Chapter 5 – Clearing the Way for D-Day

January – May 1944

January 1944

Everyone knew the invasion would probably happen in the spring of 1944, but no one at the 323rd Group knew when or exactly where. The Marauder men were very aware that they were charged with preparing the way for ground troops to land in 'Fortress Europe,' and performed accordingly. Most of the aircrewmen had flown 25-35 missions at this point, and while they looked forward to unequivocal victory in Europe, they also hoped to complete their personal combat mission tours. A friend of mine while looking at the photos herein, stated, "In every single picture, these guys are completely optimistic and gung-ho."

Wilson R. Wood

With Col. Thatcher leaving for a higher command, Wilson R. Wood was promoted to Group commander. Like Thatcher, he was very well liked by the men in the Group because of his hands-on approach to command. He had led many missions and when he did not fly, he would wait out on the field for the aircraft to return, and if necessary, he would personally assist in getting the men out of the damaged planes.[1]

But while our men fought and hoped for the best, the US Air Force command in Washington D.C. was becoming concerned about "the human factor." On January 4th the Air Force generated a report that was sent to the Secretary of War. It read as follows:

Combat Crews: their Devotion and Pride

Nowhere in the world are the lives of men as interdependent as in a bomber on a mission. The pilot must be quick, daring, cautious. The gunners must draw a bead on shadows flashing past them at six hundred miles an hour. The navigator has the plane in the palm of his hand from start to finish; every minute he strays off course makes it 60 seconds less likely that he and his comrades will return. If the bombardier misses, the sortie has been pointless. He takes over at the moment of greatest danger when the airplane must be in level flight and not engaging in evasive action. During the bomb run, the plane must be traveling a straight course, with speed and altitude constant. No dead engine, or groaning companion with a leg shot off, must interfere with the operation of an intricate bombsight.

In military reports soldiers are spoken of as "personnel" or "the human factor." Let us not take exception to the usage. Let us not forget, either, that those soldiers are men. The nervous strain imposed on them is much greater than any physical effort. After a certain period of operational flying, the average crew member's efficiency curve will start going downhill. Then he must be replaced not only for his own welfare but for the safety of his companions and his airplane.

Charts, graphs and strategy would mean nothing without the devotion, anger and bitter pride of our men. The reading public has been almost surfeited with fabulous accounts of how they live and what they do, how after having had three engines and a wing shot off, they come in on the other wing, one engine and a prayer. Unfortunately, it always takes two wings and usually two engines to return. The crews are made up of men, and it is as men – not heroes – that they have to fight this war. It is a dirty war, as dirty as any.[2]

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At this stage of the war, the science of aerial gunnery was improving. The gunners had come a long way since their days of training, however they claimed to have shot down twice as many planes as the Germans had. They had been taught to lead the target plane in its flight trajectory but depending on what the enemy pilot was doing they sometimes should have fired behind the target. By this time there were seven schools in the U.S. and they were teaching the most realistic methods possible.[3]

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[1] Moench, *Marauder Men*, 129.
[2] Online USAF Museum.
[3] Perret, *Winged Victory*, 363-364.

As the reader can see, aerial gunners did not have a high survival rate in 1943 – a fact that caused the rate of volunteers to slow to a trickle. As volunteering slowed men had to be assigned to the job. The rate of bomber losses in 1944 had dropped to half of what it was in 1943. That said, just as gunnery was improving and good turrets were being installed on airships the German fighters were so reduced in numbers that they ceased to be a critical threat.[4]

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A 453rd plane in flight, *Circle Jerk* 41-31896 VT-G; the Crew Chief was Louis Tonis
(photo courtesy of Nels and Ronnie Cassano).

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By January 6th the fast-moving Russian columns had crossed into Poland on their way towards Berlin. Meanwhile, the western Allies had not even entered France yet and the fierce fighting in Italy continued to rage on.

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In January, 1944, the 323rd Group logged twenty more missions with the Foster crew participating in five of them. Tex flew four with two of them back to back on the fourth, one in the morning and one in the afternoon. Willie was still off active operations. Early in the year the 453rd finally received some reinforcements, about 40 men, some of whom were aircrews. Men hoped that the replacement aircrews might allow them to go home.[5]

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On January 14th on a mission to the Embry Bois De Pottier Noball the 453rd gunners were busy again. This time two FW-190s were shot down, one by T/Sgt Ketcham (RG), the 'blind' radio/waist gunner on Lt. Foster's crew and S/Sgt Benno A. Becker (EG) on Lt. Hartnett's crew. In addition three more were damaged, one each by Sgt Dec (EG) on Foster's crew, S/Sgt Odom of Capt. Heather's crew, and S/Sgt Broecker of Captain Steen's Crew. The miracle this time was that none of the 453rd's planes were damaged.[6]

[4] Perret, *Winged Victory*, 365
[5] Moench, *Marauder Men*, 131.
[6] Moench, *Marauder Men*, 130.


Charles Ketcham


Benno Becker


Howard Odom


Ferdinand Dec


William Broecker

Gus was shocked (and probably a little jealous) that Ketcham had shot a plane down.

He stammered, "He couldn't even see across the room! Well, he did shoot that plane down! But he couldn't miss, because the plane was only 25 feet away! He got so shook up when that plane came up by us. He laid into it. He couldn't even see that plane! He didn't even know he did it. We didn't tell him till we got back. He never knew!"

"He could hardly see the end of the doggone gun!" Willie added (laughing). "He was a genius at repairing the radio, though. Larry, the radio/gunner on my plane was the same way, nearsighted as could be, but he could get that radio working no matter what happened to it. Frenchie used to take the eye exams and aircraft recognition tests for Ketcham when it came up every month or so and I'd go do it for Larry. We'd grab their dog tags and go take it (laughing). They were both good radiomen and we didn't want to lose them. We'd rather have a good radioman than a gunner that could see (laughing). We knew that if that radio got damaged they could hook up a few wires and at least get an SOS out for us. That's what we wanted. Ketchum was a sharp boy. I was too but I got dull later on."

"Dec was a real Pollock from Pennsylvania," Gus related. "Ya know, the only way he'd get along with anybody was for that person to belt him over the head with a telephone pole and then he might know what it was all about. But it never bothered him. He was Polish, but he never got over the accent. Dec was a 'squarehead,' a real squarehead. I'm telling you he had a square head. He had shoulders on him that would scare you! Willie was the same way except we could exchange clothes now and then."

Willie explained, "Dec had been a tough guy for the Trade Unions before the war, so he thought he could push everybody around. He didn't talk back to Frenchie but he talked back to everybody else! I didn't like him much."

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Willie was finally placed back on ops.

"As soon as I was able to get into the plane without help I was allowed to go back on flight status," he said. "I still had some trouble with my knees and back, particularly when I would slip in the mud or get into an awkward position while checking out the plane, but it seemed very unimportant at the time."

Willie's first mission after his accident was on January 23rd to the Bois D'Esquerdes Noball. As if to make up for his absence, the Sprague crew was extremely busy that last week of the month, flying six missions in seven days.

Tex also took part on the Bois D'Esquerdes mission on the 23rd which he described as having "very hot flak." The 323rd Group sent planes out on three separate missions that day, all Noballs – in fact, all the 323rd missions in January 1944 were to Noball targets. Tex had another close call on this one.

AN VIII AIR SUPPORT COMMAND STATION – Darting over the Channel late today, B-26 Martin Marauders smashed at enemy installations in the Pas de Calais area, that part of the French coast nearest England. Fires were started in the target area, and towering columns of black smoke bore witness to the success of the raid as the medium bombers turned for home.

The target was a heavily wooded area, in which Nazi supplies and installations had been concentrated. Strong flak defense was encountered, but all of the formation returned safely to their base. The Marauders were escorted by RAF Spitfires, but no enemy planes came up to engage the little armada participating in the sweep.

Second Lieutenant Dale Neely [455th], co-pilot of the "Mr. Fala," found his first trip over enemy territory without terrors. He said: "This was my first mission. I hope to hell they're all as easy as this one was. The flak looked nasty, and I think it's a good thing to stay away from."

Staff Sergeant Samuel M. Findley, tail-gunner in the Marauder "Egg Crate," would say "Amen" to that last part of that remark. He brought home a pair of flak-riddled gloves as a souvenir of today's raid. He said: "They were sure loaded for us this time. I feel kind of lucky getting off so easy."[7]

"My flight suit had a pocket located just below the right knee which I understand was designed as a pocket for maps," Tex explained. "If the weather was not too cold I would use it to put my gloves in. On one mission a piece of flak came through the pocket tearing a hole in it and in the glove, and the glove was knocked out of the pocket. I was lucky that the flak didn't hit my leg. I was flying in the plane that we flew overseas [the *Egg Crate*]. It was a B-26 C model that did not have the tail guns in a turret, requiring them to be manipulated by hand. At the time I was sitting on an empty 50 caliber shell box that I used for a seat."

A B-17 crew that made an emergency landing at Earls Colne poses with their mascot; Willie's plane, *Truman's Folly*, is in the foreground *(photo courtesy of W. L. Brainard).*

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[7] Samuel Findley's Scrapbook.

Towards the end of the month, on the 22nd, the Allies landed at Anzio in Italy. On the 27th, after a 900 day siege, Leningrad was relieved by the Russians.

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February 1944

During the month of February the 323rd Group would fly its 100th mission, but as a few new men came in, the experienced men continued to be drained from the unit to bolster the four new marauder units that were entering the England-based theatre of operations. Ranks were thinning in the 453rd Squadron. By the time of the invasion, there would be eight Marauder groups in all: 322nd, 323rd, 344th, 386th, 387th, 391st, 394th, and 397th.

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The Mingus crew in front of *Ticklish Percy* 41-34727 VT-O. L-R Front row: Ivan B. Altmanshofer (engineer/turret gunner), Chester E. Whitehouse (tailgunner); Standing: Fred J. Mingus (Pilot), Thomas T. Goddard (togglier), and Paul J. Remsick (radioman/waist gunner). *(Photo courtesy of Fred Mingus)*

Sometime in January, Fred Mingus and crew arrived at Earls Colne. He said, "I was sent down to the 323rd Bomb Group, the 453rd Bomb Squadron. I was one of the first replacement crews that came in. Colonel Thatcher called me in to his office. He said, 'Mr. Mingus, I see you have a short crew. You only have five men….you have no copilot and no navigator. You have an option. You can fly your short crew or we'll break up the crew and fill in other crews.' There were a number of others there without copilots. I said, 'Colonel, may I talk to my crew?' He said, 'Certainly.' So I went out and asked them, individually. I said, 'This is what the option is. You can either fly with me or say goodbye and fill in somebody else's crew.' They said, 'Well, you

brought us this far so we'll stay with you.' So I told the Colonel, 'We're going to fly with a single pilot, and I'll teach my engineer to help me on the landings and take-offs and we'll get by.'"

"The other crewmen were Thomas T. Goddard (togglier), Ivan B. Altmanshofer (engineer/turret gunner), Chester E. Whitehouse (tailgunner, and Paul J. Remsick (radioman/waist gunner). Chuck Whitehouse was from Stoddam, Massachusetts. Paul Rensick was my radioman….probably the oldest radio operator in Europe at that time. He was 34….but he was a hell of a good radioman." Fred flew his first mission as a co-pilot with the Johnson crew on the 3rd of the month and the next two days following that as a copilot with the Sprague crew. On the fourth day, the 6th, he was deemed ready to take out his own crew, which he did. This crew also did not have a co-pilot. One would have thought that by this time in the war replacement co-pilots would have been readily available, however, this is not quite how it happened. Fred wrote in reply to a query:

"Why so many missions without a copilot? The casualty rates of the B17s & 24s were high and they had first call on replacements and there was not enough [replacement co-pilots] coming through to keep up with the demand. I and my crew had the option of flying short crew or being broken up to fill other short crews. My crew, (the very best) opted to fly with me alone rather than be broken up. Lt. James R. Scally was my first assigned co-pilot. He came aboard 7/31/44 so I flew, to the best of my knowledge, about 46 missions without a co-pilot."[8] New crews were needed badly and the Mingus crew flew a total of 14 missions this month.

On the 5th of February the Sprague (Fred Mingus was still a co-pilot on this one) and Haller crews participated in a strike at the Linghem Noball in France. Tex remembers that this was a particularly difficult mission.

"February was a bad month for our crew," Tex recalls. "On February 5th our aircraft was so badly damaged by flak while on a mission to bomb a Noball in France that we were forced to bail out of it after returning to our stations rather than attempt a landing. That was the end of the *Egg Crate.* An account of this incident was published in the "Stars and Stripes" (a daily newspaper of the U.S. Armed Forces in the European theater of Operations) and parts of it have since been published in several other publications. The article written by Bud Hutton, Stars and Stripes staff writer is as follows:

> A MARAUDER BASE, Feb. 10 – When Capt. Roscoe Haller gathered a torn, unpacked parachute into his arms and jumped out of his flak-crippled B-26, *Miss Chevious* [#41-31825 VT-H], he brought down the curtain on one of the most hilarious bail-out performances ever enacted over England.
>
> As a matter of fact the LaFargeville (NY) pilot almost tagged a tragic ending on the performance. As he dropped, the unpacked 'chute caught on the bomb-bay doors, ripped out an entire panel, and sent him earthward supported by only half the canopy. Though bruised and battered by the high speed landing, Haller laughed today as he told the story of his crew's 31st mission Saturday to targets in France.
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> Flak shot out the plane's hydraulic system just inside France but because he was leading the formation Haller could not turn homeward, and went over the target with the rest. Back at the field he circled till the other ships landed, then found to his dismay that one wheel could not be lowered and the other two already down could not be withdrawn to permit a belly landing.
>
> "At this point it began to be a little funny," Haller said.
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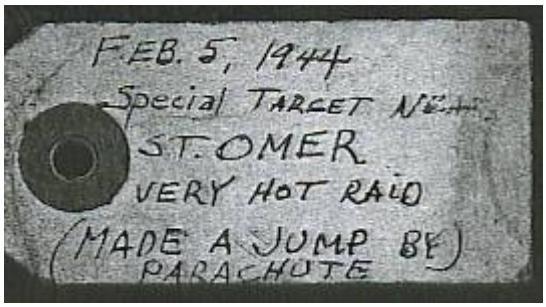
> Over the command radio, Col. Wilson R. Wood of Chico, Tex. told Haller to bail out the crew and either crash-land alone or bail out himself. Haller settled for the latter, and things began to happen.

[8] Mingus, letter to Trevor Allen, 7/31/78.

S/Sgt. Bryce Ramey, of East Lynn, W. Va. discovered his 'chute harness was too loose, and 1st Lt. Curtis Wheat of Pharr, Tex., navigator, tied Ramey's harness with six feet of rope from the dingy.

Next scene in the "comedy" found Ramey and 1/Lt George J. Friesner of St. Louis, bombardier in the bomb bay putting on an Alphonse and Gaston act, Ramey bowing and motioning Friesner to jump and Friesner bowing back. They finally jumped and after landing, Ramey was chased around a field by a zealous knife-armed farmer who mistook him for a Nazi 'chutist.



Tex's bomb tag for St. Omer.

When S/Sgt. Sam Findley, engineer-tail gunner, from Mt. Vernon, Tex. and S/Sgt. Jimmy Smith of Charleston, Miss., top-turret gunner, had gone out, Haller and Wheat took the ship to the coast and Wheat bailed out.

"I started to follow" Haller said, "but as I got up I accidentally pulled the ring on my 'chute and wind rushing through the nose well spread the silk through the ship."


The Haller Crew: L-R (front row) Capt. Roscoe R. Haller (pilot), Lt. Donald A. Nelson (bombardier, standing in for George Friesner), Lt. Curtis E. Wheat, Jr. (navigator), T/Sgt Bryce Ramey (radio-gunner), S/Sgt James M. Smith (top turret gunner), S/Sgt Sam "Tex" Findley (engineer-tailgunner). Tex says, "Best damn B-26 crew in the ETO!" Note that they are standing in front of Willie's plane, *Pub 13* 41-34687. "It was convenient for the photo," Tex said. *(Photo courtesy of Tex Findley)*

Gathering the silk in his arms and leaving the pilot chute sticking over his shoulder, Haller jumped. The trailing edge of the 'chute caught on the bomb bay door, ripping out the panel and leaving him with only half of the 'chute working from 1,000 feet on down.

"It must have slowed me down to about two miles and hour, but I landed," Haller said, "I can still walk and the next week we'll be back on ops [operations]."[9]

Tex continued, "Our top turret gunner, Smith, broke his ankle when he landed and was not able to fly any more. Actually I was the first to bail out and the only one of the crew to land on the base. I jumped out of the waist gun window and it was a good feeling when the parachute opened! I landed right by the W.A.A.C. (Women's Army Auxiliary Corps) barracks area which was surrounded by a high chain link fence and was off-limits to male personnel. Some of my buddies accused me of trying to guide my parachute to land inside the compound, but that wasn't so. I was just happy to get back to earth anywhere it put me down. Someone came out in a jeep and picked me up. The driver took me to Col. Woods in operations and he asked me 'How did you land, Tex?' and I replied 'Right on my butt, Col. Woods!'"

Tex continued, "No one jumped for sport in those days, and mine was the first jump that many observers had ever witnessed, so I was quite a celebrity for a few days and a new member of the Caterpillar Club. The Caterpillar Club is what every one becomes a member of when they save their life by use of a parachute. There is no roster of members, no club officers, or dues, or meetings. It is named for the worms that made the silk from which the 'chutes were made prior to the advent of Nylon."

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Tex added, "Three other B-26s from our Group were shot down on this mission."

One of these was from the 453rd squadron. The plane designated 134866 VT-T piloted by Lt. Arnold J. Mandiberg, received a direct hit by flak and was lost.[10] The right propeller along with the entire engine had been shot off the wing. It proceeded to fly through the formation along with numerous pieces and engine oil. Directly behind Mandiberg was Lt. Chris Chriesman whose plane met a hail of engine parts and oil. Mandiberg jettisoned the bombs and turned around to get back to the Channel but it was clear they were losing altitude. He ordered his crew to bail out. S/Sgt William B. Hendrickson and Sgt Paul A. Pearce bailed out first. They were picked up by underground and sent to the French-Spanish Border where Pearce was captured but Hendrickson escaped, getting wounded in the process. T/Sgt. Robert C. White was injured in the jump and died soon after. 1st Lt. John R. Martin, the co-pilot, reached the ground safely but the underground refused to try to get him to Spain as he was so tall he stuck out like a sore thumb. Apparently the French were not as tall as some Americans. Since most of the gunners were fairly short they didn't have that problem. The rest of the crew, including Mandiberg were captured upon reaching the ground and were interned for the rest of the war. [11]

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The *Stars and Stripes* was and is a very ancient publication service that most of us associate with World War II, but actually it had its humble beginnings in Missouri during the American Civil War. It began by publishing letters of some of the Union soldiers, but they only could make one publication. Then in WWI a weekly edition by that name was printed late in the war. On April 18, 1942 the paper was revived in London where it soon became an 8-page daily. Finally, during the height of the war there it was being printed from 25 different locations all over the world.[12]

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[9] Bud Hutton, *Stars and Stripes*, February 1, 1944; courtesy of Samuel Findley.
[10] MACR 1829 – Courtesey of Alf Johanneson, aircraft researcher.
[11] Moench, *Marauder Men*, 142-144, Postwar comments of John W. Price [453rd], (Horace Chriesman was one of the men who attended the last 453rd reunion in Colorado Springs); and Postwar comments of Arnold J. Mandiberg.
[12] Stripes.com/about/aboutnew.html.

February was really busy for the 323rd Group. The Foster crew flew twelve missions with three of them being double headers (two missions in one day) - the first one was on the 8th. The next day, on the 9th, the Hunt crew flying in the *Sad Sack Jr.* [453rd], flew a record three missions in one day and made the front page of *Yank* magazine on March 19th, 1944. On this crew were Capt. James F. Hunt, Lt. Philip G. Haglund, and Sgts Charles I. Vacanti, James S. Seigenthaler, and Joseph L. Bothwell. Flying several mission a day kept every man on the base hopping to keep the planes and crews in the ai, the cooks, mechanics, ordnance men, armament men, and intelligence men.[13]

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On the 16th the Foster crew flew a mission to a Noball named 'Pommerval.' Ketcham must have been sick this day because a replacement radio-gunner named S/Sgt Charles R. Foster went in his place. This was the only mission throughout his entire tour that Gus flew without Ketcham.

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Gus and Willie, as usual, continued to try to get as much time off as possible.

"There were a lot of things that went on in London," Gus said. "We were only nineteen so what were we to do? Anything that came across our minds. We were free. We rode bikes; 11 miles to and from the city just to get a drink. Oh, one night in London, holy mackerel, I'll never forget that. There were three friends and myself in a bar named the Horse and Groom where one could buy a cold beer… the only such place in London. At that time everything was rationed, you know. I told my friends that I knew where to get a couple of fifths."

"We used to go to a pub in London." Willie said. "Frenchie had talked to the bartender and somehow he got us some Black Label real cheap."

"I got a couple of bottles and on the way back to the bar, I ran into a couple of characters who followed me all the way," Gus continued. "I knew they were following me. It was no surprise. I got to the bar and told my friends, 'Let's go to the hotel.' On the way out these two characters were standing there waiting. This time I wasn't alone, the other guys were with me. I had told the boys about these characters. That night it was so foggy we couldn't see out the window. Oh boy, we couldn't see the curb or the sidewalk. They waited and let me go first. These two guys appeared and started following me. So my friends clobbered them right off quick. Didn't even ask any questions; no ands, ifs, or buts. Bang! They had it."

"One time at our hotel in London," Willie said, "Frenchie got jabbering with some Canadian RCAF officers, a pilot and a navigator/bombardier. They were some real tough cowboys. They were flying bombing missions in a B-25 with only a two-man crew – no gunners, no copilot. We thought they were crazy. They did their runs at dusk or dawn and they went in at very low level. They said they'd swoop down to the deck, level off, and drop their bombs and go home. They had that 'don't give a damn' attitude just like we did. They were as crazy as we were. The Americans and Canadians would go right at the enemy, but the British were more cautious."

"Well, we got talking," Willie continued, "and they wanted to go into an NCO club. 'We can help you out there,' we said. So we gave them our blouses with the stripes on them and we took theirs. We were going to go to an officer's club. Afterwards we're walking down the street on the way to the officer's club and suddenly I felt a tap on my shoulder. It was a British MP. 'You forgot to salute me, sir,' he said. 'Sorry,' I said, 'we were talking about girls and we didn't notice you.' At least he couldn't tell the difference between an American and a Canadian. I mean, they look the same, don't they? Anyway, that kind of shook us up so we decided to head right back to the hotel and wait for the other guys. We thought we might get arrested for impersonating an

[13] Moench, *Marauder Men,* 145-147.

officer. We didn't have to wait long, because they got stopped by a British MP that wanted to know why American sergeants were saluting him!"

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During missions, clouds as well as flak became the standing order of the day. The Germans now had equipment that allowed them to fire through complete cloud cover. Gun-laying radar meant that in 10/10 (total) cloud cover, the Germans could 'see' and shoot at the marauders while the airmen could not see the targets they were to bomb. The extra damage to the planes kept the ground crews extremely busy repairing the planes in the finger-numbing cold, often working the day and the night. General Moench cites their incredible dedication to "keep 'em flying."[14]

In mid-March 1944 the 323rd Group helped pioneer a new type of Marauder equipped with electronic equipment that could find the target in cloud cover. These specially-equipped planes would be called 'Pathfinders.' The 1st Pathfinder Squadron was activated on the 16th of February, 1944, by transferring crews from five different Marauder Groups. The crew taken from the 453rd Squadron was that of Captain Lauppe. This was an original crew of the 453rd including Robert C. Lauppe, George W. Clausen, Joseph E. Casper, Philip J. Hughes, Melville A. Erickson, and William R. Beecher. The Pathfinder aircraft were fitted with a special navigational system derived from the British "Oboe" system, which required intersecting measurements from two transmitting ground stations in order to locate targets in full cloud cover. This squadron began operations five days later, on the 21st of the month.

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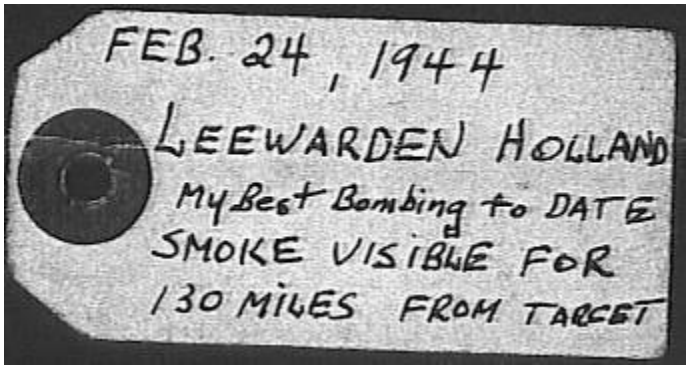
On the 24th of February 1944 Tex and crew flew two missions. The morning run to Leewarden Airdrome, Holland, had spectacular results. Tex described it as the best bombing run yet. Only one Marauder was hit by flak and no enemy fighters were encountered.[15]



Tex's bomb tag.

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During February the Battle of Truk took place in the Pacific Theater. It was an American victory against Japanese naval power. The US forces destroyed 265 aircraft, sank thirty-five ships, losing only 25 aircraft and one carrier, and the *Intrepid* was damaged. As Gen. Moench says, "If anyone doubted it before, air power was clearly the cutting edge of the military forces."[16]

[14] Moench, *Marauder Men*, 142.
[15] Moench, *Marauder Men*, 147.
[16] Moench, *Marauder Men*, 141.

The Marauders hammer Leeuwarden Airdrome *(Photo courtesy of W. L. Brainard).*

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March 1944

On March 7th Gus flew his 50th mission. The target was the Aulnoye Marshalling Yards in France. On their return he must have celebrated the completion of their mission tour. Surely he would now be rotated to other duties – or would he? Unfortunately, 9th Bomber Command changed the mission tour again. They sent out the order that 50-mission combat tours were cancelled, meaning the tour length would now be indefinite. Lt. General Brereton had met with higher command and they had determined that mission tour durations were no longer necessary. It appeared that Brereton was completely out of touch with his men.[17]

Tex wrote, "Old General Lewis Brereton (the hated commander of the 9th Air Force) was reported to have said, right before crews were approaching the 50 mission mark, 'I sure have a great bunch of combat crewmen. I promised them a 50 mission tour and every last one of them has volunteered for another tour.'"

General Moench suggests that the aircrews were "unappreciative."[18] Gus, Willie, Tex, and Zip kept flying.

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Bill Mauldin described how the infantryman felt about the Air Forces mission tour. Clearly they did not feel very good about the Air Force mission tours, or their rest cures, bivouac at a comfortable base, and frequent leaves. They themselves had no such things.[19] It's true the infantry struggled through the most difficult conditions, in all kinds of weather, marching to the front, hunkering down in a foxhole, even when held in reserve. But the times they suffered the most was on the offensive, when they had to leave what cover they had and advance out in the open, exposed to enemy fire. This is normally when they experienced the heaviest losses. To put it in perspective, however, living conditions aside, every Air Force mission was an all-out attack –

[17] Moench, *Marauder Men*, 338.
[18] Moench, *Marauder Men*, 338.
[19] Mauldin, *Up Front*, 101-103.

without any cover, and with full exposure to enemy fire. But I never heard an Air Force man say they had it worse than the foot soldiers.

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Bud Hutton, the *Stars and Stripes* staff writer who often covered the Marauders and even flew with them on several missions (not a small feat of courage for a correspondent), wrote about the attack against the Noball targets.

Calais Raiders Told "Smash Secret Targets at Any Cost" by Bud Hutton

The Allied air offensive against "military objectives in northern France" entered its fourth month this week with fleets of American and RAF bombers shuttling over the Channel sometimes twice a day to keep up the incessant pounding of the targets which neutral sources have described as the site of Hitler's secret rocket guns.

On five missions beginning with the first on Nov. 5 and spaced through three months of bombing, this reporter has flown with American bombers to watch the progressive pulverizing of the unidentified installations.

Since the operations began, no matter what the opposition, not one American bomber has turned away from the vital targets because of the enemy. The paramount importance of the targets is emphasized not only by the frequency with which they are hit but by what the combat crews have been told:

"Your bombs must get in there. We've got to smash the objectives at any cost, no matter what opposition they put up."

All the attacks have been carried out in clear visibility to prevent harm to the conquered French in the vicinity.

In the three months, U.S. marauders under the command of Brig. Gen. Samuel Anderson, have spearheaded the offensive, striking 23 blows on a total of 21 days, and dropping some 4,000 tons onto the secret targets. During the same period American heavy bombers have struck ten such blows, and RAF formations of medium, light or fighter bombers have operated on an average of almost every other day against "military objectives" in the Pas de Calais area of northern France.

They have obviously been given a high priority, for example, they have constituted one-sixth of all objectives the mediums have hit since they first began operations early last summer. And to indicate how fiercely the Germans on occasion have defended what Stockholm and Berne say are the locations of the long-range rocket guns, one-third of all the Marauder's losses since they began medium altitude bombing has been over the "military objectives."

The heavy bombers have lost 20 bombers in attacks on military objectives in northern France. RAF operational losses are not available on those targets alone.

Opposition to the attack has varied. This writer has flown on raids in which the Marauders made two or even three bomb runs to insure accuracy and still encountered not a puff of flak, nor a German fighter. On other raids squadrons of Luftwaffe fighters have been hurled deliberately against the bombers – medium and heavy – and flak has filled the sky.

On Jan. 23, in particular, when the heavies were turned loose in force against the secret objectives, we ran into what one gunner called "post-graduate flak gunners," and six planes were lost while dozens of others came home with heavy flak damage. A few groups, on the other hand, bombed and came home that day with virtually no opposition.[20]

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Meanwhile, the Germans attacked Earls Colne Airdrome again, just as the 323rd was about to relocate.

"Well, one night," Gus said. "Poor Germans, I feel sorry for them but it's too late now, they came over in a JU88. It got hit and it came down on the field. When it did, it hit a cement slab, oh, bigger than this room. One of the guys flipped out of the plane, slid under the slab, and the slab

[20] *Stars and Stripes*; Samuel Findley's Scrapbook.

came down over him. The slab came down and he was buried. It took a couple of days to find out where that guy could have gone. You couldn't find any parachute because he never got in one. One guy did bail out but he got picked up right off."

On March 20th the Group conducted an exercise that had them hopping. They practicing moving their facilities to Great Dunnow where the 386th Bomb Group was stationed. During the day, the Germans again attacked the Earls Colne airfield. The anti-aircraft crews shot down a Junkers 88 which smashed a 386th plane upon crashing. Two of the German crew were able to bail out while the rest died in the crash.[21]

"They were those ME-110s, I think; or Junkers 88," Willie said. "They were the German bombers. One of them crashed on the edge of our field. Didn't hurt the field. I don't remember if they ever hit the runway. We had holes around the field. Everybody pitched in to shovel the dirt back in. But I don't remember them hitting the runway. We had an anti-aircraft outfit just off the edge of our base in the woods. They moved in one that was about an 80mm and the next one they brought in was a 90mm. After that we hardly ever got scared when we got an aircraft warning. Lots of times Woods, Larry, and I didn't even leave our beds. We'd listen to it for a minute and go back to sleep."

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On one of two missions he flew on March 23, 1944, pilot Fred Mingus was returning from a bomb run when it was discovered that a 2,000-pound bomb was still hanging in the bomb bay. It hadn't let go when the bombs were released. The crew couldn't get it to drop so they would have to land with it still in the bomb bay – a very dangerous thing to do. He related the event in a local newspaper:


Fred Mingus

Before the wheels of the B-26 dipped down onto the runway, Mingus made one last request for the air traffic controllers.

"I told them, 'Even if you think you see that thing coming out – tell me – because I'm gone,' Mingus said, his hand soaring quickly upward and away to simulate an airplane trying to flee a blast. "With a 2,000-pound bomb loose in my bomb bay, just a front shackle holding it, if I'd have run over a cigarette paper it would have been like running over a 6-inch speed bump."

The landing went smoothly as Mingus rolled to a stop.

"I got off the runway onto a taxi way; an armored truck came up and put a cradle under that bomb, before they got that cradle set, it dropped in," he said, revealing how the bomb barely stayed in place long enough to prevent an explosion.[22]

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On March 26th, 1944, the 323rd Group participated in a maximum effort raid on Ijmuiden, Holland. This was considered to be a revenge raid for the losses of the 322nd BG on the first two Marauder raids back in May 1943. Bud Hutton wrote another article in the *Stars and Stripes*:

THE MARAUDERS SQUARE AN OLD DEBT

The Marauders settled an old score today – they went back to Ijmuiden. [The 322nd Group's mission to Ijmuiden of May 17, 1943] was a 100 percent licking and for ten months, as their forces grew and they hammered the Nazis from medium altitudes, the B-26 crews waited for a chance to get even.

Today they got it – and wiped off the slate.

[21] Moench, *Marauder Men*, 153.
[22] *Daily Sun*, Nov. 11, 2005; courtesy of Fred Mingus.

Storming out of the bright skies above the North Sea, more than 375 Marauders and more than 2,000 Marauder Men fought through a bitter flak barrage to splatter the Nazi torpedo and submarine pens at Ijmuiden with more than 700 tons of high explosives.[23]

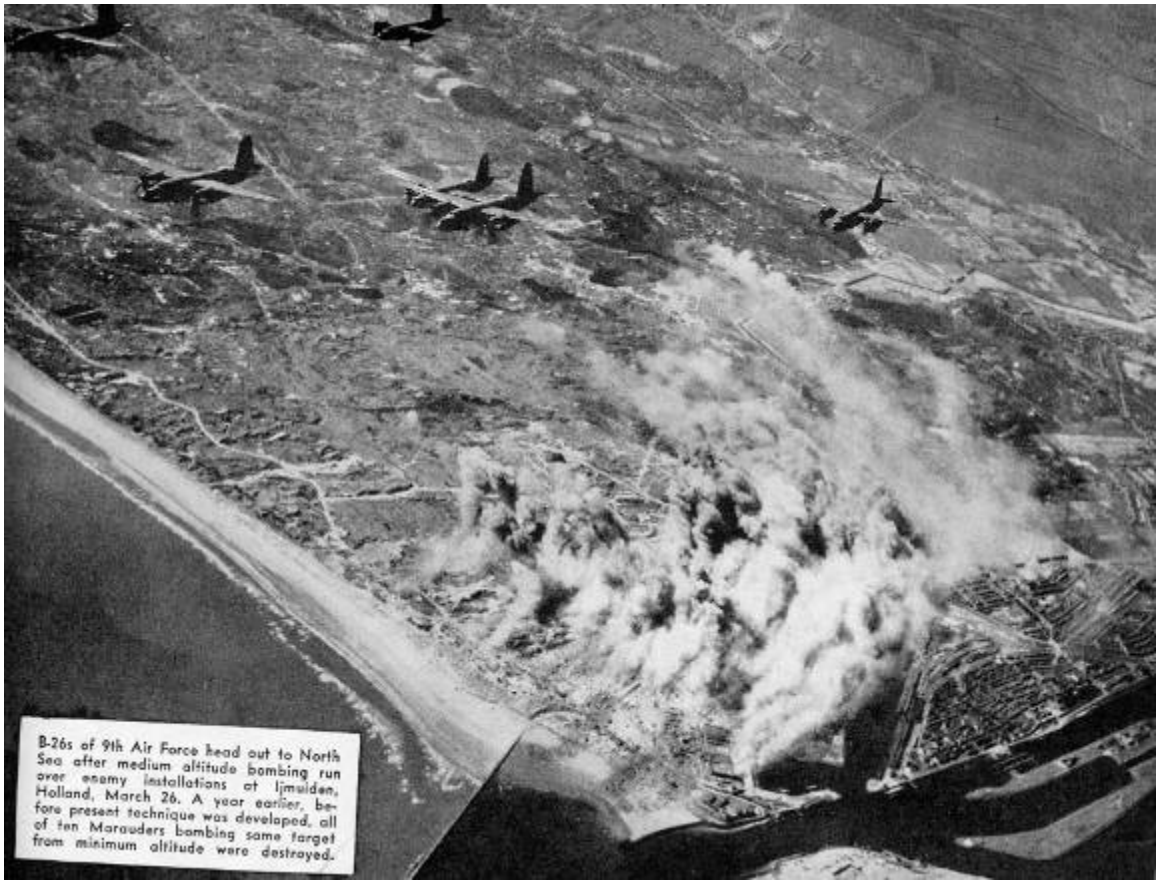

Photo from the publication, "Air Force, July 1944." *(Courtesy of W. L. Brainard)*

But the raid was not without loss for the 453rd. A rookie crew piloted by 2nd Lt. Reese was hit and went down with all hands. This was their first mission. The flak over Ijmuiden was very heavy and 2nd Lt. Halmuth Reese's plane received a hit in the bomb bay and "blew up." went down with all hands: Maj. William C. Berryman (323rd), Sgt Ralph N. Brown, Sgt. Donald R. Jacobs, Sgt Paul R. Scott and S/Sgt Alex E. Sundberg. ."Reese got a direct hit in the bomb bay and blew up. I flew directly through the trash." (Postwar comments of Frederick J. Mingus).[24]

The Foster crew must have had the day off, because the Reese crew was flying in the *Toid Boid.*[25] Both plane and crew were lost. Considering the emotional importance of this mission, the Foster crew must have wanted to be in on this one… and later, they must have often pondered the fact that they weren't. Gus and Ketcham had flown 29 missions in that plane and the other crewmen had flown even more. This was quite a surprise for me because Gus had never once mentioned the loss of the *Toid Boid* to anyone in the family, and seemingly talked about the plane as if it had never gone down. After that, they flew most of their missions in a plane designated #41-31901 VT-A, *Punching Bag.*[26] Gus continued wearing his *Toid Boid* flight jacket, which he brought home after the war.

[23] Moench, *Marauder Men*, 157.
[24] Moench, *Marauder Men*, 156.
[25] Alf Johanneson, aircraft researcher.
[26] Flight log courtesy of Trevor Allen; aircraft identification by Alf Johannesen.

I asked Tex if he had been on that raid.

"No. I wasn't on the 'avenge raid' to Ijmuiden. I may have been on a sort of leave at the time. In order to give crews a rest some crews were rotated back to the states for R and R. and other crews (I was one of these) were given orders that stated to the effect that the individual was hereby attached to the military hospital at Cambridge, England or any other place in the United Kingdom they wished to travel. I went to Blackpool, England which was sort of like Coney Island in the U.S. and spent the week."

Crews with most amount of missions were given as much time off as possible, often allowing them to anywhere on the Island they wanted to. However, the permission for time off had to be couched in "orders" for special duty.[27]

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One day I was contacted by email right out of the blue. A man from Holland who identified himself as "Gr. William" wrote:

"I have no info your dad Gaston "Frenchy," but I found some parts from the plane (B-26 Marauder) "Toid Boid" that went down in IJmuiden on 25th of March 1944."

He sent a photo of a metal part he found. I was curious. I asked William how he had identified the plane and this was his reply:

"First I must say sorry, it's not 100% sure that the parts I found are from the "Toid Boid." I forgot the word 'probably' in the first mail. Some years ago I was walking with my metal detector in the dunes of IJmuiden. I met an old man, and after a short talk, he mentioned a crash site nearby in the dunes. His story was that late in the war a plane was shot down by the Germans and the whole crew died in the crash. The Germans had cleared the site, but maybe you can find something over there, he continued his story. I went with my metal detector to the place and found several aluminum parts that were definitely from a plane. When I later searched for more information I found some articles about a plane crash (26-3-1944, Marauder B-26 bomber got a direct hit from FLAK), but no exact location was mentioned, only the place IJmuiden. But IJmuiden is not so big and there were several FLAK batteries in the area. I went back with my metal detector and found one day some interesting parts like the identification plate from the Glenn L. Martin Co. This was THE manufacturer of the B-26 Marauder, so I thought that was a little evidence for the old man's story and the other information I had found. But I must say I found no serial number of the plane itself. So it's not 100% sure, but there are so far as I know, no more B-26's shot down later in the war. As time went by, and I became internet connected, the search went on. I found a lot of information about the B-26 and even the name "Toid Boid" (if the story is correct). Then I also found the names of three of the crewmembers and that they were buried in Margraten, Holland. I went there to visit their graves. And that's my story about the whole thing. I will send some extra photos with this mail. Greetings from William."[28]

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Tex said, "Although we continued to hammer the Noballs we began to bomb a variety of other targets, too. We bombed railway marshalling yards, airfields, and enemy gun batteries during March and April. The stress from combat was beginning to affect many of us in the Marauder crews. The fact that you were flying in an aircraft fueled with 960 gallons of highly volatile fuel and loaded with two tons of highly explosive TNT while being shot at with heavy artillery is a very stressful feeling. Each German 88-millimeter gun battery had four to six guns and each gun could fire 15 to 20 shells per minute. On some missions the shrapnel from the flak barrages would hit only a few of our planes, while on other missions all of the aircraft would receive flak damage. An enemy fighter posed a great threat to you but you could try to defend your plane when attacked.

[27] Moench, *Marauder Men*, 338.

[28] Alf Johannesen, aircraft researcher.

There was nothing you could do to counteract the flak when making a bomb run on the target. The flak was very demoralizing."

Gus agreed, "Everything's coming up from underneath you, everything but the kitchen sink. You couldn't hide from it. Some guys used to sit on their helmets. All you could do was sit there and take it."

"I laid an extra flak suit under me," added Willie. Pilots had to watch the weight build-up in the plane but aircrewmen were scrounging metal plates to put underneath them.[29]

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Flak was definitely the chief antagonist for the Marauders, especially since their medium altitudes were a more effective firing range for the flak guns. Some men from the heavy bombers disagreed. They argued that flak was worse for them because they spent more time flying over the target due to their altitude. Everyone agreed that the enemy fighters were a bigger problem for the heavies than they were for the Marauders. Perhaps because of their speed and fighter cover, it seemed that enemy fighters avoided them and concentrated on attacking the heavies. But possibly it was also because the heavies were directly attacking the Nazi homeland.

Tex continued, "We B-26 gunners only had to fire at enemy fighters on rare occasions. Our fighter escort usually kept the German fighters at bay. One of the things that mattered the most to us was the fact that we did not have a combat tour of a certain number of missions to fly as did those airmen flying in the B-17s and B-24s or in the medium bombers of the Mediterranean area. The Marauder was a rugged aircraft and would take a lot of punishment from the German flak batteries but if you flew combat long enough you would be killed, wounded, or shot down and taken prisoner by the enemy." Many of the airmen were beginning to believe their luck might soon be running out.[30]

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April 1944

If the weather hadn't been such a deterrent to bomb runs (only ten missions would occur this month), a new problem would have slowed the 323rd anyway – a critical lack of bombs, but that wasn't all. On April 4th B-26 production at Martin's Omaha plant came to halt. On the positive side the high-mission air crews were beginning to receive 30-day furloughs to visit home. The new scuttle-butt was that the new mission tour length would now be 65 missions.[31]

First it had been a 25 mission tour, then it was 30, then 50. After that, they heard they had all volunteered for another 50 missions, then last month they had gotten word that the mission tour was cancelled and they would fly at least until D-Day. Now the men got news that the number 65 was the elusive, magical goal. But that hardly made any sense! The units were not receiving replacement crews, so how could they finish their tour anyway.[32]

The men did not know what to believe; so they mostly believed nothing - they just kept flying. Things weren't much better in the heavies of the Eighth Air Force where their mission tour was increased from 25 to 30 missions.

Concurrent with the bomb shortage, a program was developed in which the medium bombers would also be used to drop psychological warfare leaflets, which the men did not like to do. If they were going to risk their lives, they would prefer to drop bombs.

Tex remembers, "We did drop some leaflets in France where the Atlantic Wall defenses were under construction that were in the German language. I remember at one mission briefing,

[29] Moench, *Marauder Men*, 62.
[30] Moench, *Marauder Men*, 339.
[31] Moench, *Marauder Men*, 165.
[32] Moench, *Marauder Men*, 165.

one of the briefing staff asked Zip to interpret one of the leaflets so we would know what it said in English."

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Aerial photo of an English village, possibly Colchester. *(Photo courtesy of W. L Brainard)*

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The 323rd also began to experience the receiving end of this element of 20th century psychological warfare.

Gus suddenly burst out with, "Ha! That's when Lord Haw Haw said…"

"Who's Lord Haw Haw?" I asked.

"Well, he was a German radio announcer/commentator who would tell us that the clock in town was a half minute late. We were like a thorn in his side."

The propaganda spewed by German radio host, Lord Haw Haw, was intended to unsettle allied aircrew nerves even more than they were already frazzled. He tried to convince them that he knew everything they were doing, often mentioning units by name or the tail insignia of a unit's planes, and even talking about a specific airman by name and serial number. He had them looking for spies in their midst.[33]

"But you can't tell the difference [between a German and an American]," Gus said. "Can you? Do you recognize a German when you see one? I don't think so. I know I can't. Lord Haw Haw said, '323, we're gonna get you! Definitely.' 'So what,' we thought. 'We'll sit here and wait for the bombs. You can always duck 'em like raindrops...' but that's getting ahead of the story – the bombing."

"He was a German?" I asked.

"Right. Now, how did he know that about the clock being a half minute late?"

"Spies."

[33] b26marauderarchive.org.

"Right. They had plenty of them. One time, they found a guy in a corporal's uniform, American Army. He was up in the tower. We got belted a few times when we'd go on a mission and hit a certain spot, and we couldn't figure out how come. See, everything would come up but the kitchen sink, and I think if they could have thrown that up, they would have. But come to find out, this corporal in the tower was a German spy. He evidently came over during Dunkirk. I don't know if you read your history or not - at Dieppe. You recognize that name? Dieppe, France? That's where all the Frenchmen and Englishmen and whoever else could grab a boat, came across, in rowboats, canoes, anything they could use to get out of France."

Enlisted air and ground crews for *Truman's Folly* L-R standing: Donald G. Snay, Walter B. Woods, Thomas A. Hoffman, Melville J. Taylor; kneeling: Harold T. Newkirk, and Nelso F. Cassano (crew chief). Willie was still recuperating when this photo was taken. *(Photo courtesy of W. L. Brainard; names courtesy of Nelso Cassano)*

"They came to the United States?" I wondered out loud.

"No, they came to England. That's where the Germans came, right behind 'em."

Air Corp Intelligence men were kept busy tracking down the people and things by Lord Haw Haw, but in the end, his effect on the Allied airmen was minimal.[34]

Willie said, "One time Lord Haw Haw announced that one of the guys in our unit -- he mentioned him by name -- his wife had just had a baby! The father didn't even know it yet, but Lord Haw Haw knew."

[34] from Hirst Mendenhall, 323Bomb Group/454th Bomb Squadron, b26marauderarchive.org; and Moench, *Marauder Men*, 335.

Actually Lord Haw Haw was not a German. His name was William Joyce and he was born in New York. His father was Irish and his mother was English. He moved to England in 1921 and in 1933 he joined Sir Oswald Mosley's British Union of Fascists. He became so enamored of Hitler's Fascism that he relocated to Germany in 1939 where he became a broadcaster of Nazi propaganda. At the time, "Haw Haw" was a common description among Britons for people who tried to be too haughty in their speech. Joyce was very much like that so he soon became Lord Haw Haw to the Allies. After the war he was captured and convicted of treason by the British and was hanged in England on January 3rd, 1946.


William Joyce

Although Gus and Moench both scoffed at Lord Haw Haw, they also inadvertently admit that the radio broadcaster had them inadvertently looking for spies among their ranks, as well as believing that the Germans possibly knew their next mission sites and would be ready for them when they got there. However ineffective it was ultimately, there was definitely a psychological achievement at some level. Although Lord Haw Haw reminded the 323 everyday for thirty days of the severe bombing they would receive, it never materialized.

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Leo Myron Denny
(Photo courtesy of Barbara Denny)

On April 11th, while flying through dense fog, the *Miss Safartus Rickenschicker 2nd* piloted by 1st Lt. Leo Myron Denny, collided with another plane of the 454th squadron and was lost in the English Channel. There were no survivors in the Denny crew and only two gunners from the other plane survived by bailing out into the sea. Lt. Denny's had been one of the replacement crews that had arrived in the squadron the first of the year. He and his crew had flown 28 missions in the very relatively short time they were in active combat.[35]

Lt. Leo Myron Denney hailed from Stillwater, Oklahoma. He had joined the Air Corp in 1942 and trained as a pilot at several bases in Texas. He married Betty Jean Arnold of Enid, Oklahoma, on the day of his graduation from flight school. Then he was sent to Avon Park, Florida, and subsequently sent to to the 453rd Bomb Squadron at Earls Colne in January of 1944.[36]

The Missing Air Crew Reports (MACR) from the two surviving gunners in the other aircraft reported that Denney's aircraft crashed and sank immediately and no survivors were seen.[37]

[35] This and the following information courtesy of Barbara Denny, niece of Lt. Denny.
[36] vintagememoirs.com/honorbook/38.html.
[37] Courtesy of Barbara Denny

The Denny crew L-R standing: Robert Reney (co-pilot), Louis Bleaker (bombardier), Charles Foster (radio-gunner); kneeling: William McMath (engineer-gunner), Daniel Beitchman - Richard Priar was actually the turret gunner at the time of the collision. Charles Foster was the replacement radioman that had flown in Ketcham's place with the Foster crew back in February. *(Photo courtesy of Barbara Denny)*

Miss Safartus Rickenschicker 2nd. (Photo courtesy of Alf Johannessen)

Another collision occurred on the 18th of April when two planes collided during combat, one each from the 454th and 456th squadrons. All the crewmen of both ships were lost. On April 19, both of the older Marauder Groups in England, the 322 and the 323, were ordered by bomber command to stand down due to 'war weariness.' The 323rd group was directed to spend a week on formation training flights. The airmen's schedules regularly included such training flights, but this time there was a particular emphasis on it.[38] The 323rd Group was ordered to spend the next week in flight training coupled with practice missions, intended to accompany the D-Day practice landings done by the army troops in Studland Bay. They didn't have enough bombs at this time for a heavy combat schedule anyway.[39]

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Finally, after flying missions for almost three months, pilot Frederick Mingus was commissioned as a 2nd Lt. on April 26th, 1944.

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May 1944

D-Day was coming… no one knew exactly when, but everyone could feel it in the accelerated pitch of activity around the base due to the number of missions scheduled during May - 31 missions. However, the Foster crew flew only four of them before being scheduled to return home on leave. The Sprague crew was also given a furlough sometime after the fifteenth of the month. Some crews were given a 30 day furlough, partly because of their high mission numbers, partly to defray the possibility of combat fatigue, and partly to fool the Germans into thinking the invasion wouldn't happen yet. Some lucky ones, Gus and Willie included, got to go home, but the others, like Tex, just kept on flying and taking flak, hoping to complete their mission tours in one piece. In terms of combat operations this month turned out to be the exact opposite of April. Unfortunately German anti-aircraft fire was also intensifying.[40]

Tex said, "I averaged flying 6.5 missions per month, but really racked up a bunch in the spring of 1944. I flew 19 missions in May before the invasion. On some days that month we flew two missions. We were fully aware that we were flying a lot. It took a lot out of us and I felt that my fate was sealed and I would either be wounded again, or become a POW, or pay the full price. We felt bad about the 'no tour' policy. I remember that, before landing, when someone in our flight had completed his 50th mission, we buzzed the field and shot off a bunch of the flares of different colors from the flare pistols that every plane carried, as a protest."

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Since its inception in October, the Ninth Air Force had continued to grow until it had become a formidable war machine with over 200,000 men. Correspondingly the Bomber Division had also grown from 300 to 1100 bombers.[41] The Marauders, however, remained a small part of that machine, comprising only eight of the forty-five groups. The Kohn/Harahan report acknowledges that while the medium bombers were a very small part of the Air offensive in Europe they were highly critical in carrying out the pre-invasion strategy. The Marauders, however, remained a small part of that machine, comprising only eight of the forty-five groups. The Kohn/Harahan report acknowledges that while the medium bombers were a very small part of the Air offensive in Europe they were highly critical in carrying out the pre-invasion strategy.

> Although the medium bomber force was small and although the necessity for contact flying both in target and base areas restricted the number of operational days, these counter air force operations contributed

[38] Moench, *Marauder Men.*
[39] Moench, *Marauder Men*, 169.
[40] Moench, *Marauder Men*, 175.
[41] Kohn/Harahan, 12.

materially to forcing the Luftwaffe to draw its fighters inland, where they represented a less serious threat not only to the "heavies" but to the invasion forces which were to arrive in Normandy on 6 June 1944.[42]

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THE BRIDGE PLAN

While still maintaining attacks on the marshalling yards, enemy defenses on the coastline, and NoBalls, the Marauders were instructed to begin a campaign against a new target – bridges. Certain bridges behind enemy lines were selected for destruction in order to isolate the invasion beaches from reinforcement and resupply by the Germans. Statisticians in command levels believed that the bombing of these bridges would cost perhaps 80,000 French civilian deaths. That number, if realized, would have exceeded (by 20,000) the number of civilians that Britain lost throughout the entire war - and that was at the hand of the Germans who were trying to kill them! Since France had already lost many more civilians than that, the British were worried about post-war relations. As a consequence precision bombing became highly desirable. To minimize civilian casualties the Marauders were now directed to attack the bridges from the side rather than flying down their length. In tandem with raids radio and leaflets were also used to warned civilians to get out of the area. Bridges in high locations with high concentrations of civilians, such as the bridges on the Seine in Paris were not targeted.[43]

Allied command issued a directive announcing that soon, the collateral casualties would be our own soldiers, not civilians. Steps were taken in planning and in implementing the bridge raids that were designed to reduce the number of civilian casualties. They were successful in that the actual French and Belgians killed were estimated to have been only 12,000 instead of the projected 80,000[44] – and some statisticians insisted the number would be closer to 140,000.[45] This estimate does not include the number of people wounded.

Tex wrote, "In May we began taking out the bridges over the Seine River. Many of these bridges had parts of a city at each end, so we were required to bomb going up or down river at a right angle to the bridge to save the lives of French civilians. It was much more difficult to destroy a bridge when bombing in this manner. During the same time that the Seine River bridges were being bombed, operations were also being taken against gun emplacements and other targets in the Pas de Calais area of France."

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On May 4th, 1944, Ernie Pyle came to visit the 323rd Group. He stayed for three days. He had met two officers from the 456th squadron, Jack T. Arnold and Lindsey C. Greene in a pub and they invited him to visit the Earls Colne. He accepted. The entire Group was trilled to have him there.[46] He even went on a night training flight (two squadrons of the 323 had been selected for night missions). He talked to the men of the 456th Squadron, described their life on the base and even flew a training mission with them. He also remarked on the "real eggs" he had for breakfast. Finished by saying, "It was good to be with them."[47]

According to Willie, they didn't get real eggs very often. "That cook was damn good," he said. "I don't know how he made those powdered eggs taste so good."

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[42] Kohn/Harahan.
[43] Moench, *Marauder Men,* 176.
[44] Moench, *Marauder Men,*
[45] Perret, *Winged Victory.*
[46] 456BS History, Moench, *Marauder Men,* 179.
[47] Pyle, *Brave Men,* 319-325.

FROM THE MESS LINE: "For just a few cents our mess sergeant can make dessert for a week's meals. That sounds like applesauce. It is too, and we're getting damn sick and tired of it!"[48]

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During Ernie Pyle's visit, the 323rd continued to fly its regularly scheduled missions. On the 7th, the Foster crew flew to the Malines Marshalling Yards. A few days later, men of the 453rd participated in a series of costly missions beginning on the 9th of May. They attacked the Beauvoir Noball site and met very heavy flak over the site, in spite of dropping 'window' (strips of tin foil) in order to divert the enemy radar. Nineteen ships were damaged and four planes had to land at auxiliary bases. According to Lt. Col. Roy B. Pratt nine aircraft landed with single engines. In the 453rd single-engine landings were made by 1st Lt. Frederick J. Mingus, 1st Lt. Daniel G. Frank, 1st Lt. Elwood C. Johnson, Lt. Col. Roy B. Pratt. Saul Rubin, Navigator on the Pratt crew was badly wounded and S/Sgt Lemuel M. Coggins was also hit.[49]

Fred Mingus later told a newspaper that he was flying the number 2 spot when he was caught up in a hail of anti-aircraft fire that took out several engines. "One of them was mine," he said.

"On May 9th, 1944 we were going into a target called Frevant. It was called a Noball – nobody knew what the heck it was. Actually, it was a V1 rocket, buzz bomb ramp for bombing London. The Pas de Calais area was saturated with these buzz bomb ramps. It was a flying bomb with a ram jet engine on top of it. It was built to go one way and when it ran out of fuel it went down. They'd bomb London with them. We headed for the little town of Dieppe….a little town between Dunkirk and Oestend. It was called a hole in the wall because it had light, inaccurate flak and we used to go in [to France] and out of there. We usually flew at 9-10,000 feet. The flak had changed because on the 22nd of July they had moved all the flak guns from Dunkirk and Oestend to Dieppe. The flak guns had proximity fuses. We'd make evasive maneuvers. We'd see the flak trying to track us and we'd make a fifteen [degree turn], a fifteen, and fly in that direction for so many minutes, and then take a thirty degree to get back. We were still going towards the target but we were evading the flak. The Pratt and Whitney 2800 had a two-stage blower. It didn't have a compressor link – it only had a two-stage – and above 9,000 feet you put the high stage, second stage in, which gave you a little more power."

"On May 9th I did everything we were supposed to do. [Mimicking an instructor's voice:] 'If you get hit and lose an engine, look for a flat spot on the ground because you're going to go down.' I lost my right engine and I got back into formation. We dropped the bombs and I fell out of formation – we couldn't maintain formation – I started going down. I was too far into the coast to make it to the Channel. I went down to get down close to Dover – the White Cliffs of Dover – Dover was the short cut across from the Pas-de-Calais area. But the ship went down to 5,000 feet and it was like it was hung on a string. It didn't want to go down any further. Being a country boy, I didn't want to ask no questions. I kept going and going and here was the flight out behind me. I was outrunning the flight on a single engine! I got across the Channel and a Spitfire came down and barrel-rolled me they wanted to know if I was going to go into Manston and I said no, I was going to go back up to the Wash (whew!). I went up and crash landed at Earls Colne. Five planes came back on single engine that day."

"I did everything I was supposed to do except one. I closed the cowl flaps, feathered the prop, closed everything up. I had forgotten I was over 9,000 feet [when the engine was hit] and I still had it in high blower. I didn't find that out until I got back on my final approach to the base. I looked down and I saw two big red knobs staring me in the face. Then I looked at my manifold

[48] Gus Poulin's Scrapbook).
[49] Moench, *Marauder Men,* 180.

pressure and I was pulling 54" [54 inches mercury, maximum military power]. I flew it all the way back from France and I didn't blow an engine. I wrote a Tech Order on that thing. It said, 'If you lose an engine leave it in high blower because that Pratt and Whitney [engine] will bring you back.' And that same aircraft with the same engine brought me back without an overhaul. The B-26 had the best record for losses of any aircraft ever built. We had one tenth of one percent combat losses. We could catch the flak and bring the flak back. They said it wouldn't fly on a single engine, well a bumblebee can't fly either, according to aerodynamics!"



Roy Pratt, Fred Mingus, Saul Rubin (WIA)

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In the Pacific, on May 19th 1944 US forces secured Wake Island.

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That same day a 323rd formation flew to Dieppe on the coast of France. It was cloudy weather and of the bombers that made it to the target, 17 were flak-damaged and two crash-landed at emergency airfields. This was the 57th mission for 1st Lt. Jesse R. Swan and also his first as flight leader. The formation had been scattered by the heavy cloud cover and he ended up flying in formation with William J. Heather. With his right engine gone he salvoed his bombs over the Channel. Heather picked him up the next morning at Manston where he was forced to land.[50]


Jesse Swan, William Heather (KIA)

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By this time the German defenses in western Europe were bolstered with additional anti-aircraft and fighters, including some elite units that had been brought in from the Russian front. The next day, the 323rd visited the same target and met an exceptional barrage of anti-aircraft fire.[51]

Gus related, "One Sunday we went into an area between Belgium and France [the Dieppe area]… right on the borderline. And it was cloudy like this here (looks out the window). You couldn't see the ground. We couldn't bomb France unless we could see our target. Then 'bingo', seven airplanes right off, boom, boom, boom... seven out of 18… a pretty good average. Boy, we'd got belted and I don't mean maybe." The German had reinforced their anti-aircraftguns covering

[50] Moench, *Marauder Men*, 181.
[51] Moench, *Marauder Men*, 182.

bridges from the coast inland to Paris – all of it radar-directed. Three ships were shot down and 20 were damaged. Four crews had to make single-engine landings.[52]

Aircraft *Red Dog*, 41-31818 VT-C, piloted by Jerome St. Peter was shot down on May 20, 1944.
(Aircraft identification by Alf Johannesen; photo from Moench 162)

Two of the planes lost were from the 453rd, one was "Red Dog" 131818 VT-C flown by Lt. Jerome F. St. Peter[53] and the other was "Red Dog" piloted by Maj. William J. Heather.[54] The St. Peter crew jettisoned their bombs before they went down. MIA were 1st. Lt. Louis J. Bamberger, S/Sgt John H. Biddle, S/Sgt Raymond D. Hamley, Maj. William J. Heather, T/Sgt Paul O. Johnson, T/Sgt Richard G. Keefer, S/Sgt. Leroy E. Neal, 1st Lt. Jerome F. St. Peter, S/Sgt Eugene F. Thibault, 2nd Lt. Frank L. Watkins, 1st Lt. Curtis E. Wheat, Jr. Heather and Wheat (Tex's usual bombardier) were killed. Two more men, T/Sgt James C. Bailey and Lt. Edward L. Merrigan, were wounded and one of Merrigan's men bailed out over target (unidentified). "With Lt. Merrigan wounded, the copilot, 1st Lt. F. Catrell, brought the aircraft home – once again demonstrating the value of what the experts at Wright Field had determined to be 'excess baggage'"[55]

"Afterwards, one of the guys," Gus continued, "he comes into what they call de-briefing. He saunters in. He's got a hole right through the top of his helmet. I asked him, 'How was it today, John?' [This was John Bull, again.] He shrugs, 'Oh, not bad.' I says, 'Where'd you get that hole?' 'What hole?' Here, we lost seven planes. He got belted….and didn't know it. I don't know how many holes they had in the airplane. If anything ever got John excited, I don't know what it was!"

[52] Freeman, *Marauder At War*, 106.
[53] Alf Johanneson, aircraft researcher.
[54] Moench, *Marauder Men*.
[55] Moench, *Marauder Men*, 182-183.


James Bailey (WIA), John Bull (almost WIA)

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By this time, the unit's medical officers were becoming alarmed regarding increased incidents of combat fatigue, and began spending time with the men as a way to look for signs of it. The men called it "flak happy." General Moench notes that with many men approaching 70 combat missions the 30-day home leave plan was put into effect, but with the coming of D-Day the program was cancelled.[56]

The stress was taking its toll. There were reports of airmen who began to cry when a piece of equipment malfunctioned, bombardiers who couldn't clear their heads to sight, pilots who couldn't correct their sloppy flying, gunners who fired wildly or not at all; and crewmen who would suddenly bail out for no reason - or because they had misunderstood something the pilot had said - or if the ship had lurched just a little too much. Anyone who has experienced stress and fatigue knows that these actions and reactions are completely involuntary and the individual involved is often barely aware that it is happening.

"I should have known something was happening to Woods," Willie said. "Sometimes he would sit up in his bed and stay that way all night. I'd wake up at two or three in the morning and Woods would still be sittin' there staring – waitin' for something to happen, I guess. He'd clamp his teeth whenever we took off on a mission and stayed that way through the whole trip."

As Moench points out, the medical men had their hands full trying to separate the regular antics of men who were just 'blowing off steam' from actual incidents of 'fatigue.' It was about this time that General Moench joined the 323rd Group. He describes his experience as a new arrival meeting the 'old-timers.' One officer, desiring a seat next to the stove threw a box of cartridges into the fire. Once they started exploding he had his choice of seats. Newcomers were shaken while old-timers just laughed. Another distraught officer filled the roof of his Quonset hut with holes by firing off his pistol.[57]

* * * * * * *

In early May, the Poulin family received this happy news from Colonel Wood:

HEADQUARTERS
323RD BOMBARDMENT GROUP (M) AAF
Office of the Group Commander

APO 140 % Postmaster
New York, N.Y.
27 April 1944

Dear Mr. Poulin:

[56] Moench, *Marauder Men,* 338.
[57] Moench, *Marauder Men,* 173-174.

Your son, Gaston, has either just arrived, or will arrive shortly for a much deserved rest. He has been selected as one of the first of our Group to be given a leave back home. As his Commanding Officer, I want you to know how much all of us here have appreciated his work.

As you probably know, we have been in combat for nearly a year now. I cannot write to you about any of the missions your son has flown, but I want to give you an idea of his life with us. In the months that he has been with us, he has given us his best. His effort has been an important factor in the success of our Group. We are proud of him, and I want you to know how we feel.

The success of our work demands the highest degree of precision in training for and planning each attack. This training is hard and grueling. It must go on continuously. Sometimes we must ask your son, and others, to go into training within a few hours after a combat mission, when they are tired and would like to rest. On the missions themselves, success depends on the perfect discipline, courage, and the resourcefulness of your son and those with him. We ask a great deal of our flying personnel; it requires courage and stamina to do the job.

I am happy that it is possible for him to visit you. It has been made possible by the outstanding work your son and his comrades are doing over here.

Sincerely yours, WILSON R. WOOD,
Colonel, Air Corps, Commanding

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The Swan Crew in front of the *Flying Trapeze* #41-35023 VT-S, L-R: Meyer Dunn (RG), David J. Beamer (N), Jesse R. Swan (P), Billy T. Harris (TG), John W. Vaughan (CP), Aulden D. Sudberry (TG), [not in photo Willard G. Barto (B)].[58]

* * * * * * *

Gus said, "I came home in May."
"How many missions had you flown?" I asked.

[58] Newspaper clipping furnished by Alice Vaughan from a Laurel Mississippi newspaper; 453rd Bomb Squadron Association Newsletter by Ronni Cassano, September, 2009 – the last one published.

"At that time? It was 50 official, and about 70 unofficial." Actually it was 58 official.

> Mr. and Mrs. Poulin of North Avenue have been informed that their son, T-Sgt. Gaston Poulin, recent recipient of the Distinguished Flying Cross, Air Medal and four Oak leaf Clusters to the Air medal, has completed 50 missions over France and Belgium.[59]


Alfred MacSoud

"We rode on a ship - the *Queen Mary*," Gus said. "The copilot… [that would have been Alfred C. MacSoud] oh, that guy… poor guy. See we came home on a 30-day furlough. He was sicker than a dog all the way over and all the way back on the boat. Four days and 10 hours he was sick and I don't mean maybe. He walked around the top deck. And he walked it, and he walked it, and he walked it. He says, 'I'm not gonna' get sick.' And the first thing you know... he feeds the sharks [pukes]. 'Course, we kind of kidded him, you know. He'd come into our quarters and we'd say, 'How come you're sick?' 'I'm not sick!' 'Oops!' [puke]. So he'd walk another two days. It didn't amount to beans. He thought he could get by with walking. He could fly, but he couldn't ride a boat!"

* * * * * * *

While on leave, Gus was interviewed by numerous newspapers, and to one of them, he spoke on life in England as well as on being an airman:

> The airman states that England is "all right," but that "it isn't home." He says that it is amusing to hear the English cockney lads try to speak "American." The U.S. fliers are received with hospitality by the English families and the Skowhegan gunner has been to London several times. He was there during an air raid when bombs dropped within a hundred feet.
>
> This veteran of European battles wanted to be a pursuit pilot. But he is now all wrapped up in his job as gunner. One thing he is sure of and that is that the Air Corps is the best branch of all the Armed Forces.
>
> T-Sgt. Poulin has a brother, Staff Sgt. Joseph Guy Poulin, also serving with the Air Forces in England… He is a ball turret gunner on a B-17 and is expected home on leave sometime in the near future.
>
> T-Sgt. Gaston hopes that his brother, Staff Sgt. Guy, will arrive home while he is still here on leave. For as he says with a smile: "My brother and I are due to have some hot arguments over the merits of the B-26 and B-17 planes."
>
> The local man's life and daily routine have been one mission after another, countless flights until, as he says, "I commenced to forget and lost track of the number," He states that many a time he has been so "dog tired" that he "didn't know what was going on."[60]

Uncle Victor, Gus's younger brother, remembers when he and Gus went to a movie while Gus was home.

"We went to a movie and it was a war movie," Victor said. "During the film there was a German plane coming right at us, and Gus went into his shooting position and he thought he was firing at a real plane. Boy, was I scared. He started to shout and holler at the plane. When the incident was over I talked him into leaving the show, and we did. All that time he was a nervous wreck. He wondered all the time how Guy was doing, and he had still about 15 days to go before reporting back to his station." Uncle Vic was fourteen years old at the time.

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[59] Gus Poulin's Scrapbook.
[60] Gus Poulin's Scrapbook.

After flying his 54th mission with the Sprague crew on May 15th, Willie and company also left on a 30 day furlough to the States.

"When we were coming home on the ship," Willie related, "Steve, he was a real gambler. He set me up with a blackjack table, gave me a few hundred dollars, and I started. I set up my table and he set up his. He never drank when he was gambling. He could double-shuffle and deal four aces right off the bottom. I didn't have to know anything for blackjack, I just dealt out the cards, 'cause the house will win, Oh, I guess about 15-20% of the time. By the time I hit the docks I had won 2,300 dollars! He gave me $1,200 for my cut, so when I hit the docks I was loaded."

"I went home on a ship, *Liverpool*. The rail was damn near covered with guys hanging out over it. What fascinated me was I didn't get seasick. I couldn't figure that out. It didn't seem to bother me. They asked me if I would assist with gun duty. They had these four 20mm guns like you see in the Navy. You get in that seat, you got your flack jacket and you got your helmet, and a heavy coat to keep warm. Then you slide yourself off into that cage over the edge of the boat. Below you was water. And you're sitting out there in that thing looking for somebody to shoot at. All of a sudden a wave was out there this high [pointing up] coming straight at me. I couldn't see over it. What was happening was that the boat would go forward, right up and over one of those big waves. I was seeing the top of the wave. That was just amazing."

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Meanwhile, Tex was transferred to a new crew. "Our navigator, Lt. Curtis Wheat, flew with another crew and was killed [Lt. Heather's]. Our bombardier [Lt. Friesner] flew a mission on another crew and was severely wounded in his foot. Our pilot was promoted to Squadron Operations Officer, and as such, was not permitted to have his own crew, and James Smith had broken his ankle during our parachute jump. This only left the radio operator [Bryce Ramey] and me from our original crew so we were reassigned on other crews."

Curtis Wheat (N) KIA, George Friesner (B) WIA, James Smith (TG) WIA

"I was told that I was going to be assigned on the crew of a replacement pilot who had just arrived from the U.S. The fact was, he was not even a pilot, he was a co-pilot; and had not flown the Marauder as a pilot. A few days prior, I was the engineer on his check-out flight as pilot. I didn't think much of his piloting ability and I didn't relish being on a crew of novices. After discussing my feelings with Col. Roy Pratt, the Squadron Commander, he re-assigned me as engineer-tail gunner on Captain James Hunt's crew. Capt. Hunt was from San Bernadino, CA, and was an excellent pilot. The enlisted men on his crew were Jim Siegenthaler, top-turret gunner, from Council Hill, OK, and Joe Bothwell, radio operator, from Mondamin, IA. Lt. Phil Haglund, bombardier, from Brockway, MT, and Lt. David Beamer, navigator of Sacramento, CA, rounded out the crew. Capt. Hunt now became flight leader. The name of our plane was *Sad Sack II* (the original *Sad Sack* had been shot down). We were flying two missions on some days and from the air we could see the build up of equipment and forces for the invasion of the European Continent."

Charles Vacanti who had previously held Tex's position (engineer-gunner) on this crew had been transferred to the Chriesman crew as a togglier-bombardier. Horace Chriesman was one of the veterans who had attended the reunion in Colorado City, 2003.

James Hunt, Philip Haglund, Jim Siegenthaler, Joe Bothwell, and Sam Findley, crew of the *Sad Sack II.*

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Music was probably one of the biggest morale boosters of the war, for the people back home as well as the men at the front. Here's an airman song that the people on the home front did not normally get to hear.[61]

I Wanted Wings

I wanted wings, now I've got the God-damned things,
Now I don't want them anymore.
They taught me how to fly, then they sent me here to die!
I've got a belly full of war.
You can save those zeros, for the God-damned heroes,
For Distinguished Flying Crosses,
Will not compensate for losses.

I'm too young to die in a damned old P.B.Y.,
That's for eager, not for me;
And I don't trust to luck to be picked up in a duck
After I've crashed into the sea.
Oh, I'd rather be a bell hop than a flyer on a flat top,
With my hand around a bottle, not around a God-damn throttle!

I don't want to tour over Berlin or the Ruhr!
Flak always makes me part my lunch.
For me there's no "Hey-Hey" when they holler "Bombs Away!"
Things always happen in a bunch!
There's one thing you can't laugh off, and that's when they shoot your pants off,
And I'd rather get home, Buster, with my pants than with a cluster!

They filled me full of poop, then they sent me to this Group,
That's where my troubles all began.
If I had stayed at home, instead of crossed the foam,
I'd have my tail out of this jam.
When the rockets start a-bustin, and the gunners start a cussin'
Then I wish that I were back,
In Wichita or Hackensack!

Chorus:
I wanted wings, now I've got the God-damned things,
Now I don't want them any more.

[61] *The Blue Book,* 240.

Photos courtesy of William Gr. Of Holland:

B-26 metal parts probably of the Toid Boid, picked up by William on the beach at Ijmuiden.

This plate found by William identified the wreckage as parts from a B-26 Marauder

Graves of L-R: Alex E. Sundberg, Halmyth C. Reese, and Paul R. Scott in Margraten, Holland.