

Chapter 7 - The Battle for France

September – November 1944

September 1944

All through August 1944 the Allied land forces had raced across France to capture as much ground as possible from the retreating Germans. Patton's troops had advanced 450 miles from Brittany in eastern France to Lorraine in the west. Patton pursued his goal of splitting France in half, but he was exposing his right flank. The Allies were on his left, but he filled the gap on the right by utilizing the French Underground to clear roads and bridges, guard supply dumps, and located German patrols. He had the support of up to 25,000 FFI troops.¹ Patton reached Metz on September 1st after his lightning advance across the country. The other armies on his right were pushing forward too. Everyone began to feel that victory was just ahead of them. The Germans now had only about 100 tank and 570 aircraft against the Allies' 2,000 and 14,000 respectively.² Men were shouting, "End the war in '44!"³ But then the Allied advance ran out of gas, literally!

On September 1st Eisenhower took over direct command of the Allied forces in Northern France from British General Montgomery. Almost his first act on duty was to halt the First and Third Armies so they could be replenished. General Patton fumed, replying that his, "men can eat their belts, but my tanks have gotta have gas!" Eisenhower was hard put to keep his commanders at bay.⁴ Bradley's forces need 20,000 tons of supplies a day but they only received 11,000, not enough to continue advancing.⁵

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One unusual thing about the advancement of the 323rd Bomb Group to Lessay was that now the Germans were to the east as well as to the west. To the east was Germany and the as-yet-to-be liberated areas of France, but to the west, trapped on the Brest Peninsula, was a substantial group of Germans who had been ordered by Hitler to hold out at all costs. General Patton's troops split up into two contingents, one fighting east and the other fighting west. This meant the Marauders would be flying in both directions. General Moench categorized it as "Brest or Metz." In order to minimize Allied casualties the bombers were heavily employed against enemy concentrations.⁶

But the rain was against them again and missions were briefed and scrubbed day after day. The airmen know what was being said about them but nothing could be done.⁷ Moench describes a "growing undercurrent of exasperation between air forces and ground forces." High Command decided that in order to create mutual understanding officers and Enlisted men would spend some time in an exchange program. Ground-pounders would fly and airmen would serve with the ground troops. However, neither group, received much appreciation or understanding of the other group's situation.⁸

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¹ Perret, *War to be Won*, 366.

² Hastings, *Victory in Europe*, 78.

³ Perret, *War to be Won* 359.

⁴ Hastings, *Victory in Europe*, 82.

⁵ Perret, *War to be Won*, 369-370.

⁶ Moench, *Marauder Men*, 250.

⁷ Moench, *Marauder Men*.

⁸ Moench, *Marauder Men*, 251.



The 323rd Marauders attack a railroad yard (*Photo courtesy of W. L. Brainard*).

About this time the ever vigilant David Goss found another opportunity to sneak off and visit his wife in England.

In the first week of September, one of the B-26 aircraft damaged both propellers landing on the steel plank strip. David heard that another B-26 was preparing to go to England to pick up replacement props. He promptly caught up with the pilot, who knew him quite well. “Any chance I might be part of your crew to go get the props? You know my wife is in London, and I’d love to see her even for a brief hello. Can’t help worrying about her.”

Typical of the officers in the squadron he answered, “Sure, why not? We’re going to be cranking her up pretty soon. I’ll sign you up in the log if you think you can be back here in fifteen minutes, ready to go.” They flew to Croydon, south of London, landing in the early afternoon. The pilot allowed the crew to take off immediately with return to France scheduled the next morning.

The night was short. Early morning he was back at the plane where he helped load the replacement props and preflight the plane for departure. Sgt. Krout, the propeller specialist also came from Baltimore. They had a good time on the way across talking about where they grew up. After a neat touchdown, he had a few explanations to make about his disappearance. To the question, ‘Where have you been this time, Goss?’, he quietly answered, ‘On special assignment, if you please.’⁹

⁹ Goss, *Meant to be?* 113-116.



David Goss (armament section), Erwin "Ernie" Krout (propeller specialist)

Erwin W. "Ernie" Krout was one of the 453rd members photographed at Baer Field in February, 1943. He was originally a crew chief mechanic but probably became a propeller specialist later in England. Erwin was born on March 27, 1921, in Baltimore Maryland, the son of LeRoy A. Krout and Grace A. La Motte. After the war he worked for Baltimore Gas and Electric. His daughter, Elaine Chavez wrote to Sochocki, "Ernie was proud of his association with the bomb squadron."

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Back in the States, Tex was in California and was settling into a well-deserved new assignment.

"The army had an entire hotel in Santa Monica and all sorts of activities that we could attend if we wished. We could visit the Hollywood Stage Door Canteen and dance with the movie stars, tour the movie picture studios, go on beach parties, go horseback riding, and many other events. Mostly I went around on my own. I was there, as I remember, for about 10 days. I saw some of the movie stars and went to some nightclubs. One, in particular, was the Florentine Gardens. I went with a girl that I met and Sgt. Mickey Rooney, the movie star, and party occupied the table next to ours. The entertainment feature was Sophie Tucker who sang 'Pistol Packing Mama.' We were given physical examinations and I was certified as 'qualified for overseas duty,' but my next duty station was the Central Gunnery Instructor School at Laredo Army Air Base in Laredo, Texas."

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Finally the 323rd including the Foster and Sprague crews flew to Brest on the 6th – it was Gus's 65th mission, Willie's 57th. The German positions were pounded three times, twice on the 6th and once on the 7th. The Germans then dug into the ruins as the American ground forces attacked. However, when Brest finally fell, it was a complete embarrassment to the Allies, especially to Patton, Bradley, and Eisenhower because after losing 10,000 casualties, it was determined that the port city was not useful to the Allies anyway. The defenders could have been besieged instead of assaulted as the Allies were doing at other unusable ports.¹⁰ But the Americans had gotten their dander up and the city had to fall – generals get mad, soldiers get killed.

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Then the 323rd turned their attention to the east where the rest of Patton's Third Army was completely stalled before the French town of Metz, in the area known as Lorraine, just before the border of Germany. While the Allied forces ground to a halt the 323rd continued to 'fight' with the weather in order to be able to lend its support. Missions would be briefed and flights would take off only to return with their bomb loads, and they had to land in the same thick cloud cover with full bomb loads. Moench wrote that it was a wonder there weren't more mid-air collisions or accidents.

¹⁰ Perret, *War to be Won*.

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After having been stationed in comfortable England for a year, the men had to make quite an adjustment to their new surroundings, an air base carved out of a war zone. Gus quickly made contacts with the locals.

Gus said, "About two weeks after we had established the airfield just near Omaha Beach. I asked one of my chums, 'Let's go to town.' I knew some people there. I had smuggled my bicycle across the channel in the airplane."

Willy confirmed, "We put our bikes in the bomb bay of the plane. You weren't supposed to do that. Then we piled up our duffle bags and other stuff on top so no one could see them."

Gus continued, "But the other guy didn't have a bike, so he asks, 'How am I going to get to town?' So I says, 'Follow me! Run!' The distance was about ten miles. I knew the people by being able to speak French. I got everything I wanted there. I had met them the day before. I brought them a steak. Then the lady made me all the tomato soup, onion soup, potato soup, what have you."

"Did that other guy go, too?" I asked.

"Ya, he had to run. What else?"

"The whole ten miles?"

"Right. He certainly wasn't going to ride on my bike! We had to go by this dead horse, I remember that. Boy, did he stink. Holy mackerel, aughhhh!! You could smell him for 20 miles."

Apparently a lot of dead farm animals lay all around the base, and in one location the smell came from dead Germans – and the fields were still mined, so it would not be easy to remove them.¹¹

"Any kind of soup I wanted, they gave me," Gus related, "but I always brought them some meat which they couldn't get. So we worked that out together. I would bring the meat, and they would furnish the soup. That's all I wanted. I can't make soup the way they did. It was good! That's why it didn't bother me to give them the meat. And of course, big deal, what I would do is get a fifth of Calvados, bring it to camp and the chief cook would pass me the meat."

French Canadians love soups, stews, and ragus. Moench mentioned that Lessay didn't afford any interesting places to go on leave; but Gus didn't need anything special. Just visiting a French family must have been like spending time with the relatives back home. Gus never thought much of the French government either, but he never missed a chance to visit the locals. I hope the cook was careful with the Calvados because it was a very strong drink that was totally unfamiliar to the Americans. David Goss described the effects of Calvados on his friend "Moose" McKinney in a letter to his wife Joan.

"...the men here had discovered Calvados. It's a brandy made from apples, with a pungent taste reminiscent of hard cider, but with a kick like a mule. I think of it in terms of 'bathtub gin' and don't like it. But it's readily available and strong. Two drinks, you think you're in trouble. Three drinks, you know you're in trouble. Anyway somebody decided it was time Moose became acquainted with Calvados. They turned loose a monster who would not hurt a mouse. When Moose decided to head back to his tent, his guidance system was not working well, but nothing was wrong with his determination. He aimed at the space between two rows of tents, back to back. Where the guy ropes crisscross, he proceeded to plow his way one rope at a time toward his tent. By the time we got him turned around, six tents had collapsed, and Moose had been called names he hadn't heard before. Moose doesn't like Calvados..."¹²

Willie added, "Now you could go temporarily blind drinking that stuff. Couple of our guys did... it took them a couple of days to get their sight back."

¹¹ Moench, *Marauder Men*, 245.

¹² Goss, *Meant to Be?* 118-119.

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On September 11 Allied Army Group 6 that had landed in southern France, met up with elements of Patton's Third Army. They had advanced north 400 miles in one month, similar to Patton's march east. Patton's right flank was now secure. Eisenhower estimated that the participation of the French underground had sped-up the liberation of France by two months.

That same day thousands of Germans surrendered to the XIXth Tactical Air Command (part of the Ninth Air Force). Twenty-thousand enemy near Orleans surrendered to a platoon of the 83rd Division, mostly because they believed that the 'jabos' would destroy them. Correspondingly, the infantrymen told the commander of the XIXth TAC that they were his problem.¹³ In his memoirs Patton wrote that these Germans had specifically surrendered to General Quesada's XIXth TAC and the Third Army. People began to joke that the Ninth Air Force had been re-designated 'Patton's Air Force.'

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OPERATION MARKET GARDEN

In the North the British army reached the Belgian border, and Field Marshall Montgomery planned a strategy to advance through the Netherlands in just a few days. He decided to drop paratroops to seize the key bridges while the land forces advanced along the main road. Soon after, Operation Market Garden, as it was called, was launched. On September 17th, 1,550 transport planes and 500 gliders dropped three paratrooper divisions on Dutch soil. They were supported by 1,250 fighters and 1,000 bombers.¹⁴



L-R: Bill Miller (Togglier), D. J. Matkin, and Manny Blumenthal (EG) next to *Heaven Can Wait/Miss Satan* 42-107688 VT-C. (Photo courtesy of Manfred Blumenthal)

¹³ Perret, *War to be Won*, 367.

¹⁴ Perret, *War to be Won*, 384.

The intention was to quickly open a way into Germany, but although the Allied forces gained most of the intended ground, the operation miscarried and it was an unmitigated disaster. By reason of national politics rather than Allied strategy, Gen. Lewis Brereton (USAAF) had been placed in command of the parachute army, even though the author Perret notes that, “Brereton had a reputation for being lazy and uncooperative.” He was chosen in order to keep control of the parachute army out of British hands, because American commanders felt that the British tended to misuse foreign troops while saving their own. This was a mistake because, as many people criticize Field Marshal Montgomery for planning “One Bridge Too Far,” they seem to overlook one other factor. Unfortunately General Brereton had limited the drop to one lift a day instead of two. His airmen had done it before. All of the paratroopers should have been dropped on the first day.¹⁵

Bad weather set in, delaying the second drop until it was too late to make any difference. The Germans severely mauled the British, Polish, and American paratroopers and took 6,000 prisoners, mostly British and Poles who could not be rescued – losses the British could not afford. Their paratrooper division was ruined and the American 82nd and 101st Divisions were all that were left of the parachute army. The last bridge at Arnheim was still in German hands.

It was an Allied ‘last gasp’ in 1944 and signaled then end of the brilliant dash across France and Belgium. The commanders had believed that the Germans were nearly defeated but this was not so. They were surprised by the strength of German defenses and counter-attacks.¹⁶

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By now the Russians had reached the Czech/Polish border on their way towards the borders of Germany, the heart of the Third Reich, which, except for isolated armies still in far-flung pockets, had effectively shrunk back to its original size. But they were far from beaten.

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Meanwhile, Gus and Willie still managed to get some time off.

“In France there were little riot wars.” Gus said. “We went to the dance hall one day. The whole thing split up when a Negro came in with a hatchet. He was gonna split somebody’s head. We weren’t ready to get our heads split so we went out through a small window in the bathroom. Since I could speak French, a lady let us in her house. I took Willie in with me. The rioters were chasing us. This was about six weeks after we landed in France.”

“Why were they chasing you?” I asked.

“I don’t know and Willie didn’t know either. We didn’t stop to ask.”

But Willie did know. “A Negro came in the front door with a hatchet,” he said, “and me and Frenchie went out the back. The other blacks had pieces of those stays that hold up the canvas on the back of the trucks and the one guy had an ax – a French girl got hit in the head with the ax. They were mad because they were not invited. The French did not patronize the blacks the way the English did. They didn’t want anything to do with them. We heard later that a truckload of blacks got shot at by some G.I.s because of that incident.”

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It seems that at this point in the war Gus and Willie truly did not recall any of it worth mentioning. Quite likely, as Gus had told the reporters back home, it had become a blur. But they did remember the time off they had together. Gus and Willie – drinking and riding bikes again:

“We got ‘riding in formation’ one night,” Willie continued, “on our bicycles, going back to the base. I was on the right wing... can’t remember who was on the left. Frenchie was ‘lead ship’ because he could pedal straighter. I got too close to him and caught my foot in my spokes and tore them out of my front wheel. We pushed the bike through a gate and covered it up a little bit; then we closed the gate. We came back two or three nights later; the bicycle was gone. So we went

¹⁵ Perret, *War to be Won*, 384.

¹⁶ Hastings, *Victory in Europe*, 91.

down to the café and I told those guys what happened. ‘We knew you left your bicycle there,’ the café owner said. ‘Ya, I think I know where it is. No, I can’t get it. You don’t just leave stuff lying around these days.’ That was true – these people had nothing. And I’d already seen the bike. It was already fixed up and a guy was riding it! ‘What do you want to do?’ the café owner asked me. I said, ‘Oh, let him have it. He’ll get more use out of it than I will.’ It was a good English bike, too.”

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Back in the States, Tex attended Gunnery Instructor School. “The course at Laredo was for six weeks and this school was very advanced. While there I learned how to instruct students in gunnery and on the General Electric Remote Controlled Gun Turret which was installed in some of the newer bomber aircraft coming off of the production lines. I was given a choice of several stations for my next duty assignment and I selected Lake Charles Army Air Base in Lake Charles, LA.”

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Willie said, “One night we were out at that same Pub on the seashore and me and Dec got in a real argument. The Café owner had two daughters not old enough to be married, but almost old enough to be kissed. And by God that’s why me an’ Dec almost got into it that night. Dec decided he was going to take one of them outside in the bushes and teach her a lesson or two about life. Those girls were only about Junior High school age. Anyway he started to grab one of those girls. I said, ‘Like hell you will.’ I grabbed a hold of him, and when he took a swing at me, I ducked down and came up with an uppercut to his crotch. It never hurt him. It just made him grunt. In France, we all carried our 45s on us, so we decided to go outside and shoot it out, like a duel, but Frenchie stopped us. Frenchie got a hold of him and he said, ‘Dammit, if you want to take on somebody, why don’t you take me on for size?’ Frenchie and Dec were close to the same height, Dec may have been a little heavier. I wouldn’t want to tangle with old Frenchie.... I had a feeling he was a pretty tough boy. I looked at his nose and it looked like somewhere along the line it had been smashed... probably by a hockey stick.”

“Ya, that’s right,” I said. “He got hit with three sticks in a row in High School. It broke all the cartilage in his nose. He could smooch it around, squash it, and it would pop back into shape.”

Willie continued, “So I thought, ‘You don’t mess with hockey players especially when they’re not on skates.’ They’d been in a lot more scraps than I had. Dec looked at me and Frenchie, and he said, ‘You tell your buddy there to lay off.’ We both had our hands on our 45s. Frenchie grabbed my arm and we went back inside. I don’t know if Dec really would have done anything bad. I didn’t like that guy, to this day I still don’t like him (laughing). I always felt sorry that Frenchie and Ketcham had to put up with him. He was a little too quick to want to take a swing at somebody. Well, after that, he stood around looking at Frenchie and me. He didn’t know what to do with us. He figured if he whipped one he’d have to whip the other (laughing).”

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Combat fatigue was not very well understood by Allied Medical Officers. The men simply tried to ignore it. They continued to strive to be excellent in combat even when the evidence suggested it was a long shot. In hindsight it was “beyond the discussable” and for the Medics it was baffling and unpredictable. Some pilots broke formation at the sight of flak, bombardiers would break down, gunners would be non-participating and these were only the reported events.¹⁷ After the war men would acknowledge they had been affected by combat fatigue; that they had been suffering from stress and were performing under reduced effectiveness.¹⁸ Dr. Charles B. Sadler, 453rd Flight Surgeon, related after the war that at the 70-75 mission level, still without a set

¹⁷ Moench, *Marauder Men*, 340.

¹⁸ Moench, *Marauder Men*, 346.

tour of duty, stress continued to increase, yet no true breakdowns occurred and the men kept flying.¹⁹

“Tension,” Gus said. “So that adds up. I don’t care how you put it. All right, you take an elastic band. How far can you stretch it? Not too far, can you? Tension is the same thing. How much tension can you take? How long can you be pushed? Like an elastic... it’ll stretch, but you don’t know when its going to break, right?”

“Ya,” I replied.

“Right, same damn thing. Am I supposed to forget everything that happened to me? I can’t. You don’t expect me to, do ya?”

This was the real war, not the one that came home in the newspapers and the movies. In every war we have the “Audie Murphys” who thrive on the excitement of battle and there were some men who flew many missions, seemingly without effect, but to the average guy who just wanted to do his job and go home, the war was not merely an adventure. These men are easily admired, but I also find a deep admiration for those who found it difficult yet still did their tour, like the architect I worked with in Albuquerque. He had been a tail gunner in a B-17. One day the Confederate Air Force (a memorial aircraft group) brought a B-17 to town and he and his son went to see it. The son was very excited, of course, and was trying to coax his dad into the plane, but he would not enter it or even go near it. He told me later, “Dave, I was terrified the entire time I flew in that plane.” He did his job, and he went home.

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Once the Germans were on the run, General Eisenhower issued this directive: “I want every airman to make it his direct responsibility that the enemy is blasted unceasingly by day and by night, and is denied safety either in fight or flight.”²⁰ Gus described an experience that occurred during a low-level ground support mission during this period.

“There was one time,” he said. “This was after the breakout at St. Lô. I caught one poor German soldier out in the middle of the field. I hated to pull the trigger, but I had to. Lifted him up and cut him up. (Low voice): Holy mackerel. I don’t think I would ever do it again.”

“What was he doing?” I asked.

“Just running across the field, instead of being where he should have been. You know, it’s no fun to kill people. It’s all right like bombing because you don’t see the people being killed. But when you’ve got your guns trained on another person, that’s another thing. (Pause.) I know damn well he wasn’t much older than I was, because if he had been older, he wouldn’t have run out in the field. But those were our orders. That’s what we were supposed to do.”

The kill-or-be-killed scenario got one’s blood boiling, but Americans in general did not appreciate the necessity of killing ground support personnel, transportation people, forced-labor, factory workers, and civilians who just happened to be in the wrong place at the wrong time. When Gus visited the French people, speaking their language, he got to hear about their sufferings, first at the hands of the Germans, then at the mercy of American and British bombs. By war’s end, France would lose almost eight times as many civilians as Britain would. And when the Allies started bombing Germany, there was no consideration for civilian casualties at all; in fact, they were often the targets – such as at Cologne, Hamburg, Berlin, and later, Dresden. As the January 1944 Army Air Force report to the Secretary of War said, “It is a dirty war, as dirty as any.” There was no way around it.

To be fair to our side, it was a German general who first decided in this war, that civilian casualties were inconsequential to the military objective. His policy made it total war – and the

¹⁹ Moench, *Marauder Men*, 346.

²⁰ Moench, *Marauder Men*, 239.

Allies (especially the British) took it 'in kind' straight home to Germany. But it was the men who executed the orders who lived with the fact, not the Generals.

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Reminders of the medium-bomber 'handiwork' existed all over France. The men could see the damage a lot closer now.

"I was there on that mission to St. Lo," said Willie. "We went there on a visit and looked at it afterwards, when we were stationed at Lessay. It was destroyed. Also, we flew over it at low level a couple of times. I felt sorry for that town."

It shouldn't have been surprising that the reception of the natives in Normandy was less enthusiastic than those in locations with less destruction. Their towns were in ruins, their young men and women had been taken for forced-labor, or drafted for service on the eastern front, or else they were hiding in the woods with the FFI. They had been bombed and shelled by both sides, and now they were overrun by endless swarms of Allied men and equipment, they had almost nothing to eat, and they did not feel much like celebrating. In Paris, it was easy to celebrate.

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The 323rd Group relocated again.

"Then we moved to Chartres, Gus said. "It's one of the larger cities south of Paris. We landed in our own bomb holes 'cause I remembered a few months before how we had bombed that place. I mean, we nailed it." On the 17th of September, 1944, the 323rd's advance echelon moved to Chartres (Station A-40), France, with the rest of the group moving on the 21st. The new location would allow the 323rd's bombing range to easily stay ahead of the advancing Allied troops. This move went a lot smoother now that the men were used to 'field conditions,' i.e. tents and camp stoves. One of the nice things about Chartres was that it did not have the minefields and decomposing bodies surrounding it. This location also had 25,000 German prisoners nearby for free labor, and a store of hastily abandoned commodities that made life easier.²¹ Once the airmen viewed the extent of the havoc they had released on the enemy they were amazed at the devastation. The entire area was described as "the skeletons and misery of war." The air base was dotted with craters and full of booby traps and destroyed equipment.²² Nevertheless, the Group was soon operational.²³

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Bad weather continued to plague them, and with missions grounded, the men soon made efforts to get leave and let off some steam.

"Once again we were stationed on a plateau," Gus said. "Chuck, he was an Indian pilot. In Chartres, he and another pilot carefully lined up some bicycles and bulldozed 'em all to heck."

Boredom was a problem so passes to Paris and Reims were approved. Near the base the men adopted the restaurant at the railroad station at St.-Germain.²⁴

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²¹ Moench, *Marauder Men*.
²² Moench, *Marauder Men*, 253.
²³ Moench, *Marauder Men*, 255.
²⁴ Moench, *Marauder Men*, 264.



Two aircraft of the 456th Squadron. (photo courtesy of W. L. Brainard)

October 1944



Fred Mingus

Due to bad weather, October was a very lousy month for the 323rd's operations. Although they were charged with supporting the advancing ground troops, they tallied only 6 missions and the Foster crew did not fly on any of them. It's possible they were given some time off. And the first thing the 323rd Group did that month was to move forward again - to Laôn, France. The advance echelon left for Laôn on the 4th. This time the group was given C-47 transport planes for the move.²⁵ On the 6th the 323rd Group flew to the Hengelo Marshalling Yards. Fredrick J. Mingus and crew had a difficult time getting home.

This mission was a screw up from the time the gear came up. It was not a nice day and, apparently, the lead Navigator had severe problems. We were told to stay away from Liege due to heavy flak concentrations at that location. But we ended up circling over that point getting the hell

²⁵ Moench, *Marauder Men*, 262.

shot out of us. Twenty minutes late for fighter rendezvous, we headed to Hengelon where, under continuous, heavy fire, two passes were made before we got bombs away. With everyone low on fuel and with weather turning increasingly sour, the formation broke up. I throttled back and, with almost five hours airborne time, saw an airfield through a hole in the clouds... (Postwar comments of Fredrick J. Mingus)²⁶

We were running on fumes. I saw a hole in the clouds and a concrete strip. No idea where in the hell it was, but I knew I was going to put my wheels down on that strip. So I get down through the clouds, through what I thought was the prevailing wind...looked down on the ground, nothing but B-26s, (but) not my base.²⁷

The airfield was Beaumont Sur Oise and I commandeered fuel [at pistol point] from a truck parked there. With gas onboard, I called for clearance. This was denied due to weather at Chartres. Exasperated, I told the tower to get the "Follow Me" jeep out from in front of me or I would blast it off the runway with my fifties [the package guns]. They moved the jeep and I took off to land at Chartres in a heavy rain storm. I was the last aircraft to be accounted for and Col. Wood met me and asked where the hell I had been. Thoroughly frustrated with the day, I told him that I had been all over hell and half of Georgia. It was my 65th mission. (Postwar comments of Fredrick J. Mingus)²⁸

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On the 15th of October, 1944, the 323rd flight echelon arrived at their new base in Loan-Athies.

"Geesh, the first night we arrived there," Gus said, "we got all settled and the first thing you know we had bombs banging all over the place. 'What the heck is going on?' we asked. 'No one is supposed to know that we are here'. But somebody knew, and they gave us a little 'dressing down'. We spent two weeks there. It rained about every day. If it didn't rain, it was foggy. So we'd take-off in the rain and the fog. We couldn't do anything about bombing because we couldn't find the targets."

This base was also in very bad shape. Few of the buildings could be used and the taxi strips were in bad shape. Again, the men were bivouacked in tents.²⁹ Men began to improve their conditions by upgrading their tents, making wooden floors, operating doors, and sometimes installing cast iron wood stoves, sometimes installing fuel lines that caused fires. Others used the "Stars and Stripes" to insulate their cots.³⁰

David Goss, who had arrived with the advance echelon, also did not have a good opinion of the Laon airbase. He wrote in his book:



Nels and a friend chop wood for the winter
(courtesy of Nels and Ronni Cassano)

"There was mud everywhere, sticky and deep. For the tents, their homes, it was every man for himself to find materials to build something of a floor. There was a heavily damaged wooden hangar at the base. It provided the needed materials for the men to make the floors and doors for their tents. Each 16 x 16 tent was home to four (sometimes five) of them and their personal duffel. Each [tent] had a small 'pot-with-a-top' stove set between the door and the center pole to provide some heat. They had to scrounge wood for fuel except for a lucky find of some coke that lasted for a short while. Dragging in and cutting wood

²⁶ Moench, *Marauder Men*, 260.

²⁷ Daily Sun, Nov. 11, 2005.

²⁸ Moench, *Marauder Men*, 260; Postwar comments of Fredrick J. Mingus.

²⁹ Moench, *Marauder Men*, 262.

³⁰ Moench, *Marauder Men*, 263.

for the little stove was a steady chore. The scraps from the hangar helped. With no shower, a sponge bath with water warmed in a helmet was a cold affair. They dug their latrines a long muddy walk for their tents. However, the mess hall was in a real, somewhat battered, building. Whether they were going to move soon or not, they dug the foxhole slit trenches and settled in. It did become a long stay at the Laon base.”³¹

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Looks like Nels did chop his own wood.
(courtesy of Nels and Ronni Cassano)

Winter was coming on and the men had to get ready for it. How to survive a winter living in a tent with any semblance of comfort was a problem that many men soon put their best efforts on. The men of the 323rd became very creative.

“For the winter months I had four cords of wood chopped up.” Gus said.

“You chopped it yourself?” I asked, skeptically.

“Yup.”

“On your own free time?”

“What free time? No, you know what? I had one of the best doggone tents in the whole area. The fact is, the Colonel wanted to take it away from me. It had a floor, walls and was all set up with four cords of chopped wood... all set up for the winter.”

“What did the others have?”

“Nothing. I even had running water in it. I kinda borrowed a sink from one of the Frenchmen, you know. I took it out by a window... you know?”

“That wasn’t very nice to do to your French friends who gave you wine and everything!”

“Well, there was no one living there, I kinda borrowed it. There was nobody there at the time. That’s where I borrowed the wood from [so he didn’t chop it!]. I found four cords of wood split up for the stove. Of course, the officers would come up every night to play bridge. You know why they came up to play? Cause it was warmer in my tent!”

“Where did they sleep?”

“They slept in their own cotton-pickin’ tents. They wanted me to go down there and fix up their tent like ours was. I says, ‘Uh uh.’ We were just the four of us Willie, Dec, Ketcham and myself.”

Willie added, “We had a wood floor with a 2x4 rail running around it. Those officers wanted the tent with a floor. They decided that was a little too good for enlisted personnel. We were better scroungers than they were. Those officers didn’t want to get their clothes dirty. We didn’t care about getting dirty. If we saw something that looked pretty good we’d grab it and haul it back to the base. I didn’t mind the situation there. If I could go to town once in a while anything was all right by me”

“Shortly after, we went on leave to Soissons,” Gus related. “Champagne city of the world... big wine cellars there. Of course they were a bit dry at this time because the Germans had been there. But the wine presses were still operating. They were really caves [the wine cellars]. The Frenchmen weren’t too fussy. They also were dickerers. Everybody likes to dicker. Like I said about the Arabs, last price first, please. Wine wasn’t too expensive there, not as bad as in England where we had to pay twenty dollars for a fifth of Scotch, even Irish whiskey, which I couldn’t stand. If you want to make friends, speak French when in France. So I’d go down town to make friends. Then I’d go into the caves to get some wine, which I’d bring back to the army camp.

³¹ Goss, *Meant to Be?* 120-121.

Everyone wanted to know where I got it. However, it was none of their damn business where I got it.”

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The Germans began to fall back on their own version of the Maginot Line, called the Siegfried Line, which was a series of fortifications that defended the German border. It was also known as the West Wall. The Group’s targets became bridges again. But the weather had them grounded for days.³² But the lack of missions flown belied the amount of activity that was actually occurring. Nineteen missions had to be briefed and scrubbed and some men described the period as worse than flying a mission.³³ In his analysis of war diaries, Gen. Moench concluded that the stress induced by flying in bad weather was easily equal to the anxiety caused by flak.

* * * * *



Samuel 'Tex' Findley

Tex arrived at his new station at Lake Charles, Louisiana, and found a pleasant surprise. “I reported to the Army Air Base and was assigned to a Training Squadron. As I was carrying my gear into the barracks an officer came out of the Squadron Office. It was my pilot, Capt. James Hunt, and he was to be my squadron commander. A few weeks later my first pilot, Col. Roscoe Haller, arrived for duty and so did Col. Roy Pratt who was my squadron commander while I was in England. Another fellow airman and friend from England, Sgt. Eugene Duffy (bombardier for the Van Antwerp crew) also came for duty at Lake Charles, so we had a reunion of sorts there.”

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At this time, a pass to Paris was quite difficult to obtain, but somehow, Gus and Willie managed to get one.

“Frenchie and I went into Paris together,” Willie said. “I had a musette bag full of cigarettes and soap and I had one pair of nylons my sister had sent me. We went into a hotel and they wanted ‘so-much’ [money] for a room. We said, ‘We need a good room.’ I put my musette bag up on the counter and asked, ‘How much will that buy?’ He looked at it. ‘Let me show you to a room gentlemen.’ That’s all he said, he never said what it was worth. He brought in a cart on wheels... a complete bar – anything we wanted to drink. We went down to get something to eat. ‘It’s all paid for,’ they said. We got dinner that evening, breakfast the next morning... I don’t remember if we ate lunch there. We got another dinner, the room for another night and breakfast the next morning... all from the stuff in that musette bag full of soap and cigarettes. I found out later how much he got for those cigarettes... two-dollars and fifty cents American, per pack! That was back in 1944 – we bought ‘em for a nickel a pack!”



Gus and Willie – still trouble.

“And that first night,” Willie went on, “I don’t know where in all we went. I know we went to the Eiffel Tower. Of course we had to stop and check all the bars out. We walked... and we walked... finally we got smart and got a cab. Then Frenchie found out the name of a nightclub. The cab driver says, ‘Oh, that’s a nice place.’ We went there it was full of women... all women... not very many men... only a few G.I.s. We had champagne and danced with these women. Oh, they were great dancers. The champagne was two dollars and something a bottle. That was good

³² Perret, *Winged Victory*, 351.

³³ Moench, *Marauder Men*, 336.

champagne... 1937 champagne. They had a lot of wine and a lot of Cognac, and they also had Calvados.”

“That night,” Gus related. “Willie and I were just strolling around, keeping out of trouble. Wham, Bam, comes a couple of fellows with knives. Willie got 13 knife cuts in his coat.”

“Did they cut him?” I asked.

“Nope. They didn’t penetrate. We weren’t looking for a fight, just strolling down the street. What they wanted to do was to rob us. There was a French policeman on the corner there. He might as well have been a clown or something. He didn’t even notice anything.”

Willie said, “I had that coat specially altered by the king’s tailor in London. It was a G.I. issue overcoat but I had it cut down into a car coat. It looked real good. I was pretty fussy about my uniform. I was a little on the G.I. side about my dress uniform. I even had the creases in my shirt stitched in so I could iron them easy. A lieutenant took the coat away from me when I was going through Ireland on the way home. ‘This isn’t regulation,’ he told me.”

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More and more “oldtimers” who had passed the “magic Number” of 65 missions were sent to other duty, mostly back to the United States.³⁴ After flying 68 missions, Willie was taken off of flight status. He had finished his tour.

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For the last two months General Patton had experienced his most frustrating period of the war. The 3rd Army had not been able to advance for weeks. First they had run out of gas. Then they ran into very stiff defenses near Metz, France, in the Moselle Valley just in front of the German border. They needed air support again in order to break through. The situation was so bad that General Patton sent a letter to Lt. General Doolittle requesting that the Air Force to “...provide large bombs of the nastiest type, and as many as you can spare, to blow up this damn fort so that it becomes nothing but a hole.”³⁵ On the same day as the writing of his letter, Patton’s troops entered the town of Metz. However, the ring of fortifications near the city still held firm. On October 21st, a massive group of Germans near the city of Aachen on the Dutch-German border surrendered. The Allies were poised to enter Germany.

* * * * *



Ralph Neil
Turcotte

In the Pacific Theater the Allies landed on Leyte Island in the Philippines on the 20th of October thus beginning the liberation of that US Territory. The outlook in the Pacific at this time was very good. The Allies had recently taken Morotai, Peleleu, and Anguar in the Palau Group. It was clear that the Japanese were losing ground that they could not take back. Yet, some of the most difficult fighting was still yet to come. Four days after the landings on Leyte, Uncle Neil’s 475th ground echelon arrived right behind the ground troops. The air echelon would arrive about a week later and begin new operations there immediately. Soon, they would become one of an elite group of fighter units that had shot down more than 500 enemy planes.³⁶

Aunt Solange continued, “From there [Biak Island], they moved to the Philippines. They flew to Davos on the island of Mindanao, then Leyte and camped on Tacloban. Later, they moved to Clark Field on Luzon. When they reached the Philippines they were able to go to town occasionally. The people were friendly but there were still headhunters around the area. They wore a bone through their nose and filed their teeth [sounds like American kids today]. Neil

³⁴ Moench, *Marauder Men*, 264.

³⁵ Moench, *Marauder Men*, 275.

³⁶ 475thfghf.org.

brought home a souvenir Jap rifle which is the weapon he used when he went hunting deer. He had to go to Coopers Mill [Maine] to have the bullets specially made.”

“When Leon [Neil’s brother] was sent to San Fernando in the Philippines, he came across mail to be forwarded to Neil. He didn’t know where Neil was before that. He wrote to Neil and they made plans to meet. Neil got permission from his C.O. and hitch-hiked 100 miles to visit Leon. There was a lot of hugging and teary eyes. They hadn’t seen each other for about three years.”³⁷

* * * * *

November 1944

On November 4th the Foster crew participated on a run to the Eschweiler gun positions. The *Punching Bag* must have been retired, because they flew in a new plane, 42-107622 VT-W. With the Third Army still stalled and howling for assistance, the Marauders made a desperate effort to bomb the defenses around Metz. On the 4th a box of 54 planes were sent to the Eschweiler gun positions near Metz, but the weather made it impossible to drop and the crews returned with full bomb loads. Ten airships had been damaged by flak.³⁸

After a furious six weeks the frustrated Patton was allowed to attack, starting on the 8th. It was raining heavily so they went in without air support. But the next day the airmen came out in droves. 1,000 fighter bombers on the 9th and 2,000 planes on the 10th but the weather turned sour again and the airmen were unable to fly after that. The fall of 1944 had brought three times the average rainfall for that area. General Patton ordered his chaplains to ask God to stop the rain.³⁹ Patton’s new offensive was called Operation Madison. The same day, the 8th, the French 5th Armored Division was the first Allied unit to reach the Rhine River, but there was no way across. Two days later, to the north, the city of Aachen was captured by the Americans – the first city on German soil to fall to the Allies. On the 23rd the French captured Strasburg, Germany.

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On November 5th, 1944, Fred Mingus began his journey back to the United States. He arrived there on November 17th. He was stationed at McCaran Field at Las Vegas, Nevada and then transferred to Marfa, Texas as the base Engineering Officer.

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Tex said, “My parents moved to Orange, Texas and my father became employed in a shipyard there. They moved there so they could be close to me. They gave me my first car, a 1940 Ford sedan. I had already obtained a gasoline ration book and I later became acquainted with a tugboat owner who was always giving me a few ration stamps. I was living the ‘life of Riley.’ After instructing students during the day some of my friends and I would get in my car and visit some of the ethnic French villages around Lake Charles and date the girls and go to some dances where they played Cajun music, etc. We would go to Jennings, Evangeline, Lake Arthur, Mermentau, and of course into the City of Lake Charles.”

“Once, while in a café, in Lake Charles,” Tex continued, “I was playing a jukebox and there were two girls there. One of them appealed to me and I struck up a conversation with her and learned that her name was Dessie Sewell and that she worked in a pharmacy there. The next day I went by where she worked to see her and made a date with her. After a very short while I knew that I was in love with her and that she was the one person with whom I wanted to spend the rest of my life.”

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³⁷ Biography by Solange Turcotte, 3.

³⁸ Moench, *Marauder Men*, 278.

³⁹ Perret, *War to be Won*, 394.

For the next two weeks bad weather delayed the bombers again, as if it were working directly in the service of the Germans. The ‘Dogfaces’ (ground troops) had even more to gripe about concerning the Air Force, but their complaints were becoming muted. Bill Mauldin summed it up the best he could stating that the infantrymen tended to sympathize with the flak-happy airmen. It was a “rude fraternity” of battle fatigue.⁴⁰

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Willie said, “I was sent back to the States in November, 1944. Frenchie wanted me to wait for him so we could go back together. I don’t know why I didn’t wait. I guess I wanted to get home.”

Willie left the ETO on November 17th and arrived in the US on the 26th.

* * * * *

The Foster crew flew three more missions this month. By this time, Lt. Foster had been promoted to Captain. On the 18th, they took off again, headed for the Weisweiller Strong Points. As a flight leader, they carried an additional navigator, 1st Lt. J. J. Ryan. Also, Dec had been replaced by M/Sgt. R. W. Hayden.⁴¹ Perhaps he had also been rotated back to the States. On the 18th the weather broke slightly but it was enough to send a box of 32 Marauders to the Weisweiller Strong Points, with only slight damage to two aircraft.⁴²

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Gus’s final mission occurred on the next day, on the 19th, with the same crew and the additional bombardier. Lt. Col Satterwhite and Captain Adams led an afternoon mission to the Landau Ordnance Depot, but the sky was so overcast over target that they could not drop their bombs. All planes returned with full loads.⁴³

However, this is how Gus described it.

“The last mission was a doozie. We were in Laôn, France, then, and we were going out to bomb Metz. Well, at that time it was cloudy, overcast and we had these bombs that you couldn’t drop under 1,000 feet. They were English made, high concussion type. Well, anyway, we had been waiting for two weeks to do some bombing. It had rained steadily, and that day the cloud coverage was down to around 600 feet. We saw the target and tried to tell the flight leader but he wouldn’t listen. And don’t forget, with these bombs you’re not supposed to drop them under 1,000 feet. Well, we went in and dropped them.”

“At 1,000 feet?”

“No, at 600 and the stupid fools behind us followed us.”

“You mean your own men?”

“Ya, we were leading the group [the second flight]. The Colonel who was leading us had his six planes with him... he decided to return to base when he saw the cloud coverage. But we had been waiting so long, over two weeks, to drop bombs. The other group followed us in, so we were twelve planes that went through there. We lost one plane because he was directly in back of us. With any kind of bomb, no matter what speed you’re traveling or what altitude you are, it always lands directly underneath you. So if you have a bomb that is slightly delayed, then the poor guy behind you gets it. And that’s what happened.”

“We returned to find half the town of Laôn right up there in the bay,” Gus continued, “which was supposed to be closed. They were all over the place.”

“What were they doing there?”

⁴⁰ Mauldin, *Up Front*, 100-101.

⁴¹ Trevor Allen, B26 researcher.

⁴² Moench, *Marauder Men*, 278-279.

⁴³ Moench, *Marauder Men*, 279.

“They were greeting us. I know the Colonel [the Group Commander, Colonel Wood] wasn’t too happy. I don’t know how come they did it, but evidently they wanted to. The Colonel couldn’t stop them, they came from all over the place. I think it was the idea that we had liberated them and they wanted more or less to thank us. They couldn’t do anything for us. Fact is... we had more than they did.”

“So we came back a half hour later than the Colonel [the mission leader]. We returned without any bombs in the bomb bay because we dropped them. He asked us, ‘Where had you been? What had you done?’ Zoom! That’s when we got our traveling papers, for pulling that stunt.”

“What, for dropping your bombs?” I asked.

“No, for going out of formation. That’s why we got sent back to the States. We were supposed to pull another fifty missions. I flew sixty-five, no eighty-five.”

“You were grounded? Why?”

“That’s a good question. I don’t know. I didn’t do anything. I flew in the turret in the back of the plane. I mean, what could I do there? I could have shot somebody, yes, but I didn’t. So the thing was they called it air fatigue.”

It was initially difficult to figure out exactly how many missions Gus had flown... because he wasn’t sure. Finally, Trevor Allen composed a Mission Log for Gus based on official records and came up with a tally of seventy-one in all. But of this last mission he found no evidence of a plane breaking formation or of any rookie planes that were lost.

In Moench’s account of the mission no mention is made of the flight breaking formation, nor of any planes being lost that day. Based on Moench’s consistent reporting throughout the war, he would have mentioned an incident of this magnitude if he had been aware of it. However, he also notes that great pains were taken to cover up incidents of combat fatigue. But even one lost plane and crew has to be mentioned somewhere, somehow and they are not. However, when I asked Trevor Allen about it, he wrote back:

According to the 323rd Bomb Group records, no B-26s were lost to enemy action in either late October 1944 or November 1944 in the period shortly after moving to Laôn /Athies. Sixty-five combat missions was a normal tour of duty on B-26s and you will see that your father did more than this. I believe this is the reason they were returned to the USA, not for any misdemeanor or for battle fatigue. I would think however that at that time he would certainly have all the signs of battle fatigue.⁴⁴

For the commanding officers who were trying to hang on to the oldsters in order to bolster the new recruits, it must have been a touchy situation. The recruits were too new and the oldsters were too ‘old.’ Therefore, men who had finished their tours were still needed. On the other hand, there could be trouble if the veterans showed signs of suddenly becoming flak happy. That wouldn’t help the youngsters very much and it just might set off the brass. It’s easy to guess that on the first sign of a goof up, in order to protect all involved, they were instantly out, or at least sent for a medical evaluation. Possibly, the only thing that happened that day was that they broke formation and dropped their bombs. One thing was for sure... they were grounded.

Perhaps when the Colonel was ‘dressing them down’ Gus thought he heard that rookies were lost, when actually the officer said something like rookies ‘could have been lost’ – perhaps something like that. I suspect that, somehow, the memory of this last mission became fused with the loss of the *Toid Boid* and the rookie crew - all mixed up in a jumble of physical exhaustion, combat fatigue, too much booze, and a head wound to boot.

⁴⁴ Trevor Allen, B26 researcher; in a letter to the author.



Two white-tails of the 453rd Squadron heading out over the English Channel. The aircraft in the background is *Wolf Pack II*, #41-34865 VT-X. The plane in the foreground, #42-107588 VT-R, was the aircraft used by the Foster crew on their last mission (Trevor Allen). Don Pepmiller who submitted this photo and others to Roger Freeman for his book was an aerial photographer in the 453rd Squadron photo section. (Photo from Don Pepmiller/Freeman 82).

When Dad told me this story so long ago I believed him. I thought something bad had happened and the crew had been expelled from combat status. It was quite a shock for me to find out it wasn't true. But whatever had really happened, the bottom line was that Gus felt that he had been 'pulled' from the arena before his term was up. He had no idea that he had completed his mission tour. I believe this lack of clarity weighed on him as a nagging question of whether or not he had fulfilled his duty. I asked Trevor Allen to check it again but he found nothing. I asked Willie about the mission tour.

“Typical of postwar comments were those of then S/Sgt Samuel M. Findley. ‘When we first started combat we had rumors of a 25 mission tour, then 35 and later 50. The low point [for our] morale was when Gen. Lewis Brereton put out the word that all his aircrewmembers had volunteered for another tour. After that we didn't have any tour at all. I suppose Gen. Brereton

had his reasons but I don't know of any combat crewman who had much esteem for him after that.”⁴⁵

As Gus had mentioned before, there was a big difference between volunteers and draftees. Even the history of the 99th Combat Wing notes that there was a problem. They noted the demoralization of air crews in the 322nd and 323rd Bomb Groups. They also qualified that it was not due to the original attitudes of the men but rather to the “faulty handling” of the mission tour policies.⁴⁶

In his footnotes, Moench suggests that ‘demoralized’ was too strong a word. I can see his point, because completely demoralized men will not fight well, if at all, but even though very unappreciative, the Marauder crews kept flying – and flying well. But he also notes that in hindsight the stress was more a factor than realized at the time, yet the men continued to fly well despite it.⁴⁷

According to Gus, his entire crew was sent to a ‘nut house full of shrinks.’ This is very plausible, since it was an established policy to have the entire crew examined at once. How did it feel for a high-flying combat sergeant to suddenly become the equivalent of a mental patient? We can only guess, but Gus’s lifetime dislike for shrinks gives us a clue.

“That was my last day,” Gus said, meaning his last day on flight operations.

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⁴⁵ Moench, *Marauder Men*, 338; Postwar comments of Samuel M. Findley.

⁴⁶ Moench, *Marauder Men*, 338; Operational Annex to History of 99th Combat Bombardment Wing covering the period from November 8, 1943 to May 9, 1945.

⁴⁷ Moench, *Marauder Men*, 348.

He Wears a Pair of Silver Wings

Although some people say he's just a crazy guy,
For me he means a million other things.
For he's the one who taught this happy heart of mine to fly
He wears a pair of silver wings.
And though it's pretty sad, the job he does above,
I wouldn't have him change it for a king.
An ordinary fellow in the uniform I love,
He wears a pair of silver wings.

I'm so full of pride when we go walking,
Every time he'd call on me.
He wears those wings on his tunic;
Me with my heart on my sleeve.
But when I'm left alone, and we are far apart,
I sometimes wonder why he loves me.
For I adore that crazy guy who taught this happy heart
To wear a pair of silver wings.

Alvino Rey; Alyce King, vocals (Maschwitz.Carr) 1942

Photos of Neil Turcotte and Satan's Angels courtesy of Mary and Dick Poirier:



Camp road at San Pablo, Philippines.



Camp site at San Pablo.



Humbolt Bay waiting to embark to Biak.



Ralph Neil Turcotte somewhere in the Pacific.