

Chapter 6 – The Invasion and the Breakout

June – August 1944

June 1944

Preparations for the invasion of Normandy continued to forge ahead. By June 5th three million personnel, four thousand ships, and eleven thousand planes were now ready and waiting for the assault. The 323rd found itself the focus of news correspondents. In the afternoon orders were issued to paint invasion stripes on the wings and fuselages of the aircraft at the base. The announcement of the next day's briefing time was earlier than ever, 3am.¹

That night a secret radio signal from England was broadcast over western Europe, and 200,000 French freedom fighters were mobilized. Under cover of darkness, the invasion fleet moved toward its landing positions. Just after midnight the airborne divisions started their flight overhead to their landing zones and dropped or glided into the dark of night. As the paratroopers were landing, the bomber crews were getting up and making ready. The 323rd Group was scheduled to take part in the 'softening up' of Utah Beach.



Sam "Tex" Findley

The ordnance and ground crews were active through the night and all the next day, readying the aircraft for the day's missions. Sochocki wrote, "The Squadron pulled four missions that day. We were kept very busy supplying the aircraft with bombs and ammo."

Tex said, "I woke up on the morning of June 6th to learn that the invasion had begun and that I was on the loading list for the next mission. At the mission briefing we learned that our target would be a road junction near the city of Caen, France, and that we would have to go down below the clouds at about 1500 feet to be able to see the target. The briefing officer also informed us that our usual fighter escort would not accompany us but that there would be fighter cover over the entire beachhead."

Although the men had known it unofficially, Colonel Wood finally announced that this day was the invasion. The men cheered and whistled. Then target were designated for the crews. They would support the western-most landing areas, Utah Beach. The weather report was not encouraging.² Then they were told they would go in at any altitude necessary to hit their objectives. The room became silent. Everyone was thinking of IJmuiden.³ The unit's last box was scheduled to drop only six minutes before the infantry came ashore. Timing was critical.⁴



Fred Mingus

Fred Mingus and his crew were on the first mission of the day. He said, "It was so overwhelming, a sky full of airplanes and a channel full of boats, you had to know this was something special."⁵

A British friend of mine, Andy Sherwood, tells the story of his grandmother who went out early on the morning of June 6th to hang out the washing. There was always noise of planes overhead in England in those days, but that day the drone was louder and deeper than usual. Looking up, she was stunned to see that the planes literally blocked out the sky. It was paralyzing. She stood there watching it, tears streaming down her face. Her son (Andy's dad) came out and asked her why she was crying. She replied, "Because I know how many will not be coming back." Andy's

¹ Moench, *Marauder Men*, 193.

² Moench, *Marauder Men*, 193.

³ Moench *Marauder Men*, 194.

⁴ Moench *Marauder Men*, 195.

⁵ *Daily Sun*, November 11, 2005.

father tells that she had lived through WWI when whole English villages had been depopulated of young men, and that's what she was thinking of. They stood there together, watching the unbroken stream of allied planes for an hour and a half – the better part of 8,000 aircraft heading for Normandy, France. Up there, somewhere, was the 453rd squadron.

So, while Gus and Willie were fidgeting in front of the radio at home, Tex was flying over the invasion force on that historic day. His pilot, Capt. Roscoe R. Haller, led the twelve planes of 453rd Squadron on the first mission of the day. The Chriesman crew also flew on this one. So did Manny Blumenthal with the Cuneff Crew. Manny wrote, "Captain Frank Cuneff was our first pilot. We did not get credit for our first mission on D-Day. We flew over the coast of France but did not make formation." The 323rd Group put up a total of sixty aircraft for this maximum effort. Besides the first one, the Group also made three more raids that day, Tex and the Hunt crew flying on the last one to Caen.



Manfred Blumenthal

"The invasion armada was something to see," Tex described. "There were ships as far as the eye could see. I didn't believe there were that many ships in the world. We flew right over the battleship *Texas* just as it fired a broadside. A large yellow flame belched from her guns and at first I thought she had blown up. As we proceeded a little ways inland we were flying down a railway track that had some boxcars on a siding. I got completely absorbed while shooting into these boxcars and did not realize that our bomb bay doors were open and that we were on our bomb run to the target. Then all hell broke loose. Our bombs exploded beneath us on the target and the noise and vibration were terrific. We had never flown a mission this low before and I wasn't prepared for this. The concussions from our bombs broke some of the plexiglass windows in some of the airplanes. One plane from our Group was shot down on this bombing raid."

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Visiting home must have been a very happy occasion for the lucky men involved, but for Gus it had one nasty consequence. After fighting the air war for eleven months, making preparations for the day the Allies would finally assault 'Fortress Europe' from the west, when it happened, he was home listening to the radio!

"While I had been home on a 30 day furlough," Gus said, "I missed the invasion which kinda made me a little bit mad because after working all that time to get to it, I didn't get at it. That's like working for nothing."

Uncle Vic, who was with him that day writes, "I remember D-Day. Gus was home and he went through four packs of cigarettes while listening to the radio about the invasion. He was really upset. I could tell he was mad about missing the invasion."

Frank E. Larkin III, son of the Toid Boid's bombardier, also said the same about his father, "I think he did regret that he was not there for D-Day."

Willie said, "They let us go home as part of a diversion, so that the Germans wouldn't suspect when the invasion would occur. They were rotating crews. I walked in the door at home on the morning of the 6th of June, the day of the invasion, so I missed it, too."

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So what was it all for? In the last eleven months, what had the medium bombers actually accomplished for D-Day? Once summed up, it appears that the unremarkable airplane had chalked up some very remarkable accomplishments:

German forward air bases – In addition to destroying German planes on the ground and in the air, all of the enemy's forward air bases had been destroyed or damaged, forcing the enemy fighter bases too far back to have any effect on the troop landings. Only 319 sorties were flown by Germans versus the thousands performed by the allies. Imagine the casualties on the beaches if

there had been more German fighters. When Hitler tried to send fighters closer to the front they couldn't find any bases to use.⁶

Bridges - Almost all the bridges through which reinforcements and supplies could be brought into the battle area had been knocked out or at least temporarily damaged.

Railroad yards - Railroad yards had been devastated making them unusable for transportation for troops and supplies.

Utah Beach - The Eighth Air force bombed Omaha beach defenses while the Ninth bombed Utah. The landing on Utah was almost a 'cake-walk' in comparison to Omaha, because flying at high altitude, the Eighth's bombs overshot the German defenses and landed in empty fields. On the other hand, the Ninth's low altitude operations knocked out the heavy guns on Utah. While hundreds were killed at Omaha only four men were lost at Utah....less than they had lost in their training exercises.



Members of the Mingus crew prep the waist guns; L-R: Chester E. Whitehouse (tailgunner) and Paul J, Remsik (radioman/waistgunner). (Photo courtesy of Fred Mingus)

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With complete surprise the Allies had put ashore 176,000 men within the first twenty-four hours of their first landing. They began to move inward from the beaches fighting bitterly for every foot of ground. Although the German coastal defenders were mostly static, lower-grade divisions, they fought tenaciously. By night fall the Allies had over 150,000 men ashore. Omaha had about 2500 casualties and the paratroopers had about another 2500, with 10,000 casualties for

⁶ Perret, *War to be Won*.

the Allies overall.⁷ The logistical accomplishment executed on D-Day was one of the greatest achievements in history, but the Allies had already won another great victory – air superiority.⁸

Air superiority was a fact, and after the invasion, the emphasis on the operations of the Ninth Air Force turned to close support of the advancing ground troops. This was very dangerous for both the men on the ground as well as the men in the air. The reason that the airmen had been ordered to paint “invasion stripes” on 11,000 aircraft was due to the fact that so many Allied anti-aircraft gunners had been shooting down Allied planes. Even with the black and white stripes the Allies lost aircraft to friendly-fire. The Navy had been described as “trigger happy.” But the Navy restrained itself that day and only shot down two P-51 recon fighters⁹ The Ninth Air Force lost 71 aircraft, mostly fighters shot down by ground fire while the Germans had lost 28 fighters.¹⁰

That night at dusk, a group of forty RAF DC3s were flying supplies to the airborne troops in Normandy. The Navy shot down six of them, two were forced to turn back, and fourteen others were damaged. The paratroopers did not receive a whole lot of supplies that night. As a result, future close support missions would only be flown during the day.

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In the Marauders, the lack of priority in providing replacement crewmen was almost crippling; but these ‘sons of the Great Depression’ still managed to ‘make do’ with what they had – as they had always done. They had never been at full complement anyway. Of the 54 Marauders of the 323rd Group 38 did not have co-pilots and 25 had Toggliers instead of Navigator/Bombardiers and many Navigator/Bombardiers and gunners had been drafted as ad-hoc co-pilots.¹¹ Clearly, in the grand scheme of things, the Marauder was, as General Moench said, ‘considered a dog.’ But this dog wouldn’t quit.

Willie said, “Nelson, the bombardier would ride in the copilot’s seat during take-off and landings and I stood behind them. After the bomb run, if there weren’t any fighters around, Nelson would move to the copilot’s seat and Sprague would have him take some turns flying. He let me try it sometimes - you’d be surprised how hard it is to keep a plane level! I was a real expert (laughing). Nelson tried some landings too. I thought I just might be able to make a landing if I had to.”

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The frequency of bombing raids had been fast and furious. But although the ground and air crews had been working in overdrive for months to prepare for the invasion, 9th Air Force command was worried that they couldn’t let up now. On June 13th, the same day that the first German V1 rockets hit Britain, Tex was ordered to attend a meeting.

“On June 13th, our crew was directed to put on Class ‘A’ uniforms and report to the Group Operations Briefing room at once,” he wrote. “Several other crews reported there also. No one had any idea why we were ordered there. We did note that all of us there had previously been awarded the Distinguished Flying Cross and that we were all crews with the highest number of missions. We thought, perhaps, we were there for a photo session.”

“The Provost Marshall called us to attention and in strode Generals George C. Marshall, ‘Hap’ Arnold, and Samuel Anderson. They looked at photos showing the results of our bombings and made various inquiries regarding our operations. Finally Gen. Arnold asked if anyone had any questions. An officer [Lt. John D. Helton, 456th squadron] stood up and said, ‘Sir, what is the

⁷ Perret, *War to be Won*, 323.

⁸ Hastings, *Victory in Europe*, 22.

⁹ Perret, *Winged Victory*, 305.

¹⁰ Perret, *Winged Victory*, 306.

¹¹ Moench, *Marauder Men*, 196)

possibility of a mission tour for Marauder combat crews?’ They wanted to know how many missions we had accrued. I believe Generals Arnold and Marshall were surprised to learn that every crewman in that room had more than 50 missions and that some of us had more than 70. Our Wing Commander, General Sam Anderson, had been making every possible effort in our behalf for a tour to General Brereton who was Commander of the Ninth Air Force, but Brereton would do nothing.” Finally, General Anderson went over General Brereton’s head and spoke directly to General Arnold concerning problems with the lack of a combat tour for aircrews.¹²



Manny Blumenthal at the tailguns of his airship #42-107688 VT-C.
(photo courtesy of Manfred Blumenthal)

“I never knew a combat crewman who had any regard or the least bit of admiration for Brereton,” Tex said. “General Marshall commented that infantrymen had no duty tour and General Arnold said, ‘This is a man’s war and men have to fight it.’ Nothing else was said. After hearing this I felt as if I was doomed and my probability of surviving the war was slight.”

The whole purpose of the meeting was to tell the medium bomber aircrews that they would have an unlimited mission tour - not just the sixty-five mission tour, or just until D-Day (which had already passed), it would be for the rest of the war. But, the meeting must have had some effect on General Brereton, because on the same day, unknown to the aircrews, he penned a letter to the high command regarding an impending fatigue problem in the medium bombers, “The prospects, based on considerable medical opinion, are that a substantial portion of these crews will break under the strain of operations during the next four to six weeks.” In addition he noted that the flow of reinforcements was not adequate to counteract the depletion of the effectiveness of the units under his command.¹³

Finally with the urging of General Samuel Anderson, and possibly Brereton’s letter, the no-tour policy was canceled. “The net result was a new stateside emphasis on the provision of

¹² Moench *Marauder Men*, 207.

¹³ Moench *Marauder Men*, 339.

aircrewmembers to the Marauder Groups and a cancellation of the 'no combat tour' policy."¹⁴ But somehow, the promised acceleration of replacement crews never materialized; and, as yet, no one knew what limit to set the tours at, so many of the airmen did not know it had been canceled. They still thought they were supposed to fly forever. Eventually the Brass went back to the sixty-five mission tour, but apparently, this was never fully administrated.

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On June 17, 1944 David Goss and Joan Brewer were married in London amidst V1 buzz bomb attacks and anti-aircraft fire.

Air Force problems aside; two days later, on the shores of Normandy, Eisenhower was very pleased with the Allied progress so far. General Eisenhower and his son, Lieutenant John Eisenhower toured the Normandy Beach area on June 15th. John noticed how the line of vehicles moving inland observed no protocol against enemy aircraft and he commented on it. "You would never get away with this if you didn't have air supremacy," he told his father. General Eisenhower snorted, "If I didn't have air supremacy, I wouldn't be here!"¹⁵ It was affirmed by enemy commanders that Allied air superiority was the most effective factor in the success of the Normandy Beach landings. German Air Force commander Herman Goering stated: "The Allies owe the success of the invasion to their air forces. They prepared the invasion; they made it possible; and they carried it through."¹⁶

Notwithstanding the brilliant execution of the invasion, due to a surprising German endurance and willingness to fight, the Allies discovered that getting ashore was one thing, and advancing inland was another. The 'old men and boys' of the German static divisions were not so easily defeated and they had tougher divisions waiting on the sidelines. Although the Germans had incurred heavy losses in North Africa, Italy and Russia their army had grown from 5.8 million men in 1942 to 6.5 million in the Spring of 1944. In France they had posted sixty divisions and 2000 tanks. Half the divisions were older men with obsolete weapons but the rest was a force to be reckoned with.¹⁷

The Allies also learned why the Germans thought it was crazy to invade Normandy in the first place. It was a nightmare of narrow roads and fields surrounded by hedgerows. There was no room for an attacking army to maneuver and it was too easy to defend. Air support was difficult with the enemy hiding in all the foliage, and worse, the whole peninsular could be bottled up by forming a defensive line across it. For two months the campaign became a "bloody slogging match" with two million men on both sides. The Allied air forces prevented significant German counterattacks but the ground troops made almost no progress.¹⁸ The German troops fought ferociously to keep them bottled up but they were fighting a war of attrition that they could not win. They had no replacements while Allied men and materiel kept piling ashore. Hitler would not allow the German commanders to make a strategic withdrawal. Yet the German ground units fought one of the "greatest defensive actions in history," though it gave no reflection of skill on the part higher command.¹⁹

¹⁴ Moench *Marauder Men*, 207.

¹⁵ History of the Ninth Air Force – online.

¹⁶ Kohn and Harahan, *USAF Warrior Studies*, 19.

¹⁷ Perret, *War to be Won*, 314.

¹⁸ Hastings, *Victory in Europe*, 45.

¹⁹ Hastings, *Victory in Europe*, 47.

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On June 22 the 453rd assisted on two missions that had spectacular results. On the first one, they pulverized the German defenses at Cherbourg. The German commander there, General Wilhelm von Schlieben reported to his commander, Field Marshal Rommel that his batteries were out of action, his troops were exhausted and fighting with their backs to the sea. He had 2,000 wounded who could not be extricated.²⁰

The 453rd's second mission was to the Armentières marshalling yards where a huge explosion with fire and smoke rising 12,000 feet indicated that an ammunition train had been demolished. On that raid, a 453rd plane piloted by Frederick J. Mingus was hit and barely made it back to England.



Fred Mingus

“On the way to the target, several 88s went off directly under me and literally blew the aircraft out of formation. I recovered with the gauges over the red lines, the right engine out and the left engine hit, the right stabilizer cut in two, the electrical system out and the fuel tanks hit and leaking.”²¹

“Over the Channel, we salvoed our bombs at which time we lost a parachute. I ordered bail out with my chute to replace the missing one. My men, however, refused to let me go it alone. We eventually landed at Manston, passing a B-17 on the runway landing from the other direction.”

“I finally got stopped, I used all the concrete, all the blacktop. There were between 50 and 65 holes in that plane, that you could throw a teacup through,” he said. When Mingus went to climb out, his left foot slid along an area totally saturated with hydraulic fluid, causing him to hyperextend his knee.

“I put an ace bandage on it and flew another mission that day,” he said.²²

“On arriving back at Earls Colne, I read on the bulletin board that I had been shot down in flames. It was with pleasure that I erased the notation.” (Postwar comments of Frederick J. Mingus)²³

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“I went back to pull another 50 missions,” stated Gus.

Gus was awarded a Distinguished Flying Cross by GO 11 Hq IV Bomber Command on the 16th of June, 1944 (Enlisted Record). He got the medal for flying twenty-five missions, even though he had already flown fifty-eight. The airmen must have had a good laugh since they had already completed more than 50 missions – where was the cluster on the DFCs they were only just receiving? When a soldier receives a medal twice, he is given a small metal Oak Leaf Cluster to pin on the first medal – bronze for once, and silver for five times.

Skowhegan Man Wins Flying Cross

Washington AP T-Sgt. Gaston G. Poulin of Skowhegan, Me., was among 260 officers and men of the U. S. Army Ninth Air Force awarded the Distinguished Flying Cross for participation in 25 combat missions against the coast of France, the War department announced today. The citation said: “Although many of these missions were dispatched under adverse conditions and against skillfully devised enemy defenses, these men displayed marked ability and unswerving devotion to duty.”²⁴

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By June 30th the 6,000 Germans trapped on the Cherbourg Peninsula by the invasion force surrendered as other allied troops continued to inch eastward through the nightmarish hedgerow (*bocage*) country of Normandy. Casualties were very heavy and progress was slow - it was measured in yards, not miles. The Allies needed a breakout and with assistance from bomber command, continued to probe for one. However, a new problem soon struck the Allied ground

²⁰ Moench, *Marauder Men*, 210; reprinted with permission of Frederick J. Mingus.

²¹ Moench, *Marauder Men*, 210, Postwar comments of Frederick J. Mingus.

²² *Daily Sun*, Nov. 11, 2005; courtesy of Frederick J. Mingus.

²³ Moench, *Marauder Men*, 210; reprinted with permission of Frederick J. Mingus.

²⁴ *Lewiston Evening Journal*, Gus Poulin’s Scrapbook.

forces; especially hard-hit were the infantry rifle companies. The rifle companies of the infantry were taking the brunt of the fighting and consequently the brunt of the casualties. Most rifle companies lost 30-40% of their men in every assault they made and battle-fatigue reached epidemic proportions.²⁵

The field hospitals were flooded with ‘shell-shocked’ men and the medical staff couldn’t handle them all. In desperation, one doctor resorted to an unorthodox method of determining the status of his patients. He put them in a parking lot and had four trucks backfire. The patients who hit the ground were deemed sufficiently recovered to return to frontline duty.²⁶ The army had not anticipated the tremendous losses in the rifle companies and the replacement problem became acute. As a result, thousands of Air Force trainees, artillery, and anti-aircraft men were quickly sent to the infantry. The situation was described by historians as ‘deplorable’ because men were inhumanly handled like ‘spare parts.’ But for the Marauder men, it meant that badly needed replacements would not be forthcoming.

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Andrew Kovatch, the 453rd aerial photographer who would loan Willie a camera (Courtesy of W. L. Brainard).

PLAY SAFE: “What’s the first thing you do when cleaning your rifle?” the Sarge wanted to know. “Look at the number,” said the rookie. “Oh.” remarked the Sarge, “and wot is the big idear?” “To make sure I don’t clean somebody else’s,” murmured the recruit.²⁷

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Behind the German lines the resistance fighters were more active than ever. Many historians tend to downplay the participation of the FFI (Forces Françaises de l’Intérieur) in the war effort after D-Day, but this is not accurate.

On D-Day the French Underground became fully activated, fighting ferocious skirmishes with local German garrisons. They also attacked railroad and road connections and enemy convoys. Allied command considered their actions to be of little consequence but contrary to their opinions their actions had a significant effect on German responses to Allied advances. The entire Army Group B in southern France became embroiled in responding to

Underground attacks. This allowed the Allied invasion on August 15th in southern France to roll over them. Also the 2nd SS Panzer Division was distracted by Underground efforts and was stalled from going to the front in Normandy until the end of June. The FFI had kept them busy for three weeks.²⁸

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Willie and the Sprague crew returned from their 30-day leave.

Willie said, “When we got back to Atlantic City. I could see that Woody was really tense. He wouldn’t loosen up. We were sitting on the boardwalk and Larry and I were gobbling down beers and he wouldn’t hardly touch his. Even drinking beer wouldn’t loosen him up. He was thinking about how he didn’t want to go back. So when we went through processing I lost both Woody and Larry. They both didn’t pass the physical. I believe Woody said he never wanted to

²⁵ Hastings, *Victory in Europe*, 47.

²⁶ Perret, *War to be Won*.

²⁷ Gus Poulin’s Scrapbook.

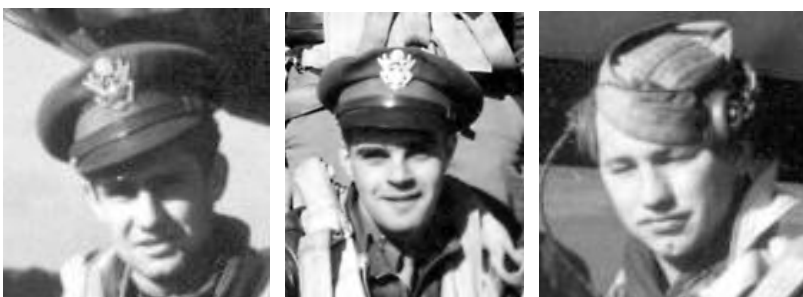
²⁸ Hastings, *Victory in Europe*, 58.

get in another airplane again as long as he lived, and Larry must have failed the eye exam. They didn't return to the squadron. So Sprague, Nelson, and me were the only ones that came back. We returned on a boat called *Mauritania*. When we came back we had a submarine scare. So the ships separated."

"I thought it was safer to stay together," I said.

"No, not with ships. With submarines, if the ships are all bunched up they just need to go one, two, three, four with the torpedoes. They wouldn't even have to worry if they had 'em aimed right. So we split up and headed southwest. We lost the convoy. 'Course we were watching for subs. All of a sudden the weather got warm. The sun was shining. You know what was coming out of the water alongside the ship? Flying fish! Here they come out and back in right along the prow of the boat. A submarine could've come within twenty feet of the boat, 'cause I was watching those damn fish! They were amazing. How could they fly?"

When the remainder of Willie's crew reported to Earls Colne, radio/gunner Larry Nusser was replaced by S/Sgt Norwin E. Hoffman, and S/Sgt Schaysik (most likely Donald E. Syryczuk) took over Woody's spot in the turret.²⁹



Mark A. Sprague (P), Donald A. Nelson (N/B), Willis Lee "Willie" Brainard (EG); remaining crewmen of the *Truman's Folly*.

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Meanwhile, Tex had flown a total of eleven missions in June, the last one was on the 25th to the Forêt de Sémonches in France. Tex didn't know it at the time, but this would be his last mission.

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July 1944

In July Allied troops and supplies continued to land in Normandy behind the stalled front-line troops and the area became one huge traffic jam. It was difficult to find places for airfields – but even so, some fighter squadrons were quickly moved to the front. Ground troops were lucky to find a place to lay down at night. Airfields and supply dumps were in short supply. Because of the failure to move inland the Allies were vastly behind schedule. They had to break out.³⁰ The Air Forces had not been trained in ground support tactics and it took them a while to get the hang of it and the hedgerows continued to impede their attempts.³¹

Soon, the tactical fighter wings were working out the procedures for close ground support and the Germans came to live in mortal fear of what they called the 'Jabos,' the dive-bombers. After all the excitement of June, July brought a period of clouds and rain that kept the 323rd Group on the ground for the first seventeen days. Moench states that the Germans were favored by the weather again. Daily, missions were briefed and scrubbed.

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²⁹ Trevor Allen, B26 Marauder researcher.

³⁰ Perret, *War to be Won*, 332.

³¹ Perret, *War to be Won*, 333.

Suddenly a new development took place in the 323. Without notice high-mission aircrews were rotated out of combat service. Most of the men had flown mission that numbered in the sixties and seventies.³²

Tex said, "On my birthday, July 16th, someone told me that they had seen my name on a list of combat crewmen that were to be rotated back to the U.S. All of us on the list were not scheduled for any more combat missions. I had completed seventy-eight missions during the year that I was engaged in combat against the Nazis."

Soon Tex's hometown newspaper received a happy letter:

Printed below are the excerpts of a letter received by the Optic-Herald this week from Colonel Wilson R. Wood, commanding officer of S-Sgt. Samuel M. Findley, son of Mr. And Mrs. S. E. Findley.

"In a short time Staff Sergeant Samuel M. Findley of Boling, Texas, will return home for a much-needed rest. He is returning after a year overseas as an engineer-gunner on a B-26 Marauder. During that time he flew on 77 [actually 78] aerial operations over enemy territory in France, Belgium and Holland, attacking highly important enemy targets. For his achievements in aerial warfare against the enemy he has been awarded the Distinguished Flying Cross, the Air Medal, two silver Clusters and three bronze Oak Leaf Clusters."

"I am writing you this letter so that Sgt. Findley's parents and friends may be made aware of his achievements in the European Theatre of Operations. He has fulfilled every demand made on his skill and courage in a spirit reflecting our increasing victories. He has never shirked his duties and this rest has come as a well-earned reward for his devotion to his responsibilities."³³

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David Goss

Sometime in mid-July David Goss was able to procure a room at a farmhouse across the road from the Earls Colne airbase for his new wife, Joan. Conveniently, the farmhouse was located directly across from the armament shack and David could hop the fence whenever he had some time. Finding her a place to live nearby was very lucky, but the proximity only made her aware of the activity on the base. One day Joan begged him to let her help load the bombs. Of course, he refused her flatly, but she used his friends to nudge him into it. Another excerpt from his book:

"Now hold on, Honey! Don't get any ideas. Besides being illegal, that's no place for a lady. It gets so cold in the wind, it hurts. And the bare hands are even worse. Forget it Joan Patricia!"

She knew better than to press him then, but she didn't give it up that easily. One afternoon when [George R.] Fewell, [John W.] Foutch, [Hiram H. "Moose"] McKinney, and [Michael J.] Napychank joined him on a visit with her, she put it to them. "I asked David to let me come with him just once. To help with a bomb loading so I could be a small part of hitting back at the Germans. Would that be asking too much?"

She could persuade a priest to become a Rabbi when she turned on her charm. He objected, "I know how you feel, but it's crazy. Forget it! You have already done your share of hitting back at the Germans."

The others didn't fully agree with him. Moose [McKinney] expressed their feelings, "Give the lady a chance, Dave. You can dress her warmly so she looks like one of us, and you could bring her over the fence to the nearest hardstand. Who's going to tell on her? I know she wants to send a special personal message to Adolf."

"OK you guys! See, I can't resist her and neither can you. You had better let me pick some ships around this end. Just don't spread it around. The Captain is a decent guy, but he couldn't go along with that." For the next night loading operation, he dressed her in a work uniform, with GI shoes and a hat pulled over her hair. He bundled her in his tired flight jacket. She did not look much like the lovely lady that she was, and the GI shoes and flight boots felt like pieces of lead.

She gamely slugged along with him and happily accepted his assistance in crossing the fence. It was a fair walk to the nearest hardstand, where they joined the crew. The load of 500 pound bombs had been dropped off by Sochocki and his ordnance crew, and the APU (Auxiliary Power Unit) provided power for the

³² Moench, *Marauder Men*, 224.

³³ Samuel Findley's Scrapbook.

bomb bay lights. Otherwise it was dark enough that she was unlikely to be spotted. They thought it was fun having her along. At the first plane for loading Mike [Napychank] showed her the whole procedure with the first bomb to be hoisted into the bomb bay, and they let her prepare one bomb for loading. She attached the release shackle, replaced the plug nuts with the nose and tail fuses, and installed the arming wires. After she removed the safety wires from the fuses, Mike cut off the excess length of arming wire to the two fuses. That was a little too hard for her. After that, while they maneuvered the bomb into position and used the hoists to crank the bomb up into the bomb bay and hang it on the rack, she continued to prepare the bombs for loading. They checked her work and finished the preparation on each bomb before hoisting it and hanging it in its correct location on the rack. When the loading operation for that plane was complete, David delayed to turn off the bomb bay lights and shut down the APU, while the men moved on to the next plane to be loaded. Then he led her to where the others were starting the APU.

Before finishing that first plane, Joan had become quite good at the preparation process, and made a meaningful contribution to the night's work. What she was doing was cold, hard work for her, but she worked with a concentration and determination that really impressed the men. They made fun of her when she fumbled with her frozen fingers and mumbled something that might not have been ladylike. She gave some right back to them about some comments they made when the bomb they were hoisting in position for hanging on the rack refused to cooperate.

She stayed all the way through four plane loads that night and became quite proficient with her rigging. She made no complaints, but it was obvious she was cold clear through. The men treated her with the respect she had earned in her determination to stick with it to the finish. She was one frozen girl when David took her back across the road and up to her room.

...George [Fewell] told him later, "It looks as if she has been accepted as part of the crew."³⁴

* * * * *

About this time, the medium bomber command was trying to expand and stabilize its command structure for the next phase of the war. Many officers were offered chances of promotion if they continued to fly as leaders rather than return to the states. Lt. Col. Pratt was replaced by Maj. Alfred A. Blomberg as the 453rd Squadron commander. Maj. Satterwhite also volunteered to remain as a combat leader.

"Satterwhite was a career officer and so was my first pilot, Col. Haller," Tex explained. "Promotion was much easier to come by during the war than in peacetime. Both Satterwhite and Haller stayed in the Bomb Group to become Squadron Commanders, rather than rotate back to the U. S., in order to put themselves in line for promotions." It was a dangerous way to get ahead.

Due to a lack of replacements many men had flown more than their share of missions. When 31 pilots did arrive at the 323rd Group none of them had ever flown a B-26. The result was they had to be trained as co-pilots.³⁵ A few new airmen, mostly designated as copilots, also arrived came in as replacements, but Meonch writes that it was obvious to everyone that the state-side replacement system had completely malfunctioned, and these recruits had to be trained virtually 'on the job,' between missions. Col. Wood was quite irate with their appearance as one of the new arrivals commented, especially when Wood announced that many of the assigned aircraft did not even have co-pilot controls.³⁶

What the new copilots soon came to realize was that because they had been forced to fly combat without copilots for a year, a culture of bravado had been built up in the 323rd Group. Amazingly, there was a kind of a 'we don't need no stinking copilots' attitude in a unit that desperately needed them. In addition to the new recruit's inadequate training, they found that they were unwanted, unneeded, and more than that – they were considered by many to be bad luck! Some of them found a begrudging slot in the right side seat of a B-26 but most of them were so badly treated by the Group's members that many jumped at the first opportunity to transfer to another unit. Ironically, many of the veteran airmen were glad to see them go. This is truly

³⁴ Goss, *Meant to Be?* 105-107.

³⁵ Freeman, *Marauder at War*, 114.

³⁶ Moench, *Marauder Men*, 225.

difficult to understand. The recruits who did fly as copilots were usually treated as kids with a ‘don’t touch anything’ injunction by the pilot, and most of them spent the war just looking out of the window. Some of them had so little flight time it would have been a miracle if they could remember how to get the ship home without the pilot’s help – thus defeating the purpose of having a copilot in the first place. Gus mentioned that one copilot forgot to put the landing gear down when he came in for a landing, which makes sense if that copilot had not made a landing in months. This is how the 323 became known as a group that hated copilots. Robert L. Smith, quoted above, eventually became a fighter pilot, where they were glad to have him.

* * * * *

The 323rd logged eight missions in July starting on the 18th, the same day that US troops reached the town of St. Lô, but first, they moved to a new base – Beaulieu, England, near Southampton. Sochocki described this move.

“Left Earls Colne by our own trucks at 6:50 7/18/44, and again, saw beautiful southern England – arrived at Beaulieu Field, Station A-408, at 10:00 A.M.”

David Goss described it in more detail.

After so many months settled in the familiar facilities and surrounding communities at Earls Colne, all four squadrons of the Bomb Group again had to adjust to a nomadic life. The men trimmed their belongings to essentials in their duffle bags, discarding some and packaging others for shipment home to the states. They loaded up all the vehicles and the assigned drivers checked their readiness for the move to Beaulieu Airdrome close to Portsmouth on the south coast.

To many of the men, leaving their ever handy bicycles behind was the real signal of the coming style of operations. The squadron relocated to Beaulieu in three sections. The air crews doubled up in the planes and flew to the new airfield. Assigned drivers assembled the squadron’s vehicles (jeeps, trucks, and heavy handling equipment) in a convoy; and drove to Beaulieu. The rest of the personnel transferred by train.

There were billets for the officers, but the others set up tents that were their homes for the balance of the war. Later on, in Europe, the officers also lived in tents. Their work quickly resumed in the familiar routine of mission planning, preparation of the aircraft, and alert standby. They were ready to take off with any break in the weather to continue pounding enemy targets. The few days at Beaulieu set the pattern for life for France.³⁷

General Moench wrote, “The air field was several miles from the sleepy villages of Beaulieu and Brockenhurst, but the men soon located the best pubs of the territory and made good use of them.”³⁸

* * * * *

OPERATION COBRA – BREAK-OUT AT ST. LÔ.

For almost two months the allied invasion force had crawled forward, yard by yard, through the hedgerow country of Normandy, at great cost to the allied troops – 122,000 casualties (killed, wounded, and missing). Though the air forces worked ceaselessly to stop them, the Germans still managed to bring up some reinforcements and were able to keep the allies bottled-up, seemingly forever. It appeared that no one was going anywhere; it was just as frustrating for the Allied air forces. No matter how many supportive drops they made, the ground troops hardly moved! One Nazi Division at Caen, made up of Hitler Jugend (Hitler Youth), with hardly a soldier over eighteen years of age, took 90% casualties before it was finally overrun by the Brits. To effect a complete breakout once and for all, the Allied Command determined to collect the greatest air armada since D-Day and drop all their bomb loads at one small point in the German lines in front of General Bradley’s American First Army near the village of St. Lô.

³⁷ Goss, *Meant to Be?* 109.

³⁸ Moench, *Marauder Men*, 225.

On July 25th, all the available fighters, fighter-bombers, mediums, and heavies were collected into the most massive air formation men had ever seen in one flight and sent to bomb one small 1x5 mile section of the German line. It was codenamed Operation Cobra. Planning was complicated by the fact that American troops had already been bombed by mistake the day before, and British as well a short while before that. Gus and Willie were both on this mission.

The goal of the mission was to destroy the German Panzer Lehr Division to the point where the U.S. 4th Infantry Division could smash through them. General Bradley had asked for saturation bombing in a rectangle that was three miles by 1 ½ miles. But this would call for dropping bombs only 800 yards in front of U.S. troops and he wanted it done en masse in a very short time. The Air Force asked for a minimum of 3000 yards instead and warned him there might be friendly casualties. They finally agreed on 1500 yards. Bradley wanted them to fly across the front but was told by the Air Force that flying 1900 bombers and 550 fighter-bombers through a 1 ½ mile slot would take hours. He wanted a quick strike so he decided they could fly over the U.S. lines, perpendicular to the St. Lô-Periers road.³⁹ Everyone wanted to avoid the kind of friendly casualties caused the day before so it was decided that the bombardiers would site the drop visually instead of using their bomb sights.⁴⁰

There on the ground with 4th Division was none other than Ernie Pyle! And who better to describe what was seen and felt on that day. Pyle describes how the operation began with the fighters and fighter-bombers strafing and dive-bombing the German front lines. The sights and sounds were impressive, but soon a new sound was heard. Pyle stated that the distant rumbling “was a gigantic faraway surge of doomlike sound.” The bombers were coming. It seemed as if they moved very slow and the formation appeared to be endless. He had never known “such a ghastly relentlessness.”⁴¹

The ground troops, and Pyle with them, stared to the sky, craning their heads until their helmets fell off and then the bombs fell with a “monstrous noise” that seemed as if it would “destroy the world ahead of us.” A cloud of dust and smoke enveloped them, and the noise continued to crescendo.⁴² The German anti-aircraft guns began to fire and black clouds of flak appeared high overhead where the planes droned on. Then planes began to be hit and chutes opened up as the aircraft fell out of formation. First one, then another, and another... One airman was hung up on the tail of his aircraft as men with binoculars could see. But the flames enveloped his chute and he dropped without it, “...a tiny black dot fell through space, all alone.” Ernie described how the sky was “roofed” by aircraft. “God, how we admired those men up there and sickened for the ones who fell,” he wrote.⁴³

But they were suddenly conscious of another phenomenon. The falling bombs were creeping towards them and there was nothing they could do. Then the sound changed and they knew they were in danger.⁴⁴ Ernie had never heard the sound of bombs falling from directly above. Everyone took cover or at least sprawled prone on the ground.⁴⁵ “...It was chaos,” he wrote. Just the concussion the men felt was immense.⁴⁶ Then the airmen corrected the error and the bombs moved back across the road again, about a mile away. The earth was still shaking with the concussions.⁴⁷ One hundred and eleven Americans were dead and four hundred and ninety were

³⁹ Perret, *Winged Victory*, 110-111.

⁴⁰ Blumenson, *Liberation*, 54.

⁴¹ Pyle, *Brave Men*, 434.

⁴² Blumenson, *Liberation*, 54-55.

⁴³ Pyle, *Brave Men*, 436.

⁴⁴ Blumenson, *Liberation*, 55.

⁴⁵ Pyle, *Brave Men*, 436.

⁴⁶ Pyle, *Brave Men*, 437.

⁴⁷ Pyle, *Brave Men*, 438.

wounded. Command posts and vehicles were destroyed and some men had been buried in their foxholes. Eisenhower was distraught and decided never to use heavy bombers as troop support again.⁴⁸

Some history books suggest that the effect of the bombing on the enemy was minimal and that the Americans took as many casualties as the Germans did. This is simply not true. One thousand of the men of Panzer Lehr Division had been killed and the rest were completely shell-shocked. All of the German forward tanks had been destroyed and he only had about twelve left. The German commander reported that his, “front lines looked like the face of the moon, and at least 70 percent of my troops were out of action – dead, wounded, crazed or numbed.” Three battalion command posts could not even be located and all communications were knocked out. An entire parachute regiment had disappeared. The roads were unusable. “We could do nothing but retreat.”⁴⁹ When they advanced all American commanders affirmed that their chief obstacle was the destroyed terrain, not the Germans.⁵⁰

Even though the lead attack company was part of those that were bombed they stepped off right on schedule. A message came back that they were 800 yards beyond the enemy lines and still continuing forward. Ernie Pyle described how the generals “almost wept” at the news. “The American soldier can be majestic when he needs to be,” he wrote.⁵¹

As for the higher commanding generals, everyone started blaming everyone else – including General Bradley. General Spaatz of the Eighth Air Force blamed the mediums of the Ninth Air Force. Bradley claimed that he had been told that the bombing would be parallel to the road, not perpendicular. “The sad truth is Bradley lied.”⁵² So in most history books the Ninth shared the Eighth’s blame for the bombing failure and the Air Force took it on the chin for an Army strategic planning mistake - even though Bradley had been advised that friendly casualties could occur and he had accepted that. But the average doughboy never knew that. All they heard was Bradley’s version of the truth. A similar resentment was leveled at the British because the US troops felt that the British were not doing their share of the fighting, when actually the opposite was true. They were opposed by three Panzer divisions in the area of Caen alone. It appears that the Germans were aware of the possibilities of an Allied breakout onto the Falaise region. In defense of the airmen, Ernie Pyle felt compelled to add a postscript to his account of the battle: Ernie noted that the news of the disaster must have been a shock to the airmen as well. And he tried to soften the blow by writing that among the infantry the enmity soon passed and, “After the bitterness came the sober remembrance that the Air Force was the strong right arm in front of us. Not only at the beginning, but ceaselessly and everlastingly, every moment of the faintest daylight, the Air Force was up there banging away ahead of us.”⁵³

Even Bill Mauldin almost acquired a soft spot for the air force at one point, saying he had changed his views regarding the airmen. The average Infantryman still resented some of the perks they enjoyed. “But he doesn’t bitch when he sees a formation of planes going through heavy flak and he feels pretty awful when he sees one go down and thinks of the guys in it.”⁵⁴ Americans at home were outraged and saddened at the news of American casualties but few people realized that these deaths were still less than one percent of the French civilian losses due to the Bridge Plan alone; and less than one thousandth of a percent of the Allied ground losses in Normandy thus far.

⁴⁸ Blumenson, *Liberation*, 55-56.

⁴⁹ Moench, *Marauder Men*, 229.

⁵⁰ Kohn/Harahan, *USAF Warrior Studies*, 26.

⁵¹ Pyle, *Brave Men*, 438.

⁵² Perret, *Winged Victory*, 110-111.

⁵³ Ernie Pyle scrapbook exhibit Albuquerque, NM

⁵⁴ Mauldin, *Up Front*, 99-100.

On the part of the Air Force, ground support was never a one-sided series of blunders, because unknown to most doughboys, the aircrews had also received the short end of the stick at times. They were sometimes fired upon by friendly anti-aircraft or even by Allied fighters by mistake. In one case in the North Africa the Marauders shot down one of our fighters in self-defense.⁵⁵

This we call “the fog of war” - and though the American troops were sorely chafed at the Air Force mistake, they had to admit the massive bombing had done the job, and two days later, the Americans were out of the hedgerow country and out into the hill country – an area where tanks could maneuver. The breakthrough was complete. As for Gus and the Foster crew and the rest of the 323rd BG that day over St. Lô:



The Foster Crew: L-R (rear row) Charles J. Ketcham (radio-gunner), Selby M. Foster (pilot), Frank E. Larkin II (bombardier/navigator), (front row) Ferdinand P. Dec (engineer-gunner), Alfred C. MacSoud (co-pilot), Gaston G. Poulin (armorier-turret gunner). The plane is the *Toid Boid* #41-34853 VT-R. This photo was taken shortly before the plane was lost over Ijmuiden, Holland (Photo from scrapbook – names courtesy of Casimier V. Sochocki).

“When we bombed St. Lô, we got belted,” Gus related. “We lost one engine and the other was not working very well so we had to land on a fighter strip, which is only about half the distance of a bomber strip. So I guess you know we couldn’t quite make it. We ended up in the woods.”

It’s likely the Foster crew’s aircraft was the source of one of the trails of smoke that Ernie Pyle had seen. The *Punching Bag* must have been under repairs during this mission, because they had borrowed another plane, #41-31826 VT-M, Zip Zipperling’s *Flying Dutchmen III!* Gus and company were forced to make an emergency landing at a beach head fighter strip on the coast of France. The plane was so damaged during the crash-landing, they abandoned it there in the woods

⁵⁵ Moench, *Marauder Men*, 221.

near the beach.⁵⁶ That was the end of the *Flying Dutchmen II*. The Foster crew must have wondered to themselves, “Two thousand planes up here and we get hit?”

“Wreck the plane?” I asked Gus.

“Ya.”

“Did you get a new one?”

“Don’t worry, they always had a new one.”

But although the Air Force always had new aircraft, the 323rd continued to have a shortage of new crews due to the lack of priority for medium bomber units, all this in spite of a supposed change in policy. Although their numbers were reduced men felt that the most difficult part of the war was still ahead of them.⁵⁷

* * * * *

Tex began his journey home.

“During the last week of July,” he wrote, “I departed with the rest of my crew to Liverpool, England, where we boarded the troop ship SS United States bound for Boston, MA. There were about 600 German prisoners of war on board. The threat of sinking by enemy submarine was a possibility, but to make it less likely the ship took a zigzag course back across the various parts of the route. The crossing took six days and everybody was on deck as we were approaching the U.S. to catch the first glimpse of land. When we docked in Boston harbor the flags were waving, the people were cheering and the band was playing. It was a glorious feeling to be back.”

* * * * *

The Foster crew continued to fly in the *Punching Bag* #41-31901 VT-A, performing two more missions this month. The third and last mission, on the 31st to Le Manoir RR Bridge, Lt. Foster and Gus were both hit by flak as was 1st Lt. Grady M. Corbell.⁵⁸

“I remember the time I got hit and the pilot got hit also,” Gus related, “...for one stinking little bridge. We got over there, somewhere in France, and we didn’t expect anything. I mean, here’s a stinking little bridge, and you couldn’t see any guns anywhere. Boy, then they opened up. There were only four guns. There’s one thing about anti-aircraft when they burst, they go one, two, three, four. Then they go one, two, three... watch out; then one, two... boom, boom. The way they fired their guns was that as long as you could count ‘em you didn’t have to worry about them. But the last ones that you couldn’t count, then you had to worry about ‘em... ‘cause they’d hit you. I remember, the pilot got hit with the number three gun and I got the number four.”

“At this time, it was Captain Foster that got belted,” Gus continued. “He got a whole side of shrapnel. I was lucky. All I got was one little piece. ‘Course when I got hit, it kinda knocked me down a bit, and blood was running all over the place. I told myself I had to do something about it. I couldn’t use my mike [throat mike] because I had gotten too much blood in it. I tried to communicate with Ketcham, the waist gunner. I dropped down out of my seat, turret seat, and tried to explain to him that I wanted a medical pack. Did you ever put one on? You know how to wrap one around your head? You have to go this way and that way, across and up and down, so it will stay there. So Ketcham was there putting it on. He’s holding it there and he’s trying to wind it around my chin. The minute I said something or moved my jaw, it fell off. ‘Course he was all excited, I mean the blood was going like this [sweep of the hand]... like a faucet. So finally after the third try, I says, ‘Give it to me. I’ll take care of it.’ And I put it on myself. ‘Course the pilot was kinda worried... it was kinda cold. He wanted me to come up front. One has to walk through the bomb bays, and like I said, I couldn’t communicate. I thought it was the pilot calling. That’s

⁵⁶ Trevor Allen, B26 Marauder researcher.

⁵⁷ Moench, *Marauder Men*, 232.

⁵⁸ Moench, *Marauder Men*, 236.

what Ketcham was telling me. So I went up front, come to find out, the pilot is laid out. He got hit with small shrapnel. It was the co-pilot [MacSoud] that was running the plane... he had called.”

Willie added, “I heard from Ketcham that Frenchie wouldn’t let him take his Mae West life preserver or the parachute off to get at the wound. Ketcham fired a red flare as they approached the air base to signal wounded on board, so they could land first. After we landed we went over to the plane to help him out. At first we thought it was real bad because of the blood all over. But when we got him over to the hospital everybody was real surprised that it wasn’t that bad. We were also surprised at how hot that shrapnel was and how much it had burned him. It must have been red hot.”

I often think that if the Foster crew had been flying without a copilot, they would have been lost that day. How many B-26s of the 323rd Group were lost because they didn’t have a copilot – no one knows. To me, the value of copilots is as plain as the nose on my face. Without one I wouldn’t even be here – so my hat’s off to Alfred MacSoud.

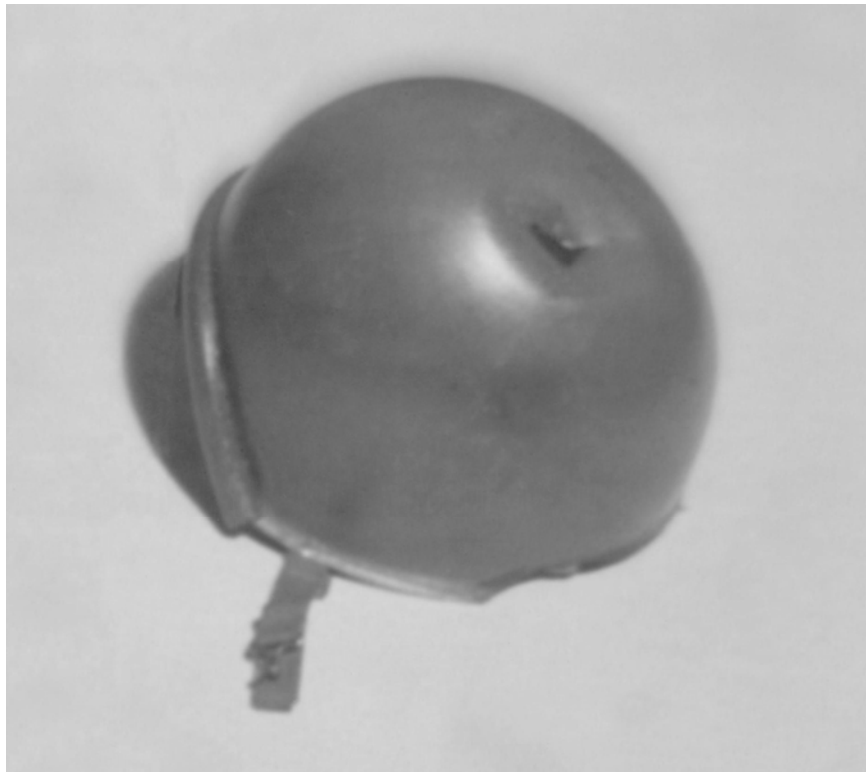
“Did you go to a hospital?” I asked Gus.

“What hospital? They didn’t have a hospital. It was a Living Room. No anesthesia, nothing. The doctor says, ‘Lie there, I’m going to dig to see what’s wrong.’ So what do you do? You lay there and let him dig. You wanna belt him but...”

“Were you grounded?” I asked.

“Ya, until I could wear a parachute. See, I got hit in the back, too.”

“That fragment went down through the turret plexiglass,” Willie explained, “then right through his steel helmet, and didn’t stop until it hit his hard head! I guess you know he got quite a bit of ribbing about that. It made us wonder why we were even wearing the darn things, but I guess the helmet slowed it down.”



Gus’s helmet. This helmet illustrates how the front and back were cut away for gunners. Incidentally, penciled on the inside of the metal shell is a name that reads ‘Siegenthaler.’ (*Gus’s Scrapbook*)

The flak had pierced Gus's helmet, striking him on the back of the head. But it was spent and did not enter his skull. Still, it must have felt like getting hit with a hammer. The hot fragment burned his head, and fell down into his clothing, rolling down his back to his waist. We, in the family, were familiar with the long scar. Willie said, "The funny thing was, Frenchie got the Purple Heart for the little bruise on his head not the big burn on his back. They had special rules for Purple Hearts." Gus was awarded a Purple Heart by GO 146 Hq. IX Bomber Command, a week later on the 6th of August, 1944.⁵⁹

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August 1944

On August 2nd, Churchill announced the British civilian losses to date in V1 rocket attacks on Britain at 4,735 killed and 14,000 injured. Although the rockets did considerable damage, it would have been ten-fold without the intense bombing done on those sites - and the Marauders had taken a large share in that bombing. They still had to attack the German Noball sites, support the ground forces, and hit railroad and road bridges.⁶⁰

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At Camp Miles Standish Tex was ready for his next assignment, but first he would finally get some time off.

"There, our orders were prepared for our next duty station," he said, "with a delay of 21 days en route. There were banks of phones at the Camp for service men to call their loved ones but my parents had no phone so there was no way that I could notify them of my return. After two days my orders were prepared, sending me by train to the Rest and Rehabilitation Center in Santa Monica, CA, for reassignment. These orders specified that I was authorized a delay of 21 days to reach this destination. It was summertime and hot, and after two or three days on a coal burning train, my uniform was smudged from the smoke and cinders. I don't remember why a number of us overseas returnees were let off the troop train at Camp Beauregard at Alexandria, LA, to begin our 'delay en route.' I suppose that this location was central to where a number of us planned to begin our 'delay.' I had planned to ride a regular passenger train from Alexandria to Dallas where my parents were living while they were working in aircraft factories. When the train came into the station, it was full of passengers and I could not board. There were many others in my same situation. Five of us servicemen each paid a taxi driver \$20.00 to take us to Dallas. The taxi driver drove me to the address of my parents and when I got there I sat my bag on the curb and told him to wait. It was about two in the morning. I knocked on my parent's apartment door and their landlady awoke and asked who I was looking for. I told her for my parents and she told me that they had gone back to Mt. Vernon since they heard the news. At that moment I knew that my brother had been killed. Without waiting for any further explanation I went to an agency that arranged for people to ride with someone traveling in the same direction by sharing the expenses."

* * * * *

Still in England, Gus was recuperating from his wounds.

"What did you do then?" I asked him.

"What did I do then? I just hung around while they put in a replacement for me. That was a long month, I'm telling you."

While Gus was waiting to get back on the flight line, he had given his trophy helmet with the hole in it to a friend from Maine who was going on leave, and asked him to drop it off at his home in Skowhegan. However, the friend ended up sending it in the mail instead. Aunt Bunny recalls being there when the package arrived. "I remember that someone came to the door and delivered the box," she wrote. "George and Roger were there also. There was someone else

⁵⁹ from Gus Poulin's Enlisted Record.

⁶⁰ Moench, *Marauder Men*, 236.

there... a neighbor??? Mémère was very upset after she opened the box and saw a hole in the helmet and blood on the inside of it, without a message of explanation in the box. There was a large shell inside and a piece of metal (flak). We, the children, were fascinated with the discovery. I was only five or six years old, but I will never forget that day! I also remember the letter she received at a much later date, with news about Gus [that he was all right], and that explained the story about the helmet.” The piece of flak in the box was the one that had pierced his helmet. A small article in the local newspaper reported the incident:

Mr. And Mrs. Joseph Poulin of North Avenue received...the helmet that was worn by their son, T/Sgt. Gaston Poulin who was wounded in service and also the Distinguished Flying Cross medal which he had received. The helmet shows the bullet wound, and is a reminder of how fortunate the young soldier is to be alive. The couple were quite alarmed upon receipt of the articles of warfare fearing that tragedy had overtaken their son. It was later learned, that an acquaintance of Gaston’s had brought the helmet and medal to his home in Augusta when he was on furlough, and that they had been forwarded from there without complete explanation.⁶¹

“What about your knee?” I asked Gus. I knew that he had also been wounded in the knee in a separate incident.

“That was another time,” he replied. “I didn’t report it. I’ll tell you why. The first time I got hit a friend of mine was coming home and I asked him to bring my helmet back here. So he drops it off on Mémère’s steps. So I guess you know she got shook up! I heard about it. So the next time I got hit... ‘Forget it,’ I told ‘em. ‘I fell out of an airplane... gimme a band-aid!’”

Gus pretty much sat out the month of August, recuperating, while the 323rd flew 12 more missions.

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On the 5th of August, Fred Mingus and crew were flying a night mission. Fred wrote: “August 5th was a mission to St. Malo in an attempt to get the German port defense knocked out. I had severe flack damage to the left under carriage and crashed on landing as the left gear folded up on landing.”⁶²



Wolf Pack II after crash landing on August 5th 1944. The Mingus crew was OK.
(Photo courtesy of Fred Mingus)

⁶¹ Gus Poulin’s Scrapbook)

⁶² Letter from Fred Mingus to Trevor Allen 7/31/78; courtesy of Fred Mingus.

* * * * *

Tex finally reached home. “I arrived in Mt. Vernon that morning and confirmed with my parents what I felt that I already knew. My brother, Louis Ray, was killed at age nineteen while fighting for his country in Italy. One of my cousins was at my parent’s house with her baby. She had lost her airman husband just a few months prior on a B-17 raid on Kiel, Germany, and her brother was, at that time, in a German prisoner of war camp after being shot down in a B-17 bomber over Germany. Everyone was nice to me during my leave. I visited with relatives in and around Mt. Vernon and then went to Boling, Texas, where I was raised and visited with more relatives and friends. The time passed away so quickly that it was nearing the time that I would have to report to Santa Monica, CA, where I would be re-assigned. My parents drove me to Big Springs to visit with my aunt and uncle whose son was a German prisoner and I left by train for Los Angeles. I tried to buy a ticket for a Pullman coach berth for the trip but there was none available. In fact I wasn’t even able to get a seat until we were somewhere in New Mexico, but had to stand up.”

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THE FALAISE GAP

Meanwhile, by August 14th, 1944, the Allied ground forces in France had trapped a large group of Germans, the remnants of Army Group B, in an area known as the Falaise Gap and were calling for air support to destroy them – B-26s and A-20 Havocs helped in that operation. On the 14th by bombed bridges and railroad junctions just behind enemy lines. Some of the retreating Germans actually surrendered to the Nineteenth Tactical Squadron which herded them to our lines.⁶³

But the 323rd had other targets that day. They had recently been asked to provide five night bombing missions. On the night of the 14th/15th Willie and the Sprague crew flew on the Group’s fifth night mission. They attack the Marseille-en-Beauvais Ammunition Dump. They met no opposition but six planes did not make to the target and returned to base with their bomb loads. Their requirement of five night missions was completed without loss or casualty.⁶⁴

Unfortunately, Allied command originally did not know how many Germans were still in the Falaise trap – they thought most of them had already escaped. However, the 5th and 7th Panzer Armies were still there. The Allies had already rushed further east to close the gap again at Chamblais.⁶⁵

Even so, it was an unmitigated disaster for the Germans. In all, they lost 10,000 men dead and 50,000 captured, 344 tanks and self-propelled guns, 2,447 vehicles and 252 guns destroyed or abandoned. Still, the allies were amazed how many Germans had escaped the trap. The entire battle up to this point had been very costly for both sides, but more so for the Germans. Up to this time the Germans had lost 450,000 casualties (almost half of them captured), including 1500 tanks and 3500 artillery pieces. The Allies had lost 209,672 casualties of which 36,976 were killed.⁶⁶

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On the 15th of August, 1944, the Allies launched ‘Operation Dragoon,’ landing troops in southern France. That same day the 323rd Group was ordered to relocate to the town of Lessay, France, which they did, completing the move by the 26th of the month. This move was a little more complicated as it involved getting all the equipment across the Channel.

Just before the orders ship out arrived, David Goss was given enough notice for him to make a quick visit to his wife. He received this news through William McBride who had also

⁶³ Moench, *Marauder Men*, 240.

⁶⁴ Moench, *Marauder Men*, 240.

⁶⁵ Perret, *War to be Won*, 351.

⁶⁶ Hastings, *Victory in Europe*, 52.

married an English girl. One of the pilots had told him to see her now before they moved across the Channel. Bill and David headed for London.⁶⁷

Goss and McBride made it back just before the squadron began to move. Sochocki, who was with the advance echelon, wrote, "Left Beaulieu 10:50 A.M. 8/18/44 – arrived South Hampton 3:00 P.M. – arrived at docks 11:45 A.M 8/20/44 – boarded the L.S.T. (an equipment carrying ship) 2:35 P.M. – left South Hampton docks 7:05 P.M. and anchored off the Isle of Wight till 11:50, then started towards France. We beached [the next day] at exactly 1:05 P.M. 8/21/44. I drove the truck off at exactly 5:35 P.M. and reached Lessay Air Base (A-20) at 10:05 [that night]."



Casimier Sochocki, David Goss, Bill McBride

David Goss wrote about his experience crossing the Channel:

The column of vehicles that had moved down the roads from [Beaulieu] and then to Portsmouth was a mixed lot. There were large trucks, the ones usually referred to as 'Six-Bys'. They had a nominal two and a half ton capacity, loaded for this move far in excess of the rated capacity. Tough and uncomfortable, they were built to handle nearly any terrain, particularly mud or snow, of which there would be plenty.

There were fuel tankers and oil trucks to service the life giving fluids to the planes. The Ordnance Section had winch hoist trucks and bomb trailers for transporting and handling the various sized bombs and crates of ammunition. There were smaller, general purpose trucks, called weapons carriers that served as the light duty carriers of equipment or open air transport for the men.

Ambulances and fire trucks also fell in line. Then there were the little ones, the jeeps that were the necessary taxis for the quick transportation of people, high and low ranking, around the miles of air base. Trailers for the jeeps even made these tough little "Sports Models" into equipment transports for the servicing and repair of the Marauder Bombers that were hitting the Germans so hard. The huge tank like Cletracks that were the tugs to tow the planes around the base or out of the mud had been sent on ahead.

[David's] jeep was part of the advance echelon as the column of vehicles moved to the marshalling area in Southampton. After two days there, they reformed and moved on to Portsmouth. There they hustled onto an LST (tank landing ship), tied down the vehicles, and set out for a crossing of the channel in the dark. By daylight the LST beached and lowered the ramp. He drove onto Omaha Beach and churned his way up through a ravine in the bluffs to the plain above. In company with the others of the advance echelon he proceeded to Lessay on the west coast of the Cherbourg Peninsula. The heavier vehicles trailed much further behind.

Some of the squadron personnel moved out from Beaulieu Airdrome by train. They stopped over at the staging area in Southampton and crossed to Cherbourg in infantry landing craft. The Six-Bys doubled back to pick up the men. A week later the aircrews doubled up and flew over, landing on the newly laid steel plank runway at Lessay. The advance echelon had set up tents, dug latrines, established mess facilities, and organized the facilities for support of the aircraft.⁶⁸

The new base was designated as A-20 but the men just called it Lessay. It had been hastily built by Army Engineers using steel planks for a runway. First the Advance Echelon moved there, then the Marauders began moving supplies and equipment, and finally, on the 26th of August, the

⁶⁷ Goss, *Meant to Be?* 110.

⁶⁸ Goss, *Meant to Be?* 112-113.

Aircrews flew there with full bombs loads and all their personal baggage.⁶⁹ It was the day after Paris was liberated. That same day the Marauders of the 323rd took off for their first mission based in France.⁷⁰

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The US 79th Infantry Division crossed the Seine River at Mantes on the 20th. Paris was liberated on the 25th by French troops of the 2nd Armored Division, known to the French as the 2^{ème} Division Blindée. It was composed mainly of Frenchmen from North Africa, most of whom had never even seen Paris. A part of the American 4th Infantry Division that had landed on Utah Beach also entered Paris from the north at about the same time. General Leclerc's 2^{ème} Division was an outstanding unit that had done excellent service Alençon and Argentan. His men had come from North Africa to join with De Gaulle's forces.⁷¹ Repeatedly General Leclerc had requested permission to advance to Paris and repeatedly it was denied. Finally, Leclerc was given a green light. They drove to the center of the city on the night of the 24th and after some bitter fighting German General von Choltitz surrendered his Paris garrison the next day.

But Paris was not liberated by the Allied troops alone. Most of the work had already been done from within by the FFI. In addition, many citizens of Paris rose up to join them. They had been told not to start anything, but they did it anyway. In three days of fighting, they captured strategic areas and buildings and created blockades in the streets, a maneuver which contained the Germans in isolated pockets throughout the city. The fighting was bitter and about 1,000 French people were killed in the process.⁷² Eisenhower had feared a knockdown street battle in the city, but the citizens themselves and the underground forces had already taken care of that. Eisenhower had two reasons for not wanting to liberate Paris. The first was the he did not want to feed the city. He was barely feeding the troops. The second was that he dreaded getting bogged down in costly street fighting. If it could be avoided, the Allies did not want to destroy the city.

It was amusing for Americans visiting or based in Paris after the liberation to hear from a café owner or office worker (and almost everyone else) that they had been active in the Resistance. However, for downed Airmen in the previous, most dangerous years, the real FFI had been vital and was very well appreciated. They had contributed, "immeasurably to the resurrection of the soul of France."⁷³ An astonishing number, over 6,000 airmen, had been rescued by the resistance fighters of Holland, Belgium, France, and Spain – sometimes at a great cost to themselves.⁷⁴

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On the 27th of August, 1944, the 323rd Group flew another mission from its new base in France. Cloud cover over the target forced them to return to base – the only bonus was that on the return trip they flew over the Falaise battlefield and got a good look at the incredible destruction that had occurred there.

Things were moving fast. On the 28th, the large port of Marseille was also liberated by the French 1st Armored Division who had landed in Southern France as part of Operation Dragoon. The Allies were quickly moving north and would soon link up with Patton's Third Army. Marseille was an important prize because the port facilities were so large that they could easily move more tons of supplies than all the ports of northwest France together.⁷⁵

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⁶⁹ Moench, *Marauder Men*, 242.

⁷⁰ Moench *Marauder Men*, 243.

⁷¹ Hastings, *Victory in Europe*, 66.

⁷² Hastings, *Victory in Europe*.

⁷³ Hastings, *Victory in Europe*, 58-61.

⁷⁴ The History Channel.

⁷⁵ Perret, *War to be Won*, 363.

Gus, now back in operation with the Foster crew, flew a mission to the Querrieu Ammunition Dump. It was a very successful mission. The Germans made a fierce defense, damaging sixteen of the aircraft.⁷⁶

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De Gaulle, commander of the Free French Forces was worried about the communist influence in the Resistance in Paris. He thought they might try to take over political power in the capital city so he asked Eisenhower for a show of force. As a result, four days after the surrender on the 29th of August, the US 28th Division marched through Paris, out the other side, and straight into combat in the eastern suburbs. Ernie Pyle was there also and was completely overwhelmed with the warm response of the French people. “I felt totally incapable of reporting it,” he wrote, but added that it “was the loveliest, brightest story of our time. It may be that this was because we have been so unused, for so long, to anything bright.”⁷⁷ He also added that the fighting men who most deserved to experience the celebration were not there. Most of the Allied men in the city at that time were rear echelon staff people and correspondents like himself. Some of them admitted they were a little ashamed. He ended the story with, “But that’s the way things are in this world.”⁷⁸ However at least one combat man was there - Gus was also there in Paris that day of the parade. While the rest of the 323rd Group was carving out campsites beside the metal runways of Lessay Airdrome, he was ‘drafted’ for special duty.

“I had to go into Paris with four officers to translate,” he related. “This was right after the Liberation. The officers had to identify one of the boys who got shot down a couple of months before. I was the only one in 400 people who could speak French. Out of the whole doggone squadron I was the only one. We had to identify him because the French underground would have killed him right there. If we couldn’t identify him, they’d shoot him - they would, too. They shot more than one unknown person. Four days after the Liberation, Paris was full of snipers when we went in. We were supposed to carry 45s on us but they recommended not to carry them because then you could be accused of spying. If you didn’t have a 45, you were just an ordinary G.I.”

“Who would capture you?” I asked him. “Were there still Germans in Paris?”

“Yes, there were Germans all the way around where we were. But there was nothing we could do about it. I mean, after all, we were in the Air Force and not in the infantry. So you didn’t fight with these guys, you lived with ‘em.”

Incredibly, Gus had managed to be exactly where a lot of GIs on the entire Western Front wanted to be at that time – in Paris during the celebration. I’m sure he made the most of it. Paris was not the city it used to be. Food and drink were hard to come by – medicines were even more difficult. Rationing was extreme and it was not easy to acquire a balanced diet. During the occupation, some of the people had collaborated with the ‘Bosch.’ Others worked actively against them. But the average person just tried to get on with their lives, hoping they could avoid the Vichy Police or the Gestapo, the German secret police. Any anonymous accusation would be acted upon by them. No one knew when they might be accused of something and the police never investigated the veracity of a tip, so people lived in total paranoia. It took a lot of courage to do even the smallest thing for the Allied cause. The regular police in Paris were known to cooperate with the different secret polices, but some of them worked clandestinely to give out as much information as they could to the resistance groups. And some of them were caught. When the town finally rose up in revolt, the police simply vanished from the streets. They came out again after the liberation and started working for their proper ‘owners.’ It had been a dark time for people who were not used to dark times. Still, they were infinitely better off than their cousins who

⁷⁶ Moench, *Marauder Men*, 241.

⁷⁷ Pyle, *Brave Men*, 457.

⁷⁸ Pyle, *Brave Men*, 463.

lived in the path of the battlefield. On D-day alone, ten thousand civilians had been killed; more than the Allied soldiers that were lost.

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The Last Time I Saw Paris

A lady known as Paris, romantic and charming,
Has left her old companions and faded from view.
Lonely men with lonely eyes are seeking her in vain.
Her streets are where they were, but there's no sign of her,
She has left the Seine

The last time I saw Paris, her heart was warm and gay,
I heard the laughter of her heart in every street café.
The last time I saw Paris, her trees were dressed for spring,
And lovers walked beneath those trees and birds found songs to sing.
I dodged the same old taxicabs that I had dodged for years.
The chorus of their squeaky horns was music to my ears.

The last time I saw Paris, her heart was warm and gay,
No matter how they change her, I'll remember her that way.
I'll think of happy hours, and people who shared them,
Old women selling flowers, in market at dawn.
Children who applauded Punch and Judy in the park,
And those who danced at night and kept our Paris bright,
'till the town went dark.

Tony Martin with Victor Young's Orchestra (Kern/Hammerstein) 1940.