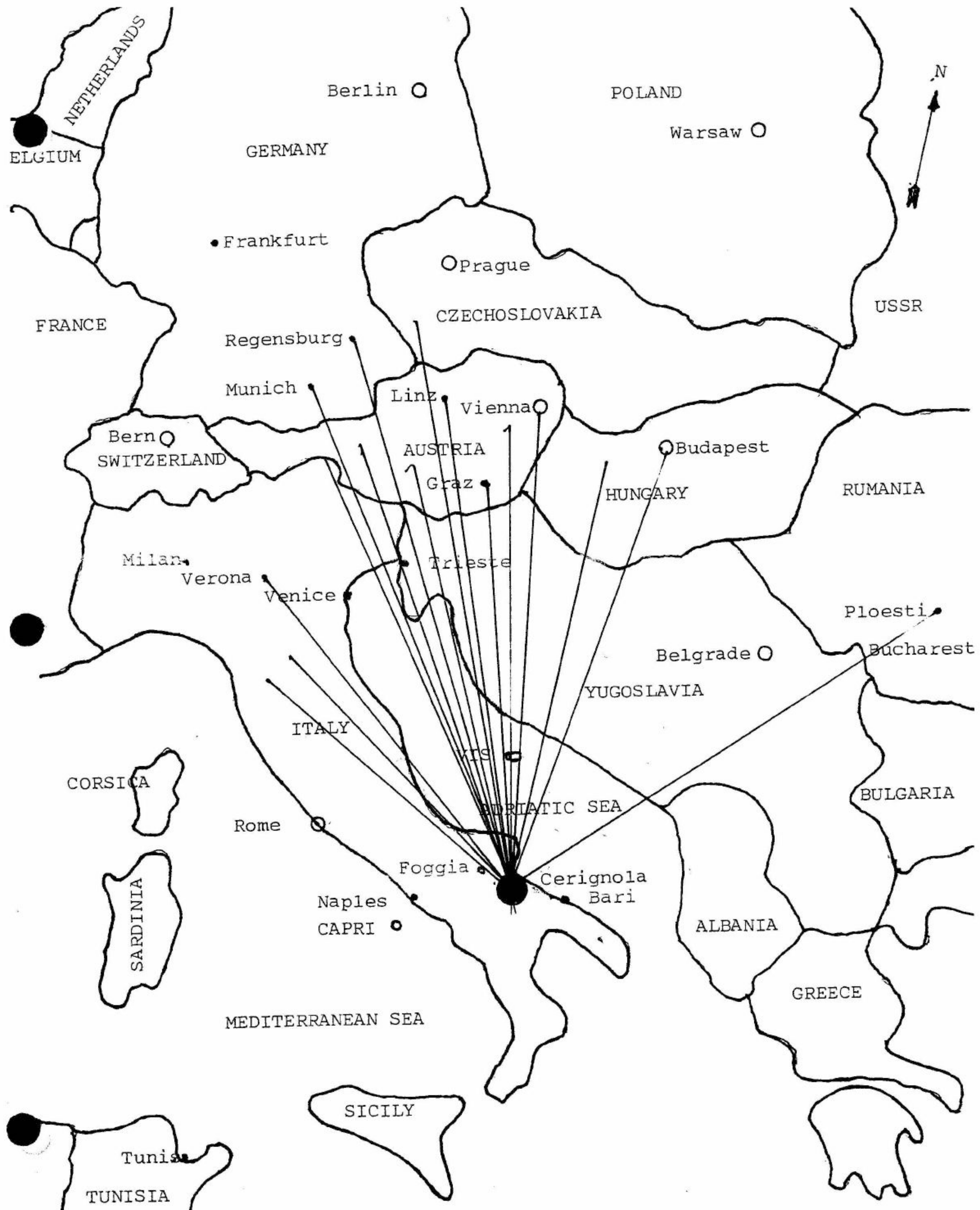
My next stop was Chanute Field located near the small town of Rantoul, Illinois. This field was a permanent field, which meant lots of brass. It was also a place where soldiers came to be discharged. Since I had several months to wait before being discharged I was assigned to a life insurance office. The only thing I knew about life insurance was that I had $10,000 dollars worth. My job was to try and talk the discharged soldiers into keeping their insurance.

The insurance office consisted of a regular army Bird Colonel, a WAC 2nd Lieutenant, two Buck Sergeants, two civilian secretaries, four or five co-eds from the University of Illinois and myself. I had less knowledge about the job than anyone else, but I was a Staff Sergeant and the ranking non-com so I was in charge of day-to-day duties. The Colonel was a gentleman about 50 years old, a Westpoint graduate, straight as a ramrod and all spit and polish. I got in trouble the first day I reported for duty. He took me into his office, made me stand at attention while he proceeded to read me the riot act. He said, and I quote, "Soldier, you're in the Army and I expect you to act and dress like a soldier, get you hair cut, put on a clean uniform, polish your brass, and shine you shoes." Those smarty co-eds thought that was funny. After that little incident with the Colonel things went pretty well. I think the Colonel took a liking to me, although he would comment about my shoes and brass occasionally. I spent all my three months at Chanute field

on base. My regular papers were still AWOL so I never got paid. I went to the office, flirted with the co-eds and kept out of the Colonel's way. One time I about got busted for not saluting an officer. If I had been busted, I would have been discharged as a buck private instead of a Staff Sergeant.

On November 8, 1945 my number came up for a discharge. Before being discharged I had to go through the usual paperwork and take a physical examination. Guess what? My blood pressure was too high so they wouldn't let me go. I talked them into letting me lie down for an hour, so they could check it later. It was good enough at the second check so I was free at last.

On my way home by train I had the opportunity to reflect on my experience during the previous 21 months and 15 days. It was a wild ride from my first day in the army as a raw recruit just off the farm to a somewhat wiser individual at my discharge. It was an adventure, sometime exciting, often times frightening, and other times comical. I made a number of close friends, did a lot of different things, and saw many new places. Had the war not happened, my life would have surely been different. That's why I would not want to change anything, but I wouldn't want to do it over again. As I reviewed all the close calls I had, I am convinced that it was only by the grace of God that I survived, and that the good Lord must have other plans for me.



EUROPE 1944-1945

Since the end of the war our bomber crew members and wives regularly hold reunions. The wives enjoy these reunions as much as the crew members. In addition, the 454th Bomb Group holds an annual reunion. During these reunions, part of the program includes a moment of silence to memorialize those who were killed during the war and others who have since died. The reunion ends by singing the Army Air Corps song. The song never fails to bring a lump in the throat and a tear to the eye of all those present.

Army Air Corps Song

Off we go into the wild blue yonder,
Climbing high into the sun;
Here they come zooming to meet our thunder,
At 'em boys, Give 'er the gun! Giver 'er the gun!
Down we dive, spouting our flame from under.
Off with one helluva roar!
We live in fame or go down in flame. Hey!
Nothing'll stop the Army Air Corps.

Here's a toast to the host
Of those who love the vastness of the sky,
To a friend we send a message of his brother men who fly.
We drink to those who gave their all of old,
Then down we dive to score the rainbow's pot of gold.
A toast to host of men we boast, the Army Air Corps!