

The 453rd Bombardment Squadron (M)

The story of eight men of the 453rd and their many Air Force friends during World War II.



By
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Cover photo courtesy of Willis Lee Brainard.

INTRODUCTION

A friend of mine, whose 'nom-de-guerre' is 'Kurly', likes to express his conviction that "Joe and Willie" (Bill Mauldin's cartoon characters) won the war in Europe in World War II. His dad was a tanker with Patton. I know the ground troops were necessary, but I like to come back at him with a, "No, Gus and Willie (a different Willie) won the war, in the air. And I like to add, "and they were both called 'Frenchie.'" Neither one of us is right, of course, but it's fun. So I guess this piece could be put forth as my argument on why I think Gus and Guy and their many friends in the Air Force won the war. Many of the accounts listed herein are the stories I grew up on. I found that some facts I had miss-remembered and others had been miss-told, but based on the material at hand, this is the truest account I could set down.

Gus, my Dad, became a top turret gunner in a B-26 Martin Marauder, 453rd Bomb Squadron, 323rd Bombardment group, Eighth and Ninth Air Forces, in the European Theater of Operations 1943-1944. He never talked much about the war, except in a few sparse and usually humorous references. Oh, he would talk about it generally, but not in terms of his personal experiences - never enough to satisfy me. He would just let others make their comments and change the subject. But one night he began to talk, and by an unbelievable coincidence, I had a tape recorder nearby. I turned it on. I don't know if it was the recorder that caused him to continue talking that night, but talk he did, almost all night long. But if I was expecting to hear the nuts and bolts of a combat mission, I was to be disappointed. He talked mostly about the good things he could think of, avoiding the bad as much as possible.

His narrative, although good, was difficult to put in perspective. I needed background material to make it '3-dimensional' as well as chronological. If you go to your local library you will find very few books about Martin Marauders, and if you get a book on WWII airplanes in general, chances are, it will not have much information on those types of planes. There are several books (I only found three specifically about Marauders, and two of them I already had, thanks to Mom), but one of them, by Retired Major General Moench, was incredibly helpful as it focused largely on the 323rd Group - Dad's Group! Because of this book I could vicariously understand what Dad had really gone through - much of what he did not talk about, so I borrowed heavily from Moench's book "Marauder Men." I'm grateful for his work.

Two other books I borrowed from heavily were Ernie Pyle's "Here is your War" and "Brave Men," because he could describe so well what the fighting men in Europe were experiencing. I also hired a professional B-26 Historian, Trevor Allen (B-26.com, hosted by Michael E. Smith), who has access to the 323rd's official records. He sent me a Mission Log of Dad's flights complete with dates, destination, crew names and plane designation. This work answered many confusing questions. Other information about 453rd planes was furnished by Alf Johanneson.

Other facts come from what I call 'the scrapbook,' a pile of Dad's and Uncle Joe's pictures and newspaper articles, mostly unidentified and undated. I was surprised to learn that family members didn't know Dad had a scrapbook. Other comments and pictures came from the family. Thanks to all those who furnished their photos and memories, and especially to my wife Angelina, as well as Uncle David and Aunt Martha for helping with editing. And a special thanks to Porter Swentzell who helped me so much with scanning and cropping photos.

Then I wanted to talk to some of the veterans. My Mom said Dad's friend, Willis Lee Brainard was living here in Albuquerque (actually in Rio Rancho), so I looked in the phone book and he was listed. I went to see him. When I walked in, his son, Dar, said, "I grew up on stories of Frenchie." I said, "I grew up on stories of Willie." And everybody laughed. We swapped stories and photographs. Some of the quotes and many of the pictures in this book are his. As the reader will see, it was impossible to tell Dad's story without telling Willie's too. Then Willie, who I found out prefers to be called Lee (I have continued to irritate him by calling him Willie), invited me to go to a 453rd reunion in Colorado Springs and how could I refuse?

So Willie and I drove up to Colorado Springs for the weekend of October 5th, 2003. Willie can barely see and barely walk but he wanted to go to this last reunion. There were about a dozen guys there and many of the wives came. Four pilots, one bombardier, two engineer/gunners, a maintenance chief, a crew chief, and two ordnance men who volunteered to be Togliers [bombardiers without bomb sights] in late '44, and one or two guys I didn't get to talk to. I was surprised that one nephew of a veteran who had

died during service came, as well as the wife and daughter of a deceased veteran. All the veterans there were very spry and fit mentally, still telling stories and sipping on their favorite drinks, and going over old times. What a great spirit these guys had, even Willie, who was always positive in spite of his difficulties. He'd laugh at himself when he made a mistake and say "Watch it, old man." Most of Willie's present physical difficulties come from an accident that happened during service. When he remarked about what good shape the others were in compared to him, I reminded him that they didn't have a bomb fall on them. About half of the guys present at the reunion had known my Dad and they were happy to meet me. One of the guys who knew him was Samuel "Tex" Findley. He gave me his story, all typed up. Another was Casimir V. Sochocki (pronounced 'so-hockey') whose name I had heard many times in my youth. He had helped to keep the 453rd Squadron Association together and was very active in various roles in the association. He sent me a letter and some pictures later. I can't believe I never thought of going to one of these reunions before, and I really regret it now.

The veterans present at the reunion were:

Richard Inman – ordnance/toggler
Casimir V. Sochocki – ordnance/toggler
Nelso F. Cassano – crew chief
Willis L. Brainard – engineer/gunner
Samuel Findley – engineer/gunner
Calvin Coats – bombardier
(Names courtesy of Ronni Cassano)

Robert Gregor - pilot
Lewis Williams - maintenance chief
Oran Begwin - pilot
Horace Chriesman - pilot
Henry Dunston - pilot
Family of Ben Lasky - radio/gunner

So Kurly, I have to respectfully disagree with your belief that "Willie" and "Joe" - Bill Mauldin's cartoon infantry characters won the war in Europe. I think it was Gus and Guy, Willie, Tex, Sochocki, and a few hundred thousand close friends who won the day, in the air.

(A verse of the Navy Hymn)

Lord, guard and guide the men who fly
Through the great spaces in the sky.
Be with them always in the air,
In darkening storms or sunlight fair;
Oh, hear us when we lift our prayer,
For those in peril in the air!

Mary C. D. Hamilton (1915)

Chapter 1 – Boys to Airmen

October 1941 – December 1942

Sitting in his favorite rocking chair, staring away at some distant scene of life that denied its very existence to me, Dad began to reminisce. A faint, teasing trail of his liquored breath hit me as I settled down - a long story was coming, I knew, and he was not prone to long stories.

“Let’s go back to 1941... I went to Bangor. I hitchhiked to Bangor to sign up.”

“Why’d you sign up?” I asked. Realizing I wasn’t going anywhere, I tried to look a little less like a trapped animal. Tonight was a big night in my life; little I knew then, though. My father and I had begun the evening arguing over something, and the actual rift had been hazy in the left-over smoke of young rebellion and adult authority - something about the car? Current events? Who knows? The topic of his youth had entered the discussion and stopped everything. I saw the ‘when I was your age’ look appear on his face as he tranquilized himself on what must have been vivid pictures of an important time.

“Why did I sign up?” he went on. “Well, why didn’t I sign up? One reason was, I didn’t want to be drafted. I wanted to join, on my own. I wanted to go into the Air Force as a pilot, but unfortunately at that time, if you were foreign born you didn’t count.”



We can’t be sure how much being foreign born influenced his placement in the military, but that’s obviously how he felt about it. What was the situation on the world scene in October 1941? In Europe, Hitler’s armies and their allies had already invaded as far as Moscow in the east, overrun Scandinavia in the north, reached the Atlantic Ocean and English Channel in the west, and had been fighting in North Africa in the South for over a year. The Germans had also been bombing England almost as long. In the Pacific the Japanese were invading Asia and Southeast Asia. And what had the United States

done thus far? We sent supplies to beleaguered nations (the ones that still existed) through the Lend Lease Act, and froze the financial assets of the Axis countries in the U.S.

There was a coalition of Allies in Europe in early 1940 and they were facing one of the most dangerous men the world had ever seen. We weren’t in it yet. We stood by and watched as one-by-one, sovereign nations were invaded and conquered – telling ourselves that it wasn’t our problem – that the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans would save us. The Axis powers in Europe had essentially reached their zenith in expansion and had already set in motion the process for systematically eradicating inferior races (including their own sick and disabled). And on the other side of the globe, Japan would soon turn its attention on us.

For some Americans it was too much to stand. Most of the people already in the armed services by late 1941 were career people or those who had just joined to serve a regular term. Others had responded to the President’s vague ‘temporary emergency’ proclamation. However, there were a few individuals who saw the real storm clouds coming, and for them the United States wasn’t moving fast enough. A few Americans served in the British and Canadian RAFs while others, like Dad, signed up early in the US armed services; not just to serve a term, but because they could see what was coming and wanted to get in early. So in this light, perhaps the proper question was not why did he sign up; but rather, where was the rest of America?

* * * * *

October 1941

Dad settled into a hypnotic tone of voice - very slow and very deliberate.

“So I didn’t get to go to cadet school. I wanted to be a pilot. They took me in... but not what I wanted... I wanted to be a pilot.” As he went on, the speech impediment imposed on him by the night’s refreshments (every night he had refreshments) became less and less irritating. Soon it was an integral part of the narrative. Dad’s Enlisted Record indicates that the actual date of recruitment was October 6, 1941 at Portland, Maine. He was 5’ 6” and weighed 150 pounds. Before being allowed to enlist, he had to procure a copy of his father’s certificate of citizenship as proof that he was an American; which he carried in his kit throughout the war.

“But that’s part of living, I guess... you have to accept what comes,” he said. “If you can’t make it, you have to accept it, which makes quite a bit of difference. Well, finally they accepted me into the Air Force. I didn’t even know then that it was part of the regular army.”

That puzzled me. I didn’t realize that he meant ‘regular’ versus ‘volunteer/draft’ army.

“It was just as much of a surprise to me as to you,” he said. “So, when one got in the pay line every month - for that whole \$21.00 dollars; everybody stood in line, and here I was, ahead of master sergeants and staff sergeants who weren’t regular army. They came under a different category cause they signed up after a certain time. I signed up just before they changed the categories. So that made me a wheel without a deal. Well, anyway, I went from Bangor down to Ayers, Mass., Fort Devens, there. I had to take different intelligence and physical tests, and ‘what-have-you.’”

* * * * *

November 1941

“And from there they sent me to that ‘beautiful,’ ‘lovely’ place in Missouri, Fort Jefferson. They finally condemned it. Drew Pearson put the right word on it: ‘Concentration Camp of the U.S.’ ...and I mean it was rough.”

“Why?”

“Why? All right. You pick up your tent in the morning and go pitch it somewhere else. Then, the next morning at 5:00 a.m. you go bring it back and pitch it. Meanwhile, when do you eat? I mean, if you’re pitching a tent, how are you going to eat? So we go a day or so

without eating. It’s good for you, really. And this was before Hitler even thought about concentration camps [well, not really]. We had them here. Boy, after you’d spent six weeks there, you knew you’d been through something. There were quite a few guys that committed suicide there. They were hanging themselves and doing everything you could think of.”

“Why?”

“Because they couldn’t take it. It was too rough. Actually, the camp officers were very ‘off the ball.’ They didn’t know what was going on. Now our sergeant in our area was what he thought was a real tough guy. Of course, you’ve got to realize now that we were only 18 or 19 years old. So to us a guy 24 years old with stripes was a big wheeler dealer, and he pushed it. And that’s what happened. Nobody bothered him.”

“How many suicides happened while you were there?”

“About 13.”

“How long were you there?”



Gus, the recruit (*Scrapbook*).



Private Gus, the Armorer
(Courtesy of Bernadette Karter)

“About six weeks. That’s a pretty good average, huh? But all those kids that actually committed suicide, they had been drafted and were stuck, you know? With the deal? And they couldn’t accept it. ‘Course the majority of us were volunteers and we knew we had to take a beating. It makes a big difference you know between draftees and volunteers. ‘Course they didn’t burn draft cards in those days, they didn’t dare to. It was a funny life there actually because you had no choice, really. You could be drafted, or you could volunteer. That was your choice. One way or the other, you were going in and that was it. You stop back and think, there were 16 million boys in the service when I was in England. You know? That’s a lot of people! Sixteen million! You don’t pick them up right off the street; not today, anyway.”

* * * * *

December 1941

“And in December ‘41, from Fort Jefferson I went to Lowry Field in Denver, Colorado, which is the Air Force Academy now. When I went there, I went to school as an armorer. They also had a photography school there, and fact is, we had a guy come into the Shop [Dad’s upholstery shop in Skowhegan, Maine] this afternoon that went through Lowry as a photographer. You never know when you’re gonna meet somebody. I spent six months there. I should have gotten three stripes, but I didn’t.”

* * * * *

As Gus began his armament training, the country was suddenly at war. On December 7th, 1941, the “Day of Infamy,” the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor. In the first wave, 214 Japanese aircraft swooped down on the unsuspecting American fleet and began to destroy it, beginning at 0750 hours (ten minutes to eight in the morning). The surprise was complete. In the first wave almost every US aircraft was destroyed or damaged and seven battleships were put out of commission. After the second wave attacked the entire US Pacific Fleet was out of action.¹

If the Japanese commander, Admiral Nagumo, who did not understand air power, had allowed the attack to continue, the American aircraft carrier *Enterprise* could have been added to the death toll as well as the huge oil tank reserves and repair facilities which were left intact. Without these reserves and facilities, the US Navy would have had to retreat back to the American mainland. Two American aircraft carriers escaped the slaughter but it would be a long time before the Japanese would feel the might of American sea power.²

Ironically, the Japanese commander who had planned the raid, Admiral Yamamoto, had attended Harvard University in the US, and was possibly the only person in the Japanese military who understood what had been really accomplished. He feared that they had merely awakened ‘a sleeping giant.’ He was right. On the other side of the globe, another astute man also understood what had been accomplished. After receiving the news of Pearl Harbor Winston Churchill felt very relieved, “Being saturated and satiated with emotion and sensation, I went to bed and slept the sleep of the saved and thankful.”³ He knew that America would be joining the war, and that made him hopeful – and to show his support he declared war on Japan even before we did. Back in the States, Americans everywhere were thoroughly enraged. The next day, on the 8th, while millions of people listened on their radios, Congress unanimously declared war on Japan, and as an afterthought, also declared war on Germany. This challenge was tantamount to a declaration of

¹ *Warplanes and Air Battles of World War II*, Beekman House NY, BPC Publishing, 1973, 69.

² *Warplanes*, 62.

³ *Warplanes*, 69.

war to the death. The Germans returned a declaration of War on the US three days later on December 11th. The major allies were Britain, Russia, and the USA, versus Germany, Italy, and Japan. The Free World had opposed Hitler's New Order and Japan's Greater East-Asian Co-Prosperity Sphere. But things did not look good. The Germans were outside Moscow and Leningrad and the Japanese seemed unstoppable in the Pacific.⁴

When the Japanese struck, the US only had a small Air Force of about 100,000 men and 1,157 combat planes spread out all over the world. Of the 526 planes stationed in Hawaii and the Philippines, only 176 were left after the first few days of combat.⁵ The officer in charge of the Air Force in the Philippines reported that his command consisted of "twenty airplanes, a lot of trucks and five thousand kids without a leader."⁶ America needed an Air Force and it needed it fast. How to create new schools and fill them with recruits; and then train them adequately for war was the awesome task taken on by the USAAF. And how to create fighting squadrons from boys barely out of high school with such a small cadre of experienced men, was an equally daunting challenge. At this point, not even one airman had yet been trained as an aerial gunner. "The job was treated as nonessential."⁷

* * * * *

January-April 1942

By mid-January the Germans had begun a U-boat campaign along the American east coast. Despite that, by January 26th, the first American forces were already arriving in England. But mainly, during this period the US worked on expanding our armed forces – thousands of men were recruited and hastily trained. And while these preparations were underway, setbacks continued to befall the troops already in the field. On April 9th, 1942, US and Filipino troops on Bataan surrendered and began their infamous Death March. After the surrender, only fourteen B-17s managed to escape from the Philippines to safety in Australia.⁸

To raise American morale, General Jimmy Doolittle made a daring raid on Tokyo with sixteen B-25 bombers that took off from the aircraft carrier *Hornet* on April 18th. In military terms, the effect was minimal but Americans got a 'boost' and the very surprised Japanese got a 'black-eye;' but still only a small portent of what was yet to come. An air raid drill was being practiced in Todyo as Doolittle's B-25s flew by at 1,000 feet. But the surprise was total. They hit oil storage tanks, factories and military installations in four cities, Tokyo, Kobe, Yokahama, and Nagoya. One bomb hit the aircraft carrier "Ryuhō." Doolittle reported that the results had "far exceeded the most optimistic expectations."⁹ Amazingly, the one American who did not get a morale boost out of the Tokyo raid was Jimmy Doolittle himself. His squadron was spread out all over the oriental map and most of his men had been captured or killed. It was a miracle he and most of his crew had survived. As a squadron commander he felt he had been a total failure.

* * * * *

May 1942

Gus graduated from armament school on May 2nd, 1942. Towards the end of his stay at Lowry, he wrote a letter to the Independent-Reporter – the local newspaper in Skowhegan, Maine:

I wish to thank you very much for sending me your newspaper. I find it very interesting and it helps me to keep up with what is going on around my home town. I have been gone for seven months now and I find through your paper that there are already many changes made in the old home town.

⁴ Warplanes, 69.

⁵ Online USAF Museum.

⁶ Geoffrey Perret, *Winged Victory*, 145.

⁷ Perret, *Winged Victory*, 124.

⁸ Online USAF Museum.

⁹ Warplanes, 78.

The people here in Denver are treating all of us very fine but they cannot be like those at home. So thank you again for thinking of me and for your paper.
“Keep ‘em flying.” Pvt. Gaston G. Poulin.¹⁰

“Keep ‘em flying” was a byword for US Air Force ground crews everywhere.



Gus at Lowry Field (he’s in there somewhere) (*Scrapbook*).

* * * * *

Gus continued his narration.

“And from there I went down to Meridian, Mississippi, should call it another name, and then, Jackson. I remember the train ride – 2 ½ days! And I don’t mean with a bunk. It was on a coach, not a Pullman... and we slept on the floor, without sleeping bags. Well, when I was down in Jackson, Jimmy Doolittle was planning a special mission. I had hoped to go, but I had only been there a couple of weeks. Remember that raid on Japan?”

“Ya (*Thirty Seconds over Tokyo*.)” I replied.

“If I had been there a little longer, I might’ve had a chance to get in. I had experience as an armorer, but I hadn’t been on the flight-line long enough. He picked out 16 crews. It was a real hush-hush deal. Fact is, we didn’t even hear from them afterwards.” In Meridian, some men who had been training for B-25s and the new men just out of training schools were put together in groups, and at this point, Gus thought he would serve as ground crew for a B-25 unit.

“This was ‘42, after we got our big raise from \$21.00 a month to \$50.00. You try to live on it. Oh ya, the first time I ever pulled any KP was there, in Jackson, only I didn’t pull it very long. I gave up on it - just quit. We didn’t have to, so I didn’t. We were technicians... ah... specialists unspecialized.”

* * * * *

ARMY INTELLIGENCE: The Military Intelligence Division of the Army got this message the other day, and it was some time before the officers discovered it was not a code but a proverb.

¹⁰ Gus Poulin’s Scrapbook.

Are YOU smarter'n them? "Inhabitants of domiciles of vitreous formation with lapidary fragments should not perform jactation."¹¹ (People who live in glass houses should not throw stones.)

* * * * *

June 1942

On June 4th, 1942, the Battle of Midway took place in the middle of the Pacific Ocean. It was clearly a US victory, stopping the Japanese invasion force headed for Midway Island, a small American base in the middle of the Pacific Ocean. But although we blunted the Japanese advance we didn't stop them altogether. The US and Japan would trade blows, engaging in see-saw air and naval battles, including land assaults, for at least another two years. During the battle there was a little-publicized episode in which four B-26 Marauders - the only four available on Midway took part in the air attack against the Japanese fleet. One, piloted by Captain Jim Muri launched his torpedoe at a carrier and flew over the flight deck to avoid the ship's anti-aircraft guns. But what impressed him the most was the size of the carrier's battle flag. Two of the four Marauders were shot down.¹²



Willis L. Brainard

In June, 1942, the men slated for Marauder service were sent to their first phase of training. Two B-25 groups were sent to Barksdale Field in Louisiana and MacDill Field in Florida. These were the two main training sites for B-26 crews.¹³

Gus said, "Well, from there, I ended up down in Tampa, Florida, at MacDill Field - breaking in green pilots. We had to fly with 'em, you know? And most of these guys would come out and look at a B-26 and (gasp!), 'Does that thing really fly?'" When the Marauder appeared at the early training bases it was deemed the "most advanced bomber in its class." However, the design enhancements were too radical for any but the "best pilots and mechanics."¹⁴

"Anytime anybody took-off," Gus related, "they had to have a full crew. So my job was just sitting up back and sweating out the guy in front. That's where I met Willie."

* * * * *

Willis Lee Brainard, aka "Willie," was born in Bozeman, Montana, the fourth child of five. He went to school in Chinook, playing football and basketball and graduating in the spring of 1941. After that, he bummed around all summer, riding on railroad cars, and decided to join the Army Air Force just a few days before Thanksgiving. He was to report for duty in January, 1942, but after Pearl Harbor he was called in earlier. His enlisted record indicates he mustered in on December 23rd, 1941. He was 5' 6" and weighed 171 pounds. He went to basic training at Shepard Field in Wichita, Texas, and then went to MacDill Field, Florida, where he trained as a flight engineer.

"What does an engineer do on a plane?" I asked him.

"You transfer fuel," Willie said. "At MacDill Field, I used to stand behind the pilot and the rookie. My job was to make sure he didn't do anything wrong. One time this new guy reached for the flaps, but he reached too far down and was about to grab the lever that let down the landing gear. I slapped his hand and he got pretty mad. 'How dare you...' he says. He went to Captain Travis, the squadron commander, and complained. 'Did he break your wrist?' Travis asked him. 'No,' he said. 'Well, he should have,' says Travis. That officer never mentioned it again. Travis told me about it, later."

¹¹ Gus Poulin's Scrapbook.

¹² b-26marauderarchive.org.

¹³ Roger A. Freeman, *B-26 Marauder at War*, Charles Scribner's Sons, NY, 30.

¹⁴ Freeman, *B-26 Marauder at War*, 6, introduction.

Then Willie asked me, “Where’d you get that ‘Willie’ stuff?”

I was at a loss. “From my Dad,” I said.

“Ya, he started that,” Willie replied. “I made the mistake of telling him my home town nickname and pretty soon it was all over the squadron. My name was Willis Lee but my sister’s called me Will Lee and that turned into Willie.”

“Well, what do you call yourself?” I asked.

“Lee,” he replied.

Apparently he had not heard the name ‘Willie’ in a long, long time.

* * * * *



Samuel M. Findley

Another enlisted man who flew with the pilot trainees at MacDill Field was Samuel M. Findley from Mount Vernon, Texas – people just called him ‘Tex.’ He was six feet tall and weighed 130 pounds. Sam had been working as an airplane mechanic for a school for British R.A.F. flight trainees when Pearl Harbor was attacked. He signed up immediately and did his basic training at Shepard Field and then went to Aerial Gunnery School at Harlingen, Texas. Tall for a gunner (there was a 5’ 10” maximum height and 150 pound weight limit), Tex literally ‘squeezed-by’ by bending his legs just a bit until he stood just under the maximum. So, compared to the others, he was tall and lanky and got some comments for it.

“Tex got a lot of ribbing,” said Willie, “because he was so tall and skinny.”

* * * * *

About his experience at MacDill, Tex says, “MacDill Field was located on Tampa Bay and upon arrival there we were all billeted in tents on a section of the field called ‘Tent City.’ There were some beautiful twin engine airplanes lined up near the flight line of a type that I had never seen before. I asked someone what they were and was told ‘those are B-26s. They are medium bombers called Marauders and are made by the Glenn L. Martin Co.’ Boy! How I wished I could be a gunner on one of those. Some were flying around the field and they were noisy and seemed to be very fast.”



Richard J. Travis
Captain, 453rd

“After we were in Tent City for a day or two,” Tex continued, “we noted that no one came around and called the roll or otherwise checked on us or assigned us any duties. A few of us went up to headquarters to see what our status was. We gave an officer our names and after checking around he informed us that none of our records had arrived and that we should go back to ‘Tent City’ and await further orders. We went back and told the others what we had learned and several of them left and went ‘absent without leave’ (AWOL). Some were gone for up to two weeks and were never missed. I sure felt like going myself but I just couldn’t bring myself to do it and besides I didn’t want to risk losing my stripes. Time sure passed slow just laying

around with nothing to do and I thought, ‘Here we are with a war going on, and I’m an aerial gunner and should be out fighting those damned Japs, but I’m just here in this tent city laying on my butt.’” The squadron commander, Captain Travis, acknowledged the difficulty of throwing so many men together into non-existent units and trying to organize them into efficient squadrons in such a short period of time.¹⁵

¹⁵ John O. Moench, *Marauder Men*, Gen. (Ret.) Malia Enterprises, 1989, 22. Postwar comments of Richard V. Travis.

Tex continued, "After two or three weeks some NCO came and called some names (mine included) and told us to gather our gear and follow him. We got in an army truck that carried us to some permanent wooden barracks where we were to be billeted. I found out later that I had



Eugene L. Pechon

originally been sent to MacDill Field to join the 320th Bomb Group but they had become fully staffed and had departed for another airfield. The 320th Bomb Group finally ended up in North Africa. Our group was equipped with the airplanes that had been used by the 320th for training and they were in poor shape. My Military Occupational Specialty (MOS) was, because of my civilian experience, Airplane Mechanic Gunner and I was assigned to assist one of the new crew chiefs in our squadron in readying one of the aircraft for flight. We were in a race with the other crew chiefs to be the first to have their assigned aircraft operational. The crew chief who I was assisting was a recent graduate of an Army technical school, but he had never had any prior experience working on aircraft. His name was Eugene Pechon. We really worked hard and diligently and were the first crew to get our aircraft readied."

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ARMY AIR FORCE MECHANIC REQUESTS: Hand me the fabric, dope. Put in the cowling, screw. Check the aileron, droop. Time that engine, Mag. Check that spark, plug. Watch that retainer, nut.¹⁶

* * * * *



Col. Thatcher
Group Commmander

Tex described what happened next, "We advised the Group Commander, Col. Thatcher, and Squadron Commander, Captain Travis when they arrived to fly the aircraft. Col. Thatcher questioned me as to the airworthiness of the plane and I assured him that it was ready for flight. He said, 'Get you a parachute and get on board.' Boy was I thrilled! This was the first multi-engine aircraft in which I had ever flown in and when it took off it accelerated with a surge of power that I could hardly believe. During flight Col. Thatcher shut one engine down, feathered the propeller, and flew around with only one of the two engines operating. I wasn't even aware that such a thing was possible in an airplane. After that first flight I flew as often as I could with whoever would take me along as engineer on a flight. Many of our flights were to the bombing range where hours were

spent making bomb runs on a large circular target. The bombardiers, who were recent graduates from bombardier school, would release one sand-filled practice bomb on each bomb run. These practice bombs had a small powder charge which, on impact, would explode and indicate the impact point. Each bombardier strove to be the most proficient in getting his bombs closest to the bull's eye of the target."

The 323rd Group commander, Colonel Herbert B. Thatcher was a native of Orange, NJ. He had graduated from the U. S. Military Academy in 1932 and joined the Army Air Corps in 1936. He attended flying school at Randolph Field, TX, and, as part of the small cadre of seasoned Air Force officers, now found himself in command of a B-26 Marauder Bomb Group.

¹⁶ Gus Poulin's Scrapbook.



Two Marauders ready for take-off
(Photo courtesy of W. L. Brainard).

* * * * *



William P.
 Zipperling

Another young man, who happened to have an unusual background, also joined the group at MacDill Field. His name was William Paul Robert Zipperling, and everyone called him “Zip.” He was born in Hamburg, Germany on January 30, 1913, to parents Robert and Elise (Reddig) Zipperling. While he was in the German merchant marine, his mother arranged how he would escape from Germany. She contacted relatives in the United States and let them know that Zip would jump ship in New York Harbor and asked them to help him get settled in his new country. He was sixteen years old at the time. His parents remained in Hamburg. Zip became a naturalized citizen and had tried to join the U. S. Navy when hostilities broke out. They wouldn’t take him because of his flat feet. He was about to be drafted so he entered the Army Air Force instead and trained to be a radio-gunner. He was older than most of the other enlisted men at MacDill, being 29 years old at the time.¹⁷

His wife, Lillian Zipperling described him:

“Bill Zipperling was a stubborn German with a soft heart. He didn’t say very much but what he did say was final. What he wanted to do, he did; and when he laid down the law, that was it. Yet with this same stubbornness, he defended anyone or anything in trouble. He was the most loyal friend you could ever have and when he adopted you, you were his forever. His first adoption was a country...”

* * * * *

Gus continued, “One pilot, an Indian... Boy! Could he fly that plane! [There were several native Americans in the Group.] He was a captain, training the rookies, and one day I just happened to be on his flight. I’m telling you, I took one look at that rookie and I knew we were going to be in for a rough time. You can tell when a guy’s scared of a plane just by the way he looks at it. Well, anyway, we were just cruising along and all of a sudden, we went into a flat spin – that’s when the plane goes down in a spiral but it’s still horizontal to the ground. When we were

¹⁷ From telephone conversations with Lillian Zipperling; and newspaper clippings sent by her.

down to about 40 feet above the bay, the Indian hollers, ‘Leggo! Gimme the wheel!’ And he pulled us out of it. Brought the plane back, too. Boy, didn’t he give that rookie hell. We wouldn’t fly with that guy anymore.”

The B-26 was quickly recognized as a ‘hot’ plane, which could only be flown safely by an equally ‘hot’ pilot. Because of this, a culture quickly developed in the B-26 aircrews in which they became very choosy about whom they would fly with, and whom they would not. In fact, for aircrewmembers, it was a primary concern whenever joining a new crew. The B-26 was way ahead of other bombers in design and therefore in performance. It has been called “the Rolls Royce of combat airplanes.” The engines were two 1,850 horse-power Pratt and Whitney R-2800 engines that could take the plane to 315mph. But what complicated things was that it had to be landed at 105mph or it would stall out. This is the same landing speed of modern jet fighters. Also the plane needed a 2500 foot runway to take off.¹⁸

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Gus remembered one of the men who had a musical inclination. “I remember another Indian who saw a piano for the first time, ‘What’s that?’ he asks. ‘It’s a piano.’ ‘A what?’ ‘It makes music.’ ‘How?’ ‘Like this.’ And we showed him how. He learned to play it, too. I mean he didn’t learn to read music and everything, but he got to play pretty good by ear.”

Gus wasn’t bad at tickling-out a rousing ‘boogie woogie’ on the piano, either.

* * * * *



Jack L. Boling

“We had a first sergeant,” Willie said. “Jack Boling. Evidently he had been in the army since ‘39 or ‘40. Boling was one of those guys that when he got out of his bunk he was properly dressed, ready for inspection. He was our first sergeant in Tampa. Once, I kind of spouted-off to an officer. Boling took me aside and he said, ‘Soldier, let me help you out.’” Willie sat upright as if standing at attention. “‘If you want to cuss-out an officer, this is how you do it’ (laughing). And he drilled me on how to call an officer an SOB without ever saying the word and ending with ‘Sir.’ ‘Sir, I think you are an SOB, Sir,’ with perfect respect. Boling could tell any officer that without ever getting out of line. The officer might get upset but he couldn’t do a damn thing.”

* * * * *

“That was a rough six weeks,” Gus said about the time spent breaking in new pilots. “One rookie pilot came in for a landing at about 140 mph (normally it’s supposed to be at about 120 mph) – hit the ground, bounced about 40 feet the first time, 30 feet the second time, 20 feet the third time, then out into Tampa Bay. We used to say ‘One a day in Tampa Bay.’ They even kept a crane at the end of the runway to pull them out with.”

“That’s why I hated rookie pilots,” Willie said. “They just... did things too fast! I’d fly with anybody... except the rookies. If they needed an engineer and I wasn’t on alert, I would go. But that was one of the jobs of the flight engineer. He sat there and watched. I had flown with quite a few other pilots, just to get better acquainted with the damn airplane.”

Rumors sprang up in reponse to the accidents. People began to say that the Marauder was a bad plane, one that was unsafe to fly. Unfortunately the Press and therefore the Politicians also picked up on the rumors which became magnified beyond the reality.¹⁹

Tex explained, “Many B-26 crashes were occurring at MacDill Field. The saying, ‘One a day in Tampa Bay’ was an exaggeration, but anyway it was bad. [Actually, it was about one a week²⁰]. I just accepted it as a hazard of flying in military aircraft. Most of us in the flight crews

¹⁸Perret, *Winged Victory*, 94.

¹⁹Freeman, *B-26 Marauder at War*, 6, introduction.

²⁰Perret, *Winged Victory*

began wearing identification bracelets, on our wrist, in addition to our official identification tags (dog tags) that we wore, on a chain, around our necks. Most of us had somewhat of a fatalistic attitude about flying. Most of the crashes were due to pilot's inexperience and some were due to faulty design problems that were soon corrected. I also participated in many navigational training flights made for the purpose of giving the navigators, who were fresh out of navigation school, more experience. Many of these flights were at night and over water in what is now known as the Bermuda Triangle."

"One plane disappeared completely," Gus said, "706 was the number. They never found it... it's either in the Gulf or in the Atlantic. I've seen nights, I'm not kidding you, you'd be there sittin' there watchin' 'em come in... Wham! Blow up! What reason? Nobody knew. Ever hear of a magneto?" Gus suddenly asked me. "It's like the battery in a car. We found out one morning that every mag had filings in it. Naturally, if you took off, it would be like flying without a battery. The airplane might get off the ground, but then it would start to stagger; and you can't glide a B-26 like you can a cub; B-26s have an 87 degree gliding angle. That's not far from straight down! I saw some of the boys in Europe get it, and of all the guys I saw, none came out of it. The wings would tear off. How're you going to fly with one wing?"

The Martin Marauder soon picked up many unofficial names besides *Widow Maker*: *Baltimore Whore* (named for the factory in Baltimore), the *Flying Prostitute* (because the wings were so small it had no visible means of support), *Winged Coffin*, *Martin Murderer*, *One-way Ticket*, *the Flying Cigar*, and *the Flying Brick*, were some of the more common nick-names. In fact, the reputation of the plane was so bad that military placement personnel began to lie to recruits assigned to Marauder service, telling them they were going to a B-25 unit or a fighter squadron, etc.

In those days, the Air Force was the cutting edge of advancements in military technology and other branches began to complain that they were attracting the brightest and best men. Others complained about the quick advancement and youthfulness of its officers. Enlisted men in infantry units also felt that the enlisted airmen had too many stripes as well. But even with all those perks the reputation of the B-26, probably the most advanced bomber in its class at the time, made the benefits feel somewhat precarious. General Doolittle called it an unforgiving aircraft.²¹ But the bad reputation was ill conceived. Although the accident rate was higher than B-25s it was lower than A-20s and P-38s, those aircraft never received such bad publicity as the name "widomaker"²² The real truth was that many pilots had not been properly trained to fly the Marauder, and it was also a hard plane to maintain²³

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Throughout the war, fully fifteen thousand men and women, 5% of the American deaths in World War II, were killed in stateside flight accidents.

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Towards the end of June, the first of many USAAF planes, eighteen B-17s, left the United States for England, and it was about this time that General Dwight Eisenhower was selected as the overall Allied commander in Europe.

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July-August 1942

"The officers were looking for volunteers for gunnery school," said Gus. "Just to get the hell out, I was ground crew, they didn't have enough flight crew so they had me go along. They made me a flying armorer, and sent me to gunnery school."

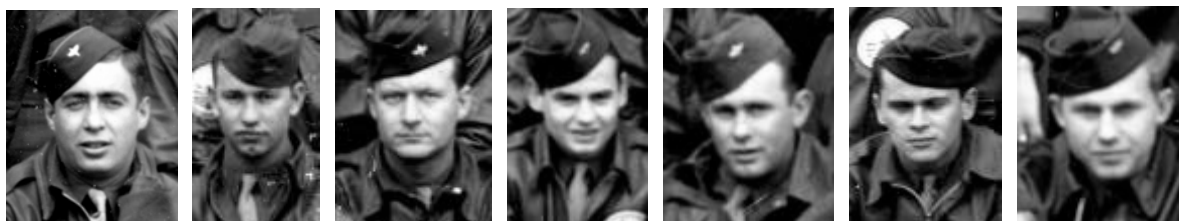
²¹ Freeman, *B-26 Marauder at War*, 6.

²² Freeman, *B-26 Marauder at War*, 31.

²³ Perret, *Winged Victory*, 96.

Gus's records indicate that he entered gunnery school on July 20th at Tyndall Field, Florida.

Willie said, "There was a bunch of us that went through gunnery school at Tyndall together. There was me, Frenchie (Gus), Odom (Howard Odom), Roy (Clarence C. Roy Jr.), Dell (S.) Benson, Crowe (William F. Crowe), and Kenny Class. We weren't doing anything, anyway... there was nothing to do... it was so disorganized. One day the First Sergeant asked me if I wanted to volunteer for gunnery school and I said, 'Sure.' I didn't think about it – we didn't know enough at that time not to volunteer for anything in the Army!"



Gaston Poulin, Willis Lee Brainard, Howard Odom, Clarence Roy, Dell Benson, Bill Crowe, Kenny Class

Tex, who had already attended gunnery school at Harlingen, Texas, explained, "One T-6 aircraft towed a fabric sleeve and gunner trainees standing in the open cockpits of three other T-6 aircraft in the flight would alternately fire 100 rounds of 30-caliber ammunition at the sleeve. The projectiles in each trainee's ammunition belt were coated with a different color of paint. After each flight completed firing, the aircraft returned to the field and the sleeve was dropped and the hits scored by each trainee were tabulated. In order to graduate from the Gunnery School a trainee was required to score an average of 20% hits during the Air-to-Air firing."

"For training pilots we had flying sergeants - a bunch of nuts," Gus related. "You were supposed to stay at least 200 yards away from a flying target. They flew right next to it. You couldn't miss... could have thrown the gun at the target! The guy towing the target, sitting in a V-18 [a training plane], would sit and shiver, afraid you'd hit him... didn't blame him."

"I wouldn't tow targets for that bunch of guys!" Willie added.

"Most of those pilots wanted to get into combat," Gus continued. "Some guys ended up in swamps goofing around, supposedly not checking the gas gauge; or they would fly upside down, a guy's gun would fall out. We had crotch belts not safety belts; you couldn't fall out but you could hang out."

Tex said, "I was consistently scoring more than 20% hits in the Air-to-Air firing. The machine gun had a ring and post sight and I took care to fire short bursts to keep the shot pattern close to the sleeve. At 200 to 250 yards that sleeve looked very small. Sometimes it would be towed at an altitude above you requiring you to squat down in the cockpit in order to aim the gun and sometimes it would be towed at a lower altitude requiring you to climb up on the side of the cockpit in order to fire down. There was a strap secured to the floor of the rear cockpit that the gunner trainee could fasten to his parachute leg strap to assist in keeping him from falling out of the aircraft. After the first few flights I did not fasten myself to this strap. I had horrors of falling out and my parachute accidentally opening so I figured I would rather fall free and then open my parachute if I did fall out."

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On August 8th, U.S. Marines landed on Guadalcanal; and the 'island-hopping' in the Pacific began in earnest. Also about this time the first all-American air raid took place in Europe. The 97th Bombardment Squadron H made the first U.S. heavy bomber raid on August 17, 1942.²⁴ The US air war in the European Theater had commenced. A few days later, Gus and his cohorts graduated

²⁴ Online USAF Museum.

from gunnery school (or should we say survived) on August 25th, 1942. Also about this time, another blow to the B-26 reputation occurred. The high command decided to take the Marauders out of service in the Pacific Theater. To simplify logistical problems, maintenance, and to accommodate the need for shorter airfields, the commanders of the Air Force in the Pacific decided to concentrate on use of the B-25 Mitchell bombers instead. Many of the aircrewmembers did not appreciate the switch.²⁵

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September-October 1942

On September 6th, the United States lost two B-17s, the first American bombers shot down in the ETO. They were lost to German fighters.²⁶

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The 323rd Bombardment Group was created on September 11, 1942. It contained four squadrons, the 453rd, 454th, 455th, and 456th. It was at that time that the men were finally being assembled into specific units at Fort MacDill, Florida.²⁷

Gus continued, "Well, after we got through that... let's see... that's when Colonel Travis... ah, Captain Travis then, organized the squadron to go to England. He went around picking the raunchiest group he could get (laughing)."

"Ha! I was just thinking about Willie," Gus said. "Hauled him out of the guard-house!"

Willie protested, also laughing, "I was never in the guard house or ever in any kind of trouble like that! None of those stories are true!"

"Why'd he pick them?" I asked Gus.

"They weren't afraid. He didn't want any 'scare crows,' or whatever you want to call them. I call them 'yellow bellies.' That's what he was picking out... the whole group... the raunchiest bunch you could get."

"How many guys were there?"

"Well, there were six to a crew, and we had 16 crews; so you take it from there. Even with the pilots and co-pilots and bombardiers and navigators, he wanted the hardest ones."

"You were one of the hardest ones?"

"Right!"

"How come?"

"I dunno, just was, that's all."

I thought he was just exaggerating for my benefit, the way they do in the movies. It's WWII American folklore - all the best fighters are misfits, you know, like the movie *Dirty Dozen* or *The Devil's Brigade*, etc. That's how it usually goes, just a twist on the old American Cowboy image. But later, I read a statement by a 323rd Group flight surgeon, Dr. Charles B. Sadler, and I realized that in this case, it was actually true. "Following graduation from Randolph [flight surgeon school], I went through the AFCC at Nashville and then was sent back to MacDill field, eventually to join the 323rd Group which I soon realized was an elite assembly of men."²⁸ Gus, Willie, Tex and the others were now members of the flight echelon of the Squadron and got their wings to prove it. They were 'Marauder men' of the 323rd Bombardment Group, 453rd Bomb Squadron.

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Willie described their off-duty time.

"While we were at MacDill, we used to go down to the dance hall in town, the Red Rooster. There were a lot of girls there. It was a great place to dance and meet girls... and get into trouble

²⁵ Freeman, *B-26 Marauder at War*, 23.

²⁶ Online USAF Museum.

²⁷ Moench, *Marauder Men*, 21.

²⁸ Moench, *Marauder Men*, 346.



Kenny Class

(laughing). They had a black dance band that was really good. One of our guys, Kenny Class, was a drummer before the war. He went right up there and started playing drums with them. In those days things were pretty segregated and you didn't mix much with black people. Everybody wondered what the hell he was doing up there. The band liked to have him come. 'Ah, here comes our replacement drummer,' they'd say."

"Musicians had no color line," Willie continued. "Kenny was a musician and musicians didn't care. All they cared about was if you could play – if you could play, you could be in the band. Music was about the only non-segregated part of society then. Kenny sounded a lot like Krupa [Gene

Krupa, a famous big band drummer] when he played those damn drums. Some people told Kenny he shouldn't do that, but he didn't care. He was having a hell of a good time. I liked that place. Girls went in there and there was lot's of 'em to dance with. I really enjoyed dancing. You got four or five drinks in ya and you went dancing. I guess that's why I really didn't drink that much, because I was dancing all the time."

"Were you a good dancer?" I asked Willie.

"My wife says I was. She didn't like to jitterbug, though. My older sisters would put on a record and teach my kid brother and me how to dance. We were only 8 or 10 years old when we started dancing with our sisters... and that makes a difference right there. It also improves your balance and footwork. I tried to learn how to tap dance, too. God, what a club foot I had!"

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On September 13th, 1942, the Battle of Stalingrad began, opening the Russian counter-offensive against the German invasion. Soon after, in a public speech, Stalin cryptically warned the US and Britain that if they didn't begin a western front soon it might go badly for them. No one knew for sure what that meant, but it didn't sound very good. Regardless, the Americans were not ready for an offensive in Europe, yet. We decided to concentrate on Africa first and began assembling an invasion force.

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By this time, the end of October, 1942, the squadrons of the 323rd group had only reached two thirds of their authorized strengths, a situation that would not change by the time the unit would enter combat. To make up for it, enlisted men were advanced to positions meant for officers or higher grade NCOs and as regulations tightened down, they were reclassified to hide their true functions.²⁹

November – December 1942

Early in November, the Marauders of the 323rd Group relocated for training.

"When we left Florida, we went up to South Carolina, Myrtle Beach," Gus said.

"We were about to begin another phase of training," Tex explained, "in simulated war zone battle conditions at Myrtle Beach, SC. This time I didn't have to ride the train to our new destination. I flew up in one of the Marauders." Myrtle Beach was to be their base of OUT exercises (Overseas Unit Training) because the environmental conditions were supposed to be similar to those of England. The men were bivouacked in tarpaper huts which did nothing to keep out the cold or heat. But the men got in a lot of flying time.³⁰

"The airfield at Myrtle Beach consisted of two asphalt runways carved out of a pine forest," Tex continued. "Our quarters were tarpaper barracks scattered out among the trees. Here we slept on canvas cots and ate standing up at tables in the mess hall. This is where the flight personnel

²⁹ Moench, *Marauder Men*, 22.

³⁰ Moench, *Marauder Men*, 26.

were organized into crews and began flying together as a crew and where specific stations were assigned to the gunners. It was decided that all of the flight engineers would be the tail gunner on our crews. The other two enlisted men on our crew [besides myself] were Sgt. Bryce Ramey who, when not required at his station in the aircraft's radio compartment, would man the waist guns, and Sgt. James M. Smith, who was the top turret gunner. Smith was from Mississippi, Ramey was from West Virginia, and of course I was from Texas. No one in the squadron called me Sam. Everyone knew me as Tex."

Tex said, "The officers on our crew were Lt. Roscoe R. Haller from New York, pilot, and Lt. Wayne Kachner, bombardier, who I believe was from Kansas. The Martin Marauder was equipped with dual controls for a co-pilot, but none of the flight crews in the 323rd Bomb Group had co-pilots. We were the only Marauder group that did not have them. Our training at Myrtle Beach was somewhat different than what we had done at Mac Dill. We were flying at really low altitude."



The Haller Crew: Roscoe Haller, Wayne Kachner, Samuel "Tex" Findley, James Smith, Bryce Ramey.

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Of the forty-six men in 'Barracks No. 2' (fancy name for a tarpaper shack), there were two men who had also attended the reunion in Colorado City - S/Sgt Richard Inman and S/Sgt Casimir V. Sochocki both of the ordnance section. Men of the armament, transportation sections were in that barracks also. Thinking that everyone had a nickname, I asked Mr. Sochocki what he was called in the service. He wrote back, "We called each other by our last names, SOCHOCKI, of course there was a few exceptions for the ones that were called other names (ha, ha!)."



Casimir Sochocki (L) and Richard Inman (R)

I asked Sochocki about his background.

"I was born on January 28th, 1923, in South Bend, Indiana. Dad came from Poland in 1906, married Mom, a local girl in 1913. Her name was Tillie Szulezewski – how's that for a Polish name! They had four boys and four girls and believe it or not, Mom had seven miscarriages. They lost a girl, Irene, in 1918 during that flu epidemic. I attended a public school, a parochial school and quit high school in my senior year and joined the USAAF. I loved to play softball and did a lot of golfing. I enlisted on January 16, 1942. I did basic training at Charlotte Army AM Base, Charlotte, North Carolina and also received ordnance training. I joined the 677th Ordnance

Company AVN(P) in its infancy and promotions came quickly. The 677th was split up and the men went to different bomb groups. I and 16 of the 677th went to the 323rd Bomb Group – I and 3 others wound up in the 453rd.”

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Gus and Willie were placed together on the same crew, along with radioman Charles J. Ketcham. Gus was assigned as turret gunner, Willie was the engineer/tailgunner, and Ketcham was the radioman/waist gunner. The officer crew was 1st Lt. Albert W. Satterwhite (pilot), George Friesner (bombardier) and 2nd Lt. Richard J. Baker (navigator).

“When Ketcham joined the crew as the radio operator,” Willie explained, “he hadn’t gone through gunnery school yet. He only went to radio school. Unfortunately, he was blind as a bat, wearing those thick glasses, you know. So Satterwhite would fly the plane past a floating target in the water off the coast, and me and Frenchie would coach him on aerial gunnery. We finally got him so he could hit the darn thing, but it took a while! Sometimes we took the shots for him, just so we could go home.”

Gus said, “Ketcham was from New Jersey, but I’m not kidding you! He couldn’t see. He was a tall character with big goggles. His father was a minister and he used to carry this small Bible with him, and he’d read the Bible. I don’t know how in heck he could read it; the print was so small! But he read it anyway and it made him happy. No, really, he was a good ‘Joe.’ I mean, there was no getting around that.”



The Satterwhite Crew: Albert Satterwhite, Richard Baker, George Friesner. Charles Ketcham, Willis Brainard, Gaston Poulin.

“I liked flying as tail gunner,” Willie said. “I had no trouble getting in and out and there was an escape hatch right near my position. I liked that. I used to practice popping that thing out, just in case. I never knew where we were going, but I always saw where we’d been (laughing).”

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Willie described his part in the new combat simulation training. “I used to sit in that tail, Satterwhite (the pilot) didn’t like it at all. But I could see when they’d use the vertical stabilizer, I could sit there and watch it move. And I’d watch it and watch it... so long I’d watch it. At that time, we were flying practice bombing runs, using flour sacks for bombs. At a certain point, the bombardier actually takes over control of the airplane, he makes the last part of his run and makes the final adjustment before he releases the bombs. I could lay down on my back and get my foot up against the damn thing [the base of the stabilizer], and when I thought he was getting ready to drop the bombs I’d give it a shove. Of course the tail would go like this (swing to the side) and Satterwhite would yell over the intercom, ‘Brainard! Get your damn foot off that vertical stabilizer!’ Well, our bombardier had a pretty good sense of humor... of course, Satterwhite didn’t like that. I did. I thought it was funnier than hell.”

I told Willie the story in Freeman’s book of the turret gunner, Denny McFarland, who’d rotate the turret from side to side, just to make the pilot adjust the trim – until the pilot caught-on.

“Well that’s the way you would keep up the spirit of a crew,” he said. “You know... you did things. Maybe they weren’t funny to a serious-minded guy, but those of us who were good at our jobs... well... if that pilot and bombardier weren’t good at their job, well, they shouldn’t have been in the front seat (laughing). But that’s what made life worthwhile. I never took things too seriously at that time.”

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On November 8th, 1942, Operation Torch, the US invasion of North Africa was implemented. The plan was to catch Rommel’s troops between the English in the east and the Americans in the West. The operation had to be executed “as American as possible,” due to the fact that the British had recently sunk the French naval fleet at Oran. Because of that General Dwight D. Eisenhower was selected as the overall commander of the allied forces.³¹ A few days later on the 11th, the Germans and Italians occupied Vichy France (so much for an armistice with the Germans). Operation Torch was a success. The French fought half-heartedly for a few days to save honor, and then quickly embraced the invaders. The North African French were allies too. There were many other allies all over the world but their participation was limited by their resources.

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Tex said, “As we progressed in our training all personnel were being granted furloughs on a rotational basis. In November I got my furlough and came back to Mt. Vernon, Texas, where my parents resided. My brother came home on leave at the same time and we spent a joyous time together with parents, relatives, and friends. This was the last time we were to see Louis Ray alive.”

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Gus said, “We stayed there [at Myrtle Beach] about two months. We were waiting for our new planes. They hadn’t built them yet. Meanwhile, of course, we’re running around all over the place.”



Richard J. Travis
Captain, 453rd

“You had free time?” I asked.
“Free time? We made it free!”
“What did you do?”

“Oh, we went into town. There was usually nobody there, so we went into a couple of other towns... might as well forget those towns. Greenville, South Carolina, holy mackerel, what a disappointment that was. We ended up in town at Myrtle Beach. There was one restaurant, thirteen bars, and no hotel, so you went to the bars, bought your liquor and went back to camp to forget about it - except to raise heck with the cook about 2:00 in the morning.”

“Why?”

“Well, we wanted something to eat! We couldn’t go into town; there was nobody there. Oh, one night, the C.O. [Captain Travis] came out and says, ‘All right, you guys are all grounded.’ So we says, ‘All right,’ and we had a couple of guys sneak out and pick up a few jugs.”

“How’d they get out?” I asked.

“Crawled through the fence.”

“You didn’t have any guards?”

“Ya! There were guards there, but... ah... they knew better anyway... we knew them as well as they knew us. Besides, they wanted some, too, so you can’t blame ‘em there. Some of the boys went out, got a supply, and came back. We were playing cards and stuff - the only thing to do. Next morning, of course, we had to do something with the bottles, so we buried them. The Captain

³¹ Perret, *Winged Victory*, 180-181.

comes around and he says, ‘What’s there in the ground?’ We said, ‘dead soldiers.’ Nah,’ he says, ‘can’t be.’ We said, ‘Ya! They’re dead!’ Well, naturally some of the boys had left theirs out, you know. Then he says, ‘Now I know what kind of dead soldiers they are.’ At least we’d buried them, so he couldn’t say too much about it.”

“He didn’t mind?”

“He wasn’t happy! Oh, he racked into us for a few minutes, you know? Really blowing his top! It didn’t make any difference; nobody listened.”

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James S.
Siegenthaler

“Travis got on me one time in Myrtle Beach,” Tex related. “I had on a pair of cowboy boots. He told me, ‘You know, you’re out of uniform in those cowboy boots instead of G.I. shoes.’ Later on, he told me to put the boots away and when we got overseas I could probably wear them. I later sold those boots to Jim Siegenthaler after we got to England.”

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Almost upon arrival at the new base a rumor circulated that they were to be sent overseas right away. This prompted many men to take a leave.³² Aunt Martha, Gus’s younger sister, remembers when Gus came home on leave. “I do recall the leave he had before going overseas. I was in the 8th grade and it was wintertime. I do not recall the exact date. I do have a photo of the event. The only one missing was Guy who was in the service out in one of the western states.”

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Tex related, “After I arrived back to Myrtle Beach the aircrews, with their airplanes, were sent to Panama City, FL where we were trained to drop torpedoes against naval vessels. One of the instructors was a Captain Muri who had made a torpedo run against a Japanese craft during the Battle of Midway.” Part of their training was to learn how to fly the Marauder on one engine.³³

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Willie remembers one incident in Florida that also did not endear him to his pilot, Satterwhite. “Down in Panama City, we were practicing torpedo runs. Satterwhite was the copilot and one of our West Point officers was the pilot – can’t remember the name. I was kneeling between them. That was the minimum crew. Whenever you took off you had to have a flight engineer on board, and depending on your mission, sometimes a navigator or bombardier. This time, it was just the three of us and we were doing simulated approaches to an aircraft carrier. We came in and made a hard landing. The nose wheel strut gave out and the nose dropped to the ground. They had trouble with the nose struts on the early B-26’s – they kept collapsing. Luckily, no one was hurt. When we came to a stop, the pilot opened the overhead hatch – there’s one above the pilot and one above the copilot, and he got out. Satterwhite went next and got stuck in the hatch. He had a wide fanny and I was underneath pushing him through. I couldn’t stop laughing. The others thought it was kind of funny, too. Well, I guess you know that didn’t sit too well with him. That’s another reason Satterwhite didn’t like me.”

³² Moench, *Marauder Men*, 26.

³³ b-26marauderarchives.org



A crashed Marauder – not a very pretty sight (*Photo courtesy of W. L. Brainard*).

* * * * *

DEFINITION OF PATRIOTISM: Taking your arm from around your girl to clap whenever an army plane flies across the movie screen.³⁴

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³⁴ Gus Poulin's Scrapbook.

“Keep ‘em flying was the Army Air Corps byword. It was good slogan because of the sweat and toil it took to keep a plane in the air. A song was recorded in 1941 by Gene Krupa with Johnny Desmond on vocals.

Keep ‘Em Flying

Keep ‘em flying, keep ‘em in the sky.
Keep ‘em flying, hitting hard and high.
On every lip the fervent cry,
Keep ‘em flying on full soar.

Keep ‘em flying, every headline screams
Keep ‘em flying, Army fighting teams
On thirty thousand different fields,
Keep ‘em flying on full soar.

(Spoken): March to the cannons, give it the gun.
Zoom with the air corps, to the sun.
Keep ‘em flying, clear the hangar floor
Keep ‘em flying, spread your wings once more
From pole to pole, from shore to shore
Let thirty thousand motors roar
Let thirty thousand eaglets soar
Keep ‘em flying on to war.

Gene Krupa; Johnny Desmond, Vocals; Col. John F. Daye, Service Orders, (Coleman) 1941.



Technical Sergeant Willis Lee Brainard
323rd Bomb Group, 453rd Bomb Squadron
USSAF 1941-1945
(Photo courtesy of Willis Brainard)



Technical Sergeant Samuel M. Findley
323rd Bomb Group, 453rd Bomb Squadron
USSAF 1941-1945
(Photo courtesy of Samuel Findley)

Chapter 2 – On the Road to War

January – June 1943

January 1943

In early January, a pilot who was destined to join the 453rd Bomb Squadron arrived at Avon Park in Florida for advanced training. His name was Frederick J. Mingus.



Fred Mingus

“I was assigned to B-26s at Avon Park, Florida,” Fred Mingus said. “I came down in January of 1943 and did all my O.U.T. training [Overseas Unit Training] there...night missions, cross-country missions, and low-level missions. We skip-bombed all over Lake Kissimmee - cutting down stumps in the jungle - in the swamps in the back of Avon Park. And we lost a lot of good friends there because this was when the B-26 first came out. It had short wings and Curtiss Electric props which were prone to runaway – that’s what they called a runaway prop. The prop breaks, which held the prop in a certain fixed pitch – it was not strong enough and the props would spin and run away and become high speed on take-off. The plane never had a

prototype. The first plane that came off the line flew. There were no tests on it. They just took it out, fired it up and took off. Later, Martin modified the B-26 and added three feet of wing to each side and reduced the wing loading to 74.4 pounds per square foot. They took the Curtiss Electric Props off and put Hamilton Hydromatics on, which was a kind of paddle prop that made it operate a whole lot better.”

I asked Mr. Mingus about his background.

“I was born on August 31, 1920, in Green’s Run, Ohio, the first son of the 7th son...which old folklore has it as being a lucky son, and after only minor injuries in two coal mine accidents and my WWII service, I cannot dispute the old adage. I had two brothers and three sisters and liked fishing and hunting. During my years of High School we lived near Dad’s work place, Mine #355 in southeastern Ohio in Athens County. My dad was like most of his family - coal miners in Southeastern Ohio. I spent all my summers working for a farmer for a dollar a day and all I could eat with working hours from ‘can’ to ‘can’t’ – which meant from the time you could see to the time you couldn’t see. Many mornings started with a lantern to the barn to milk a herd of Hershey Cows. And after I graduated from high school at age sixteen with no chance for college, I was taken into the mine by my Dad as his partner. This lasted two years but after the mine accidents I told my Dad there had to be a better way to make a living; so I quit the mine and joined the 3C’s known as the Civilian Conservation Corps. This Corps was set up during the 1930s – deep Depression days. Nobody had any work at all. It was ‘make work.’ President Roosevelt had set up a system where he put young men to work building fences, digging ditches, cleaning forests. We built bridges, built dams, built everything. And I became part of the Forestry Division with a crew of thirty-six men, stationed at Worcestor, Ohio. My company was TSI, Timber Stand Improvement, and I was the leader – had thirty-six men and we went through the forest, cut out dead wood and improved the forest that way. We were cutting out Japanese Gooseberry which was causing White Pine Blight. And we’d have to cruise the fields, pull all the gooseberry bushes up and carry them out and burn them to reduce the Pine Blight.”

“This lasted three years from 1938-1940 and after that, I wanted to go into the service. I went up to Fort Hayes in Columbus, Ohio, in October of 1940. And the old sergeant up there – the enlistment sergeant, he looked at my school record and he said, ‘If you had one more credit of math, we could put you in the Air Force.’ I said, ‘Well, I can get another credit of math.’ So I went back home and I went to my high school Principal, Dr. Maurice Bryson. I had graduated in ’37 but he was still the Principal. I asked Bryson if he would teach me a credit hour of plain

geometry. He said, 'Of course.' And so I spent every weekend at his house learning plain geometry. I went back and enlisted at Fort Hayes in January of 1941. And my first assignment was down to Montgomery Alabama, to Maxwell Field."

"Then my Dad said, 'Well, you're going into the service and there are two things you want to remember. Keep your mouth shut and never volunteer.' I was twenty, so I volunteered for Mechanic School. I was transferred to Rantoul, Illinois, Air Corps Tech School. I spent six months going to Mechanical School and Graduated with the equivalent of an 'A&E.' After graduation, I was sent to Fort Slocum, New York, and then down to Panama with the 29th Materiel Squadron. They decided to open up a Tech school at Rio Hato, which was back up in the jungle, up in the midlands. And having finished tech school they sent me up there and I was teaching engines to crew chiefs on the V-18A when the war broke out."

"When the war broke out everybody was scrambling. They needed pilots so they sent out a memo saying that anybody interested in going to flight school should report to Allbrook Field on Friday, March 13th, 1942. I went before the cadet board and they flunked me. I didn't make it. I had three false teeth on a partial plate. I never did use those teeth to fly with (laughing), but that took me out of cadet school. But they said, 'You can be an aviation student. An aviation student would not be a commissioned pilot. If you graduate you'll be a flying Staff Sergeant.' I said, 'That's fine with me.' I came back to the States on May 9th, 1942, to the Port of Tampa and they shipped me off from there to Randolph Field in Texas in January, 1942. Then in August, 1942, I finished Randolph Preflight training at Kelly and from Kelly Field I went to Cuero for Primary Training. I flew the old Fairchild PT-19A. I graduated from that and they sent me to Basic Training which was up in Brady, Texas, which is in the heart of Texas, in November, 1942. I flew the old 'Vulte Vibrators,' the BT-13 & BT-15. I graduated from there and went up to Lubbock, Texas, and I flew the old bamboo bomber the UC-78 and the AT-9 [Advanced Trainer 9]. The AT-9 was an all-metal, twin-engined, trainer that was Ridley built and designed as a bomber for Norway."

"But it was a perfect ship to fly as a transition ship for going into the B-26s because it had much of the same flying characteristics – a hot landing, and you had to fly it from the moment you got in. A hot landing...150mph, otherwise it would stall out. My Primary Instructor, J. C. Scott, was a civilian pilot. I give him credit for most of my success as a pilot in the B26. He told me that there is just one thing I should always remember, 'Never buckle yourself into an airplane. You buckle it to you. You don't buckle yourself in. What you do determines what the aircraft is going to do.' That held me in good stead with the B-26 because you have to fly it from the time you get in it to the time you get out of it – it was very unforgiving. I finally finished up flight school and graduated in the top ten percent of my class on January 14th, 1943. And instead of being Staff Sergeants, they made us Flight Officers. A Flight Officer was not commissioned. It was kind of like being a Chief Warrant Officer. It's not a commission but it is a warrant."

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On January 14th Roosevelt and Churchill met at Casablanca in Morocco. There they were able to sit comfortably in a recently liberated area and try to figure out what to liberate next. They finally decided to invade Sicily after finishing the fight in Tunisia. Meanwhile Hitler hadn't given up trying to hold onto North Africa. It was said that his incompetence was worth many Allied troops. The Battle of Stalingrad was going full blast, but instead of sending his reserve troops there he sent them to North Africa.³⁵ On the 27th of January, 1943, Germany received its first bombing raid by Americans, when heavy bombers, B-17s and B-24s, hit the cities of Embden and Wilhelmshaven. The American air blitz of the Reichland had begun.

³⁵ Geoffrey Perret, *There's a War to be Won*, Random House, NY, 1991, 149.

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February 1943

On February 2nd, the German forces at Stalingrad surrendered – this was their first big defeat in the war. On the eastern front they would now begin to fight on the defensive, losing ground with almost every battle.

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When Gus returned from leave, things were buzzing at the base. “Then still another rumor turned into the real thing and the 323rd Group aircrews left for Baer Field, Fort Wayne, Indiana to pick up new B-26s.”³⁶ However, amid vivid world headlines, the 453rd would soon be completely stalled due to another B-26 supply glitch – the lack of priority in medium bombers was beginning to show. “At Baer Field “SNAFU” took over,” General Moench wrote, “and the men of the 453rd Squadron spent two months waiting for their aircraft which were still in modification at the Rome Depot in New York.”³⁷

Tex explained, “We anticipated that we would only be at Baer Field a few days, but we ran into a snag and remained there almost two months. The self-sealing fuel tanks were leaking and repairs had to be made. Life was not too bad while we were there. We had no duties. Ft. Wayne was a nice city with a General Electric plant employing thousands of young girls and we had a liberal leave policy for the local area.”

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Officer air crews of the 453rd Bomb Squadron at Baer Field, Feb. 23rd, 1943.

1st row: Donald A. Nelson, Vincent J. Aducci, Richard J. Baker, William J. Heather Jr., Wayne E. Kachner, Mellville A. Erickson, Clifford D. Ghodes, Roger Morwood.

2nd row: Mark A. Sprague, Philip J. Hughes Jr., Leo J. Carbonneau, Saul Rubin, Roy I. Sparks, Roscoe R. Haller, Albert W. Satterwhite, Francis J. McGlynn, Anthony G. Van Antwerp, Straughan D. Kelsey, Jesse R. Swan Jr.

3rd row: Roy B. Pratt, John T. Walior, Clark T. Dean, James F. Hunt, Courtland V. Steen, Arnold Stern, William E. Hartnett, William E. Stevens, George P. Burnett Jr., Jack P. Voight, George J. Friesner.

(photo courtesy of Grace Ghodes)

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³⁶ Moench, *Marauder Men*, 29.

³⁷ Moench, *Marauder Men*, 29-30.



Enlisted air crews and crew chiefs of the 453rd Bomb Squadron at Baer Field, Feb. 23rd, 1943 (Scrapbook).

1st row: Billy Williams, John Bull, Jack L. Boling, Ben Lasky, George Harris, Roland E. Clark.

2nd row: Harold C Gustafson, Bill Crowe, Bill Bos, Ralph E. Stevens, William M. McBride, Clarence C. Roy, Dell S. Benson, Kenny Class, James C. Bailey, Lucien W. Kidd, Michael Krizan, George D. Herrin, Howard Odom, James O. Mann, H. B. Harris, Cliff Burkhart.

3rd row: Larry Nusser, Clifford Bell, Joe Casper, Lucien Blain, Fred W. Harrison, Cecil Turpin, Louis Tonis, Lewis G. Williams, Frank Wheat, Dan Towery, Robert Blossom, Raymond W. Reaman, Keith Bradshaw, A. Greenwood, Gaston G. Poulin, Jack W. Pippin.

4th row: Arthur J. Morlock, Don Showalter, James M. Smith, Walter L. Woods, James P. Berry, Charles Vacanti, Ray A. Gonnerman, Willis L. Brainard, Keith S. Seaman, Willis D. Diel, Joseph M. Hager, Samuel M. Findley, Erwin W. Krout.

5th row: Joseph L. Bothwell, William S. Broecker, Paul Stephens, James S. Siegenthaler, William P. Zipperling, William Beecher, George W. Clausen, Don Rekow, Benny O. Becker, Charles J. Ketchem, Bryce Ramey, Bill Archer, Dave Nattis, Dan McCornack, Eupene L. Pechon, James E. Hayes.

(Photo from Gus's scrapbook, names courtesy of Casimier V. Sochocki and Mrs. Mark Sprague)

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Gus apparently did not like Fort Wayne very much.

“First time I ever slept in a jail was in Fort Wayne,” he said.

“You were in jail?” I was curious.

“Yes, I was trying to get away from the M.P.s but I made a mistake and ran into the cops.

The thing was, we were supposed to be in by 12:00, or at least off the streets by twelve. See, you could be in a hotel, but off the streets. I was headed for a hotel when I spotted the M.P. car coming. I says, ‘Boy, I’d better get out of the way.’ I knew it was after curfew. They came around... they missed me, so I started to run off the other way. What did I run into? Cops! So in the pokey I went. Ha!”

“Were they afraid you might wreck the town or something?”

“I dunno. Think of that town... I wouldn’t give you 15 cents for it. Well, I ended up in the pokey, and boy, you talk about a pokey... holy mackerel! I’ll have to tell Henderson here (our local sheriff) that he’s got a nice jail in comparison to the one down in Fort Wayne. I had to call the Colonel [Thatcher] to get me out. Well, you take at 1:00 in the morning, he didn’t appreciate it. I don’t know why, but he did come down and get me out of that stinking place... and I mean stinkin’.”

* * * * *

Just in case you think the officers were any better than the enlisted men, Master Sergeant Lewis Williams, a Maintenance Chief who attended the reunion, said, “I had a girl there in Fort

Wayne and she would go straight to Travis and get him to give me some time off to leave the base. She did that herself! One time we went into a bar there and Capt. Wood [the future group commander] and some of the other officers were there, having a few drinks. I don't know what happened, but she hollered to me, I turned around and she slapped ole' Woods and knocked him off the bar-stool. I didn't know what to do – pick him up, or kick him myself!"



Lewis G. Williams

Lt. Oran Begwin, a pilot who also attended the reunion, added. "You remember the Burghoff Gardens in Fort Wayne? They had so many women working there in that town. We'd walk in the bar and almost every seat would be taken. But all these gals would start yelling, 'Come on over. Come on over.' So anyway, we went in, sat down, got a couple of drinks, and there's

Thatcher and Pratt. They had two or three women with them. They'd been drinking. Pratt had been drinking martinis and he'd had about five or six. He went to the rest room and he never did come back. Finally, Thatcher says 'Oran, go check on Pratt.' We went into the rest room. Pratt was sitting on a stool in there – passed out. First we went back told Thatcher and he said, 'Go get a cab and take him back to the base.' I said, 'OK.' So we got him up and out of there, took him to the base and put him to bed. Never did say anything to him about it after that."

Pratt was eventually to become the 453rd Squadron commander after Travis and Lipscomb.

Williams said, "He didn't know the whole story, did he?"

They all laughed.

* * * * *



William P. Zipperling



Benny O. Becker

Tex wrote, "U. S. Army ground forces had landed in North Africa and we began to speculate that we may not be fighting Japs after all – maybe we would be fighting Germans or Italians. We would not be long in finding out, because our aircraft had been repaired and we were ready to deploy overseas."

I asked Tex if William Zipperling had any problems because he was originally of German nationality.

"As far as I know," he replied, "his German ancestry didn't cause him any real problems. I have heard that he was under surveillance while we were at Ft. Wayne, IN, for a

while waiting for some of our new planes to be repaired from problems of leaking self-sealing fuel tanks. I also heard that Zip was aware that he was being followed. Zip was 100% loyal to the U.S. Everyone in the squadron liked Zip. There was one more combat crewman that was German-born. He was 'Beno' Becker who I believe came to the U.S. as an infant."

Zip's wife, Lillian, tells that he was offered a chance to go to another theater, in the eventuality of going to the European theater, but he said he wanted to stay with the group he had trained with. While in Fort Wayne, the 453rd Squadron took group photos of the officers and enlisted men.

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The Battle of Kasserine Pass, the first time in which Americans fought against German troops began on February 14th. The untried Americans had a very difficult learning experience and lost many casualties (about 1,800 killed and over two thousand captured), but learn they did, and soon, German General Rommel was very impressed. A few weeks later, he said he had never seen troops learn so fast. After this, General George Patton took command of the U.S. troops in Tunisia, and one of the first things he did was visit the hospital and tell the surgeon on duty that he would

have no victims of combat fatigue in his command. That started me wondering if generals ever got combat fatigue. I'm sure some of them did.

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March 1943

In early March, the Allied bomber command in England reported the first effective use of the 'Oboe' navigational aid, greatly improving bombing efficiency. In mid-March, the Germans renewed their U-boat campaign in the Atlantic and sank 27 American merchant ships in five days. The British asked us if we wanted help in how to deal with the U-boats, but we said we didn't need it. In the air war, the heavy bombers were definitely the stars of the show. They were very popular with the public. At this point, bomber command was so optimistic that they told the high brass they could win the war by themselves by bombing Germany into surrendering.

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April 1943

Still in Fort Wayne, Indiana, Gus announced, "That's when we got our new planes... brand, spanking new B-26s!"

Tex explained, "Our aircraft was one of the B-26C models and was armed with eleven 50-caliber machine guns. It had a wing-span a few feet longer than the ones in which we flew in training but it still had the highest wing loading of any bomber in the U. S. inventory. Each square foot of wing surface had to lift more than 50 pounds when the airplane was fully loaded. It was theorized that because of our speed we would come in so low and fast that we could strike a target and be gone before the enemy could react."

But the new aircraft were different. They were built with out a co-pilot seat. The controls had also been removed. The intention was that the group would test a "single pilot concept" which many in the Air Force doubted the validity of. General Moench, in his research, could not find any reasonable excuse for this 'strategy,' except for saving weight, and stated that, "Marauder aircrewmen would later assert that the persons responsible for the 'no Co-pilot decision' had no understanding respecting (nor consideration of) the other members of the B-26 aircrew." The men who had been training as copilots were reassigned to other units. The new planes arrived on April 1st and the Group left for Hunter Field in Savannah, Georgia.³⁸

"So we kissed the girls at Ft. Wayne goodbye," Tex said, "boarded our new planes and departed."

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As the 453rd was starting the first leg of their journey to the war, Marauders on the other side of the globe were getting their first taste of combat. The 22nd Bomb Group at Garbutt Field in Australia attacked the Japanese held airdrome at Rabaul in New Britain. They had to gas up at Seven-Mile Drome near Port Moresby to make the trip.³⁹

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Gus said, "We had to fly the southern route from North America down through South America and cut across to North Africa because our planes couldn't carry enough gas. We went from Baer Field at Fort Wayne to Georgia."

Gus's enlisted record indicates that he left the United States on April 9th, 1943. Captain Travis, the squadron commander, decided to fly with Lt. Gene Edwards as squadron navigator and he had Gus and Willie and a crew chief as crew. Apparently, C. J. Ketcham (radio/gunner) and Lt. R. J. Baker (bombardier/navigator) flew with Lt. Haller (Tex's pilot). It's possible that Lt. Satterwhite flew with the Travis crew also.

³⁸ Moench, *Marauder Men*, 30.

³⁹ Perret, *Winged Victory*, 96.



Above the clouds, a 453rd Martin Marauder in flight; this plane would eventually named *Smokey/Wyoming's Dirty Boy* #41-31831 (Photo courtesy of W. L. Brainard).

The standard directive was that each crew would let two men off the ship while taking on their crew chief [the plane's chief mechanic] for this flight. The displaced crewmen would fly overseas in transport planes. The squadron arrived at Morrison Field, West Palm Beach, Florida on the 4th of April. Tex and crew flew in their plane, which they had christened the *Egg Crate*.

Tex notes, "The top turret gunner, the bombardier, and myself were taken off of the B-26 at West Palm and taken to Miami, Florida, where we spent the night. The pilot, radio operator, a navigator and the crew chief remained as crew for the B-26. I was roused at 4:00 AM on the morning of April 9 and taken to the Miami Airport. There I was given sealed orders that were not to be opened until I was out of the continental limits of the country. We boarded a C-47 cargo plane and took off. After departing the U.S., I opened my orders and discovered that I was on my way to England!"

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The next stop was Borinquen Field, Puerto Rico.

Gus said, "Puerto Rico was a beautiful place, nice place to visit, but that's all. We stayed there about two days. Then, we went to Trinidad, Port au Spain [the 453rd flight schedule says, Atkinson Field, British Guiana]. We stayed there overnight... in a doggone swamp. The whole place was a big swamp. Then we stopped at Belem, Brazil, on the ninth, to get some gasoline. From there we went to Natal, Brazil on the next day, where I met some Portuguese people. They lived in huts. Oh, what a stinking place that was. In fact, our tents, were better than their huts. I could talk French which is close to Portuguese. If you know one language it helps to understand another, in this case. The Portuguese people are a mixture. They use the river like we use a road and if you went to one of their huts everything there would be yours. They weren't prejudiced. They didn't care if your skin was yellow or red. They didn't have much but were willing to give what they had. They didn't expect favors in return because that was considered an insult. They were great people. I'd like to go there and see the same kind of people again. You know, from what I've seen, I don't think South Americans are approached properly."

Gus remembered, "The way it was arranged, the whole crew would help check the plane, so we did. The crew chief took one engine and Willie and I took the other. There were 36 spark plugs

in each engine, and we forgot one. Later, the pilot couldn't figure out how come one engine was pulling harder than the other one. We made it all right, but it took all the way to the Sahara Desert to find out what was wrong. The crew chief decided to take another look. There was a brand new spark plug, laying right in the bottom of the cowling. He says: 'No wonder it didn't run very smoothly.'"

Willie added, "We think it must have popped out when we landed. We must have put it in finger-tight and then missed tightening it with a wrench. I don't know who's fault that was. To this day I don't. There were three of us looking at that. Now I thought I had touched every damn one of them. That's what Travis said too. 'It's nobody's fault. You guys did what you thought was right.' I must have had it in tight enough so that when you touched it, it didn't wiggle. We just thought it was tight... but it needed a torque (laughing)... pretty damn lucky!"

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While the 453rd Squadron was just getting en route to the war in England, the Marauder was already being phased out! On April 26th President Roosevelt and Glenn L. Martine visited the Glenn L. Martin-Nebraska Company at Omaha, Nebraska. After that it was decided to phase out the Marauder in favor of the B-29 Super Fortress.⁴⁰

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Charles J. Ketcham

The next leg of the journey was across the Atlantic to Ascension Island. Gen. Moench notes that such a long flight over water with limited navigational skills was a near disaster for the 453rd Squadron. Lt. Baker, navigator/bombardier for the Satterwhite crew, noticed that the Squadron was flying on the wrong course. Four Navigators had gotten the flight path wrong. Although the flight had been warned not to use radio directional bearing since enemy submarines sometimes gave false information, Sgt. Ketchum, also of the Satterwhie crew had located a radio beam off their starboard wing. All the planes in the squadron turned to the right, due south, and the red fuel lights came on fifteen minutes before they got there.⁴¹

Ketcham had saved the squadron! Gen. Moench notes that the popular saying among the men regarding this trip was: "If you miss Ascension, your wife will get a pension." During that flight Lt. Mark Sprague, a pilot with whom Willie would fly all of his missions, got separated from the rest of the squadron. Mark Sprague had a similar experience when he was separated from the squadron by some storm clouds. He also used radio direction finding to locate Ascension Island.⁴²

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Once safely in Africa, Gus and Willie tried to relax and visit the area.

"We went into town in Dakar, Africa, south of the Sahara on the east coast," Gus said. "There were these giant guys 6 feet 5 inches tall, all dressed up in beautiful uniforms, except they didn't have any shoes. You walked into town, saw uniformed persons barefoot, stomp, stomp, dust flying. They had guns. They were soldiers of the French army as far as they were concerned. Stood up in line, real pretty, but no shoes. On the beaches, the girls were all naked. The first one I saw was when I jumped over a log; she was taking a nap."

"Dakar interested me," said Willie. "The native black people were described as Caucasians, but they were black. So I looked it up and Caucasian is not a description of a person's color. It has to do with their bone structure. They were very tall, even the women were five-nine to five-ten. So you can imagine how we felt; we were just short little guys. They were beautiful people. I don't

⁴⁰ Moench, *Marauder Men*, 30.

⁴¹ Moench, *Marauder Men*, 31. Postwar comments of Richard J. Baker.

⁴² Moench, *Marauder Men*, 31. Postwar comments of Mark A. Sprague.

understand why we were supposed to stay away from them. It was taboo. We weren't supposed to go over to the 'gook' village."

* * * * *

"Well, we were in the middle of the Sahara Desert," Gus said. "Captain Travis came out and he says, 'Well, Willie and Gus, you aren't going to find anything to drink around here.' 'Who are you kidding?' I didn't say that, but I was thinking it. So we were out in the middle of the desert and we had to sleep on the ground. Well, a little ways off was a French Foreign Legion post. The barracks were down below with the Arabs and the canteen was up above. So I told Willie, 'Let's take a walk up to the canteen.'"

"Everybody Frenchie talked [French] to," Willie related, "thought he was from mainland France because his accent sounded like a Parisian. That's unusual for a Canadian. I'll say one thing about Frenchie, by God, he'd talk with everybody. I didn't talk so much then as I do now (laughing). The place was full of French merchant sailors who came in on a freighter. They were bringing in supplies. They were the first ship to come into the Port of Dakar in a while. When we got there, the shops in the town had been all deserted, but after that ship came in there was stuff to sell in the shop windows. We had been doing training patrols, flying up and down the coast. We had some depth charges on board, so if we saw anything that looked like a submarine we dropped on them. We hit something once – could have been a whale for all we knew, but we wanted to think that we hit a sub. At least we felt like we were doing some good, scaring the Germans away. We think that's how the French ship made it into the port. Frenchie was jabbering away with them... having a great time."

This was probably the first time Willie got to see Gus in his 'other element,' his French element. They tried to get a drink.

Gus said, "Of course, I got across to the bartender what we wanted. 'No,' he said, 'it's all buried.' They had had a bad storm and the whole wine cellar had caved in. Well, I told him, 'How about if we dig it out, and take what we want?' 'Go ahead.'"

"Those French sailors were looking for liquor too," Willie added, "so we were quite a bunch digging out that wine cellar. But Frenchie was having the best damn time talking to those guys and they were all laughing. Afterwards, we were sitting there and there I was, straight from the hills of Montana, and I didn't know what the hell was going on. We were drinking, 'course we were always drinking."



Richard J. Travis
Captain, 453rd

Lewis Williams, (at the reunion) interjected, "You knew how to drink though, didn't you?" Everybody laughed.

"Then we had to haul it back to the plane," Willie sighed.

I could just visualize Gus and Willie traversing the sand dunes under a bright desert midnight moon, with gunny sacks full of wine bottles, like a scene from *Beau Geste* – except they had gunny sacks instead of rifles.

"So the next morning," Gus continued, "there's Willie and me with wine in the back – that's what it was - a wine cellar in the back of the plane! Travis said, 'No,' he says, 'I don't believe it.' I says, 'You don't have to believe it. It's right there.' 'Impossible,' he says, 'we're miles away from civilization (laughing).' Look you gotta remember one thing. We were only 18 or 19 then but never forget, what you want to do you can do. That's what the Captain didn't understand. We could do it. Beautiful runway, it was like a rock garden."

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"Well, we left there and went to Marrakech," Gus resumed. "That's in the northern part of Africa towards Algeria. Here, we landed out on a sand strip."

This is where Tex and the other crewmen who flew over in transports were reunited with their planes.

“After departing from Dakar,” Tex related, “we flew in a two engine transport 1300 miles across the Sahara desert to Marrakech in French Morocco. There was nothing but sand as far as the eye could see until we reached the snow-capped Atlas Mountains. We crossed the mountains just before making our descent for landing at Marrakech. The top-turret gunner and I were reunited with our aircraft and our pilot and radio operator here. The crew chief was removed from the crew here and we gunners were put back on for the rest of the trip to our destination, England.”

Unfortunately the 453rd received another SNAFU here and they were grounded while they waited for some radio equipment to arrive, which didn't bother most of the guys. They were in exotic Africa and the place needed exploring.⁴³ The 454th Squadron arrived right behind them; the 455th and 456th squadrons had flown the northern route.

Gus said, “We used to sleep underneath the plane 'cause there weren't any barracks. We stayed overnight. We had to borrow somebody's place to stay. The way it used to be, they'd have some boys there, and they would keep 'em there for ninety days, see? Then, they'd rotate. So we used their place.”

Willie explained, “We stayed in a place called ‘the castle.’ It had marble floors and beautiful courtyards. It's a famous palace. They gave us mattresses but the marble floors were still pretty hard. I've seen that place in pictures and on TV.”

Gus continued, “The Captain says, ‘Where are you guys going?’ Of course, we were on our way right off. ‘Well, we're going into town.’ He answered, ‘It's 5 miles off.’ I says, ‘All right. We don't care about 5 miles, 4 miles.’ And we ended up in a real off-limits deal - what they called the Medina. Well, it's a trading place (laughing).”

“Why was it off limits?” I asked.

“Because there was too much opium going around and there were a lotta things to it. Ha! Of course, Willie and I go into the Medina; we knew we shouldn't be there, but we did.”

“What was in there?” I wanted to know.

“Everything. You name it. They had it. But Willie and I came out of there in a hurry. I'll tell you about that. We went in there and Willie wanted to go into a house of ill fame, you know? I says to him, ‘Willie, gee whiz, we're stretching our luck a little bit.’ ‘Ah,’ he says, ‘It's all right. We'll go.’ So I says, ‘Okay, your way.’ So I go in with him.”

“I deny it all!” Willie said. “I never went into places like that!”

Then he gave up.

“Oh, it probably was my idea. Frenchie wasn't a lot like that. He was having a drink and talking to the madame that ran the place. He didn't grab the girls like I would – if they were willing. He was kind of strict about that. Of course, me, I was looking at this young girl.”

Gus said, “So we got in there and, geez, I looked downstairs and here comes the M.P. I says, ‘Willie, let's go!’ Up we go, up over the roofs!”

Willie said, “A couple of MP's came right in there, and you know what one of those MP's did? He picked up that young girl. ‘She may have syphilis,’ he said. They didn't want us to use the front door. ‘That way,’ one of them said, and he pointed to a door that went out to the roof. We were out on the roof in a flash. Then he yelled, ‘Get your asses out of here and don't come back!’ I think they just wanted the place to themselves. Those MP's weren't perfect you know.”

“Well, the way the Medina is made, the houses are all joined together,” Gus resumed. “You can run from one roof to another - all the way to the other end of town. So we got out of that one all right.”

Willie continued, “We came down off the roof into a courtyard with eight or ten foot tall adobe walls. It was full of camels and camel-drivers. I don't know how we got in that corral to be

⁴³ Moench, Marauder Men, 32. Postwar comments of Col. Roscoe R. Haller.

honest. Maybe there was some stairs or we jumped, I don't know. Here we were in the corral and all these guys were sittin' around a fire with their heads all covered up. They were cooking. It was very mysterious. Frenchie sat down with 'em and he got to yacking with 'em ninety miles an hour. They were smoking opium. We didn't want any damn opium, we wanted something to drink. So Frenchie got them to direct us to a place that might have some whiskey. There was a store nearby and that's where we got a hold of some raisin whiskey. We came into the front door of our barracks... that Moroccan palace... singing our heads off and carrying a case of whiskey, and everybody was asking, 'Where did you get that?' Raisin whiskey. It was drinkable, but it wasn't that good. It was OK considering that nobody could find very much to drink around there. The guys crowded around and we shared it with them. We really enjoyed that whiskey."

Willie began to philosophize.

"Stop and think back over it, we weren't being very useful at the time we were there. That wasn't really my fault (laughing). Frenchie didn't have to let me do it. After all, he was the boss, you know (laughing). He was older than me."

My aunt Martha really wonders about who it was that had all the bright ideas in this Gus and Willie partnership. I think we pretty much agree that it was Gus that was leading the charge.

* * * * *

Gus continued, "Then a little while later, we were in town there. When they close a door on a shop, it's an iron gate, they lock it. We came out of a bar... like I was saying, when they slam a door, they really mean it; an iron grill! From the Medina we got to touring the bars. Then we looked for a cab. So we got this poor little old Arab. He had a beautiful carriage. The taxi drivers didn't have gas, so they had a horse in front of the car."

"You mean they had a real car, with a horse in front of it?" I asked.

"Ya, so we ran across this guy with a regular horse buggy, with two horses, real pretty, nice fenders, etc. By that time we had gathered up about eleven of us there. Of course, eleven guys in a five-passenger deal, you're gonna squeeze something. The poor guy had to walk. We had 4 miles to go. There's the Arab driving his horses, walking, and he's cussing. Between Arabic and French, you know. 'Go ahead and sass, all you want!' Well, finally, we got to the gate at the base and he says 'so much' for a price. 'Baloney, we'll give you this much and that's all.' Well, he started hollering for the M.P.s. An M.P. comes up. I explained to him, 'The guy's all wrong. He offered us a ride.' 'Well, the cop says, 'He's gotta be paid.' 'All right,' I says, 'So a couple of bucks is enough.' So the M.P. tells the Arab to take off, 'Get out of here,' he says, 'You're causing too much trouble (laughing).'"

"That same night one of the boys slept in town," Gus continued, "in a place that they called a community dormitory. They stole his stockings, but left his boots on! Now can you figure that out? The Arabs over there were always 'last-price-first'. So they took the 'last price' and took his stockings. I still can't figure how it could be done. He got up in the morning, he had his shoes on but no stockings!"

"Did they take anything else?" I asked.

"Nope. All they wanted were his stockings."

"We went back to the ship one night," adds Willie, "to pick up something. We didn't know it, but our planes were guarded by native soldiers. Frenchie said, 'Be careful, we got guards on the planes,' but I just charged right in and one of them jumped us. He grabbed me... a big hand grabbed me by the shoulder... tore off a button trying to get at my dog tags. The German tags didn't have that. They got paid extra to kill Germans. He was about 6' 5" with a red jacket, shorts, bare feet, and a small funny hat [a fez], with a big curved knife in his belt. I saw that big knife come around to the front of my throat. They could feel for that 'notch' on the American tags.

That's what he was going for. They spoke French, these guys and Frenchie was jabbering at him as fast as he could, and I think that helped. I guess you know we were sober as judges after that!"

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Finally, England bound:

Tex said, "On the 24th of April we departed on a short flight to Port Lyautey located on the Moroccan coast where we landed on a perforated-steel runway and spent the night. The next morning, which was Easter Sunday, we departed for England. Our aircraft was heavily loaded. We had auxiliary fuel tanks in the front bomb bay and special tools stowed in the rear bomb bay. We gunners were each given 150 rounds of ammunition for our guns because we would be flying adjacent to German occupied France and well within range of Nazi fighter planes. The flight, however, was uneventful and we landed in Newquay located on the southwest tip of England."

"When we flew up along the French coast we kept looking out, wondering if anybody would show up," Willie noted. "We needed target practice. Frenchie and I – we were only supposed to carry 150 rounds per gun, but I found out where they kept the ammunition. Being an old scrounger, I got a hold of some extra belts to put over my shoulder, put on my overcoat over 'em, and took 'em out to the plane and handed 'em up to Frenchie and he tucked them away in the back bomb bay. Then I went back for another bunch and packed them away in the tail gun spot. I had enough room right to here and here (on each side) to pack in 50-100 rounds on each side. But what you do when you pack in extra weight, you make the trim job on the airplane a little bit different. So the pilot notices it."

Uh oh, Satterwhite again?

"Well, anyway, we took off, went through Algiers and headed for England," Gus resumed. "We're coming in, and I don't know if you know anything about planes, but a red light tells you your gas tanks are getting pretty darn low. So we pulled into Wales. And that was on Easter Sunday. I'll never forget that. The old red lights were blinking to beat heck. And most of the aircrafts had the same trouble, so we landed there. Of course, Easter Sunday, you figure on a decent meal, you know. But what did we have? Mutton! You know what mutton is? Dried-up lamb. And we had potatoes, mutton and potatoes!"

The fact that after the war, Gus never again ate any kind of meat that came from a lamb or sheep testifies to what an impression it made on him.

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Casimier V. Sochocki

About that same time, on the 25th of April, the 453rd ground crews left Myrtle Beach for the ETO. Casimier Sochocki describes their send-off in a small diary he kept. "Left Myrtle Beach – 1:30 P.M. – 4/25/42. Arrived Camp Kilmer – 12:30 P.M. – 4/26/42." They stayed there about a week before moving on.

* * * * *

May 1943

Sochocki and the ground crews left Camp Kilmer at 5:15 P.M. on May 4th. By this time they knew they were heading overseas for sure.

"When we left Camp Kilmer," he wrote, "we were figuring on a band to see us off, but all they had was a truck which played a few pieces for us on a record. Then, on second thought, we decided that it was the best because we didn't want anyone to know we were coming. We pulled in at the Lackawanna Station in New Jersey about 8:20 P.M, and all piled onto the Lackawanna Ferry, went across the Hudson River to Pier 40 at Manhattan Island. Boarded the Queen Elizabeth at 9:05 P.M. 5/4/43. Fifteen minutes before we boarded the Queen, the Red Cross women came around and passed out one pack of Old Golds [cigarettes] and a Hershey candy bar. Later, other women came around with coffee and doughnuts, were we ever hungry!"

The ship left New York at 8 A.M. the next morning.

“I had stateroom number 25 on B-deck – with 8 other guys. We nine would have the room for 24 hours, then nine other men would sleep in our room for 24 hours. That went on for six days. We were packed just like sardines, the approximate load on the Queen was about 18,000 troops. It had 32 life-boats which looked to me to hold about 70 men and 2,000 life rafts which would hold 30 men to a raft. It is also known that it would take 7 torpedoes (well-hit torpedoes) to sink the Queen so we were on a damn good boat.”

“The first day at sea, we were escorted by three Navy blimps and a few B-25s. Second day, we had a few Catalinas on our port and starboard sides. Third, fourth, and fifth days we were on our own. We dodged a few subs here and there and it was said that we also were missed by a torpedo. The Queen can outrun anything on sea. It can do about 35 knots and hour. It can do between 40 and 45 knots but there is no need for such tremendous speed (only in emergency). The sixth day was actually a day of happiness for us when we sighted land, passed the northern part of Ireland, and then went through the Firth of Clyde and dropped anchor.”

“Our Squadron was the first to get on the landing boat, and a General named Phillips, a Colonel, a Capt. W.A.A.C. and a 2nd Lt. W.A.A.A were the first to hit Scottish soil. I was the 4th man in our Squadron to get on Scottish soil. The trains we got on in Gaurock, Scotland, sure did look funny but boy, could they ever go. We rode through Scotland in three hours and forty-five minutes and I’ve never seen more beautiful country in all my life – clean, and very good farming land, more pretty rabbits hopping along the railroad tracks and through the fields. We stopped at Carlisle, England, and got coffee and a package full of sandwiches and cakes. They tasted out of the ordinary but damn good. I couldn’t sleep at all on the train - it gets dark here about 10:45. They shoved the watches up 2 hours ahead of time to save light. We only have about 6 hours of darkness, that is in the summer and fall, but in the winter and spring it will be more dark than light. At 8:00 A.M. on the 12th we were told to put our packs on and at 8:15 we finally arrived at Diss, England. We were welcomed by 12 British Spitfires traveling about 450 miles an hour at about 60 feet height – they sure did look pretty. We were taken to Horham Field, station 119, by British and G.I. trucks.”

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Just as the 453rd ground crews reached Horham Field, the aircrews also arrived in England. Tex said, “From Newquay we flew to Bury St. Edmunds where the 322nd Bomb Group was based. They were the first Marauder group to arrive in England but had not yet begun operations. The reason for us going to their station was that our airfield was not quite ready for occupancy. I enjoyed the deployment over but I must say I was glad it was finished. Within 16 days I had been in four of the six continents of the world!”

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Hitler’s reinforcements to North Africa at the expense of other theaters didn’t help. General Rommel’s German and Italian troops finally surrendered on May 13th, ending the three-year, see-saw desert campaign. The war was over in Africa and the Allies were now free to invade Sicily.

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Gus recalled events at Bury St. Edmunds.

“We got in there and we met boys from another outfit,” he explained. “We were the 323 and they were the 322. Two days later they went on a mission.”

Tex remembers, “Our host, the 322nd Bomb Group planned their first mission, which was to destroy a power plant at Ijmuiden (pronounced ‘eemoyden’), Holland. This attack was launched on May 14 using delayed action bombs in order to give the Dutch workers a chance to evacuate before they exploded.”

This was the first Marauder mission launched from bases in England. On the 14th of May, twelve Marauders, led by Colonel Stillman, took off at 0950 hours, each plane loaded with four 500lb bombs. One aircraft was damaged by flak and was forced to return to base without reaching the target. In another aircraft, the pilot was killed when he attempted to bail out (the rest of the crew made it). Every aircraft but one had received battle damage. The survivors were alarmed about the amount of damage they had received, but the real let-down was when air reconnaissance photos revealed very little destruction to the target. Everyone was severely disappointed. It was determined that another attack would be made on the same target.



A B-26 Martin Marauder takes off (Photo courtesy of W. L. Brainard).

Tex recalls, “The aircraft returned from this raid badly damaged from enemy anti-aircraft fire. One of the badly shot-up planes crashed after returning to the station while attempting to land. The Marauders had received a ‘bloody nose’ but the worst was yet to come – a real catastrophe. Photo-reconnaissance revealed that the power plant had not been destroyed so three days later the 322nd attacked the plant with ten B-26s.”

On the 17th of May ten planes were ordered to make the same run. In spite of adamant objections by their CO, Colonel Stillman, against making the same attack so soon after the first, the mission was pushed forward by Command. Stillman believed the mission was utter foolishness. When leaving, he insisted on saying, “Goodbye,” rather than “See you later.”⁴⁴

The return time from the mission was estimated to have been 1250 but finally by 1330 it was obvious that no planes would return. All ten had been lost. The depression and despair the men felt could not have been more complete. Everyone looked for something or someone to blame. Some even thought an enemy spy had given away the mission details, and many blamed higher command. Others blamed the B-26.⁴⁵

“We all went out on the flight line to await their return,” Tex remembers. “None of the ten planes ever returned. What a blow to our morale this was!”

⁴⁴ Freeman, *B-26 At War*, 52.

⁴⁵ Freeman, *B-26 At War*, 54.

No doubt every aircrew in the B-26 fleet in England was thinking, “We may be next.”
“We found out that low-level flying wasn’t our cup of tea,” Willie said. The Germans had 40mm’s on forty-foot towers, so when we came in at treetop level they had no trouble shooting us down.”

Gus said, “They had told us before, ‘we don’t need you right away.’ Well, they needed us after that!”

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Things were very bad, but just when it seemed that the situation could not have been worse - it got worse. Col. Thatcher was informed that the 323rd would be next to fly the same mission. He replied that he would do it but he would not order any one to follow his lead. General Longfellow, whose constant ranting had earned him the nickname “Screaming Eagle,” threatened him with dismissal from duty but he still wouldn’t back down.⁴⁶ Subsequently, and fortunately, it was General Longfellow who was replaced by a West Point graduate named Anderson and to the beleaguered Marauders General Anderson was nothing less than a godsend. Once in command he began to discuss the possibilities of attempting medium level bombing, which the Marauder was originally designed for, a fact long forgotten by the Press.⁴⁷

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In May 1943, the American public didn’t have much going for it – at least on the Air Force end of things. The only morale boost in this period was the fact that the *Memphis Belle* and its crew were the first ones to hit the coveted twenty-five mission mark. As Perret wrote, “When in May 1943 the crew of the *Memphis Belle* of the 91st Group completed the first twenty-five mission tour of any plane in the Eighth, they were immortalized in American folk lore for miraculously overcoming impossible odds.⁴⁸ I saw the real *Memphis Belle* in its place on the banks of the Mississippi River in Memphis, Tennessee. It was nothing short of beautiful. It deserves every honor. The movie is great too, if not historically accurate, it still catches the flavor of the experience of the heavy bomber crews.

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Finally, the 453rd’s new air base was ready.

“Then we went to Horham,” Gus said. “That’s a nice name for a town, isn’t it?”

Gus, Willie, Tex, and the others joined the ground crews at Horham Field, in Suffolk County. The facilities were barely adequate and so spread out that bicycles were needed to get around the base.⁴⁹

I asked Gus, “Where did you guys get your bicycles?”

“In the bar,” he said. “The first one cost me \$65.00 dollars.”

Tex remembered a funny story involving Col. Wood and his bicycle.

“Many of us rode our bicycles to the combat crew mess hall. Col. Wood rode his up there and parked it beneath a large chestnut tree. When he came for his bicycle, after eating, it had disappeared. Someone had put a rope on it and lifted and tied it way up in the tree. Col. Wood finally spotted it and had someone climb up and bring it down. He was good-natured about it and just laughed about the episode.”

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⁴⁶ Moench, *Marauder Men*, 42.

⁴⁷ Perret, *Winged Victory*, 254.

⁴⁸ Perret, *Winged Victory*, 253.

⁴⁹ Moench, *Marauder Men*, 36.

June 1943

“General Thatcher, now, was Colonel Thatcher then,” Gus explained, “after that group had lost those planes we’d been grounded. They grounded every B-26 in Europe. They were afraid that that type of plane was ineffective in combat.” Things were not looking good for the B-26 in general, having been removed from service in the Pacific Theater, along with the failure of the Ijmuiden missions. Now rumors that the Marauder might be pulled from service in Europe as well meant that the morale of the men who had committed themselves to “keep them flying” was at an all-time low.⁵⁰

Tex described his feelings at this time, “We, who flew this airplane, still had confidence in her. Some of the ‘brass’ decided that the problem was that the B-26 just wasn’t being used properly. They believed this airplane could be effective if flown at medium altitudes with fighter escort. It was decided to give this concept a try. We retrained for operations at medium altitudes of 8,000 to 12,000 feet.” While the commanders and politicians in Washington D.C. deliberated the value of the B-26 Bomber, the 323rd group crews back in England were not idle. The planes were refitted with the new Norden bombsight and they began to retrain for medium altitude missions. Everyone was very serious. This was contrary to all their training up to this point. It was like starting all over again especially for the pilots and bombardiers.⁵¹



Jack L. Boling

“Our First Sergeant, Jack Boling, was a bombardier even though he was an enlisted man,” Willie said. “He was one of the first guys ever trained on a Norden bombsight. He was our lead bombardier for a while. He was good, but he had a hell of a lot more practice with that bombsight than any of those officers. He’d been with it since it was experimental, so he knew that bombsight inside out. Boling was a real quiet guy. One day he came back from a trip to London. He had a pup – one of those English bulldog pups – he became our squadron mascot. He was one of those big-ole’ slobbery things. But they’re gentle. One time a B-17 crew was forced to land at our base, and when they left, our dog was missing. We thought they took it. Boling went over to their airbase and everywhere else trying to find that dog.”

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Gus remembered one of the ‘characters’ in his barracks, “George - Oh! Ha, ha! George, beautiful George! We called him ‘beautiful’ because he looked in the mirror all the time. He stole a full-length mirror to look in. And Ole George, when he got that mirror about the size of the door there - he’d be standing in front of it saying, ‘Boy, aren’t you beautiful? Aren’t you lovely?’ He’d be tidying up his clothes, you know, getting all ready to go out. He had the mirror in the corner in such a way that only he could use it really.”

“One night, this was at the first base. We came in and it had rained. There was this big puddle right in front of the barracks, well ...Quonset hut. George came in from town. It was dark and that little spotlight on the bike doesn’t give you much light. He comes sliding in, smack into the barracks. Naturally, he fell off the bike. I mean what else are you gonna do? He said, ‘You doggone...’ He got madder than heck at his bike. So he picks up the bike, throws it against the barracks - bangs it all up... stove it all to heck. The next morning when he got up, he asked, ‘Who stove up my bike?’ I answered, ‘George, go take another look in your mirror. You might recognize who the guy is.’”

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Willie’s troubles with the pilot, Satterwhite, finally came to a head.

⁵⁰ Freeman, *B-26 At War*, 56.

⁵¹ Moench, *Marauder Men*, 58. Postwar comments of George B. Weaver, Jr., 99BW Training Officer.



Walter L. Woods



Lawrence Nusser

Willie said, “Lt. Satterwhite decided he could get a promotion quicker if he transferred me to another crew. He was like that. He wanted those promotions... a real brown-noser... so me and Frenchie were separated.”

Tex had a different opinion, “As for me, I had the utmost respect for Satterwhite. He was the oldest pilot we had in the Squadron and that’s why he had the nickname ‘Pappy.’”

Gus appeared to remain neutral on the subject and Willie was transferred to another plane: #41-34687, called *Pub 13*, piloted by 1st Lt. M. A. Sprague. “Sprague didn’t mind a joke now and then,” Willie said. “He could take a joke.”

There was no co-pilot on this crew either. The bombardier was 2nd Lt Donald A. Nelson. Besides Willie, the enlisted crew consisted of radio-gunner Lawrence C. Nusser and turret gunner Walter L. Woods. “Woody, our turret gunner, was from somewhere in Texas,” Willie continued. “He was a pretty quiet guy. He didn’t party with us much. We used to have a few drinks together now and then but that’s all.”

“Larry Nusser, the radio operator, was from Hershey Pennsylvania. He seemed to me to be the kind of kid who didn’t get very far from home. His time in the service was the most far away. He was an older guy, I think he was married then and had one or two kids. He went to the big town [London] with us one time. When he tagged along with me he was just as happy as a clam. He couldn’t get over how I went there and I went everywhere. You know,

your Dad and I just didn’t stop. Hell, if there’s forty bars, you’re supposed to visit ‘em! Frenchie was a year older than I was. He was an old guy – that’s why he was the ringleader. He’d ask, ‘What do you think about going to that place?’ ‘Let’s go.’ I’d say. I was the ‘let’s-goer’ (laugh). He’d come up with an idea and I’d say, ‘Let’s do it.’ Anything was better than sitting around.”

“What did ‘Pub 13’ mean?” I asked Willie.

“I don’t know,” Willie replied. “Bar 13, the 13th bar. That plane never flew straight. It flew along like a dogleg over to the side. Sprague loved it. It helped him to stay in formation. The tail was working toward the plane he was flying on, so he just had to keep it trimmed up and the plane itself kept him in close. More people who were flying that plane would taxi it around, getting it all ready for take-off, and they would abort while they were going down the runway. All of a sudden, they had the brakes on and they would pull off down by the end of the runway. I remember one guy came back and said, ‘What the hell is wrong with this airplane?’ Of course our crew chief would say, ‘There’s nothing wrong with it.’ He’d get it up there... take that plane, taxi it out, get it running down the runway 50-60 miles an hour, to test it. He couldn’t see anything wrong with it. ‘Oh,’ he says, ‘you got to use a little more left rudder. Sprague, first time he took off in it, he was worried about it. Came in for a landing and it worked OK. After that, when he got in a ‘straight’ plane, he wasn’t quite sure if it was flying right or not. It was a pretty good plane. Some pilots refused to fly it when they were assigned that plane, ‘Oh no, you don’t. You ain’t putting us in that.’ They didn’t want to fly in it.”

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“Willie and I were separated,” Gus said. “He was in one crew and I was in another. So we were out of it as far as being together was concerned... unless we happened to have the same time off, which wasn’t too often.”

“You mean the only trouble you got into was with Willie?” I asked.

“Right! (laughing).”

“One time, Willie and I were out on the same trip. We used to go to this little bar every night. But we were allowed only ‘so-much’ liquor; everything was rationed. So Willie and I used to go to this little place about eleven miles from the base.”

“What did it look like?” I wondered.

“Well, it wasn’t too bright. So I couldn’t tell you what it looked like. The inside was just... call it a pub. Anyway we had an arrangement made with this guy that he would save half of his ration for us - which he would do. Naturally on the way back, we weren’t exactly sober. You see that spot of light there?”

“Ya (very small).”

“All right, that’s what we had for a headlight on the bike... on one bike, just a spot, just a stinking little spot. We had regular flashlights but had to have them covered so that only a spot showed on account of the blackout. Well, they had this traveling circus that came through. We went and took a look at it and afterwards, we headed out of town and Willie drives into this ditch about six feet deep. He’s right behind me and we’re going down this long hill. I knew the hill and he knew the hill. He says to me, ‘I’ll meet you at the bottom.’ ‘Okay, go ahead,’ I replied. We take off. I go down and I’m waiting... looking around... I couldn’t find Willie. Finally I hear a yell, ‘Hey, Frenchie, where are you?’ ‘I’m in the road.’ ‘Oh,’ he says, ‘I’m in the woods.’ He missed the turn. So I had to go back halfway up the hill to get him out. Well, I finally got him out and we started back.”

“Was he all right?” I asked Gus.

“Oh yeah, he wasn’t a bronco-buster for nothing,” Gus replied.



Gus and Willie – always trouble.

Willie said, “Every time the damn road turned, that light disappeared and I went straight off it. Frenchie was just as bad off as I was, but he never fell off his bike (laughing). He could stay on a bike even when he was drunk. I couldn’t.”

I could just visualize Gus and Willie riding along an English country road on a dark night. Just shapes zipping along on bikes and suddenly, you can’t see it happening, but you can hear Willie going into the bushes and yelling for help.

“We hadn’t been stationed at that base for very long,” Gus continues, “so when we got back, I’ll be darned, we couldn’t find the barracks! We get driving around the perimeter almost all night long. We were going for the water tower... I dunno, maybe it moved. Well, anyway, when daylight came we finally found the barracks.”

“Frenchie and I always drank cognac if we could get it,” Willie said. “We’d be sitting there drinking, and eventually his eyelids would start to droop, and then I knew that pretty soon I’d be out of the conversation ‘cause he’d start talking French. His eyelids would be almost shut and I would ask him a question and he would answer me in French. I didn’t know what was going on the first time it happened! I got so I’d just keep talking to him in English and he kept talking in French. He couldn’t speak English when he was drunk. The guys would ask me, ‘Brainard, you speak French?’ ‘Hell no,’ I’d say, ‘I’m just talking to him in English, I think he’s answering me (laughing).’ Then we’d come back to the base on our bikes, hollering and singing. My problem was I liked to sing. We’d come down the street on the base at two o’clock in the morning and I’d be singing my heart out. The MP’s would tell us to shut up. Every time we went by a Quonset hut people would be yelling, ‘Shut up!’ Didn’t matter to us.”

“Satterwhite drank and smoked but not partying like we did,” Willie added, “riding bicycles, hollering at each other. He was out taking in the scenery, drinking quietly by himself (little pinky in the air). That’s how he thought it should be.”

Willie and Satterwhite – like oil and water!

* * * * *

The Allied air command in England announced a new coordinated air offensive with the USAAF flying ‘precision’ missions by day while the RAF flew ‘saturation’ missions by night. This revealed a profound difference in bombing strategy between the Americans and the British. The Americans wanted to destroy military targets, as difficult as that was, and the British wanted retaliation for all the civilian suffering that had been inflicted by the Germans during the Battle of Britain. They wanted to destroy military targets too, but if civilians got in the way, so much the better. The new ‘coordination’ actually meant that they couldn’t agree on basic strategies – they had simply agreed not to agree.

* * * * *

The theme song for the Army Air Corps was written in 1939, before the war began. General Hap Arnold wanted a theme song for the Air Corps, one with a strong flavor to it. He organized a committee to sponsor a contest for the best song and Robert Crawford's entry won. Later, the title was changed to the Army Air Force. Here it is:

The Army Air Corps

Off we go into the wild blue yonder,
Climbing high into the sun;
Here they come,
zooming to meet our thunder,
Attaboys, give 'er the gun
Down we dive
Spouting our flames from under
Off with one terrible roar
We live in fame or go down in flame,
Boy, nothing can stop the Army Air Corps

(Spoken): Clear! Clear! Contact! Contact!

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

Off we go into the wild sky yonder,
Keep the wings level and true.
If you live you'll be a gray-haired wonder
Keep the nose out of the blue!
Flying men guarding the nations borders,
We'll be there followed by more!
In echelon we carry on,
Boy nothing can stop the Army Air Corps!

Alvino Rey, Bill Schallen & the Four King Sisters, Vocals (Crawford) 1942.



Technical Sergeant Casimier V. Sochocki
323rd Bomb Group, 453rd Bomb Squadron
USSAF 1941-1945
(Photo courtesy of Casimier Sochocki)



Technical Sergeant Richard H. Inman
323rd Bomb Group, 453rd Bomb Squadron
USSAF 1942-1945
(Photo courtesy of Richard Inman)

Chapter 3 – The Marauder War Begins July – September 1943

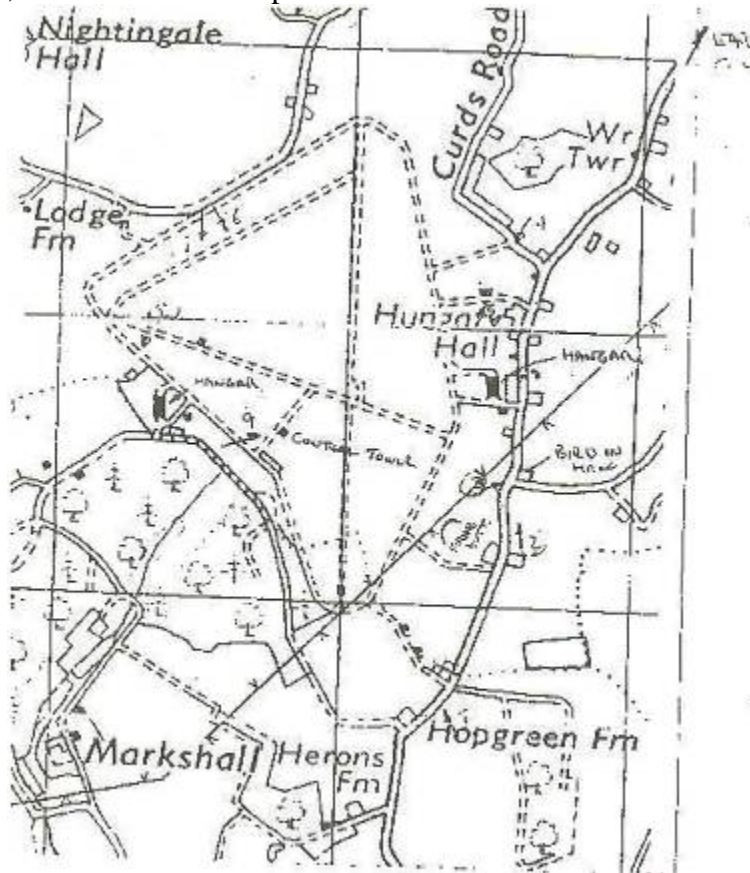
July 1943

On July 9th and 10th Allied forces under the command of General George Patton and Field Marshall Montgomery, the Allies invaded Sicily.

* * * * *

The 323rd moved to a new air base at Earls Colne. Sochocki was in the first group to arrive. “Left Horham Field in G.I. and British trucks as our advanced echelon 6/13/43 at 7:50 A.M.,” he wrote. “Seen some beautiful country on the way to new field. We arrived at Earls Colne, Station 358 at 10:25 A.M.”

The next day, the rest of the Group followed.



Map of Earls Colne Airfield. Tex wrote, “At Earls Colne we moved into steel Nissen Huts which were going to be my home for more than a year. Our station was located in Sussex County of England just a short distance inland from the English Channel. Our Niessen hut was located behind Marks Hall. There was a swan pond (the resting place of many old bicycles) between us and the old mansion that housed Wing headquarters (Courtesy of Samuel Findley).

On July 14th, the 323rd Group formally took over AAF Station 358 (Earls Colne, England) from the RAF and, in spite of the sobering news respecting the May 17th losses of the 322nd group, it was eager to get into the war.⁵² But even during this transition and retraining period, the Marauders received one more set-back, and although they didn't know about it yet, it would affect them for the duration of the war. Just before their first mission the US Committee under Harry S.

⁵² Moench, *Marauder Men*, 45.

Truman that was delegated to study procurement of warplanes issued a report that gave the impression that the B-26 was soon to be written off.⁵³

It was unfortunate that when Harry S. Truman and members of the Committee arrived as observers at the Avon Park bombing range in the US, two crashed B-26s were burning, one at each end of the runway. They concluded that the B-26 was a bad idea. But for the men affiliated with the actual operations of the bomber, there was no question about its value. Powerless to do anything else, they attempted to express their faith in the Marauder and their contempt for the Truman committee.⁵⁴

Fred Mingus was there at Avon Park the time of Harry Truman's visit. He said, "We had a big session down there when Vice President Truman came down to find out why we were killing so many pilots in training. Of course, at Avon Park we had them burning at both ends of the runway because of the runaway props."

* * * * *

Gus said, "General Arnold, he was in charge of the whole Air Force. He was Thatcher's father-in-law – nothing like being married into the family. Thatcher went to talk with him. Well, anyway, when he came back, this was July 14, he picked out the crews he wanted to fly the first mission at 10,000 feet. And he says, 'If we're not successful, the B-26s are going to be out; grounded for good.' They didn't pick the easiest target in the world for the next mission. They picked Abbeville, which doesn't mean a thing to you, but it's a big railroad junction where all the railroads of France come in together, right down in the joint."

This was Gus' and the 323rd's first mission. The plan was for the Group to send a formation of eighteen planes, called a 'Box,' composed of three 'Flights' of six planes each. The Box was arranged so that all the gunners would have the best line of fire at oncoming fighters. The Lead Flight flew in the center and forward. The Right Wing flew a bit higher and to the right of the center while the left wing flew lower and to the left of the center. Each flight would fly in a 'V' formation like a flock of geese, or in two sections of three planes in a 'V'. The position for each plane was numbered. The point of the Flight was flown by the Flight Leader (the #1 spot) and the other planes fanned out to the left and right and slightly lower than the Flight leader. That's why you read about pilots saying something like, "I was flying the number three position...etc." Each Box leader would have a squadron bombardier, and a squadron navigator and sometimes a copilot. One of the other flight leaders would be assigned as deputy leader in case something happened to the Group Leader. Flight leaders also had both, a bombardier and a navigator.

On this mission the 455th Squadron provided the Third Flight (Left Wing/Low), and Colonel Thatcher led the group, flying #1 in the First Flight (Center/Lead) with the 454th Squadron. The 453rd Squadron lead by Captain Lipscomb was slated to provide six planes to form the Second Flight (Right Wing/High). One plane from the 454th and one from the 455th did not take off due to mechanical difficulties, so sixteen planes made the bomb run. Of the men previously mentioned in this story, William "Zip" Zipperling, Howard Odom, William Crowe, and Dell Benson were also on this first mission. Willie and Tex were not assigned to this one. The six 453rd crews assigned to fly the first mission were:

⁵³ Freeman, *B-26 At War*, 61.

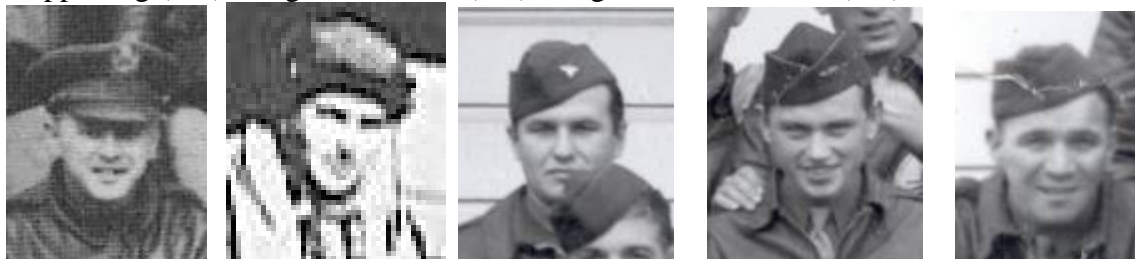
⁵⁴ Moench, *Marauder Men*, 68.

1. The Lipscomb Crew: Capt. J. P. Lipscomb (P), (no CP), 1st Lt. G. O. Edwards (NB), 2nd Lt. R Morwood (NB), S/Sgt R. E. Clark (RG), S/Sgt W. P. Crowe (EG) S/Sgt J. P. Berry (TG).



Roger Morwood, Roland Clark, William Crowe, James Berry.

2. The Van Antwerp Crew: 1st Lt. A. G. VanAntwerp (P), (no CP), S/Sgt E. C. Duffy (NB), S/Sgt W. P. Zipperling (RG), S/Sgt W. D. Diel (EG), S/Sgt H. G. Gustafson (TG).



Anthony Van Antwerp, Eugene Duffy, William Zipperling, Willis "Dirty" Diel, Harold Gustafson.

3. The Satterwhite Crew: 1st Lt. A. W. Satterwhite (P), (no CP), 1st Lt. G. J. Friesner (NB), 2nd Lt. R. J. Baker (NB), S/Sgt C. J. Ketchum (RG), S/Sgt V. Rogers (EG), S/Sgt G. G. Poulin (TG).



Albert Satterwhite, George Friesner, Richard Baker, Charles Ketchum, Victor Rogers, Gaston Poulin.

4. The Heather Crew: 1st Lt. W. J. Heather (P), 1st LT. W. E. W. Stevens (CP), 1st Lt. G. P. Burnett (NB), S/Sgt J. E. Bull (RG), S/Sgt H. Odom (EG), Sgt C. Turpin (TG).



William Heather, William Stevens, George Burnett, John Bull, Howard Odom, Cecil Turpin.

5. The Gohdes Crew: 1st Lt. C. D. Gohdes (P), (no CP), S/Sgt Roglien (NB), S/Sgt W. H. Bos (RG), S/Sgt E. C. Bell (EG), S/Sgt J. C. Bailey (TG).



Clifford Gohdes, William Bos, Clifford Bell, James Bailey.

6. The Hartnett Crew: 1st Lt. W. E. Hartnett (P), (No CP), 2nd Lt. L. J. Carboneau (NB), T/Sgt B. Lasky (RG), S/Sgt B. A. Becker (EG), S/Sgt D. S. Benson (TG).



William Hartnett, Leo Carbonneau, Benjamin Lasky, Benno Becker, Dell Benson.

In late afternoon, July 16, 1943 Colonel Thatcher led 16 B-26s from Earls Colne to attack the Abbeville Railroad yards in France. They were given a substantial Spitfire escort to support them.⁵⁵

“One thing our command did, they made sure we had plenty of protection,” Gus said. “They got 600 British and American fighters to go in with us [accounts indicate it was 18 full fighter squadrons]. We were only bombers but they came in with us. We went in and we nailed it good, real good [the bombing accuracy was actually poor, but at this point, it didn’t matter]. Of course, we got a lot of anti-aircraft, which we expected anyway.”

Only one man, a member of the 455th squadron, was wounded. Every man in the 323rd Group waited on the flight line for them to return. With all planes account for everyone felt an immense relief at the success of the mission. It was time to celebrate.⁵⁶

An article released from the Associated Press from an Eighth Air Force Support Command Bomber Base in England, July 16, relayed a description of the event:

Medium bombers of the Eighth Air Force in a surprise dusk attack on France hit the important freight yards of Abbeville today. It was the third United States medium bomber raid in this theatre and the first under the Eighth Air Force’s “tactical” branch.

None of our bombers was lost and only one man was injured in the course of a short flak barrage near the target 15 miles inside the French coast. Today’s operation was the first disclosure that medium bombers had been transferred to the Air Support Command.

One of the new armor flak suits worn by U.S. bomber crews probably saved the life of Lieutenant Thomas G. Trainor, 13 15th Avenue, Haverhill, Mass., a bombardier-navigator on the bomber “Miss Emily”.

“We hit kind of heavy flak over the target,” he said. “About the third or fourth burst I saw came past my nose. I saw a piece ricochet right past my eye.”

It ricocheted, he found out, off the back of his flak vest, tearing a hole in the canvas covering.

⁵⁵ Freeman, *B-26 at War*, 61.

⁵⁶ Moench, *Marauder Men*, 48.

“All we needed was lunch – we had a picnic,” said Sergeant Gaston Poulin, Skowhegan, Me., turret gunner of another bomber, “Miss Safartus Rickenschicker.”

Brigadier General Robert C. Candee, chief of the Air Support Command, after attending the interrogation of the men involved in this arm’s first action in this theatre, said: “It was swell – a good start and we’ll keep it up until we smash them for good and all.”

One of the flyers was Captain Frank Kappler [454th BS], 2992 Johnson Avenue, Alameda, Calif., a navigator in the Doolittle raid on Tokyo, making his first mission, except for one operation in China, since the attack on Japan. Colonel Thatcher summed up the mission: “The bombing was only fair but the experience gained was incalculable and they’re not so tough. We never made a better bombing run. The weather seemed to open up just for us – there was a rift in the clouds right over the target. The boys worked like a bunch of old-timers.”⁵⁷

[Later, Gus told the local newspaper...] The most vivid of all is the first [mission], “for that really was the big thrill.” It was a case of “where ignorance is bliss” for the local man states that “I didn’t think anything about it, because I didn’t know what was in store.”⁵⁸

* * * * *

On the 24th of the month, the British instituted a new campaign in their night bombing raids – Operation Gomorrah - sending 746 RAF bombers to the German city of Hamburg where they dropped 2,300 tons of high-explosive and incendiary bombs, causing fires that were visible for 200 miles. It was the first use of ‘window,’ radar-jamming strips of aluminum foil. The German radar was useless. Their ground control could not direct the fighters to the bombers and the searchlights and radar-guided flak guns aimed at empty air. Without window the RAF could have expected to lose about 50 bombers, but instead they only lost twelve, so the effect of the bombing was maximum. People back home did not know what they were saving their scrap tinfoil for.

“Zip’s parents lived in Hamburg,” Tex related, “After reading in the Stars and Stripes about a raid by the RAF on Hamburg, I informed Zip that the RAF dropped 2,000 tons of bombs on Hamburg and Zip’s response was, ‘I bet the old man sh_t that night.’”

* * * * *



Sam “Tex” Findley

Throughout the latter half of July, the 323rd flew 10 medium altitude missions, all the while gaining confidence, and yet taking relatively few casualties.

“On July 25th, I flew my first mission,” Tex said.

This was Willie’s first mission also, flying with 1st Lt. Sprague in a plane designated *Ecstasy* #41-34741 VT-P instead of *Pub 13*. Tex flew with the Haller crew in the *Egg Crate*.

“The target was some coke ovens at Ghent, Belgium,” Tex related.

“As our flight of 18 planes approached the coast of Belgium I felt a fear and anticipation of what my fate would be. When we crossed the coast black puffs of smoke began to erupt throughout the formation. So this was flak. It didn’t seem so harmful. I developed a healthy respect for it later when I saw the holes it made in the planes. I kept my eyes peeled for German FW-190 and ME-109 fighters. The only fighters I saw were the Spitfires of the RAF that were our escorts and were a comforting sight. All of our aircraft returned to our stations. No one was killed or wounded and only three aircraft were damaged. The group had now completed five missions without the loss of an aircraft – how long would our luck hold out?”

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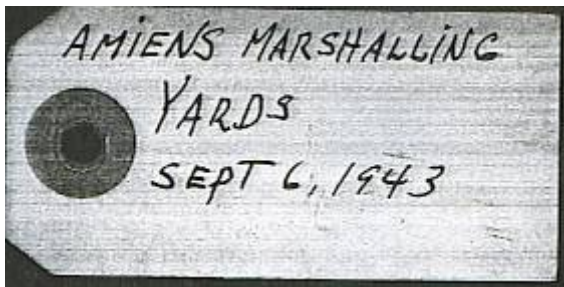
It didn’t take long for the regimen to become routine. Tex described the procedure for preparing to go on a mission: “A loading list was posted on the Squadron bulletin board to alert the crews who were scheduled to participate on each subsequent mission. When the mission was

⁵⁷ Gus Poulin’s Scrapbook.

⁵⁸ Gus Poulin’s Scrapbook.

announced these crews went to the Operations briefing room to be briefed on the target, weather, expected enemy opposition, bomb load, fighter escort, rendezvous point, route to and from the target, and take-off time. When the Mission Briefing Officer announced the target he would display a large map with a string marking the route to be flown to and return from the target. Enemy flak batteries along the route would be indicated by circles drawn on the map. Where the string passed through a circle, flak could be expected at that location during the mission. Of course there was always flak at the target. Any target that was worth bombing was one that was also worth defending.”

“After the briefing,” Tex continued, “we would go to the equipment room. Here our parachutes and escape kits were issued. The parachutes were of British manufacture, and the parachute harness incorporated a quick release feature that enabled the airman to quickly separate from the parachute in case of landing in the water after bailing out of the airplane. A ‘one man’



One of Tex’s bomb tags (courtesy of Samuel Findley).

rubber boat was available to each crewmember and it remained in the aircraft, as did the flak vests that each crewman wore when flying over enemy controlled territory. The escape kit contained many useful items such as a compass, rubber water bottle, a map and money of the country where the mission target was located, etc. Each combat crew had a jeep available to transport them to the hardstand where their aircraft was parked and ready for the mission.”

As the flight engineer, Tex had one more job to do on his way back to his tail guns, and this chore helped him to keep track of how many missions he had flown. “I was the one that always pulled the safety pins from the bomb fuses, and plugged in the IFF detonator, on the way from the front of the aircraft to my tail gun position on a mission. IFF stands for ‘Identification Friend or Foe’. Each combat aircraft operating out of England had one of these devices. It continually transmitted a signal to the Brits that we were friendly aircraft and not enemy. There was a small explosive charge built into the unit that would destroy the signal frequency if the aircraft were to crash in enemy held territory. I kept one of the tags that was attached to the safety pins and would write the date of the mission, the target, and sometimes a short comment regarding the flack etc. I kept these tags until after the war, but gave them to a young cousin along with some other souvenirs.”

* * * * *

On the 25th, the German radio announced that 100,000 people were now homeless in Hamburg. The USAAF heavies bombed the city again that day. Three days later, on the 28th, the RAF sent 722 more bombers there. This was retaliation for the bombing of London and the “Battle of Britain.” It was on this second British raid that the firestorm started. Rainfall in the previous month in the Hamburg area had been minimal. The fire exceeded 1,000 degrees and convection currents caused 150mph winds. Nine square miles of fire destroyed that section of the city. The next day the Germans ordered the mass evacuation of a million citizens from the city.⁵⁹

“We asked Zip if he thought his parents were all right,” relates Willie. “We asked him whether he thought they were alive or not. He was very confident. ‘Oh ya, they live right across the street from the Catholic Church,’ he said. We wondered, though.” From things that Zip’s wife, Lillian said, it was obvious that he was much more worried than that but preferred not to show it. There was nothing he could do about it anyway.

⁵⁹ *Warplanes*, 91-92.

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The Satterwhite Crew: L-R Gaston Poulin (turret gunner), Charles J. Ketcham (radio-gunner), R. J. Baker (navigator), A. W. “Pappy” Satterwhite (pilot), G. J. Friesner (bombardier), V. Rogers (engineer-gunner and Willie’s replacement). Their aircraft is *Miss Safartus Rickenschicker* 41-34708 VT-J. The decals on the plane indicate 15 bombing missions and two decoy missions, notated by the ducks. That would place the timing of the photo in late November or early December 1943 (*Photo courtesy of Alf Johannessen*).

* * * * *

Gus knew from letters sent by the family that his brother Guy was also stationed somewhere in England. But the problem was how to find him. With all the wartime secrecy and precautions, this proved to be very difficult. He tried to do it through letters to home, but the wartime censors kept cutting out the vital information.

* * * * *

Tex wrote, “Our luck finally ran out when the Group flew its 10th mission on July 31, 1943, while attacking the enemy airfield at Poix, France.” This was Tex’s second mission. The flight was attacked by six FW-190s. Seven marauders were hit by flak and the plane piloted by Captain John P. Lipscomb [453rd] a direct hit in the bomb bay. The eyewitness reports were not favorable to their survival. It appeared that all crewmen had been lost.⁶⁰

Gus was on that mission also, his fourth, “The fourth one, one of the boys really got nailed,” he said. “He was flying the high spot [box leader]. We were leading so we were flying up high. And he got a bomb bay full of anti-aircraft. The cockpit got hit also. Of course, he flipped over. The guys tried to get out. They got out, but had no parachutes. I recall this guy came down right by me... I mean I couldn’t help him (pause)... from here to about there (6 feet). I recognized him. I mean I couldn’t help it (pause). And the pilot. I knew him well... He went with the plane.

⁶⁰ Moench, *Marauder Men*, 52.

The thing just blew up. So, (sigh), those are some of the things you can't forget. They are just like pictures. How do you forget a picture when it's sitting in front of you?"



A 323rd Group Marauder, distinguishable by the horizontal white stripe on its tail, flies through a flak barrage.
(Photo courtesy of W. L. Brainard).

No one in the squadron knew if anyone had survived. It didn't look good from the air, but one thing they felt sure of was that the pilot did not have time to get out. The loss of the Squadron commander, Captain John P. Lipscomb, affected everyone deeply, and to this day, they still discuss it at gatherings – such as the reunion I attended. William Crowe had been one of the group that Willie and Gus had trained with in gunnery school. It was a grim reminder that the war would not be easy – that it would have a cost. It was the Group's 10th mission.



Roger Morwood, Roland Clark, William Crowe, Joseph Hager, James Berry.
Men of the Lipscomb crew (MIA).

As a result of the loss of Captain Lipscomb Colonel Thatcher decided that the Group Operations officer and all Squadron commanders would only participate in every fourth mission in order to lessen the losses of experienced leaders.⁶¹ Apparently, this practice was also extended to flight leaders as well - a 'group' was usually 54 planes, a 'box' was 18, and a 'flight' was six. Each of these formations had a leader who was responsible for all under his command. This order to fly every fourth mission meant that the mission tour for the leaders and their crews would be extended to a longer duration than the average aircrews. There were other factors too, that would extend a tour length, such as down time from wounds or injury, sickness, furloughs, or temporary special duty, etc.

* * * * *

"Did the flak give you much trouble?" I asked Gus.

"Well, you know, flak became almost normal; you knew you could expect it. So we got through that mission good. We only had... oh... 350 to 400 holes in the plane."

"Wow!"

"Oh, that wasn't bad."

"Oh(?)"

Tex said, "Allied combat crewmen in Europe always referred to anti-aircraft fire as "FLAK" (an acronym for the German term Flieger Abwehr Kanone)." Flak was their biggest problem. Everywhere their mission took them there was flak waiting. The Germans began to move in more flak batteries to protect potential targets. Flying at their medium altitude they were better targets than the heavy bombers.

Besides flak the Allied air forces also had Nazi fighters to contend with, and despite the number of sorties flown by the Allies, these enemy fighters were not decreasing in strength at this time, they were increasing. The enemy was moving in fighters and building new bases for them. At this time they had about 800 fighters on or near the coast to oppose the Marauders. They had a network of well-stocked air bases 450 miles deep from the coastline.⁶² But despite the increasing effect of enemy anti-aircraft fire and fighters, morale in the 323 was at a new high and people on all levels began to re-evaluate the B-26. General Moench described the mood as "decidedly upbeat." Many of the men felt they were on their way to completing their mission tour of 25 missions.⁶³ The airmen began to believe that perhaps they did have a chance to finish their tours and go home.

"All that training from Travis really paid off," Willie said. "We knew how to fly a good formation. It was the best exposure for the gunners. Those Germans didn't like to come at us - we would have 25-30 fifty calibers pointed at them. They figured they wouldn't last too long. I wouldn't want to go into it. We were also pretty fast and the fighters had a hard time catching us and the ack ack [anti-aircraft guns] couldn't track us very well. In the early part of the war we could outrun the fighters. That's why our losses were so low."

* * * * *

August 1943

In August, the 323rd flew eight more missions and the Satterwhite crew flew four of them. Marauder bombing accuracy began to improve and casualties were still relatively light.

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Also in August, pilot Fred Mingus arrived in Ireland to continue his training. He said, "In August I was shipped overseas....went to Northern Ireland near Londonderry, to a little town between Belfast and Londonderry. Toome Bridge was the name of the base. I took over a full crew: pilot (myself), copilot, navigator/bombardier, radioman, engineer, and tailgunner. While we

⁶¹ Moench, *Marauder Men*, 341.

⁶² Perret, *Winged Victory*, 252.

⁶³ Moench, *Marauder Men*, 53.



Fred Mingus

were in North Ireland the B-17s were having such heavy combat losses that they came up and asked for any copilots or celestial navigators in B-26s to transfer to the 17s. They offered twenty-five missions and go home. My copilot couldn't fly a kite – he'd come in and land six feet higher or three feet deeper. My celestial navigator was not necessary for this kind of aircraft [the B-26] because for our navigators, D.R. (Directional Radio) was about all they'd use. Laurent, the navigator, wanted to go to the 17s and I told him, 'Well, I'll let you go if you take Fisher with you.' Fisher was the copilot. So he talked Fisher into going in. That left me with a short crew. Fisher was shot down and killed on his first mission. Laurent was shot down on his 4th

mission and became a prisoner of war....and he went there because he could get twenty-five missions and go home. I flew sixty-five missions and beat him home."

"I picked up Tom Goddard. That's a story in itself. His personnel file looked like a Sears and Roebuck catalogue....about that thick (a few inches). He was one of the original men to check out on a Norden bombsight. Before the war, all bombardiers were enlisted men. He had made and broke every rule in the army. His father was a cavalry colonel and he was born and raised out West on some post out there. He knew every rule and regulation in the army and how to break 'em and he did it, frequently. He was a maverick. In fact I got him because he came into Tampa from Panama and met a G. I. in an alley....took his gas mask and his M1 [rifle] and went aboard a troopship that was heading for Europe. He got up into Londonderry and he got off that troop ship. And he threw his rifle and his gas mask at the 2nd Lt. that was checking off the troops doming down the ramp. The 2nd Lt. said, 'Hey where are you going?' He said, 'I'm not in the army. I'm Air Force,' and he came down to Toome Bridge. My group commander there was named Comenator.... Comenator said, 'I'll have you court marshaled for desertion.' He said, 'Colonel, you don't desert to the fight. You desert from it.' Comenator called me down and he said, 'Mr. Mingus.' I was a flight Officer at the time. 'Check this guy out. He is a maverick. He says he's a bombardier and he has no records....nothing. All he's got is his I.D. Before I try to straighten this thing out, you find out if he is a bombardier.'"

"So I took him up and I flew him up-down-crosswind, low-level, high-level, Norden bombsight, D8 sight....and he had a 50 foot error....within 50' of every target. And he said, "Now you can take these things out of here (the bombsights) and I'll use my thumb and finger and do the same thing. So I told Comenator I wanted him and he finally got straightened out, got his papers all filled back in. He could never be commissioned. The highest rank [he could achieve] was master sergeant, and he had been a master sergeant a half a dozen different times. So we got him straightened out and I got him on my crew."

* * * * *

The ninth Allied attack on Hamburg occurred on the 2nd of the month. The German civilian losses in Hamburg alone, in the last eight days now almost equaled Britain's civilian losses throughout the entire war (50,000). The Brits had achieved their goal in one week.⁶⁴ It is a strange fact of the war that in the beginning, Hitler had a soft spot for the English. To him they were long-lost Germanic cousins and in his grand insane scheme of things they were part of his 'master race.' Americans didn't figure into his picture at all because we were 'mongrels,' too culturally diverse. Early in the Battle of Britain, the Luftwaffe focused on military targets only because Hitler had given express orders that London was not to be bombed. But a lost flight bombed London by accident and Churchill ordered the bombing of Berlin - which Hitler had proclaimed would never be bombed. 'Der Fuhrer' went berserk and pulled out all the stops, targeting only London,

⁶⁴ *Warplanes*, 92.

especially civilian targets. In another twist of irony, this gave the almost spent RAF time to regroup and build up enough strength to win the ‘Battle of Britain’ in the air, causing the Germans to call off their pending invasion of England. Now, in 1943, after seeing Hamburg go up in smoke, the overconfident British thought that they could bomb Germany out of the war – exactly what the Germans had tried to do to them three years earlier. But they did not reckon with the incredible resourcefulness and tenacity of the ‘Gerries,’ which equaled or excelled the Brits. In reality, the war was far from over – and for some it was just beginning.

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At Earls Colne, the Marauder crews were finally outfitted with the new flak armor, which had already proven itself on many occasions. Up until this time, there had only been a few available and these had been given only to bombardiers in their exposed forward positions. “Earlier in the year special body armor had been developed in the UK for heavy bomber crews, but owing to demand it was not until the end of August that each of the four Marauder groups had sufficient sets to fit out every man on a 36-plane mission.”⁶⁵

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Gus described one mission to Amiens, France. “Amiens had Göering’s yellow-nosed boys,” he said. “They flew ME 109s and they were good flyers. There was only one fighter that came through the whole formation. But he was dead before he got halfway through. They nailed him right off quick.” The attack on the Amiens-Glisy Airdrome in France took place on the 19th. The Group sent 36 aircraft that soon met with heavy flak and FW-190s. One enemy plane was shot down with three additional probables.⁶⁶

Herman Göering was the commander of the entire German Air Force (the Luftwaffe), and his ‘yellow-nosed boys,’ sometimes referred to as a squadron, was actually an elite German fighter wing that usually maintained about 110-124 operational fighters at several bases near the English Channel. They were affectionately known to the Nazis as ‘Göering’s Kids,’ but their official designation was JG-26, Jagdgeschwader 26 (Wing 26). The wing was divided into three ‘Gruppen’ (Groups), composed of three squadrons (Staffeln) each, although the organization varied at times. They had taken part in the Battle of Britain in 1940, during which time they claimed a win/loss ratio of five wins to each loss. Group One was sometimes referred to by the Allies as the ‘Abbeville Kids’ but their operations also included bases at Amiens and other airfields, while Group Two was based further to the north near Calais. Two other Fighter Wings also fought alongside JG-26. In March, 1941, JG-26 began receiving Focke Wulf Fw-190s and Messerschmitt Me-109s, which, when painted with a yellow nose, became their distinctive trademark.

At different points in the war, Wing 26, or portions of it, were sent to the Russian Front or to Germany for a rest, but by 1943 they were back in Western Europe. In the minds of the Allies, they were unquestionably the best German fighter unit, and, in 1943, their win/loss ratio was still as high as four to one. But, while they were winning individual victories in the air, they were losing the overall war of attrition. The Germans simply could not put as many planes in the air as the Allies, and their replacement pilots did not have the level of training of their predecessors. Yet, even by this time, as the average pilot’s level of skill and training was decreasing, the combat ability and spirit of the unit as a whole was still very high. It was important to the Allies that all German fighter bases near the Channel be destroyed and this became one of the primary objectives of the B-26 Marauders. It was bad enough to be attacked by the yellow-nosed fighters on the way to a target, but it was really dangerous to attack their bases; not just because of the fighters, but also because of the abundant flak batteries that protected them.

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⁶⁵ Freeman, *B-26 Marauder at War*, 71.

⁶⁶ Moench, *Marauder Men*, 57



A 453rd plane - the "VT-M" on the fuselage indicates that this is very likely a photo of Zipperling's *Flying Dutchmen* piloted by Lt. Van Antwerp (Photo Courtesy of W. L. Brainard).

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At this time, military priorities in medium bombers received a new focus on 'secret targets,' which were not identified to the aircrews; actually Allied intelligence couldn't tell them, because they did not even know what they were. Described only as "secret targets," the men called them "Noballs."⁶⁷

Tex said, "What was a Noball? When we asked we were only told that it was a secret target. The only thing we could see from our bombing at 8,000-12,000 feet was a small mark in a hedgerow and a small structure of some sort. They were heavily defended with flak. Why did the enemy defend these Noballs so strongly? We combat crewmen disliked these targets. From our point of view we were exposing ourselves to great risks and unlike an airfield or railway marshalling yard we could see no real damage our bombing did. At this time there were at least six other Marauder Groups bombing them also and thirty B-26's were lost during attacks on them."

"We were just picking away." Gus ventured. "We were bombing sites that we didn't even know what they were. We found out later, after the war, that we had been bombing rocket sites. Von Braun was in charge of the rockets. You know where he got his rocket ideas from? It was from an American professor in Massachusetts. He bought every rocket book that was written. I think he put up the first rocket. We didn't even know what it was when it came up through our formation."

Together, on the 30th of the month, the Haller (Tex), Sprague (Willie), and Satterwhite (Gus) crews bombed the first 323rd Noball target. This was Gus's eighth mission, Willie's ninth. Lt. Satterwhite had just been promoted to Captain and the Satterwhite crew was honored with the presence of Col. Thatcher, flying as mission commander and Captain P. J. McGlynn, the mission bombardier.⁶⁸ Tex was one of three men wounded and twelve of the aircraft were damaged. Another wounded man was also of the 453rd Bomb Squadron, Sgt. Arthur J Morlock.⁶⁹

⁶⁷ Moench, *Marauder Men*, 59.

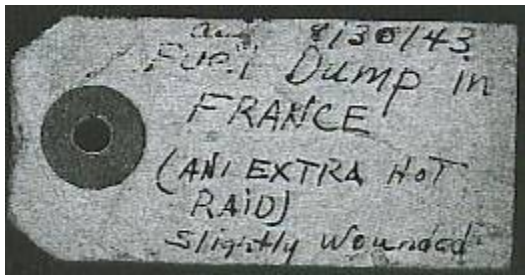
⁶⁸ Trevor Allen, Marauder Researcher.

⁶⁹ Moench, *Marauder Men*, 59.



Samuel "Tex" Findley (WIA), Arthur J. Morlock (WIA).

In Tex's words, "On the 30th of August 36 aircraft from our group bombed a secret target in the Foret de Eperlesque in France. As the formation crossed the coast between Dunkerque France and Ostend Belgium our Marauder was hit with flak. Shrapnel pierced the side of the aircraft at my crew position and severed the ammunition track to one of the guns knocking it out of commission. Pieces of flak and shreds of metal from the ammunition track pierced my right arm, hands, and neck. I immediately knew I was hit and there was blood on the piece of bulletproof glass through



Tex's bomb tag for this mission.

which I sighted my guns. After notifying the pilot that I had been wounded I asked the radio operator at the waist guns to look at my face to see where I had been hit and he told me that he couldn't see any wounds there at all. Upon returning to our airfield from the mission our aircraft landed first (it was normal procedure for aircraft with wounded aboard to be the first to land) and we were met by the ambulance and medics. The wounds to my arm and

hand were examined and treated and I advised the flight surgeon that I had also been hit somewhere about my face. After examination he concluded that I had no wounds in that area, but the next day while shaving my razor scraped something and I rode my bicycle to this office where he removed a small piece of metal from my neck. Luckily, I was not seriously wounded and I continued flying missions. For my wounds I was awarded the Purple Heart Medal. I had already received the Air Medal for flying 5 combat missions. I never learned what the secret target was that we bombed that day but considering the amount of flak at the target it must have been important to the enemy."

The next day, on the 31st, the 323rd Group flew to another Noball at the Foret D'Hesdin in France. Upon arrival, the target was shrouded in cloud cover and the group couldn't drop their bombs. Adding to the difficulties of the day, they were fired upon by Allied ships in the Channel on their return trip. Luckily, no casualties were reported. Nevertheless, things were still looking good. There were four Marauder Groups now based in England, the 322nd, 323rd, 386th, and 387th.⁷⁰

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The Marauder crews continued to visit the local pubs during their time off.

"We had this character, Goglin [possibly Coggins, or Coughlin?]," Gus related. "He ran Earls Colne. He was going out with the mayor's daughter and in a way he was running the mayor. For one night, he came down to the George Hotel and says, 'All right, we'll stay open an hour later now.' Then the guy that owns the place says, 'What do you mean?' Goglin answers, 'I told you, we'll stay open one hour later.' Well, the owner answers, 'We can't, it's against the law.' Goglin ups and says, 'I just made a new law and that's it.' Well the poor guy at the hotel didn't know what to do, so he called the mayor. And the mayor says, 'What Goglin says, is what it is.' So they stayed open an hour later. See, the mayor was hoping that Goglin would marry his daughter so that

⁷⁰ Moench, *Marauder Men*, 60.

she might be able to come to the United States. That was the biggest ambition of everybody in Europe. I know, I met a girl in France. She wanted to come to the United States. She wanted to get married in a hurry. Baloney. There was another girl from London. She wanted to get married also. That was more or less the general pace - get married in a hurry and then get to the States.”

* * * * *

September 1943

The 323rd flew fifteen missions this month and the Satterwhite crew flew on eight of them; the Haller crew flew seven and the Sprague crew flew eight also. By now, the Marauders were ‘on a roll’ and it was time the high command let the men know it was recognized by the higher echelons. On the 4th General ‘Hap’ Arnold spoke to Marauder crews at Marks Hall. He basically told them they had been accepted at high command. But contrary to his remarks Marauder production at Omana was being phased out. Accordingly, two Marauder groups were disbanded and four more were held while deliberations were made.⁷¹ In other words, not only was the production of the Martin Marauder being phased out, so were new groups, and new crews, the intended replacements for the existing Marauder crews.

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The Sprague Crew: L-R Mark A. Sprague (pilot), Donald Nelson (bombardier), Walter L. Woods (turret gunner), Willis L. “Willie” Brainard (engineer-gunner), and a replacement radio-gunner for Larry Nusser (possibly Don Showalter). (Photo courtesy of Willis L. Brainard – names courtesy of Mrs. Mark Sprague).

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More and more, combat fatigue became a recognized concern.

⁷¹ Freeman, *B-26 Marauder at War*, 73.

“We used to come back from a mission,” Gus related, “and if we had had a real rough mission, the flight surgeon was there with his jugs. He’d give you just so-much and that was it. But he knew you had to get rid of the tension, which you build up. You start at 4:00 a.m. in the morning and finish at 4:00 in the afternoon and you’ve built up enough tension to explode a whole damn city. Those are things that people don’t ever realize. All right. So it’s been 25 years, but... you can’t forget it. It’s impossible.”

“We came back from a mission,” Willie said. “I turned around, Sprague was sitting there, ‘I suppose you want this bottle,’ he said. He gave us each a bottle of Old Oak Rye. They [the officers] would get a ration every now and then. We didn’t even get a quart of beer! Sprague felt guilty about it. So did the bombardier, Nelson, so we ended up getting their booze. Of course, when I got a bottle of booze like that, I’d share it with Frenchie. He didn’t need it. I didn’t know that. But I would have it laying there under my bunk. We got completely separated. I wasn’t even in the same bunkhouse with Frenchie. I’d give each one of those guys in my hut a snort. That’s what they took – a nice decent drink. Then I’d go take and have myself a drink or two. And I’d put it in my musette bag under my bed.”

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Early in the month, Larry Nusser on the Sprague crew became ill. Several radio-gunners filled in for him for a while. They were S/Sgt’s David Nattis, Bryce Ramey, J. H. Given, Joseph L. Bothwell, Benjamin Lasky, and Robert H. McClintock.⁷²



Larry Nusser, Dave Nattis, Bryce Ramey, Benjamin Lasky, Joseph Bothwell

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One more development that was actually due to the success of the medium bombers occurred – their mission tour would be extended. “Reviewing the accumulated statistical data, Col. Anderson recommended that the B-26 combat tour be set at 30 missions.”⁷³

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In between missions, the crews experienced unscheduled time off. It wasn’t really free time because they had to be ready to go on short notice.

“Combat crews stayed pretty close together when on base,” Tex explained, “so the pilot could assemble his crew on short notice. Each crew had a lot of time on their hands - we had as many scrubs as missions we went on, really. A lot of time was spent in briefings for missions that had to be canceled at the last minute due to weather. In order to alleviate the boredom, crews would shoot skeet, play volleyball, attend survival training, etc. A lot of time was spent in aircraft identification classes. Silhouettes of all aircraft in the war theater, both enemy and friendly, and taken from various angles of flight would be flashed on a screen and crewmembers would compete in identifying them. There was a nice service club on base, but I rarely went there. I do recall going there once and eating some tomato and onion sandwiches. They tasted pretty good. During

⁷² Trevor Allen, *Marauder Researcher*

⁷³ Moench, *Marauder Men*, 60.

inclement weather we also spent a lot of time in our barracks playing blackjack or just laying on our sacks (cots).”

“Mail Call was held at the Squadron Office each day,” Tex continued, “and it was an event almost every one looked forward to (I say almost everyone because there were some who never received mail at all). All of the letters I wrote had to be mailed at the Squadron Office unsealed so a censor could read them. The censor would cut out or obliterate anything he thought may be of any value to the enemy. The mail I received was of utmost importance to me. It was the thing that kept me connected with my loved ones. I remember some candy that my mother sent me, also some leather fur-lined gloves. I lent the gloves to my radioman and he lost them. My mother also sent a pair of Nylon stocking for my girl friend in London and she tore a runner in them the first time she wore them.”



Maintenance on *Truman's Folly*:
Harold Newkirk on left.
(Courtesy of W. L. Brainard)

“The only criteria was that you would do the best you could do” Willie said. “Don’t piddle around with anything sloppy. Do the best you know how. Frenchie was like that. He was a damn good armorer. I wish I could take a gun apart like that... and he could do it blindfolded. He’d lay out the parts, put a blindfold on and put it together... as long as nobody messed up the parts... like take the blanket and shake it a little. ‘Brainard, keep your hands off that blanket!’ (laughing) I was always helpful that way. But he practiced that all the time. He’d slip over... put the parts on the floor... have a machine gun sittin’ there. Now, why he felt he had to do that, I don’t know. I would do it with my eyes open but I couldn’t do it blindfolded. I couldn’t tell exactly how the... I’d get my finger in the damn hole and try to put a part in on top on my finger. You know, stuff like that. I used to go over to the stands [the hardstands, concrete pads where the planes were parked], just like Frenchie used to go over to the hardware shack to work on guns. I’d go out to the hardstand, hell, if I couldn’t do anything but hand them tools. You can learn something every time. Even though you forget to put in a cigarette lead [spark plug] like we did that time (laughing).”

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“It took a lot of support personnel to sustain combat operations,” Tex said.

Indeed, General Eaker, commander of the Eighth Air Force once said that it took 75,000 men to keep 150 heavy bombers in the air. With crews of usually ten men per bomber, this meant that only 1,500 men, only 2% of the heavy bomber personnel, were actually combat men. For the Marauders and other medium bombers (the B-25s and A-20’s), the ratio would be similar. On the ground, logistics were the main part of the war also. Only about 20% of the frontline divisions were actually combat men, i.e. only about 2,000 men in a 10,000 man division. And behind the frontline divisions there were support divisions. This meant that only a very small percentage of the soldiers and airmen in the European Theater were actually combat troops.

The typical Marauder Squadron at normal complement would have about 450 men, with 1800+ men in the entire Bomb Group (four squadrons) and they were supposed to keep sixty-four medium bombers in the air. During the war, that was impossible of course; air and ground crews were always short of men and available planes for various reasons. When we read about combat statistics indicating the number of planes lost and the number of those damaged, it is significant that most of the damaged planes could not fly again without some kind of repair beyond their usual



Nelzo Cassano working on the engines of the "Truman's Folly"
(Courtesy of Nels and Ronni Cassano)

maintenance. Ground crew personnel worked feverishly in all kinds of weather to get their planes back into the air. And bases had to be supplied, so behind the front line Bomb Groups, there were many different supply depots, transportation people, and training facilities constantly working to keep the fighting groups supplied. Thus, the Air Forces in England were a massive logistical organization.

"Without the crew chiefs and airplane mechanics to service and maintain the aircraft there would be no flying," Tex said. He knew this better than most of the men, having been an aircraft mechanic himself before the war. Master Sergeant Lewis Williams, who attended the reunion in Colorado City, had been the Maintenance Chief who coordinated all the different shops involved in aircraft maintenance for the 453rd Squadron. He said he had been responsible for scheduling repairs and upkeep on all the aircraft involving over twenty different trade shops.

What were these skilled craftsmen?

Tex explained, "Specialists for the propellers, electrical systems, radios, hydraulic systems, and instruments were on duty. Sheet metal men were kept busy after each mission patching the holes caused by flak. They kept a supply of various size patches on hand to speed the task. The armorers took care of the guns and loaded the bombs in the planes, however I chose to take care of my two tail guns myself."



453rd prop specialists (courtesy of Nels and Ronni Cassano)

One source of spare parts was crashed Marauders. Some crews were formed specifically to retrieve parts from broken airplanes for future use. In fact one of the Group's aircraft was named *Half and Half* because it was constructed from two different planes put together. Later, the better parts of it were joined with a third plane and it continued to fly many missions although no one could tell how many missions to count for it.

"Loading the bombs was a hard job," Tex said. "We usually carried eight 500 pound bombs, but sometimes the target required 1000 or 2000 pounders. Each of the bombs would have to be hoisted up into the bomb bay with a hand-operated winch. Often, after they were loaded, the target would be changed and bombs of a different size needed."

Sometimes the damage to the aircraft was puzzling, with the ground crews trying to figure out what had happened. Sochocki recalls one incident that left everyone wondering how it had occurred.

Casimier Sochocki described the duties of the ordnance section. "As an Ordnance man our duties were to deliver the specified bombs to the hardstands where the planes were. We also supplied the ammunition for the 50-caliber guns on the aircraft, and flares for use in emergency landings and for identification if need be. We, at times, had to change bomb loads, due to changes

in targets and weather played a big part in load changes.” The ordnance men in the 453rd also developed bomb handles to help them lift the smaller bombs into place.⁷⁴



453rd Ordnance Section, Earls Colne, England, 1943 L-R (front row): Casimier V. Sochocki, Leonard J. Cotter, Frank A. Black, John E. Baird, Back Row: Robert H. Baker, Robert Laidlaw, Henry F. Jensen (behind), Bascom Musick, John B. Tilson (behind Musick), Emmett A. Clark, Jessie C. Avant, Antone S. Medeiros Jr., Charles A. Stagner (behind Madeiros), and Carroll S. Packard. Richard Inman was absent. Sochocki states, “As for Inman not being in that Ordnance Section photo – He married an English girl and I’m sure he was with her at that time.”
(Photo and names courtesy of Casimier Sochocki).

There were other specialties too: cooks, commissary and administrative clerks, medical personnel, base security, photo labs, etc. All these people were supervised by an Operations staff.

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Willie and crew on furlough:

Willy said, “One time, me, Woody, and Larry were on a 72 hour pass to Southampton. It was an R&R place. We got into the station and just missed the train. Well, sittin’ there across the tracks, pointing the other way, was the high-speed train to Scotland, the Scottish Flyer. I had read about that. It was the fastest train in the world. I’d never been to Scotland before – so we looked at each other and pretty soon we were on our way to Scotland. We got in there and the conductor came by. We asked him if we could get tickets and we showed him our tickets to Southampton. He said, ‘Ya, those tickets will do for Edinborough.’ So we gave him our tickets. We went to Edinborough near the university and we got rooms at a boarding house for students run by a little old lady. No alcohol was allowed in there. That night, me and Woody came in with a case of Scottish beer and knocked on her door to see if she wanted any. She invited us in and we had good time talking and drinking beer. The next day we went to the brewery where they made Scottish whiskey and they gave us free drinks. We were loaded by noon. We also went out to that lake with the sea monster...”

“Loch Ness,” I said.

⁷⁴ Moench, *Marauder Men*, 149. Postwar comments of David A. Goss.

“Ya, that’s it. We took a boat across the lake to a Pub on the other side and came back. We got lots of rest on that trip. We got back to the base and we were a little late. We went in to the C&C and the guy there said we were deserters and we had to go in to see Travis. Some guy from the R&R place in Southampton had called and said we didn’t show up. We were looking pretty good and we were sober so it wasn’t too bad. I was telling Travis about the train to Scotland and how great it was. I was pretty excited about it and I could see the he was really interested. It seemed like he thought it was a pretty good thing too. When I finished he didn’t say anything but they put us on KP for four or five days. They had to punish us somehow. It was on a list ‘report to the Mess Hall’ at such and such a time. Then we were put back on ops. You’d think that being a West Pointer, Travis would have been a lot stricter, but he wasn’t. He was a good C.O. I liked him.”

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The 453rd photography section. The men kneeling in front are the aerial photographers. Those standing in back are the lab crew. Front row: second from left, J. Fink; center, Julius Perlinski. Andrew Kovatch who loaned Willie a camera now and then is kneeling on the right and to his left is Don Pepmiller. Standing in the back row on the right is Proctor Ransden (Photo courtesy of W. L. Brainard; names courtesy of C. V. Sochocki).

Willie eventually developed an interest in photography and befriended the 453rd photo lab crew. “I wanted to know how that worked. They used to loan me a K20 camera and let me shoot some photos.”

Many of the photos included here, including the cover photo, are from Willie’s collection.

“Once you took a picture, it was automatically ‘classified’ for security reasons,” Willie said, “but occasionally the photo guys would say, ‘These are the ones you took,’ and they would hand me some. Some of the photos I got were rejects. I’d ask, ‘What are you going to do with

these?’ And they’d say, ‘Oh, throw ‘em away.’ So I said, ‘I’ll take ‘em.’ I got them home somehow, in an envelope, I think.”

“Those guys in the photo section were all pretty good,” Willie continued. “Other outfits would fly with them onboard. They would request them for photo recon.” General Moench singles out Julius A. Perlinski of the 453rd as “one of the best of the best...”⁷⁵



An aerial view of Earls Colne, England. It looks like this is possibly a shot from the aircraft’s bomb bay. “I used to hang out of the bomb bay for some of the photos I took,” Willie said. “The photographers liked that.”

(Photo courtesy of W. L. Brainard)

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ADVERTISEMENT: Found – a five-dollar bill. Owners will please line up at the orderly room after evening mess.⁷⁶

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Tex and crew on special assignment:

“On two occasions our crew was sent to Ayr, Scotland, to ferry some of the B-26s to southern England that were flown there from the U.S. over the northern route by replacement crews. This was necessary because these crews would not be familiar with the radio procedures, etc., in the European theater of Operations (E.T.O.). Once we went up to Scotland on the train and the other time 54 of us crowded into a B-17, which had been converted into a transport.”

⁷⁵ Moench, *Marauder Men*, viii.

⁷⁶ Gus Poulin’s Scrapbook.

Sometimes just flying around:

“Sometimes, if we were not scheduled for a mission, we would just fly around the local area just for the fun of it. Once we saw a lone B-17 flying along and decided to have a little fun with it. We could fly faster on one engine than it could cruise on all four of its engines, so our pilot shut down one of our engines and we overtook and passed very close by the B-17. The crew of the B-17 had very surprised looks on their faces as we slowly passed by apparently with no engines running!”

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On the 8th of September, 1943, the government of Italy surrendered, however the Germans still held the northern part of the peninsula, and the next day, on the 9th, Allied forces landed at Salerno and Taranto, above the German lines, to attempt to dislodge them, but it didn't work. They were contained on the beach heads. Ernie Pyle was there at Anzio Beach, sharing their misery. On the eastern front, the Axis troops continued to retreat from the Russians. Meanwhile, in Britain, preparations and training had begun for the impending Operation Overlord (D-Day). On the 8th and 9th of September, the allies in England conducted a practice “dry run” for D-Day. While ships maneuvered off the coast of France, the medium bombers were to test their ground-support capabilities. As part of the maximum effort, the Satterwhite and Sprague crews flew on both days and the Haller crew joined them on the 9th. The bombing results were exceptional, and Colonel Anderson sent out a congratulatory message: “Under extremely adverse conditions, you did successfully complete the missions assigned to you. I have just been informed that the coastal defense guns, which were your targets this morning, did not fire a single round at our ships in the Channel.”⁷⁷

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Two days later on the 11th of September, visibility cleared enough to launch the Group's 28th mission to the Beaumont Le Roger Airdrome in France. On this mission, S/Sgt Kenny Class, the drummer, distinguished himself. He was flying as the turret gunner on Lt. Stern's crew on the Groups 11th mission to the Beaumont Le Roger airdrome. Over the target a bomb got hung up in the bomb bay. Class scrambled out into the bay and freed it.⁷⁸ But on the return back to the base, the cloud cover was a problem. Willie described what happened.

“They were coming in... we had set a big bonfire on the end of the runway because visibility was so bad. I was down at the end of the runway, helping to keep the fire going. And they came in... one, two, three, four landed and the last one, [the pilot] Stern was his name. He came in and (roar) took off, he ran the throttles... I could tell by the sound... he ran up the throttles too fast... shoved 'em too far forward. Next time around he did the same thing. The third time around, he could have made it... but one engine quit. The wing went down [into the dirt] and he went cartwheeling.”

“The kid who came out of it was Kenny Class,” Willie said. “That top turret assembly flew off and he landed 30-40 yards away from the airplane... maybe farther... and it crushed the bottom part of his legs... outside of that it didn't hurt him. In the turret, your legs are down against two metal braces that you shove against when you're shootin' the guns. When the medics got there, he gave the name and the serial number of everybody on that crew, before he passed out. We hauled him into the infirmary, and from then on, we were all kind of standing around to see what happened... they came out of the emergency room... he was all wrapped up, and off they went. The next thing we heard, they had taken him over to Braintree. They had a hospital there and they tried to patch him up a little bit, and then over to C4 on the west coast of England, the great big

⁷⁷ Moench, *Marauder Men*, 74.

⁷⁸ Moench, *Marauder Men*, 76.

general hospital, and that's where they had to remove his legs – they removed one leg just below the knee and the other leg 2 or 3 inches above the knee.”



Arnold Stern (KIA), David Nattis (KIA), William Archer (KIA), Kenneth Class (WIA)

When they got Kenny out of his turret, 200 feet away from the snarled wreckage of the Marauder, they rushed him to the hospital. For a while they didn't operate on him because he was suffering from shock and they were afraid of what the operation might do to him, but they soon realized that infection was setting in, so they gave him plasma and transfusions; and they amputated both legs, one just above the knee, the other just below the knee.

For a couple of days he pretended not to know, and pretending almost made him believe it wasn't true – so finally when Miss Southerland [his nurse] went out of the room he reached down painfully and flipped the blankets aside. He couldn't be quite sure of what he was seeing, because of the bandages, but he could see enough to be certain that both his legs were gone.

Knowing for sure, he fought back the tears, but he was sick and tired and his legs hurt him, and when Miss Southerland came back into the room she could see that he was crying. For a minute he was wrenched with fear that she would start oozing sympathy. He turned his head away from her. She came up beside the bed and stood there a second before she spoke.

“Well,” she challenged, “what are you going to do about it?”

Kenny couldn't speak for a minute. The question caught him off balance, and then he turned and grinned at Miss Southerland.

“I'm going to be the best damned drummer in the world,” he said, and Miss Sutherland held out her hand and they shook on it.⁷⁹

Willie felt personally sad because of the accident. Lt. Stern had been the flight trainee whose hand he had slapped back at MacDill Field.

“Oh, we came in in bad weather sometimes,” He continued. “You couldn't see your hand in front of your face. After that, they rigged up a great big bar of bright lights at the upper end of the landing strip, and they would shine 'em away from you up in the sky like this [pointing upward], so you were coming in behind them. They lit up the whole end of the runway. They learned their lesson.”

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While flying on a mission in a flight of six planes which Satterwhite was leading, Tex and the Haller crew received some 'friendly fire' from the lead plane due to a problem with the package guns. The package guns were fixed to the side of the aircraft and had been installed for strafing during low-level flying. They were fired by the pilot or copilot. In order to be able to use these guns, they had to be 'charged' first. Tex relates what happened.

“The four guns had been prepared so only one pull of the charging handle was required to put the first live round from the cartridge belt into the gun's firing chamber. The radio operator, Ketcham, who was in the flight lead aircraft, pulled each charging handle twice which resulted in four live cartridges being ejected from his aircraft. We were flying number four position (below and a little behind the lead plane). One of the cartridge rounds struck our plane's top turret and

⁷⁹ YANK the Army Weekly, November 14, 1943 – courtesy of Lee and Lillian Zipperling.

bounced off. Another one came through the turret's plexiglass cover just barely missing our turret gunner's head (James Smith). This angered Smith and he said over the intercom, 'If he throws another round (live cartridge) out I'm going to cut him out of there.' If the live round had hit Smith in the head it would have seriously wounded him or even killed him. Apparently the other two ejected rounds missed our aircraft and hopefully Smitty wouldn't have carried out his threat if they had."

"There were two ways to charge the guns in preparation for firing," Tex explained. "One, the ammo belt could be inserted into the gun just over the holding pawl in which case the gun charger would have to be pulled once to get the cartridge under extractor and then again to pull the cartridge from the ammo belt link and insert it into the firing chamber of the gun barrel. Two, the ammo belt could be further into the gun with the cartridge under the extractor, in which event they would only have to be pulled once to chamber the live cartridge. This (second method) is the way the guns had been prepared for firing. The radio operator (Ketcham) assumed that the charger on each of the four package guns needed to be pulled twice and in doing so, on his second pull the live cartridge that had been chambered on his first pull, was extracted and ejected below the aircraft."



Charles Ketcham and James Smith

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The Quonset huts used as barracks at Earls Colne were overcrowded and Willie wanted to find a way out of his.

He said, "Woody, Larry and I moved from the Quonset hut we were in. It was so damn crowded. It didn't hardly have room for you to sit on the edge of your bunk. So we moved out – that was three of us moved out. On the end of the bathroom there was a drying room where you could dry your clothes. But where would you wash them? There were no tubs or washing machines. That was supposed to be the wash room and nothing was being done with it. All that was in there was some dirt and empty boxes so we cleaned it all up and moved in. We were scrounging around and I got a hold of an old set of bunk beds and a single one – so we set them up. We were gonna draw straws to see who got the single one. I said, 'No, I'll take the top bunk.' Nobody wanted it but I said 'I'll take it.'"



Willis Brainard, Walter Woods, Larry Nusser; enlisted crew of *Pub 13*.

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As the airmen accrued more leave time, they encountered Americans from other branches of service and learned how the rest of the army thought of them. Opinions such as expressed by the famous wartime cartoonist, Bill Mauldin who related that the infantry often complained about the way the airmen could go home after a certain number of missions. They felt that a “few hours of discomfort” followed a return to their base.⁸⁰

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Crew of the *Toid Boid*: L-R standing: John F. Shilts, Frank E. Larkin Jr (B/N), Alfred C. MacSoud (CP), Selby M. Foster Jr. (P); front row: Louis Rosen, Ferdinand P. Dec (EG). The Foster crew was one of the earliest replacement crews to arrive in the 453rd. (Courtesy of Frank E. Larkin III)

* * * * *

Tex, on leave in London:

“London survived the Blitz of 1940 but there were still lots of evidence of the destruction caused by the massive raids of the bombers of the German Luftwaffe. In 1943/44 they continued to come but they did it at night and with just a few planes. I witnessed several attacks and the British searchlights would converge on the raider and the anti-aircraft guns would open up on the intruder, which was usually a Junkers JU-88. There were servicemen from many different allied nations in London. There was an American enlisted man’s service club in an area of London called Piccadilly Circus. It was called the Rainbow Club. A serviceman could go there and get snacks and cigarettes, write letters, etc.”

“When I went into London I would call a girl friend that worked for the British mint. We would meet and take in a show or go to a dance at the Hammersmith Palais or at Covent Gardens. The lights of the city were totally blacked out to make it more difficult for the enemy bomber crews to locate specific targets. In fact all cities and military stations were blacked out everywhere in England. We used the underground subway to travel in various parts of London. Most of the service men that I knew drank socially and so did I, but the British liked their beer warm (there was no ice) and I was not too fond of it. Dave, you may recall that another famous Marauder was named “Mild and Bitter.” This name referred to two of the types of beer that could be bought in

⁸⁰ Bill Maulden, *Up Front*, W.W. Norton & Company, NY-London, 194, 98-99.

the English pubs. A person could order Mild or he could order Bitter. A lot of the Brits would order half and half meaning to fill their glasses or mugs with half of each type. They would not pronounce the word half as we do, as to them, the "h" was silent. It would come out like this, "Bartender, 'alf and 'alf, please."

"There were many cultural sites to visit in London but I didn't see many of them, however I did visit St. Paul Cathedral once. I also remember going to Madame Tussaud's Wax museum. Most of my time though was spent patronizing the many public houses (pubs), meeting girls, and seeing shows. War is bad anywhere, but it was better to fight it in a place where the natives spoke your language and were civilized. The times that I spent in London were very beneficial in unwinding, to some degree, from the rigors of combat."

"One time they were looking for volunteers for the French underground service and Frenchie's name came up," Willie said. "They wanted people to parachute into France to blow things up. He didn't have to think about that very long before he said no. He didn't like the parachuting part. He probably wouldn't have minded going by boat or something like that."

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The airmen were well aware of how the other branches of service thought of them and their cushy jobs. A song was developed as a sort of challenge to those who might envy their good fortune.

COME ON AND JOIN THE AIR CORPS

Come on and join the Air Corps,
It's a grand branch, so they say;
You never do any work at all,
Just fly around all day.
While others work and study hard,
And so grow old and blind,
You take the air without a care,
And never, never mind!

Come on and get promoted
As high as you desire,
You're riding on a gravy train
When you're an Army flyer.
But just when you're about to be
A General you will find
Your ship folds up, your wings fall off,
But you will never, never mind!

You're flying o'er the ocean,
You hear your motor spit,
You see your prop come to a stop,
The God-damned motor's quit.
You cannot swim, the ship won't float,
The shore is miles behind!
Oh, what a dish for crabs and fish!
But you will never mind!

You take her up and spin 'er,
And, with an awful tear,
Your ship folds up, your wings fall off,
But you will never care!
For in about two minutes
Another pair you'll find,
And dance with Pete, in angel's suits,
And never, never mind!

Chorus:

You'll never mind! You'll never mind!
Come on and join the Air Corps,
And you will never mind!

(The Blue Book 239)



First Lieutenant Fredrick J. Mingus
323rd Bomb Group, 453rd Bomb Squadron
USSAF 1941-1945
(Photo courtesy of Frederick Mingus)



Technical Sergeant Nelzo F. Cassano
323rd Bomb Group, 453rd Bomb Squadron
USSAF 1941-1945
(Photo courtesy of Nelzo Cassano)

More photos courtesy of Nels and Ronni Cassano:



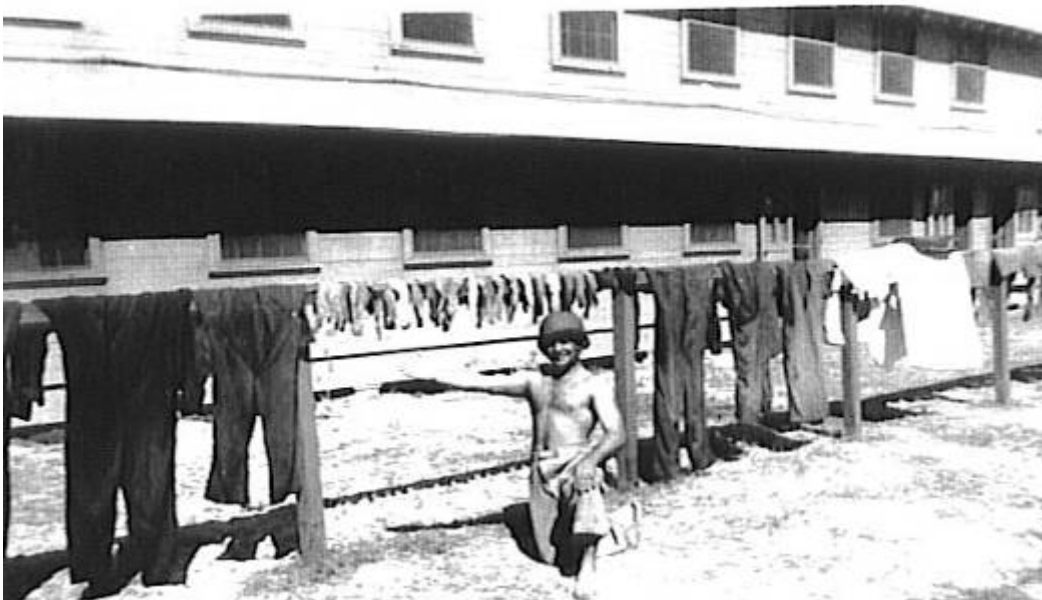
Man of many talents. Nels applies his welding skills to a project.



Nels and ground crew mates wait for the return of their planes.



Nels in front of his tent at Lessay, France
It has a working door and front walk.



Laundry day – another job well done.



Postcard to Ronni, 4/7/44.



Verona "Ronni" DiFiore 1945

Chapter 4 – The Battle to Rule the Skies October – December 1943

October 1943

During this month the Ninth Air Force was moved from the Mediterranean to Britain and, as tactical bombers, the Marauders were transferred from the Eighth Air Force to the Ninth under General Brereton. The plan was to relocate the Ninth from the Mediterranean to England in preparation for the planned D-Day Invasion. Their mission was to destroy the Luftwaffe and its bases of operation thus bringing about air superiority. This was also preparation for upcoming role of ground support after the invasion.⁸¹ Along with Operation Point Blank, the Ninth would have different objectives than the heavies of the Eighth which were mostly employed in attacks against German industrial targets.

According to the online History of Ninth Air Force, they had to prepare to move into Europe following the invasion while continuing to give the troops air support. They had to build and maintain their own airfields. The top commanders were Gen. L. H. Brereton, commander, Maj. Gen. Ralph Royce, deputy commander, Brig. Gen. Myron R. Wood, Service Command, Brig. Gen. Samuel E. Anderson, Bomber Command, Brig. Gen. E. R. Quesada, Fighter Command, and Brig. Gen. P. L. Williams, Troop Carrier Command. General Anderson insisted that aircrews stay together, even on furlough. The training program was a prodigious one. Even after a mission crews often were sent on training flights. The standard operating procedures called for two missions a day. This really taxed the maintenance crews, not to mention the flight crews. Men also received days in classes when flights were not scheduled. And, at times, whole weeks were spent in practice.⁸²

The above description, of course, was a schedule that no one could keep, and it was surely written in interview with a staff officer. At any rate, it was the intended goal for the mediums at this time. But despite the big plans and intensive schedule, the weather in October, 1943, was so bad that the 323rd Group only logged seven missions this month, the least in any month throughout the war. To add to it, the media only covered the heavies of the Eighth Air Force. It seemed that the Ninth hardly existed in their eyes. Unfortunately, except for a few notable exceptions, this would continue for the rest of the war. They were lucky to get a sentence, “the Ninth also flew today”.⁸³

The Marauder Men had been accustomed to being the underdog. In fact that idea had helped them to galvanize their resolve to prove themselves. But now that they had been doing it for some time, where was the press? As Ernie Pyle put it, “Lack of recognition definitely affects morale.”⁸⁴

Ironically, and to make matters worse, the bomber high command was getting upset with the Marauders for an entirely different reason than they had in the previous spring – the reason now was that they were performing too well! The brass believed that due to their relatively low losses, and high bombing rate, they were making the heavies look bad. The low losses of the Marauders were overlooked by the press. This should have been news because of the recent view that the Marauders should be phased out of operations. This had to be embarrassing to the review committee that Truman headed.⁸⁵

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⁸¹ History of the Ninth Air Force – online.

⁸² *Air Force, July, 1944*, 13-15.

⁸³ Moench, *Marauder Men*, 84.

⁸⁴ Pyle, *Brave Men*, 396.

⁸⁵ Moench, *Marauder Men*, 82.

Meanwhile back in the Marauders, due to the miserable weather, the Satterwhite, Haller, and Sprague crews each flew only 2 missions this month. Gus's first one was to the Amsterdam-Schipol Airdrome on October 3rd. Willie and Tex were on this one, too. Major Wood led the Squadron. Over the target they met very heavy flak, both approaching and leaving, which was noted in the post-war comments of James F. Hunt and 1st Lt. Jesse R. Swan's Mission log. Wounded were Haglund and T/Sgt Charles I. Vacanti.⁸⁶



Wilson Wood, James Hunt, Jesse Swan, Phillip Haglund (WIA), Charles Vacanti (WIA)

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The next day at Earls Colne bad weather covered the area. During the day a B-17 crash landed and started burning. S/Sgt David Goss was the first to see the pilot trying to get the unconscious co-pilot away from the plane. Still near the plane he fell to the ground. Goss arrived about that time and picked up the co-pilot thus allowing the pilot to get away too. The plane exploded a few seconds later.⁸⁷

David Goss hailed from Gardenville, Maryland, just outside Baltimore. He was fourth in a family of five – three brothers and four sisters. David's father, Andrew Goss, was originally from Tennessee and he worked as a salesman. His mother, Regina, was from a German immigrant family. David liked to wander in the woods alone and read books. He was not gregarious and pretty much kept to himself. His grades were good enough in school to win a scholarship to college. He had studied engineering for two years when the United States joined the war. He tried out for pilot but was rejected when it was discovered he was color-blind, a fact he had not known before. The Air Corps trained him in the maintenance and use of the Norden bombsight.

However, since the Squadron had only been given a few of them he found himself without anything to do. He started working with the armorers, discovered he liked it, and had become a member of the armament section by the time they reached England.⁸⁸ After being stationed in England for a while David liked to paint and started painting nose art and flight jackets. His artwork was very good but he was admittedly colorblind, and he would sometimes ask others for advice on color selections. The first nose art he painted was on the *Red Dog*. The airship's crew chief liked to play a card game called Red Dog, hence the name of the plane. David painted a smiling dog holding four aces.⁸⁹

I called David on the phone and explained who I was. He said, "Yes, I remember Frenchie. I knew him well." I told him about the story I was putting together and he said, "I will do whatever I can to help. Send me some information on what you need and I will do it."

⁸⁶ Moench, *Marauder Men*, 82.

⁸⁷ Moench, *Marauder Men*, 82.

⁸⁸ (David A. Goss, *Was This Meant to Be?* Privately Published, Arlington Texas, 1994, 7, 12-13, 21, & 25. Copy furnished courtesy of Ronni and Nels Cassano.

⁸⁹ Goss, *Meant to Be?* 28.



David Goss, servicing one of the waist guns of *Red Dog* 41-31818 VT-C, piloted by Jerome F. St. Peter.

David died before receiving the package I sent, but through a relative I was informed that after the war David had written a book titled *Was This Meant to Be?* It was out of print and I couldn't find it until Ronni Cassano sent me a copy. It was written in the third person about his experiences during the war, and it was from this book that most of the information about him was found. The following is an excerpt from his book, in which he related saving the B-17 crewmen. David, goaded on by his friend John, most likely fellow armament man John W. Foutch, is describing the event to his wife Joan, a woman he met and eventually married in England.

"I won't say it was nothing, but lots of men have done more without recognition. It was in the middle of October, when a B17 was in trouble with two engines out trying to land at our strip. We knew he wasn't going to make it and a bunch of us ran to where it looked as if he was going to try to set it down. We got to the edge of the pasture he was aiming for just as he piled in. He tried to avoid the farm house by banking the plane over on its wing and slammed in hard. Must have been a real jolt to the pilot and his co-pilot. Now *that* was something worth talking about. When both of them dropped out, I went to help them get away because the plane had caught fire. That's all!"

John cut in, "Now wait a minute Joan. That's not all. The plane was in flames, and we all knew it was loaded with fuel and a full bomb load. We all stood there, but he ran to the plane to give them a hand. Now go on and tell her, Dave. It's about time you talk about it. You knew as well as we did that the thing could blow at any moment."

"All right, John. Yes I knew, but don't ask me why I went. All I knew was they needed help and I had to go. The co-pilot was out cold, and the pilot was dazed, but he helped me get the co-pilot on my back, and we got the hell out of there. Excuse me Joan! We got far enough that when it did blow, we didn't get hurt. Then some other fellows came to help us get away."

"Joan you should have seen the blast. There wasn't much left of the plane."⁹⁰

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⁹⁰ Goss, *Meant to Be?* 43-44.

Meanwhile the Poulin family back home could only pray and wait – wait for the next letter to prove the boys were still alive, at least on the date they had written last. “It was scary,” Uncle Vic said, “We’d look for letters and wait for telegrams.” He said the family went to church every day and prayed together each night at home. “That’s probably what helped them through the war – the fact that we prayed for them.”

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Although the Air Command was elated at the heavy bombing results, and concentrating on the next targets, the men of the heavy bombers had to live with the high rate of casualties they were receiving. Combat fatigue was even more of a problem for them than for the aircrews of the medium bombers. On the one hand, they had their ‘25-mission tour’ but on the other, they had their high rate of losses. With a loss rate of 3.8 per mission they weren’t doing so well – out of 100 aircrewmen in July, sixty-four would be dead, wounded, or POWs by December.⁹¹ At higher command there was no doubt that performance was directly linked to morale, and that included the ground crews as well. Ground crews might perform poor maintenance while flight crews poor bombing results. General Moench noted that the fact that the United States was rich and powerful and would eventually win the war didn’t help the fighting individuals much. It was up to them to find the strength to go on.⁹²

The heavy bomber missions often lasted 8-10 hours at a time, while medium bomber missions were usually 3-4 hours at the most. Of course, that meant that mediums often flew two missions per day (not always combat, but still two assignments per day), so it’s very difficult to say who had it worse. Charles B. Sadler, one of the flight surgeons for the 323rd Bomb Group noticed the mood of one ‘heavy’ aircrew when he flew with them. They were very depressed and spoke of the heavy losses their unit had received.⁹³ After a particularly difficult mission, one B-17 crewman summed up his feelings as he reviewed the empty bunks in his barracks. He decided not be friendly with the replacements as they might also be lost soon.⁹⁴

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The crewmen in the heavies also had another problem to watch out for besides combat casualties and battle fatigue, and it was just as dangerous as enemy attacks – the cold. The Air Force had not expected the aircrews to fly at thirty thousand feet and did not prepare proper clothing for the intense cold. Seventy percent of our casualties came from frostbite. The Germans had electrically heated underwear. The US began to produce their own heated clothing but the wires usually broke so it was replaced by a two-layered suit. But even the new clothing was not adequate for the altitude, especially in winter. It was the fingers that suffered the most.⁹⁵ The officers and some of the gunners in the forward compartments had heat, but the gunners that were aft of the bomb bays did not. Author Joffrey Perret relates that the airmen of the Eighth Air Force did not receive adequate heated suits until 1944, and even then, fifteen percent of the casualties were still due to the cold.

* * * * *

At last, Gus’s search for his brother Guy paid off. Through letters back and forth, they set a tentative meeting place and time in London. Neither knew when the other would actually have leave, but if they both had leave in London on the same day, they would meet there with their respective girlfriends.

⁹¹ Perret, *Winged Victory*, 281.

⁹² Perret, *Winged Victory*, 408.

⁹³ Moench, *Marauder Men*, 334. Postwar comments of Charles B. Sadler, M. D.

⁹⁴ Bowman, *Castles in the Air*, 67.

⁹⁵ Perret, *Winged Victory*, 365.

Gus explained, “The thing was, that when you wrote a letter it had to be censored, see? So they gave the pilots the right to censor. Well, this one particular letter didn’t get censored. I had an idea where Guy was because I had been stationed there before. But I wasn’t sure he was there, it was merely a deduction. Finally, I got an answer from Guy and I went up to see him. Then we made a date to meet in London.”

Apparently, both boys each had a regular girl in London who they would meet at a certain time and place if they had the time off.

“Well, it was more or less an understood date,” Gus continued. “It wasn’t made in advance because we couldn’t make dates in advance. The understanding was that whenever I came into town, she was my date.”

Guy said, “I was standing there on the street with my date that had brought another girl for Gus when he walked up. Her mouth dropped open and she looked from Gus to me and from me to Gus. Then she said, ‘There’s two of you?’ (belly laugh).”

“We had met the same girl,” Gus said. “She didn’t know what to do. Well, we got rid of her anyway... there was no sense arguing over her, I’ll tell you that. The girl friend she had with her... (sour face).”

She had met them separately and gotten the two Poulins mixed up! The brothers were both so disgusted they left the girls there and went off to talk and drink. This meeting occurred on Guy’s 20th birthday, on October 15, the day after Black Thursday.

* * * * *

After that, when Guy was visiting Gus’s Marauder base, the two brothers concocted a plan to fly a mission together. They really wanted to fly together and Gus wanted to show Guy what a great plane the Marauder was, despite all the rumors.

“We all liked Guy when he came to visit our base,” Willie said. “We wanted to help him fly a mission. He switched places with the tail gunner.”

Gus said, “Guy and I were to fly out together but the plane wouldn’t fly [it returned to base] because of mechanical failure.”



Gus Poulin



Guy Poulin

(Photo courtesy of Bernadette Carter) (Photo courtesy of Solange Turcotte)

Ever since the five Sullivan brothers went down with a ship (remember the movie “Saving Private Ryan?”), the US armed forces decided that brothers must be separated, so a family would not lose more than one son at once. However, disregarding Army regulations, and their Mom’s

trauma if they both were shot down, they hatched out a plan on how to fly together anyway, substituting Guy for the usual tail gunner, Rogers. Luckily for Mémère (grandma), the plane had mechanical problems and had to return to base without completing the mission.

However, everything was OK until Guy forgot to answer with the tail gunner's name and used his own on the intercom. Guy explained, "The pilot said, 'Two Poulins on the same ship?' ...and the jig was up!"

"We got discovered, and got hell for it." Gus said flatly.

I could just imagine Dad telling Uncle Joe what a 'bonehead' he was – and Uncle Joe just chuckling it off. No doubt, with Satterwhite escorting them to the CO's office, they sniped at each other in French undertones; Satterwhite probably just shook his head or maybe rolled his eyes every now and then. If the army didn't need aircrews so bad they would have been court-martialed, but luckily, the Colonel had bigger fish to fry, so all they got was yelled at. Guy's pilot, Bill Cabral, stated that this was the only black mark on his crew's record.

"The boys are pretty good about these London missions and about conducting themselves in the expected manner," says Cabral. "In fact, the only flagrant violation we've had was when Poulin sneaked off on one of his passes to visit his brother Gaston at a Marauder station, and flew a mission with him over France."⁹⁶

I never heard what Satterwhite said. For a very short time, Uncle Joe had been a Marauder man, too. Later, one of the local hometown papers, probably the Waterville Sentinel, published a small blurb:

SOLDIER BROTHERS FIND EACH OTHER ON BRITISH SOIL

In a recent letter received by Mr. and Mrs. Joseph Poulin of 153 ½ North Avenue, from their son, Sgt. Gaston Poulin mention is made of his first meeting with his brother, Sgt. Guy Poulin in England. Both men are gunners, but this was the first occasion of their meeting on foreign soil. Sgt. Gaston mentioned the fact that Sgt. Guy took a ride with him but didn't like the plane as well as his own, "but I wouldn't change with him either," the sergeant added. The two Skowhegan lads expect to see each other quite often now.⁹⁷

A MONTREAL NEWSPAPER PUBLISHED THIS ACCOUNT (paraphrased in English):

Received from England, two Franco-American brothers, members of the United States Air Force met for the first time after they arrived overseas. Their meeting coincided with the birthday of Staff Sergeant Joseph Guy Poulin, who celebrates his exploits in a Flying Fortress *Eightball*. Joseph Guy is a turret gunner, the same as his brother Staff Sergeant Gaston Poulin, 22 years, who serves on board another type of bomber. They are the sons of Mr. And Mrs. Joseph W. Poulin of Skowhegan Maine, who emigrated from St. Joseph de Beauce to the United States just before the birth of Joseph Guy. Their only relative in Montreal is Miss Marie-Ange Lessard [Memere's sister]. They are the sons of a veteran of the last war.⁹⁸

* * * * *

In the 323rd, missions continued to be briefed and scrubbed because the targets were covered by clouds and rain. Willie and others used the time to go see Kenny Class at the hospital.

"When we went over to visit him," he said, "we all went over, giving him a bad time... and they had a nurse there named Bean, he called her 'String.' He was having a pretty good spin there that little turd was... he was the smallest gunner (laughing). 'String, I'll need another rub as soon as we get rid of these jokers,' he says, laughing. 'All right Ken,' she says. 'Don't worry about

⁹⁶ Steinmetz, *Screwballs*.

⁹⁷ Gus Poulin's Scrapbook.

⁹⁸ Gus Poulin's Scrapbook.



Kenny Class

rubbing my long leg, you can rub the short one this time,' he says. And we knew what he was talking about. She took it in stride. 'OK Ken.' She was a good nurse. She would put up with him. She had to be a good nurse."

But things had not been so easy for Kenny.

After the operation, infection did set in. A colonel who knows a lot about the use of the newest miracle drug, penicillin, climbed into a plane and flew half-way across England to take care of Kenny. And the colonel did a good job, Kenny is getting along fine.

"The boys in the squadron gave me something like six quarts of blood," he says. "I've got so many people's blood in me I hardly know who I am." The way he says it, you know he's proud of the new blood.

As soon as the hospital would let them come, Kenny began to get visitors. They came in twos and threes, and their rank ran from private to colonel. They came in and talked with him, but they didn't say much. And Kenny didn't say much. They were mostly fliers, and fliers don't need many words to show their feelings for a friend who's lost his wings.

Then Colonel Thatcher came, and he brought with him a Purple Heart ribbon.

Colonel Thatcher is tall. His face is gray. Take off his uniform and he looks like a school teacher; but he's a group commander, and his group flies Marauders. That means the fliers he leads into combat are the best pilots in the world, and his men say he's the best of the lot. It's a big job for a man in his thirties, and Colonel Thatcher's face shows it. Officers don't have any trouble remembering to say "Sir" when they're talking to Colonel Thatcher, because they know he's got the biggest job there is in war. He leads men into combat.



Colonel Thatcher receives a commendation. The man to his left is Lester Maitland, commander of the 386th Bomb Group – the oldest man flying bombers out of England
(Photo courtesy of W. L. Brainard).

Colonel Thatcher walked into Kenny's room and shook Kenny's hand.

"How are you, Kenny?" he said, "Glad to see you."

"Glad to see you, sir."

"I brought something for you, Kenny, something that stands for a hell of a lot more than the simple fact that you got hurt."

“Thank you, sir.”

The colonel pinned the ribbon on the front of Kenny’s pajamas and shook his hand and walked out of the room. Kenny saluted the colonel’s back as he was going out the door, and Miss Southerland who had been standing behind the colonel, looked at Kenny and looked at the empty door and she half-ran out of the room and caught up with Colonel Thatcher in the hall and grabbed him by the elbow and turned him around. Colonel Thatcher stopped and turned and Miss Southerland reached up and took him by the lapels of his blouse.

“You can’t do it that way!” she said tensely. “You can’t just walk in there and pin a little ribbon on his chest and walk out. That boy’s all the heroes of this war wrapped up into one. That boy deserves all the medals in the world. That boy is wonderful. You can’t just pat him on the back and then walk away and forget it.”

Colonel Thatcher let her finish, and then looked at her for a minute.

“I know,” he said at last. “I know all about Kenny. And Kenny knows that I know. There’s no need for talk between Kenny and me. We understand each other. I’d be making things difficult for him if I stayed to talk with him, because he’d be working hard to keep me from feeling sorry for him.”

Miss Southerland turned away uncertainly and went back into Kenny’s room. She still wasn’t sure. She didn’t look at Kenny when she went into the room. Kenny spoke first.

“He’s certainly a wonderful guy,” Kenny said, and Miss Southerland looked at him, hoping Colonel Thatcher had been right in what he said.

“He’s the finest man I’ll ever know,” Kenny continued. “He always reminds me of something I read somewhere.”

“What is it?” Miss Southerland asked.

Kenny quoted: “They shook from their wings the dust of their bodies.”

As he finished speaking, Miss Southerland heard an airplane in the far distance. Kenny was listening, too.

“That’s a B-26,” he said. And his eyes were shining.⁹⁹

* * * * *

“There was another guy over there in the hospital,” Willie said. “His eyes were really big, his eyelashes were gone. He had been burned. His hair was gone. So when he looked at you he looked like an owl. He still was stiff over his burns – but he was making it. He’d been in a B-17 or a B-24, one of those. We used to have wheelchair races. I’d get behind Kenny and two or three other guys would get a guy in a wheel chair and we’d head down the hall. ‘Go!’ We’d run down the hall full blast; never giving any thought to dumping somebody. Kenny didn’t either – he was leaning forward and wanted me to go faster. But that sort of thing helps those guys to get better faster. You can’t hold a bunch of young people down.”

It’s funny to hear how the boys really acted, when the brass and the press weren’t around. Willy was impressed by another nurse there at the hospital. “This wasn’t ‘String,’ this was another one I met there, a British nurse. Her husband had been out at war for three years, and she hadn’t heard from him, she didn’t know if he was coming back. I felt sorry for her. She was quite a lady. She didn’t have any serious thoughts about any man, because she was waiting for her husband. He was a medical man too. I often wondered what happened to her.”

* * * * *

On the 24th of October 1943 the Marauders were finally back in action, but some of the 453rd planes experienced an unusual difficulty on this one. Two hundred B-26s attacked the Airdromes at Mondidier and St. Andre-de-L’Eure. Flak was heavy and some of the planes had trouble with propwash, which is caused by flying too close behind another plane’s air stream – the usual result is that the plane loses its lift and begins to fall.¹⁰⁰

⁹⁹ YANK the Army Weekly, November 14, 1943. Courtesy of Lee and Lillian Zipperling.

¹⁰⁰ Moench, *Marauder Men*, 83.

Tex describes what happened. “We hit some prop wash and dropped,” he said. “I hit the ceiling. There was everything up there, parachutes, and what-not. Our plane had gone into a dive and Roscoe [Haller, the pilot,] recovered from it. Woomp! I hit the floor and I looked back, and I saw two of the bombs break their shackles. [When a tailgunner looks back, he’s actually looking forward.] We were carrying four 1000 pounders that day. One of the bombs, after breaking its shackle, wedged the door open just enough where the door joins the catwalk in the bomb bay, to continue on and fall out of the aircraft over England. The other bomb was lying on the bomb bay door.”

“So we settled-down and started to climb,” Tex went on, “I sat down by the radio operator [Ramey]... I thought we had crash-landed. And that 5-man life raft laid horizontally in there... it came loose somehow. Ramey was trying to put on the dad-gummed life raft to jump instead of a parachute!. He had been thrown around very violently after we hit the prop wash and he was probably a bit addled from the jolt of hitting the floor when Haller pulled the plane out of the dive. When [James] Smith got down out of his turret he noticed that Ramey was trying to attach the life raft pack to attachment points on his parachute harness, where his parachute pack was supposed to be, and prevented him from doing so. Haller flew our aircraft on out to the English Channel and the bombardier opened the bomb bay doors. Instead of the bomb falling out, it just remained on the door. As Haller rocked the plane back and forth, Smith caught hold of the bomb’s tail fin and succeeded in making the bomb fall free from the plane. The bomb fell in the Channel.”



Bryce Ramey, James Smith, Sam “Tex” Findley; enlisted crew of the “Egg Crate”

* * * * *

After the Satterwhite crew’s last mission of the month (15 missions total), their plane, the *Miss Safartus Rickenschicker*, was officially retired on October 24th as ‘war weary’ and sent to a training unit.¹⁰¹

* * * * *

By October 31st the US Air Force had fielded 2,385,000 men all over the world. They had flown over 250,000 sorties and had destroyed over 8,000 enemy planes with many more probably destroyed.¹⁰² America could do a lot once it decided to.

* * * * *

November 1943

This month, the 323rd Group performed twelve more missions with the Satterwhite crew flying three of them. Bad weather continued to be a serious deterrent. Willie’s plane, *Pub 13* must have also been retired as war weary, because on November 2nd, Willie and crew were given a new plane #41-31983 VT-D.

“They put it in a hangar,” he said about *Pub 13*. “And the last I saw of it, it was back in a corner, locked up. There was a couple of stands around it. They were going to use it for parts.”

¹⁰¹ Trevor Allen, B26 Marauder researcher.

¹⁰² Online USAF Museum.



Nelzo Cassano

Willie’s pilot, Lt. Mark Sprague, wondered what to name the new plane. His ground crew chief, Nelzo F. ‘Nels’ Cassano had an idea. Desiring to showcase the aircraft’s record in spite of its reputation he asked Sprague to let him name the plane. Sprague hesitated due to the controversial nature of the name and the cartoon figure that would accompany it, but he finally gave in. The new name was “Truman’s Folly,” a barb aimed t the Vice President of the United States.¹⁰³

Mr. Cassano, who also had attended the reunion in Colorado City said, “I gave the airplane the name, *Truman’s Folly*, because at one time, the Truman Committee condemned the B-26 and suggested the Army Air Corps to stop ordering the plane.”

Willie liked the name, and the cartoon... because he sure didn’t like Truman... “He was a stupid ass,” he said. Most of the Marauder men agreed. I asked Nels about his background.

“I was born in Italy on February 7, 1920,” he wrote. “Came to the United States with my parents, two sisters and one brother and went through Ellis Island in 1924. We landed in Chicago and there is where I grew up. I graduated from Hirsch High School in 1938 and worked as a chief usher for Warner Brothers. I then went to work as a brakeman on the Pennsylvania Railroad. I joined the Air Force on October 4th, 1941, went to Sheridan, Illinois, then to Jefferson barracks, and from there to Kessler Field, Mississippi, to train as an airplane mechanic. I was then sent to the Martin Factory in Baltimore and then to Ohio, on to Tampa Bay, Myrtle Beach, and then to England...”

* * * * *



David Goss

At this time, David Goss received a commendation for saving the lives of the B-17 pilot and co-pilot. He wrote in his book: “On the 2nd of November the Squadron Adjutant notified David to report to Operations in dress uniform where, to his great surprise, he was awarded the Soldier’s Medal. The Group Executive Officer, in conferring the decoration, informed the assembly, “This is the highest decoration permitted for non-combat action.” After recounting the event he turned and said, ‘Sergeant Goss, you are a true credit to your squadron.’”¹⁰⁴ David was surprised at the award but he appreciated the recognition. Sometime during November he started

painting his second nose art of a redhead called *Reddy Betty*.¹⁰⁵ Later, he would also begin painting airship art on the flight jackets of the aircrew members.

* * * * *

On November 3rd 1943 the 453rd flew a mission to the Amsterdam-Schipol Airdrome, the same airbase they had attacked a month before on October 3rd. This airdrome was a main hub of German air activity on the west coast. These were the fighters that were attacking the heavy bombers as they flew out and back from their long-range missions. It was an important target. Major Travis led the Group. German fighters came in just as the flight nosed down to begin their attack run. The gunners fought back ferociously. The Spitfire escort also joined in. One FW-190 was damaged as it dove through the formation. Another was downed by S/Sgt Eulon C. Bell (tail gunner) and T/Sgt James C. Bailey (top turret gunner). Another was shot down by Sgt Ferdinand C. Dec (tail gunner) and Sgt John H. Niven (waist gunner). Several other enemy aircraft were downed by the Group.¹⁰⁶

¹⁰³ Moench, *Marauder Men*, 68. Postwar comments of Mark A. Sprague.

¹⁰⁴ Goss, *Meant to Be?* 12.

¹⁰⁵ Goss, *Meant to Be?* 19.

¹⁰⁶ Moench, *Marauder Men*, 86.



Richard Travis (P), Eulon C. Bell Jr. (EG), James C. Bailey (TG), Ferdinand P. Dec (EG).

The 453rd gunners were hot on that day! The airdrome was damaged but continued to be used by the enemy. Turret gunner, James Curlee Bailey, was born in Clarksville, Texas, on April 30th, 1924, to parents Marie and Jim Bailey. Due to a shortage of officers and Norton bomb sights, many enlisted men served as toggliers, men who dropped their bombs when the lead bombardier dropped his. Bailey volunteered to become a togglier. He was wounded twice but survived the war to return home, only to be senselessly murdered while attending college in 1947.

* * * * *

The next day, an accident occurred on the hardstand of *Truman's Folly*. Ground crew chief Nelso Cassano describes what happened.

“On the morning of November 4, 1943, we were preparing the plane for a mission. It had been fueled, the bombs had been loaded by the ground crew, and the plane was ready for a pre-flight check by the flight crew. I saw Brainard [Willie] under the plane checking up inside the bomb bay. He had turned to start out when some malfunction caused a 2000lb bomb to release striking him across the shoulders and knocking him forcibly onto the concrete.”



The *Truman's Folly* before the nose art was painted on. Pilot Mark Sprague in center.
(Photo courtesy of W. L. Brainard)

In Willie's words, "I was in a semi-stooped position, checking the plane's hydraulics and accumulator pressure. I was stepping out from under the bomb bay, when a bomb fell off the rack and hit me square on the upper back. It knocked me forward on my knees and sprawled face-down on the asphalt surface. The bomb landed on the ground between my legs. I was lucky it didn't land on top of me. Ketcham was over on the next hardstand [the *Rickenschicker* was berthed next door], and he was yelling at everybody because he thought the bomb was laying on my legs. He came running over and he was yelling, 'Get that bomb off his legs!' Then he saw that the bomb was between my legs not on them. He was telling me about it, later. I was out cold. I kind of remember they put me on a board, put me in the ambulance, and then I was gone [passed out]. I was taken to the Earls Colne field hospital unconscious. We had been warned to carefully check the adaptors being used to hang this size bomb."

Casimir Sochocki said: "I remember when Brainard had a bomb dropped on him. I was not present when this occurred but later learned that an armament man was checking out the controls in the nose of the aircraft and mistakenly pulled the salvo lever on the intervelometer."

The Sprague crew stood down. Soon the mission was scrubbed due to bad weather anyway.

Willie explained, "When I came-to I could not move my body from just above the waist down. The hospital was three Quonset huts... kind of set out like a "T". One side was the emergency room and the other was a pharmacy and they called that the 'sick call' – that's where you reported for sick call. And the other had six or eight beds in it... might have been more. It was a regular Quonset hut like we slept in."

"It was bad," Willie continued. "I was kind of bummed up a little bit. A little bloody here, a little blood there. You know, when you hit your head on a hardstand it kind of scratches it up some... nothing that lasted very long. I sure as hell didn't learn anything. I was just as stupid afterwards as I was then (laughing). Most of the problems I have now, come from that accident. During the next few days feeling returned but I was unable to straighten my knees or move the lower part of my body. It was several days before I could move my legs or body and I can remember being in a great deal of pain. I didn't get a Purple Heart for that... didn't need one (laughing). After a few days, I felt better and I could move around a little. I was in the hospital for eleven days."

Nels Cassano wrote, "It could have been very serious. Lucky guy!"

"Somebody was watching over you!" Tex told Willie at the reunion.

Everyone agreed.

* * * * *

On the 5th of November, 1943, Gus and crew received a new plane, #41-31959 VT-S which was subsequently named *Miss Safartus Rickenschicker 2nd*, the crew being the same.¹⁰⁷

* * * * *

While on leave, Tex saw Bill Crowe, one of the 453rd airmen who had been shot down in July! He could hardly believe his eyes.

"I was in London one day," he said, "and I saw one of his [Lipscomb's] crewmen – it was Bill Crowe. I talked to him for just a minute. He said, 'I can't talk now. I gotta go, but I'm coming back out to the base.' I went back to the base and told Col. Travis and he thought I was crazy. I told him, 'I did!' He was having trouble believing me."

Bill Crowe was a member of the Lipscomb crew that had been shot down on July 31st. It turned out that three men had parachuted safely after all.¹⁰⁸

"The underground had picked up Crowe and Hager," Willie related. "Crowe told us after he got back to the outfit. They walked out of France to Spain. The underground smuggled them to

¹⁰⁷ Trevor Allen.

¹⁰⁸ Moench, *Marauder Men*, 52.

the Ambassador's house in Madrid. Then from there, they came back up to England. They gave us a little talk about their escape to England. They saw Berry. The last time they saw Berry, everybody was looking at the car. They were standing there on the street, whistling. Of course, by this time they had on farmer's clothes. Their uniforms were on under their clothes. Their flight clothes were gone but they had their jumpsuits with their insignia and rank – that's what they said you gotta keep. And you gave your escape kit to the underground. They had francs in it, and they needed that money. So you gave that to them. That was several thousand francs and they would take care of you... and that's what they did."

The Germans employed forced labor on their captured nations and thousands of young people took to hiding, eventually forming the Maquis (their name for the Underground). Regardless of what they may have thought about the French government there was no question that citizens and especially the Underground would help the Allies as much as they could.¹⁰⁹



Roger Morwood (KIA), Roland Clark (KIA), William Crowe (escaped), Joseph Hager (WIA/escaped), James Berry (MIA); men of the Lipscomb crew.

It's not likely that Crowe and Hager returned to combat duty because the Allied air forces had a policy of not allowing escaped flyers to return to their former posts. The reason for this was that if they were shot down again and captured, they could not be tortured into revealing who had helped them to escape the first time.

"Crowe and Hager said they didn't see Berry come down," Willie explained. "They only saw him in that car. I imagine Berry went off down the highway... lit up a cigarette... puffing that thing and going down the road, and they picked him up. Knowing Berry, he'd probably do that. Never give a thought that he might be picked up by the wrong people, or if he did he didn't give a damn." As General Moench confirms, Berry commonly lacked respect for pretty much everybody. His attitude in the car was reported by Crowe and Hager to have been "like a conquering hero."¹¹⁰

Willie continued, "He was riding in this open convertible sedan in the back seat between two SS officers – they looked like SS officers. And that's the last time anyone knew anything about Berry. The Red Cross tried to track him down. Nobody could find him – never did find any trace of Berry. We don't know what the hell happened to him. He probably got beaten to death by the SS officers. He probably told them to go to hell. He was that kind of guy. He wasn't afraid of a damn thing. I might've been tempted to do something stupid like that. I often thought so."

Each man must have run through his own escape scenario in his mind - how to best exit the plane and what to do once on the ground.

"I know what I would do," Willie said. "I would do my damndest. You hit the ground, roll over, roll up your chute and hide it under a bush or anything. You can get under a bush and stay there. Don't move. Let the underground find you - not try to find them. That's what Crowe and Hager did. I always felt that if I was with Frenchie, we'd get out. I'd just stick with him. Stick

¹⁰⁹ Moench, *Marauder Men*, 365.

¹¹⁰ Moench, *Marauder Men*, 52.

with Frenchie – he was my escape. That’s what I figured too. I’d tell him, ‘Don’t you screw up, ‘cause you’ve got to get me out of France.’ I’m glad it never came to that, ‘cause they separated me and Frenchie anyway.”

But the thoughts that ran through an airman’s mind on a mission were not just simply of escaping from the enemy once on the ground. There were many things to think about: being killed outright, or mortally wounded were the most obvious. But in addition, an airman also worried about things like losing oxygen at high altitude, frostbite in the cold sub-stratosphere, crash landing in a ball of fire on return to base, a parachute not opening, or, worst of all, being plastered against the ceiling of a falling aircraft, completely unable to escape, with nothing to do but wait for death.

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Willie’s plane, *Truman’s Folly* #41-31983 VT-D in flight (Photo courtesy of W. L. Brainard).

* * * * *

On the 15th of November, eleven days after his accident, Willie was released from the Earls Colne field hospital. “I began getting around on a walker and crutches,” he said, “and a short time later was allowed to go back to my unit on 2 canes. I remember having a hell of a time trying to get to the mess hall and back.” Gus wrote in a report, “As a result of his accident it was impossible for him to run, walk, or ride a bicycle any distance without having his legs lock on him. When this happened it was necessary for him to massage his legs for several minutes.”

* * * * *

During this month, as the Ninth Air Force was reorganizing to accommodate new groups coming in, experienced personnel were needed to fill the gaps in command. Colonel Thatcher was transferred to become the commander of the 99th Wing and Major Travis went with him. And if all the personnel transfers weren’t enough, the thirty mission tour was extended in duration to fifty and combat fatigue became an increased concern. The airmen must have wondered how much more they could take.

...one special problem that did worry both the Commanding and Medical Officers was that of “fatigue” – a vague term that covered many of the symptoms of stress of combat, stress of separation from home, stress of the job, and more. The reactions to such stress took on many forms – sometimes the symptoms or presence of a minor illness, sometimes a resort to alcohol, sometimes an actual “breakdown” as that term was popularly used. The Commanding and Medical Officers

were especially alert to the problem of fatigue for its emergence could have impacted significantly on the maintenance of good health, on the inherent psychological drive of the men, and on the performance of the mission.¹¹¹

Most aircrewmembers initially approached combat with a sense of personal invulnerability in which anticipated casualties were always “the other man.” Typically, the first subtle symptoms of combat fatigue might begin to show up in medium bombardment aircrew personnel with 30-40 missions – something considered normal by the medical staffs.¹¹²

Because of the RAF’s longer combat experience and the special relationships between the USAAF and the RAF, the USAAF was significantly influenced by RAF thinking. In the case of combat fatigue, that influence created a stigma regarding those affected in that, although once lenient on the matter, by the early 1940s the RAF no longer tolerated non-performance keyed to this condition, e.g. if a Non-Commissioned Officer refused to fly he was classed as “LMF” – lack of moral fiber. Such classification normally resulted in immediate loss of all rank. Reflecting or stimulated by this RAF attitude toward combat fatigue, there developed a general view among Marauder Men that anyone who succumbed to this condition was a sissy, was inherently a coward, or worse. Yet, combat fatigue was as likely to strike the daring, driving, hard-hitting combat person as any other individual.¹¹³

* * * * *

On the town in London, the adventures of Gus and Guy continue:

“One night,” Gus related, “on a 72 hour pass, half of my crew and half of Guy’s crew was there also. We were sitting at the bar with ‘Whitey’ [Widetsky?] who had false teeth. He had to go to the bathroom. Know what happened to his teeth?”

“What?”

“Down the toilet. When he returned to the bar, everybody asked him what had happened to his teeth. He says he lost them. We asked ‘Where?’ ‘Down the toilet,’ he replied.”

“He flushed ‘em down?”

“Ya, he had gotten sick and puked. We were all sitting around the table. ‘Course the bottles are underneath the table. Whitey says, ‘I need a drink.’ So he reaches under the table to grab a bottle and he drops it.”

“Did he break it?”

“Yup, broke it all to hell.”

“Everybody mad at him?”

“Nope. It was too funny. I told him he had better quit. He was only 20 years old, but you’d swear up and down he was about fifty. Baldheaded. This was a meeting we had in London.”

* * * * *

On November 28th, Roosevelt, Churchill, and Stalin met at Teheran in North Africa, to discuss the ongoing strategies of the war.

* * * * *

December 1943

Although severely hampered by bad weather in December, the 323rd stepped up the bombing of NoBall targets – missile launching sites.¹¹⁴ The Satterwhite crew flew two more missions together, then, sometime after the 5th, Captain Satterwhite was promoted to Major and became commander of the 455th squadron. The crew broke up but Gus and Ketcham stayed together and were assigned to fly with another crew. The Pilot was 1st Lt. Selby M. Foster Jr. This plane had a copilot, Flight Officer Alfred C. Macksoud, and the Bombardier was 1st Lt. Frank E.

¹¹¹ Moench, *Marauder Men*, 334.

¹¹² Moench, *Marauder Men*, 339.

¹¹³ Moench, *Marauder Men*, 334.

¹¹⁴ Moench, *Marauder Men*, 119.

Larkin Jr.¹¹⁵ The engineer-tailgunner was Ferdinand P. Dec (mentioned earlier as having downed an enemy fighter). A new crew under the command of Lt. Leo Myron Denny took over the *Miss Safartus Rickenschicker 2nd*.

Approximately the 18th sortie the crew of the *Rickenschicker* broke up as its pilot [Captain Satterwhite] was promoted to major and made commanding officer of another outfit. From here on, T-Sgt. Poulin did his flying in the “Toid Boid”. Here again was a strange name, this time dreamed up by the pilot. “What it referred to, no one will ever know,” Poulin says.¹¹⁶

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The Van Antwerp Crew L-R: Harold Gustafson (TG), Eugene Duffy (NB), Willis Diel (EG), Anthony Van Antwerp (P), William Zipperling (RG) (*A. Van Antwerp/Freeman 176*).

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Lt. George Friesner was transferred from Gus’s to Tex’s crew.

Tex says, “It was about this time that we lost our bombardier. Every time he was briefed for a mission he would plead illness to our pilot claiming that he was unable to fly due to some health problem such as tooth ache, belly ache, etc. that made him unable to fly that day. He would usually make these complaints to our pilot after the mission briefing causing us to have to get another bombardier on short notice for the mission. He just lacked the intestinal fortitude that it took to be a combat crewman. He was sent back to the U.S. and was replaced by Lieutenant George Friesner. All of us had a fear of the hazardous undertaking in which we were engaged. We were well aware of our mortality and the risks we were taking of being killed, wounded, or becoming prisoners of war. The hazards we shared forged a close bond between the members of each crew. It was a bond, which in some ways was closer than that which exists between blood brothers.”

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¹¹⁵ Trevor Allen, B26 arader researcher..

¹¹⁶ Gus Poulin’s Scrapbook.

On December 9th, Willie celebrated his birthday and the adventures of Gus and Willie continue:

“It was my 21st birthday,” Willie said, “and for my birthday present, Frenchie and some of the guys bought me 21 shots of whiskey at a bar. I went in the bar and they set these shot glasses up on the counter and they said there was twenty-one of them and I was supposed to drink them all. I drank some of them and for the life of me I couldn’t finish them. The other guys must have finished them. Then we went out and got on those damn bicycles. I had a hell of a time trying to get started. Finally, we got going.”



Richard J. Travis
Captain, 453rd

Gus added, “After that, you know, we’re pedaling along on the bicycles and I told Willie, ‘Now, you follow me this time. Don’t try to pass me.’ So zooooom (a sweep of the arm), there he goes. And over in England they have briar patches, just like sandpaper. I was just strolling along when I heard Willie yell, ‘Halp! I’m stuck.’ I went back and sure enough he was stuck - stuck in a briar patch. I had the flashlight. He was supposed to follow me. Right into the puckerbrush he went. He couldn’t get out, but I finally got him out, bicycle and all. I said, ‘Willie, you’ve got to follow me. I’ve got the flashlight.’”

Willie continued, “I was watching the little tail-light on Frenchie’s bicycle but every time he went around a turn I didn’t. That tail light would disappear and into the ditch I went – I must have crashed about five or six times that night.”

I could just visualize Gus and Willie traveling an English country road on a dark night. Just shapes zipping along on bikes and suddenly, you can’t see it happening, but you can hear Willie going into the bushes (again). But the difficulties of the night were far from over.

“We weren’t supposed to be out that late, ‘cause we were on alert,” Willie explained. “About the time we finally got back to the base, we heard the engines revving out on the field and we knew we’d better get to the briefing room right away. After spending so much time in the bushes I didn’t look too good, so I came into the briefing room... I was pretty sober by then... I had scratches, dirt, and leaves; covered with all that crap, and I was still in my Class A’s (dress uniform), we were late... had missed roll call. I was a mess. My hat was off to one side. Somehow Frenchie had changed into his flight clothes, but I just went straight into the briefing... Travis was standing there looking at me coming in. I sat down in the nearest chair, and stared straight ahead, at attention – not daring to move a muscle. Travis was just starting the briefing and he looked at me and then he turned his back to the group. He was staring at the map. He stayed that way for quite a while. Someone told me later that he was laughing. He was good like that (laughing). After the briefing I saw the yellow flare and I knew I had time to get cleaned up, so I did, but then the red flare meant that the mission had been scrubbed. Boy, was I glad!”

* * * * *



John Bull

As far as bombs are concerned, the Marauder men at Earls Colne were not used to receiving, just delivering, but now the base was bombed by the Germans, possibly in retaliation for the increased attacks on the Noball targets.

“Well, we pulled our regular missions,” Gus said, “our regular turns, we got bombed a few times, but not real bad. One night, one of our buddies who didn’t care for anything... he didn’t care if the bomb landed right in the middle of him. We were getting blasted. He’s laying on the top bunk in the Quonset hut. His name was John Bull. ‘John, you coming into the bomb shelter?’ someone asked. ‘Well,’ he says, ‘I only cover about six feet of this

ground here. They're bound to miss me.' Well, they missed him, but they caved in the whole side of the Quonset hut! That's how close they came!"

No one was hurt but the raid reminded everyone that they were not invulnerable even at their base and the air raid shelters got more use than they previously had.¹¹⁷

"They bombed us one night," Willie added, "and that was the worst place to be in that thing [the wash-drying shack]. When that first bomb hit, we got two or three splinters of shrapnel into the side of that shed. We were into that bunker real fast. But the shrapnel didn't go through the wall. It buried into the stucco. We never heard an airplane – couldn't figure out what they were aiming at."

* * * * *

Gus and Ketcham's first mission with their new pilot, Lt. Selby Foster, was to the infamous Amsterdam-Schipol Airfield on the 13th of December, 1943. This was Gus's 24th mission and Tex's 18th. Willie was still recuperating from his accident. On the approach to the target, the flak was thicker than anyone had ever seen before. It was described by some as a "large black cloud," and by others as "the 4th of July."

Another raid occurred on the 13th of December with four Marauder Groups, 216 planes in all, the largest number to date.¹¹⁸ Three Marauders were shot down, and 147 were damaged. The Foster crew's hydraulics were shot out and they crash-landed upon return.¹¹⁹ As Moench wrote, "Once more, the Amsterdam-Schipol Airdrome earned a name not repeatable in print."¹²⁰



Marauders pound the Amsterdam-Schipol Airdrome on December 13th, 1943 (Moench 126).

"We crash-landed six times," Gus stated. "This time, we had been hit in the hydraulic system again. We got the main landing gear down, of course, you don't know what flaps are..."

¹¹⁷ Moench, *Marauder Men*, 120.

¹¹⁸ b-26marauderarchives.org.

¹¹⁹ Trevor Allen, B26 Marauder reasearcher.

¹²⁰ Moench, *Marauder Men*, 120.

“Yes, I do. (I’d built those plastic models).”

“Those are more or less air brakes. We couldn’t drop any flaps... we had no hydraulic braking fluid. We hit the ground with two wheels. Naturally, at 200 miles an hour, you don’t stop without brakes... and we ended up in the ditch again.”

Sometime in December, 1943, about the 24th mission, the “Toid Boid” [actually another loaner plane] went on a flight that brought the worst flak that T-Sgt. Poulin has experienced. “The plane was pretty well shot up and we were forced to make a crash landing.” All the crew escaped without a scratch. The Skowhegan airman reports that none of his crew in either Marauder ever received serious injuries on any of their expeditions. “I guess we were the luckiest crew in the ETO.”¹²¹

Gen. Moench didn’t describe Gus’s crash landing, but he did write about Zip’s, whose plane also crashed upon returning that day. Every aircraft in the 453rd Squadron incurred damage. The “Flying Dutchman piloted by 1st Lt. Anthony Van Antwerp crashlanded at the Halesworth Airdrome. They overshot the end of the runway and ended up out in the field with pieces falling off the plane all the way. Three men were injured during the landing, T/Sgt Eugene C. Duffy (NB); T/Sgt Willis D. Diel (EG); and S/Sgt William P. Zipperling, (RG).¹²²

Tex wrote, “When Zip’s plane crashed, a machine gun came forward and hit Zip between the eyes, so he sported some black eyes for a while after that.”



Tex’s bomb tag.

Zip told his family that when he got out of the aircraft, he was shaking like a leaf. He wasn’t much of a drinker back then, but when someone asked him if he wanted a drink, he said, “Yes!” And he downed a whole glass of liquor just like it was water. This was his 25th mission. Van Antwerp’s crew received a new plane which they named *The Flying Dutchmen II*, #41-31826 VT-M.¹²³

I asked Tex if he had been on that mission.

“Yes,” he wrote, “I was on the Schipol mission, 13 December, 1943. It was one of the roughest that I flew on. Schipol received severe damage from this attack. The below sea-level airdrome was put under 10 feet of water and it was June of 1944 before the Krauts got it pumped out.”

Tex wrote on the bomb tag he saved from that mission, “The hottest flak yet, wow!”



Anthony Van Antwerp, Eugene Duffy (WIA), William Zipperling (WIA), Willis Diel (WIA)

The Amsterdam-Schipol raid ended the Nazi ability to cover the European west coast with any significant amount of air power. Because of the damage to their airfields and facilities, they had to pull back to airdromes closer to Germany. The air battle for the western coastline of Europe

¹²¹ Gus Poulin’s Scrapbook.

¹²² Moench, *Marauder Men*, 121-122.

¹²³ Alf Johanneson, aircraft researcher.

had been won. The Germans weren't defeated yet, but they were pushed back and it was the beginning of the end for the Luftwaffe. In December the American fighters known as P-51B Mustangs entered the ETO, and they could fly all the way to Berlin and back. For the first time in the war, the heavy bombers would now have a full escort. And in the next five months, 2,262 Nazi fighter pilots would die. In May alone, the month before D-day, the Germans would lose fully 25% of their pilots.¹²⁴ The relentless Allied Air Forces kept flying.



Zip's aircraft #41-34712 VT-M the *Flying Dutchman* (Photos courtesy of Lee and Lillian Zipperling)

Foster crew's plane on the Schipol mission, #41-34897 VT-W, must have been a loaner, the next time out, the Foster crew flew in their regular plane #41-34853 VT-R *Toid Boid*. The nose art on the plane was a drawing of Jimmy Carioca, one of Walt Disney's Three Caballeros, except that he was leaning on a bomb instead of a cane.

Gus logged nine more missions in December, completing his 30th mission to the Lostbarne Noball on New Year's Eve. He only had 20 more missions to go.

* * * * *

During the last year, the US citizens at home had not been idle. General Moench sums up the amazing material accomplishments of the United States during 1943.

In the United States, the "Arsenal of Democracy" was turning out materials for itself and all the Allies in increasingly enormous quantities. Beginning in 1943, the United States had produced 132,000 aircraft, 148,000 tanks, 1,200,000 trucks, 42,000 guns, 27 million tons of merchant shipping and warships. In this period, the United States had given in assistance \$3.5 billion to the

¹²⁴ ehistory.com.

USSR, \$6.0 billion to Great Britain, \$1.5 Billion to China, India, Australia and New Zealand, and \$2.0 billion to African, Middle East and Mediterranean countries.¹²⁵

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Gus in flight jacket with the *Toid Boird's* Jimmy Carioca logo.

* * * * *

A Wing and a Prayer

One of our planes was missing, two hours overdue.
One of our planes was missing, with all her gallant crew.
The radio sets were humming and waiting for a word,
When a voice broke through that humming and this is what they heard:

Coming in on a wing and a prayer,
Coming in on a wing and a prayer,
Though we've one motor gone, we can still carry on,
Coming in on a wing and a prayer.

What a show -

What a fight -

Yes we really hit our target for tonight,
How we sing as we limp through the air,
Look below there's a field over there,
With a full crew on board and our trust in the Lord,
We're coming in on a wing and a prayer.

What a show -

What a fight -

Yes we really hit our target for tonight,
How we sing as we limp through the air,
Look below there's a field over there,
With a full crew on board and our trust in the Lord,
We're coming in on a wing and a prayer.

The Four Vagabonds (McHugh/Adamson) 1943

¹²⁵ Moench, *Marauder Men*, 125.



Technical Sergeant Walter L. Woods
323rd Bomb Group, 453rd Bomb Squadron
USSAF 1942-1945
(Photo courtesy of Willis Brainard)



Staff Sergeant Lawrence C. Nusser
323rd Bomb Group, 453rd Bomb Squadron
USSAF 1941-1945
(Photo courtesy of Willis Brainard)

More photos courtesy of Willis Lee Brainard:



A P-51 Mustang with invasion stripes.



A B-24 Liberator – the other heavy bomber (besides the B-17 Flying Fortress).



Thunderbolt



A captured Focke Wulf with British markings.



A captured Junkers-88 with British markings.



A front view of the same JU-88.



A P-38 Lightning



P-38 Lightning after take-off.



Maintenance on Truman's Folly.

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 aircrewmembers 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.¹²⁶

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.¹²⁷

* * * * *

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.¹²⁸

¹²⁶ Moench, *Marauder Men*, 129.

¹²⁷ Online USAF Museum.

¹²⁸ 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.¹²⁹

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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).

* * * * *

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.¹³⁰

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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.¹³¹

¹²⁹ Perret, *Winged Victory*, 365

¹³⁰ Moench, *Marauder Men*, 131.

¹³¹ 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.”

* * * * *

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.”¹³²

“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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¹³² 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.

* * * * *

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 (toggler), Ivan B. Altmanshofer (engineer/turret gunner), Chester E. Whitehouse (tailgunner, and Paul J. Rensick (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."¹³³ 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 Lingham 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.

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.

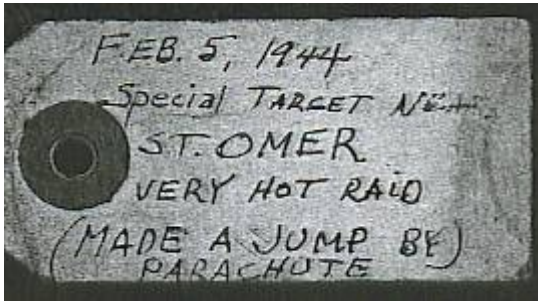
"At this point it began to be a little funny," Haller said.

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.

¹³³ 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,



Tex's bomb tag for St. Omer.

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.

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].”¹³⁴

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.”

* * * * *

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.¹³⁵ 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.¹³⁶

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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.¹³⁷

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¹³⁴ Bud Hutton, *Stars and Stripes*, February 1, 1944; courtesy of Samuel Findley.

¹³⁵ MACR 1829 – Courtesy of Alf Johanneson, aircraft researcher.

¹³⁶ 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.

¹³⁷ 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.¹³⁸

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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

¹³⁸ 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!"

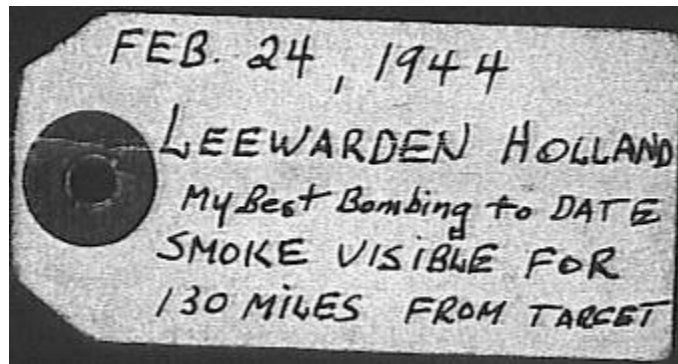
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During missions, clouds as well as flak became the standing order of the day. The Germans now had equipment that allowed them to fire through complete cloud cover. Gun-laying radar meant that in 10/10 (total) cloud cover, the Germans could 'see' and 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."¹³⁹

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.

* * * * *

On the 24th of February 1944 Tex and crew flew two missions. The morning run to Leeward 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.¹⁴⁰



Tex's bomb tag.

* * * * *

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."¹⁴¹

¹³⁹ Moench, *Marauder Men*, 142.

¹⁴⁰ Moench, *Marauder Men*, 147.

¹⁴¹ Moench, *Marauder Men*, 141.



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

* * * * *

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.¹⁴²

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.”¹⁴³ Gus, Willie, Tex, and Zip kept flying.

* * * * *

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.¹⁴⁴ 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 –

¹⁴² Moench, *Marauder Men*, 338.

¹⁴³ Moench, *Marauder Men*, 338.

¹⁴⁴ 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.

* * * * *

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.¹⁴⁵

* * * * *

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

¹⁴⁵ *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.¹⁴⁶

"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."

* * * * *

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.¹⁴⁷

* * * * *

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.

¹⁴⁶ Moench, *Marauder Men*, 153.

¹⁴⁷ *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.¹⁴⁸

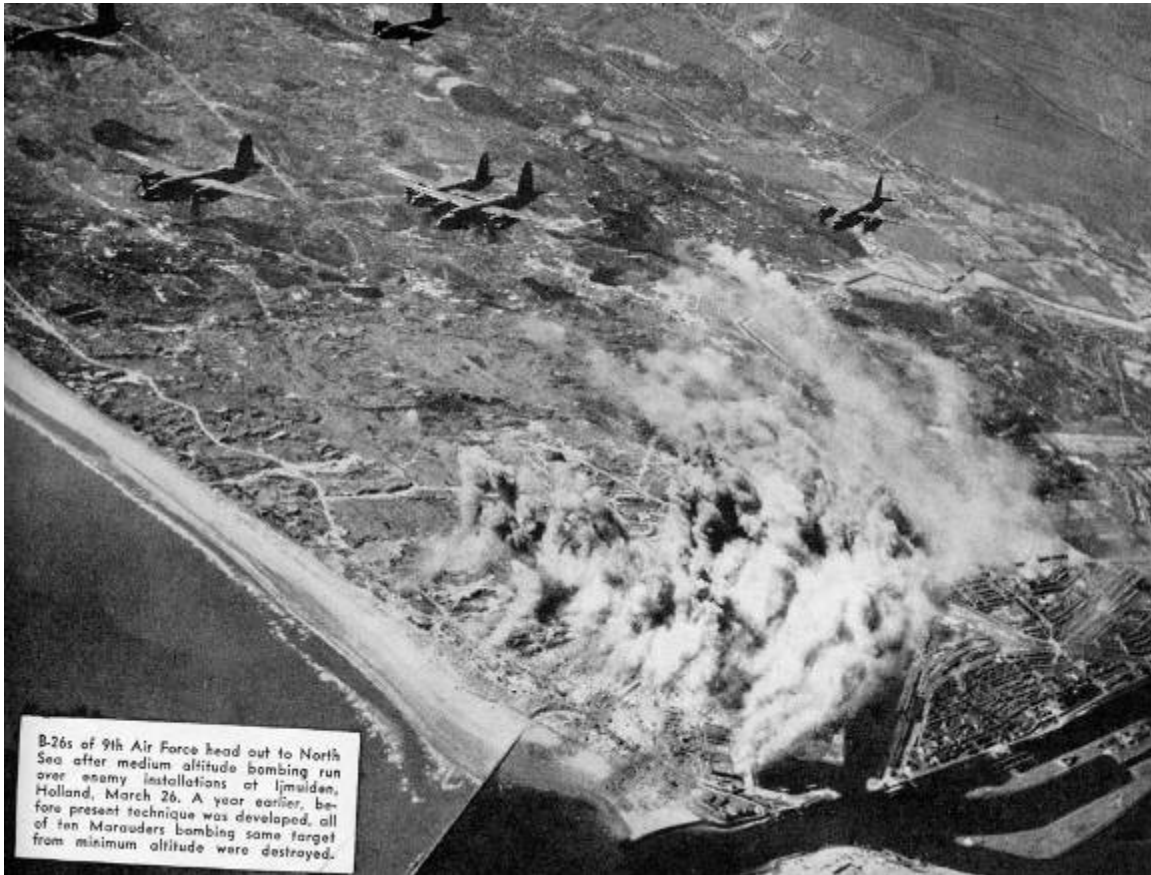


Photo from the publication, "Air Force, July 1944." (Courtesy of W. L. Brainard)

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).¹⁴⁹

The Foster crew must have had the day off, because the Reese crew was flying in the *Toid Boid*.¹⁵⁰ 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*.¹⁵¹ Gus continued wearing his *Toid Boid* flight jacket, which he brought home after the war.

¹⁴⁸ Moench, *Marauder Men*, 157.

¹⁴⁹ Moench, *Marauder Men*, 156.

¹⁵⁰ Alf Johanneson, aircraft researcher.

¹⁵¹ 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.¹⁵²

* * * * *

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.”¹⁵³

* * * * *

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.

¹⁵² Moench, *Marauder Men*, 338.

¹⁵³ 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 aircrewmembers were scrounging metal plates to put underneath them.¹⁵⁴

* * * * *

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.¹⁵⁵

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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.¹⁵⁶

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.¹⁵⁷

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,

¹⁵⁴ Moench, *Marauder Men*, 62.

¹⁵⁵ Moench, *Marauder Men*, 339.

¹⁵⁶ Moench, *Marauder Men*, 165.

¹⁵⁷ 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.¹⁵⁸

“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.”

¹⁵⁸ 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.¹⁵⁹

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.”

¹⁵⁹ 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.¹⁶⁰

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 1944.¹⁶¹

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.¹⁶²

¹⁶⁰ This and the following information courtesy of Barbara Denny, niece of Lt. Denny.

¹⁶¹ vintagememoirs.com/honorbook/38.html.

¹⁶² 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.¹⁶³ 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.¹⁶⁴

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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.

* * * * *

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.¹⁶⁵

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."

* * * * *

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.¹⁶⁶ 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.

¹⁶³ Moench, *Marauder Men*.

¹⁶⁴ Moench, *Marauder Men*, 169.

¹⁶⁵ Moench, *Marauder Men*, 175.

¹⁶⁶ Kohn/Harahan, 12.

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 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 1944.¹⁶⁷

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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 warn 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.¹⁶⁸

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 80,000¹⁶⁹ – and some statisticians insisted the number would be closer to 140,000.¹⁷⁰ 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 thrilled to have him there.¹⁷¹ 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.”¹⁷²

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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¹⁶⁷ Kohn/Harahan.

¹⁶⁸ Moench, *Marauder Men*, 176.

¹⁶⁹ Moench, *Marauder Men*,

¹⁷⁰ Perret, *Winged Victory*.

¹⁷¹ 456BS History, Moench, *Marauder Men*, 179.

¹⁷² 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!”¹⁷³

* * * * *

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.¹⁷⁴

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

¹⁷³ Gus Poulin’s Scrapbook).

¹⁷⁴ 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.¹⁷⁵



Jesse Swan, William Heather (KIA)

* * * * *

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.¹⁷⁶

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

¹⁷⁵ Moench, *Marauder Men*, 181.

¹⁷⁶ 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.¹⁷⁷



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. Peter¹⁷⁸ and the other was “Red Dog” piloted by Maj. William J. Heather.¹⁷⁹ 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’”¹⁸⁰

“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!”

¹⁷⁷ Freeman, *Marauder At War*, 106.

¹⁷⁸ Alf Johannesen, aircraft researcher.

¹⁷⁹ Moench, *Marauder Men*.

¹⁸⁰ 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.¹⁸¹

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.¹⁸²

* * * * *

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:

¹⁸¹ Moench, *Marauder Men*, 338.

¹⁸² 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)].¹⁸³

* * * * *

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

¹⁸³ 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.¹⁸⁴



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.”¹⁸⁵

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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¹⁸⁴ Gus Poulin’s Scrapbook.

¹⁸⁵ 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.”

* * * * *

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*.
* * * * *

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.¹⁸⁶

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.

¹⁸⁶ *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.

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.¹⁸⁷

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.¹⁸⁸ 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.¹⁸⁹ The unit's last box was scheduled to drop only six minutes before the infantry came ashore. Timing was critical.¹⁹⁰



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."¹⁹¹

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

¹⁸⁷ Moench, *Marauder Men*, 193.

¹⁸⁸ Moench, *Marauder Men*, 193.

¹⁸⁹ Moench *Marauder Men*, 194.

¹⁹⁰ Moench *Marauder Men*, 195.

¹⁹¹ *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."

* * * * *

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."

* * * * *

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.¹⁹²

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

¹⁹² Perret, *War to be Won*.

the Allies overall.¹⁹³ 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.¹⁹⁴

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 fighters¹⁹⁵ The Ninth Air Force lost 71 aircraft, mostly fighters shot down by ground fire while the Germans had lost 28 fighters.¹⁹⁶

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.¹⁹⁷ 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.”

* * * * *

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

¹⁹³ Perret, *War to be Won*, 323.

¹⁹⁴ Hastings, *Victory in Europe*, 22.

¹⁹⁵ Perret, *Winged Victory*, 305.

¹⁹⁶ Perret, *Winged Victory*, 306.

¹⁹⁷ 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.¹⁹⁸



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.¹⁹⁹

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

¹⁹⁸ Moench *Marauder Men*, 207.

¹⁹⁹ Moench *Marauder Men*, 339.

aircrewmembers to the Marauder Groups and a cancellation of the ‘no combat tour’ policy.”²⁰⁰ 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.

* * * * *



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!”²⁰¹ 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.”²⁰²

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.²⁰³

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.²⁰⁴ 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.²⁰⁵

²⁰⁰ Moench *Marauder Men*, 207.

²⁰¹ History of the Ninth Air Force – online.

²⁰² Kohn and Harahan, *USAF Warrior Studies*, 19.

²⁰³ Perret, *War to be Won*, 314.

²⁰⁴ Hastings, *Victory in Europe*, 45.

²⁰⁵ 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.²⁰⁶

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.”²⁰⁷

“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.²⁰⁸

“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)²⁰⁹

* * * * *

“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.”²¹⁰

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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

²⁰⁶ Moench, *Marauder Men*, 210; reprinted with permission of Frederick J. Mingus.

²⁰⁷ Moench, *Marauder Men*, 210, Postwar comments of Frederick J. Mingus.

²⁰⁸ *Daily Sun*, Nov. 11, 2005; courtesy of Frederick J. Mingus.

²⁰⁹ Moench, *Marauder Men*, 210; reprinted with permission of Frederick J. Mingus.

²¹⁰ *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.²¹¹

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.²¹² 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.²¹³

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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.²¹⁴

* * * * *

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

²¹¹ Hastings, *Victory in Europe*, 47.

²¹² Perret, *War to be Won*.

²¹³ Gus Poulin’s Scrapbook.

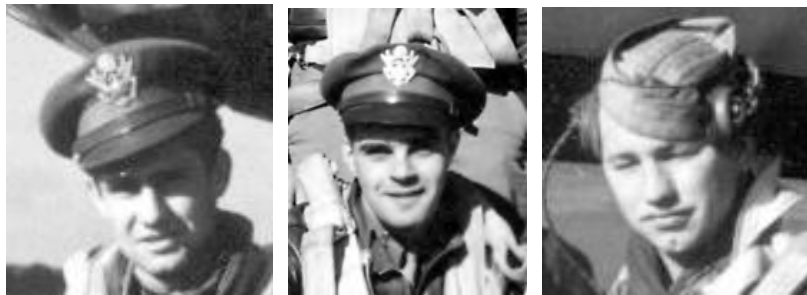
²¹⁴ Hastings, *Victory in Europe*, 58.

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.²¹⁵



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.²¹⁶ 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.²¹⁷

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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²¹⁵ Trevor Allen, B26 Marauder researcher.

²¹⁶ Perret, *War to be Won*, 332.

²¹⁷ 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.²¹⁸

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."²¹⁹

* * * * *



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

²¹⁸ Moench, *Marauder Men*, 224.

²¹⁹ 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."²²⁰

* * * * *

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.²²¹ 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.²²²

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

²²⁰ Goss, *Meant to Be?* 105-107.

²²¹ Freeman, *Marauder at War*, 114.

²²² 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.

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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.²²³

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.”²²⁴

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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.

²²³ Goss, *Meant to Be?* 109.

²²⁴ 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.²²⁵ 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.²²⁶

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.”²²⁷

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.²²⁸ 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.²²⁹

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.²³⁰ Ernie had never heard the sound of bombs falling from directly above. Everyone took cover or at least sprawled prone on the ground.²³¹ “...It was chaos,” he wrote. Just the concussion the men felt was immense.²³² 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.²³³ One hundred and eleven Americans were dead and four hundred and ninety

²²⁵ Perret, *Winged Victory*, 110-111.

²²⁶ Blumenson, *Liberation*, 54.

²²⁷ Pyle, *Brave Men*, 434.

²²⁸ Blumenson, *Liberation*, 54-55.

²²⁹ Pyle, *Brave Men*, 436.

²³⁰ Blumenson, *Liberation*, 55.

²³¹ Pyle, *Brave Men*, 436.

²³² Pyle, *Brave Men*, 437.

²³³ Pyle, *Brave Men*, 438.

were 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.²³⁴

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.”²³⁵ When they advanced all American commanders affirmed that their chief obstacle was the destroyed terrain, not the Germans.²³⁶

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.²³⁷

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.”²³⁸ 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.”²³⁹

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.”²⁴⁰ 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.

²³⁴ Blumenson, *Liberation*, 55-56.

²³⁵ Moench, *Marauder Men*, 229.

²³⁶ Kohn/Harahan, *USAF Warrior Studies*, 26.

²³⁷ Pyle, *Brave Men*, 438.

²³⁸ Perret, *Winged Victory*, 110-111.

²³⁹ Ernie Pyle scrapbook exhibit Albuquerque, NM

²⁴⁰ 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.²⁴¹

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 (armorers-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

²⁴¹ Moench, *Marauder Men*, 221.

near the beach.²⁴² 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.²⁴³

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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.”

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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.²⁴⁴

“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

²⁴² Trevor Allen, B26 Marauder researcher.

²⁴³ Moench, *Marauder Men*, 232.

²⁴⁴ 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.

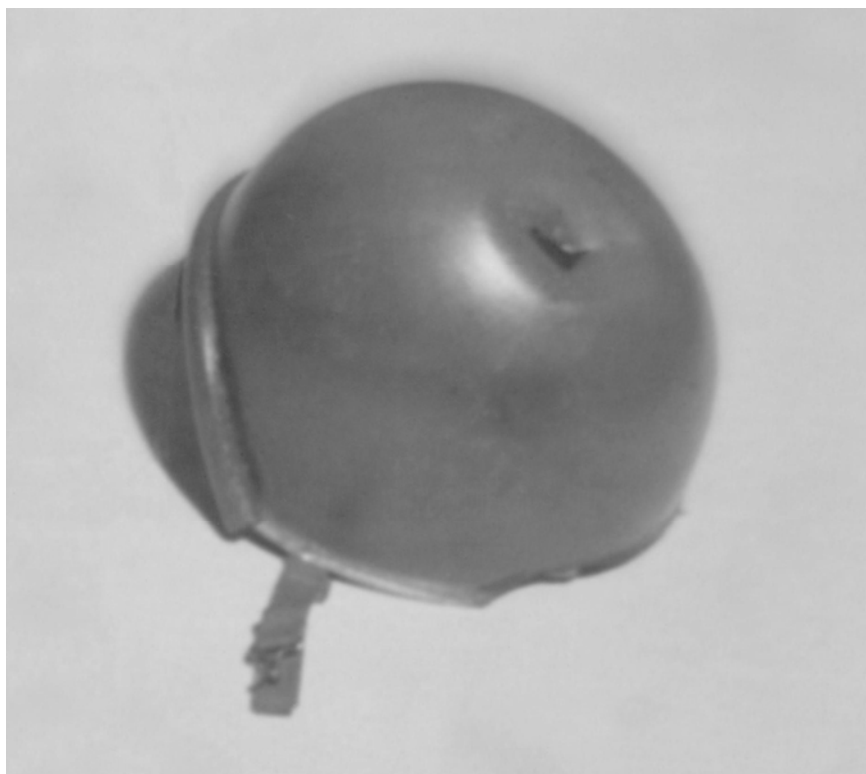
“Did you go to a hospital?” I asked Gus.

“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, 1944.²⁴⁵

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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.²⁴⁶

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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."

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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

²⁴⁵ from Gus Poulin's Enlisted Record.

²⁴⁶ 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.²⁴⁷

“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.”²⁴⁸



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

²⁴⁷ Gus Poulin’s Scrapbook)

²⁴⁸ Letter from Fred Mingus to Trevor Allen 7/31/78; courtesy of Fred Mingus.

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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.²⁴⁹

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.²⁵⁰

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.²⁵¹

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.²⁵²

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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

²⁴⁹ Moench, *Marauder Men*, 240.

²⁵⁰ Moench, *Marauder Men*, 240.

²⁵¹ Perret, *War to be Won*, 351.

²⁵² 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.²⁵³

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.²⁵⁴

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

²⁵³ Goss, *Meant to Be?* 110.

²⁵⁴ Goss, *Meant to Be?* 112-113.

Aircrews flew there with full bombs loads and all their personal baggage.²⁵⁵ 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.²⁵⁶

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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.²⁵⁷ 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.²⁵⁸ 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."²⁵⁹ 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.²⁶⁰

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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.²⁶¹

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²⁵⁵ Moench, *Marauder Men*, 242.

²⁵⁶ Moench *Marauder Men*, 243.

²⁵⁷ Hastings, *Victory in Europe*, 66.

²⁵⁸ Hastings, *Victory in Europe*.

²⁵⁹ Hastings, *Victory in Europe*, 58-61.

²⁶⁰ The History Channel.

²⁶¹ 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.²⁶²

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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.”²⁶³ 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.”²⁶⁴ 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

²⁶² Moench, *Marauder Men*, 241.

²⁶³ Pyle, *Brave Men*, 457.

²⁶⁴ 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.

Chapter 7 - The Battle for France

September – November 1944

September 1944

All through August 1944 the Allied land forces had raced across France to capture as much ground as possible from the retreating Germans. Patton's troops had advanced 450 miles from Brittany in eastern France to Lorraine in the west. Patton pursued his goal of splitting France in half, but he was exposing his right flank. The Allies were on his left, but he filled the gap on the right by utilizing the French Underground to clear roads and bridges, guard supply dumps, and located German patrols. He had the support of up to 25,000 FFI troops.²⁶⁵ Patton reached Metz on September 1st after his lightning advance across the country. The other armies on his right were pushing forward too. Everyone began to feel that victory was just ahead of them. The Germans now had only about 100 tank and 570 aircraft against the Allies' 2,000 and 14,000 respectively.²⁶⁶ Men were shouting, "End the war in '44!"²⁶⁷ But then the Allied advance ran out of gas, literally!

On September 1st Eisenhower took over direct command of the Allied forces in Northern France from British General Montgomery. Almost his first act on duty was to halt the First and Third Armies so they could be replenished. General Patton fumed, replying that his, "men can eat their belts, but my tanks have gotta have gas!" Eisenhower was hard put to keep his commanders at bay.²⁶⁸ Bradley's forces need 20,000 tons of supplies a day but they only received 11,000, not enough to continue advancing.²⁶⁹

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One unusual thing about the advancement of the 323rd Bomb Group to Lessay was that now the Germans were to the east as well as to the west. To the east was Germany and the as-yet-to-be liberated areas of France, but to the west, trapped on the Brest Peninsula, was a substantial group of Germans who had been ordered by Hitler to hold out at all costs. General Patton's troops split up into two contingents, one fighting east and the other fighting west. This meant the Marauders would be flying in both directions. General Moench categorized it as "Brest or Metz." In order to minimize Allied casualties the bombers were heavily employed against enemy concentrations.²⁷⁰

But the rain was against them again and missions were briefed and scrubbed day after day. The airmen know what was being said about them but nothing could be done.²⁷¹ Moench describes a "growing undercurrent of exasperation between air forces and ground forces." High Command decided that in order to create mutual understanding officers and Enlisted men would spend some time in an exchange program. Ground-pounders would fly and airmen would serve with the ground troops. However, neither group, received much appreciation or understanding of the other group's situation.²⁷²

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

In the first week of September, one of the B-26 aircraft damaged both propellers landing on the steel plank strip. David heard that another B-26 was preparing to go to England to pick up replacement props. He

²⁶⁵ Perret, *War to be Won*, 366.

²⁶⁶ Hastings, *Victory in Europe*, 78.

²⁶⁷ Perret, *War to be Won* 359.

²⁶⁸ Hastings, *Victory in Europe*, 82.

²⁶⁹ Perret, *War to be Won*, 369-370.

²⁷⁰ Moench, *Marauder Men*, 250.

²⁷¹ Moench, *Marauder Men*.

²⁷² Moench, *Marauder Men*, 251.

promptly caught up with the pilot, who knew him quite well. “Any chance I might be part of your crew to go get the props? You know my wife is in London, and I’d love to see her even for a brief hello. Can’t help worrying about her.”

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

The night was short. Early morning he was back at the plane where he helped load the replacement props and preflight the plane for departure. Sgt. Krout, the propeller specialist also came from Baltimore. They had a good time on the way across talking about where they grew up. After a neat touchdown, he had a few explanations to make about his disappearance. To the question, ‘Where have you been this time, Goss?’, he quietly answered, ‘On special assignment, if you please.’²⁷³



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

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

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

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

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Finally the 323rd including the Foster and Sprague crews flew to Brest on the 6th – it was Gus’s 65th mission, Willie’s 57th. The German positions were pounded three times, twice on the 6th and once on the 7th. The Germans then dug into the ruins as the American ground forces attacked. However, when Brest finally fell, it was a complete embarrassment to the Allies, especially to Patton, Bradley, and Eisenhower because after losing 10,000 casualties, it was determined that the

²⁷³ Goss, *Meant to be?* 113-116.

port city was not useful to the Allies anyway. The defenders could have been besieged instead of assaulted as the Allies were doing at other unusable ports.²⁷⁴ But the Americans had gotten their dander up and the city had to fall – generals get mad, soldiers get killed.



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

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

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After having been stationed in comfortable England for a year, the men had to make quite an adjustment to their new surroundings, an air base carved out of a war zone. Gus quickly made contacts with the locals. He said, “About two weeks after we had established the airfield just near Omaha Beach. I asked one of my chums, ‘Let’s go to town.’ I knew some people there. I had smuggled my bicycle across the channel in the airplane.”

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

²⁷⁴ Perret, *War to be Won*.

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

“Did that other guy go, too?” I asked.

“Ya, he had to run. What else?”

“The whole ten miles?”

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

Apparently a lot of dead farm animals lay all around the base, and in one location the smell came from dead Germans – and the fields were still mined, so it would not be easy to remove them.²⁷⁵

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

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

“...the men here had discovered Calvados. It’s a brandy made from apples, with a pungent taste reminiscent of hard cider, but with a kick like a mule. I think of it in terms of ‘bathtub gin’ and don’t like it. But it’s readily available and strong. Two drinks, you think you’re in trouble. Three drinks, you know you’re in trouble. Anyway somebody decided it was time Moose became acquainted with Calvados. They turned loose a monster who would not hurt a mouse. When Moose decided to head back to his tent, his guidance system was not working well, but nothing was wrong with his determination. He aimed at the space between two rows of tents, back to back. Where the guy ropes crisscross, he proceeded to plow his way one rope at a time toward his tent. By the time we got him turned around, six tents had collapsed, and Moose had been called names he hadn’t heard before. Moose doesn’t like Calvados...”²⁷⁶

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

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

That same day thousands of Germans surrendered to the XIXth Tactical Air Command (part of the Ninth Air Force). Twenty-thousand enemy near Orleans surrendered to a platoon of the 83rd Division, mostly because they believed that the ‘jabos’ would destroy them. Correspondingly, the

²⁷⁵ Moench, *Marauder Men*, 245.

²⁷⁶ Goss, *Meant to Be?* 118-119.

infantrymen told the commander of the XIXth TAC that they were his problem.²⁷⁷ In his memoirs Patton wrote that these Germans had specifically surrendered to General Quesada's XIXth TAC and the Third Army. People began to joke that the Ninth Air Force had been re-designated 'Patton's Air Force.'

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OPERATION MARKET GARDEN

In the North the British army reached the Belgian border, and Field Marshall Montgomery planned a strategy to advance through the Netherlands in just a few days. He decided to drop paratroops to seize the key bridges while the land forces advanced along the main road. Soon after, Operation Market Garden, as it was called, was launched. On September 17th, 1,550 transport planes and 500 gliders dropped three paratrooper divisions on Dutch soil. They were supported by 1,250 fighters and 1,000 bombers.²⁷⁸



L-R: Bill Miller (Togglier), D. J. Matkin, and Manny Blumenthal (EG) next to a waist gun.
(Photo and names courtesy of Manfred Blumenthal)

The intention was to quickly open a way into Germany, but although the Allied forces gained most of the intended ground, the operation miscarried and it was an unmitigated disaster. By reason of national politics rather than Allied strategy, Gen. Lewis Brereton (USAAF) had been placed in command of the parachute army, even though the author Perret notes that, "Brereton had a reputation for being lazy and uncooperative." He was chosen in order to keep control of the parachute army out of British hands, because American commanders felt that the British tended to misuse foreign troops while saving their own. This was a mistake because, as many people criticize Field Marshal Montgomery for planning "One Bridge Too Far," they seem to overlook one

²⁷⁷ Perret, *War to be Won*, 367.

²⁷⁸ Perret, *War to be Won*, 384.

other factor. Unfortunately General Brereton had limited the drop to one lift a day instead of two. His airmen had done it before. All of the paratroopers should have been dropped on the first day.²⁷⁹

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

It was an Allied ‘last gasp’ in 1944 and signaled then end of the brilliant dash across France and Belgium. The commanders had believed that the Germans were nearly defeated but this was not so. They were surprised by the strength of German defenses and counter-attacks.²⁸⁰

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

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

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

“Why were they chasing you?” I asked.

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

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

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

“We got ‘riding in formation’ one night,” Willie continued, “on our bicycles, going back to the base. I was on the right wing... can’t remember who was on the left. Frenchie was ‘lead ship’ because he could pedal straighter. I got too close to him and caught my foot in my spokes and tore them out of my front wheel. We pushed the bike through a gate and covered it up a little bit; then we closed the gate. We came back two or three nights later; the bicycle was gone. So we went down to the café and I told those guys what happened. ‘We knew you left your bicycle there,’ the café owner said. ‘Ya, I think I know where it is. No, I can’t get it. You don’t just leave stuff lying around these days.’ That was true – these people had nothing. And I’d already seen the bike. It was already fixed up and a guy was riding it! ‘What do you want to do?’ the café owner asked me. I said, ‘Oh, let him have it. He’ll get more use out of it than I will.’ It was a good English bike, too.”

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²⁷⁹ Perret, *War to be Won*, 384.

²⁸⁰ Hastings, *Victory in Europe*, 91.

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

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

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

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

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Combat fatigue was not very well understood by Allied Medical Officers. The men simply tried to ignore it. They continued to strive to be excellent in combat even when the evidence suggested it was a long shot. In hindsight it was “beyond the discussable” and for the Medics it was baffling and unpredictable. Some pilots broke formation at the sight of flak, bombardiers would break down, gunners would be non-participating and these were only the reported events.²⁸¹ After the war men would acknowledge they had been affected by combat fatigue; that they had been suffering from stress and were performing under reduced effectiveness.²⁸² Dr. Charles B. Sadler, 453rd Flight Surgeon, related after the war that at the 70-75 mission level, still without a set tour of duty, stress continued to increase, yet no true breakdowns occurred and the men kept flying.²⁸³

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

²⁸¹ Moench, *Marauder Men*, 340.

²⁸² Moench, *Marauder Men*, 346.

²⁸³ Moench, *Marauder Men*, 346.

“Ya,” I replied.

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

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



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

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Once the Germans were on the run, General Eisenhower issued this directive: “I want every airman to make it his direct responsibility that the enemy is blasted unceasingly by day and by night, and is denied safety either in fight or flight.”²⁸⁴ Gus described an experience that occurred during a low-level ground support mission during this period.

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

“What was he doing?” I asked.

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

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

To be fair to our side, it was a German general who first decided in this war, that civilian casualties were inconsequential to the military objective. His policy made it total war – and the Allies (especially the British) took it ‘in kind’ straight home to Germany. But it was the men who executed the orders who lived with the fact, not the Generals.

* * * * *

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

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

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

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The 323rd Group relocated again.

“Then we moved to Chartres, Gus said. “It’s one of the larger cities south of Paris. We landed in our own bomb holes ‘cause I remembered a few months before how we had bombed that place. I mean, we nailed it.” On the 17th of September, 1944, the 323rd’s advance echelon moved to Chartres (Station A-40), France, with the rest of the group moving on the 21st. The new location would allow the 323rd’s bombing range to easily stay ahead of the advancing Allied troops. This

²⁸⁴ Moench, *Marauder Men*, 239.

move went a lot smoother now that the men were used to ‘field conditions,’ i.e. tents and camp stoves. One of the nice things about Chartres was that it did not have the minefields and decomposing bodies surrounding it. This location also had 25,000 German prisoners nearby for free labor, and a store of hastily abandoned commodities that made life easier.²⁸⁵ Once the airmen viewed the extent of the havoc they had released on the enemy they were amazed at the devastation. The entire area was described as “the skeletons and misery of war.” The air base was dotted with craters and full of booby traps and destroyed equipment.²⁸⁶ Nevertheless, the Group was soon operational.²⁸⁷

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

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

Boredom was a problem so passes to Paris and Reims were approved. Near the base the men adopted the restaurant at the railroad station at St.-Germain.²⁸⁸

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October 1944

Due to bad weather, October was a very lousy month for the 323rds operations. Although they were charged with supporting the advancing ground troops, they tallied only 6 missions and the Foster crew did not fly on any of them. It’s possible they were given some time off. And the first thing the 323rd Group did that month was to move forward again - to Laôn, France. The advance echelon left for Laôn on the 4th. This time the group was given C-47 transport planes for the move.²⁸⁹

On the 6th the 323rd Group flew to the Hengelo Marshalling Yards. Fredrick J. Mingus and crew had a difficult time getting home.



Fred Mingus

This mission was a screw up from the time the gear came up. It was not a nice day and, apparently, the lead Navigator had severe problems. We were told to stay away from Liege due to heavy flak concentrations at that location. But we ended up circling over that point getting the hell shot out of us. Twenty minutes late for fighter rendezvous, we headed to Hengelon where, under continuous, heavy fire, two passes were made before we got bombs away. With everyone low on fuel and with weather turning increasingly sour, the formation broke up. I throttled back and, with almost five hours airborne time, saw an airfield through a hole in the clouds... (Postwar comments of Fredrick J. Mingus)²⁹⁰

We were running on fumes. I saw a hole in the clouds and a concrete strip. No idea where in the hell it was, but I knew I was going to put my wheels down on that strip. So I get down through the clouds, through what I thought was the prevailing wind...looked down on the ground, nothing but B-26s, (but) not my base.²⁹¹

The airfield was Beaumont Sur Oise and I commandeered fuel [at pistol point] from a truck parked there. With gas onboard, I called for clearance. This was denied due to weather at Chartres. Exasperated, I told the tower to get the “Follow Me” jeep out from in front of me or I would blast it off the runway with my fifties [the package guns]. They moved the jeep and I took off to land at

²⁸⁵ Moench, *Marauder Men*.

²⁸⁶ Moench, *Marauder Men*, 253.

²⁸⁷ Moench, *Marauder Men*, 255.

²⁸⁸ Moench, *Marauder Men*, 264.

²⁸⁹ Moench, *Marauder Men*, 262.

²⁹⁰ Moench, *Marauder Men*, 260.

²⁹¹ Daily Sun, Nov. 11, 2005.

Chartres in a heavy rain storm. I was the last aircraft to be accounted for and Col. Wood met me and asked where the hell I had been. Thoroughly frustrated with the day, I told him that I had been all over hell and half of Georgia. It was my 65th mission.²⁹²

* * * * *

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

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

This base was also in very bad shape. Few of the buildings could be used and the taxi strips were in bad shape. Again, the men were bivouacked in tents.²⁹³ Men began to improve their conditions by upgrading their tents, making wooden floors, operating doors, and sometimes installing cast iron wood stoves, sometimes installing fuel lines that caused fires. Others used the “Stars and Stripes” to insulate their cots.²⁹⁴

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



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

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

from the hangar helped. With no shower, a sponge bath with water warmed in a helmet was a cold affair. They dug their latrines a long muddy walk for their tents. However, the mess hall was in a real, somewhat battered, building. Whether they were going to move soon or not, they dug the foxhole slit trenches and settled in. It did become a long stay at the Laon base.”²⁹⁵

* * * * *

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

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

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

“Yup.”

“On your own free time?”

²⁹² Moench, *Marauder Men*, 260; Postwar comments of Fredrick J. Mingus.

²⁹³ Moench, *Marauder Men*, 262.

²⁹⁴ Moench, *Marauder Men*, 263.

²⁹⁵ Goss, *Meant to Be?* 120-121.

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

“What did the others have?”



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

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

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

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

“Where did they sleep?”

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

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

“Shortly after, we went on leave to Soissons,” Gus related. “Champagne city of the world... big wine cellars there. Of course they were a bit dry at this time because the Germans had been there. But the wine presses were still operating. They were really caves [the wine cellars]. The Frenchmen weren’t too fussy. They also were dickerers. Everybody likes to dicker. Like I said about the Arabs, last price first, please. Wine wasn’t too expensive there, not as bad as in England where we had to pay twenty dollars for a fifth of Scotch, even Irish whiskey, which I couldn’t stand. If you want to make friends, speak French when in France. So I’d go down town to make friends. Then I’d go into the caves to get some wine, which I’d bring back to the army camp. Everyone wanted to know where I got it. However, it was none of their damn business where I got it.”

* * * * *

The Germans began to fall back on their own version of the Maginot Line, called the Siegfried Line, which was a series of fortifications that defended the German border. It was also known as the West Wall. The Group’s targets became bridges again. But the weather had them grounded for days.²⁹⁶ But the lack of missions flown belied the amount of activity that was actually occurring. Nineteen missions had to be briefed and scrubbed and some men described the period as worse than flying a mission.²⁹⁷ In his analysis of war diaries, Gen. Moench concluded that the stress induced by flying in bad weather was easily equal to the anxiety caused by flak.

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²⁹⁶ Perret, *Winged Victory*, 351.

²⁹⁷ Moench, *Marauder Men*, 336.

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

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

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



Gus and Willie – still trouble.

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

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

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

“Did they cut him?” I asked.

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

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

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More and more “oldtimers” who had passed the “magic Number” of 65 missions were sent to other duty, mostly back to the United States.²⁹⁸ After flying 68 missions, Willie was taken off of flight status. He had finished his tour.

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For the last two months General Patton had experienced his most frustrating period of the war. The 3rd Army had not been able to advance for weeks. First they had run out of gas. Then they ran into very stiff defenses near Metz, France, in the Moselle Valley just in front of the German border. They needed air support again in order to break through. The situation was so bad that General Patton sent a letter to Lt. General Doolittle requesting that the Air Force to “...provide large bombs of the nastiest type, and as many as you can spare, to blow up this damn fort so that it becomes nothing but a hole.”²⁹⁹ On the same day as the writing of his letter, Patton’s troops entered the town of Metz. However, the ring of fortifications near the city still held firm. On October 21st, a massive group of Germans near the city of Aachen on the Dutch-German border surrendered. The Allies were poised to enter Germany.

* * * * *

November 1944

On November 4th the Foster crew participated on a run to the Eschweiler gun positions. The *Punching Bag* must have been retired, because they flew in a new plane, 42-107622 VT-W. With the Third Army still stalled and howling for assistance, the Marauders made a desperate effort to bomb the defenses around Metz. On the 4th a box of 54 planes were sent to the Eschweiler gun positions near Metz, but the weather made it impossible to drop and the crews returned with full bomb loads. Ten airships had been damaged by flak.³⁰⁰

After a furious six weeks the frustrated Patton was allowed to attack, starting on the 8th. It was raining heavily so they went in without air support. But the next day the airmen came out in droves. 1,000 fighter bombers on the 9th and 2,000 planes on the 10th but the weather turned sour again and the airmen were unable to fly after that. The fall of 1944 had brought three times the average rainfall for that area. General Patton ordered his chaplains to ask God to stop the rain.³⁰¹ Patton’s new offensive was called Operation Madison. The same day, the 8th, the French 5th Armored Division was the first Allied unit to reach the Rhine River, but there was no way across. Two days later, to the north, the city of Aachen was captured by the Americans – the first city on German soil to fall to the Allies. On the 23rd the French captured Strasburg, Germany.

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

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

²⁹⁸ Moench, *Marauder Men*, 264.

²⁹⁹ Moench, *Marauder Men*, 275.

³⁰⁰ Moench, *Marauder Men*, 278.

³⁰¹ Perret, *War to be Won*, 394.

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

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For the next two weeks bad weather delayed the bombers again, as if it were working directly in the service of the Germans. The ‘Dogfaces’ (ground troops) had even more to gripe about concerning the Air Force, but their complaints were becoming muted. Bill Mauldin summed it up the best he could stating that the infantrymen tended to sympathize with the flak-happy airmen. It was a “rude fraternity” of battle fatigue.³⁰²

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

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

* * * * *

The Foster crew flew three more missions this month. By this time, Lt. Foster had been promoted to Captain. On the 18th, they took off again, headed for the Weisweiller Strong Points. As a flight leader, they carried an additional navigator, 1st Lt. J. J. Ryan. Also, Dec had been replaced by M/Sgt. R. W. Hayden.³⁰³ Perhaps he had also been rotated back to the States. On the 18th the weather broke slightly but it was enough to send a box of 32 Marauders to the Weisweiller Strong Points, with only slight damage to two aircraft.³⁰⁴

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Gus’s final mission occurred on the next day, on the 19th, with the same crew and the additional bombardier. Lt. Col Satterwhite and Captain Adams led an afternoon mission to the Landau Ordnance Depot, but the sky was so overcast over target that they could not drop their bombs. All planes returned with full loads.³⁰⁵

However, this is how Gus described it.

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

“At 1,000 feet?”

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

“You mean your own men?”

“Ya, we were leading the group [the second flight]. The Colonel who was leading us had his six planes with him... he decided to return to base when he saw the cloud coverage. But we had been waiting so long, over two weeks, to drop bombs. The other group followed us in, so we were twelve planes that went through there. We lost one plane because he was directly in back of

³⁰² Mauldin, *Up Front*, 100-101.

³⁰³ Trevor Allen, B26 researcher.

³⁰⁴ Moench, *Marauder Men*, 278-279.

³⁰⁵ Moench, *Marauder Men*, 279.

us. With any kind of bomb, no matter what speed you're traveling or what altitude you are, it always lands directly underneath you. So if you have a bomb that is slightly delayed, then the poor guy behind you gets it. And that's what happened."

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

"What were they doing there?"

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

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

"What, for dropping your bombs?" I asked.

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

"You were grounded? Why?"

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

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

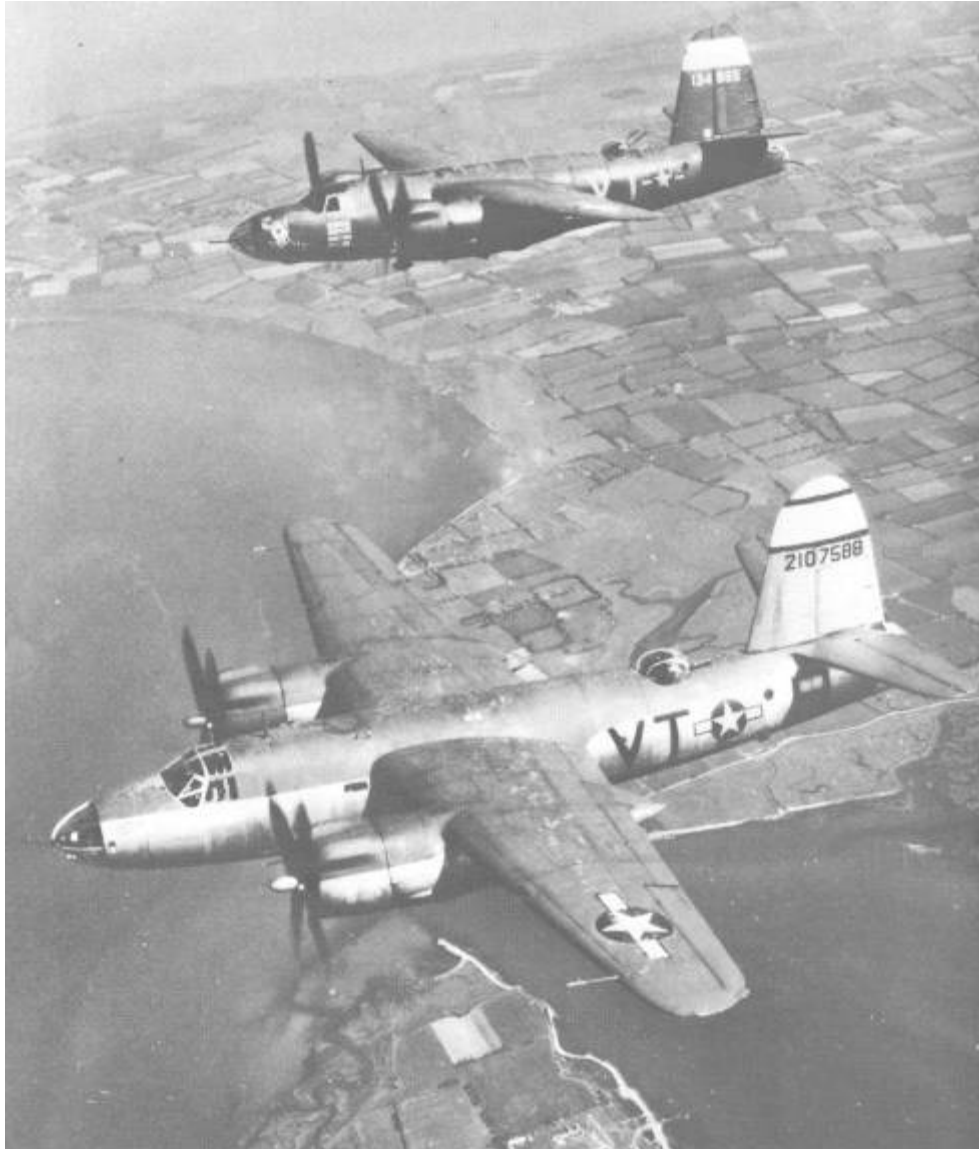
In Moench's account of the mission no mention is made of the flight breaking formation, nor of any planes being lost that day. Based on Moench's consistent reporting throughout the war, he would have mentioned an incident of this magnitude if he had been aware of it. However, he also notes that great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

According to the 323rd Bomb Group records, no B-26s were lost to enemy action in either late October 1944 or November 1944 in the period shortly after moving to Laôn /Athies. Sixty-five combat missions was a normal tour of duty on B-26s and you will see that your father did more than this. I believe this is the reason they were returned to the USA, not for any misdemeanor or for battle fatigue. I would think however that at that time he would certainly have all the signs of battle fatigue.³⁰⁶

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

³⁰⁶ Trevor Allen, B26 Researcher; in a letter to the author.

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



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

When Dad told me this story so long ago I believed him. I thought something bad had happened and the crew had been expelled from combat status. It was quite a shock for me to find out it wasn't true. But whatever had really happened, the bottom line was that Gus felt that he had been ‘pulled’ from the arena before his term was up. He had no idea that he had completed his mission tour. I believe this lack of clarity weighed on him as a nagging question of whether or not

he had fulfilled his duty. I asked Trevor Allen to check it again but he found nothing. I asked Willie about the mission tour.

“We thought we were expendable,” Willie said. “We thought we would just fly and fly and fly... there was no set tour! I just thought we were sent home because they had gotten some replacements!”

“Typical of postwar comments were those of then S/Sgt Samuel M. Findley. ‘When we first started combat we had rumors of a 25 mission tour, then 35 and later 50. The low point [for our] morale was when Gen. Lewis Brereton put out the word that all his aircrewmembers had volunteered for another tour. After that we didn’t have any tour at all. I suppose Gen. Brereton had his reasons but I don’t know of any combat crewman who had much esteem for him after that.’”³⁰⁷

As Gus had mentioned before, there was a big difference between volunteers and draftees. Even the history of the 99th Combat Wing notes that there was a problem. They noted the demoralization of air crews in the 322nd and 323rd Bomb Groups. They also qualified that it was not due to the original attitudes of the men but rather to the “faulty handling” of the mission tour policies.³⁰⁸

In his footnotes, Moench suggests that ‘demoralized’ was too strong a word. I can see his point, because completely demoralized men will not fight well, if at all, but even though very unappreciative, the Marauder crews kept flying – and flying well. But he also notes that in hindsight the stress was more a factor than realized at the time, yet the men continued to fly well despite it.³⁰⁹

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

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

* * * * *

He Wears a Pair of Silver Wings

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

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

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

³⁰⁷ Moench, *Marauder Men*, 338; Postwar comments of Samuel M. Findley.

³⁰⁸ Moench, *Marauder Men*, 338; Operational Annex to History of 99th Combat Bombardment Wing covering the period from November 8, 1943 to May 9, 1945.

³⁰⁹ Moench, *Marauder Men*, 348.

Chapter 8 – The Battle for Germany

December 1944 – April 1945

December 1944

The 323rd Group flew fourteen more missions in December 1944. The war was far from over. Of course, the Foster crew was grounded and didn't fly. It's possible that they were sent back to England for evaluation since things may have been still too disorganized at the front lines. With more and more 'oldtimers' heading for home and the continued trickle of replacements, manpower was still a problem in the aircrews; but soon manpower shortages would also hit the Infantry as well. Although higher command scoured their resources for infantry replacements they soon found that avenue was inadequate and their greedy eyes soon alighted on the Air Forces. Many men from the Group were equipped and sent to the front. Later the men would discover that General Spaatz had offered them 10,000 men. This was a difficult blow to the already depleted Marauder Squadrons.³¹⁰

The airmen/infantrymen were out of their element (and training), and were unprepared for fighting on the ground. Reports say they were always standing when they should have been prone and were prone when they could have been standing – and they probably took casualties accordingly. Colonel Wood asked for volunteers to fill in the gaps in the aircrews and many support personnel of the 453rd Squadron stepped forward. There was still a lot of flying to do. Seven of the volunteers became Toggliers: Ordnance men S/Sgt John El Baird (later MIA/KIA), S/Sgt Richard Inman, and S/Sgt Casimier Sochocki; from Armament: S/Sgt Vernon L. Berg (later MIA/KIA), S/Sgt John W. Randall, S/Sgt Charles J. Schmitt, S/Sgt R. K. Smith (later WIA).³¹¹



John Baird, Richard Inman, Casimier Sochocki

Sochocki explained what a Togglier does. “We would drop our bombs when our lead ship in our flight (of three planes in a “V” formation) would drop his load. The wing man planes (numbers 2 & 3 or 5 & 6), usually had Toggliers; in fact, we had regular Bombardiers that never had used a Norden Bombsight due to the fact that they were scarce.”

* * * * *

Back in the States, Willie found a different army than the one he had fought the war in.

“It was all spit and polish,” he said. “All present and accounted for, sir! We didn't have to do that [in the war]. We were lucky. We were all the same rank. Our lives depended on each other. We didn't salute or pull rank. Nobody wanted to be in charge of anybody.”

“We were getting ready to go to the Pacific [theater of operations],” he continued. “We got on railroad cars, to go to Panama City, FL. It was a car full. Everybody in the car was a sergeant. An officer pulled me over and said, ‘Sergeant, you got all the records and you'll be in charge of this car.’ I looked over at the bunch of guys - guys who'd been in Europe and all over. ‘Nobody can be

³¹⁰ Moench, *Marauder Men*, 287.

³¹¹ Moench, *Marauder Men*, 288.

in charge of these guys,' I said. Nobody could be in charge of me anymore (laughing). I was kind of... I'd do my duty... follow the rules as far as that goes..."



(Scrapbook)

Willie was sent to train on the new gunnery systems that were installed on the B-29 bombers, same as Tex had done.

* * * * *

Meanwhile, in the 323rd Group, the volunteers stepped forward and the airmen kept on flying. By this time the ground troops at the front were suffering terribly. There were more casualties due to the ravages of winter than there were from bullets. Because of the supply problems, many of the frontline men did not even have winter clothing. If the Germans were bad off, our men weren't in much better shape. There was also a critical shortage of ammunition. In the front lines trench foot was endemic.³¹²

* * * * *

THE BATTLE OF THE BULGE

In December, 1944, no one believed the Germans were capable of implementing an offensive – except two Ninth Air Force commanders. The Ninth Air Force Fighter and Bomber were concerned regarding the apparent enemy buildup of strength. ON December 15th they tried to express their worries to SHAEF headquarters at Versailles but no one listened. None of the higher command intelligence chiefs believed the Germans had such capability.³¹³

On the 16th of the month British General Montgomery wrote a message to his troops to the effect that the Germans were now on the defensive and were incapable of mounting any 'major offensive operations.' Then he left on vacation to play some golf.³¹⁴ That very day, the Germans initiated the Ardennes Offensive, which we call the Battle of the Bulge, forcing the Allies, mostly Americans, in northern Europe on the defensive for the rest of the month. The Allied were completely unprepared. And the location from which the attack came had been discounted out of hand as too difficult a terrain for a major offensive. But if Army Intelligence had had a few historians they might have considered the fact the enemy had already done the same thing in the same place four years before.³¹⁵ It was an unmitigated disaster. The U.S. 28th Division was severely mauled and two of the three regiments of the 106th Division surrendered; and the rest were barely holding on.

* * * * *

In the midst of the battle Gus left for the States. According to his Enlisted Record, he left service in Europe on December 18, 1944, arriving in the US on December 27th, nine days later.

"On the trip back we took the New Amsterdam again," he said, "same as six months ago. We were coming into Boston when a German submarine wolf pack chased us all the way up to Halifax."

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³¹² Hastings, *Victory in Europe*, 95.
³¹³ Perret, *Winged Victory*, 354-355.
³¹⁴ Perret, *War to be Won*.
³¹⁵ Hastings, *Victory in Europe*, 102.

The family received another letter from Colonel Wood, via the Skowhegan newspaper:

COLONEL WOOD SAYS S.SGT. POULIN WILL RETURN HOME

Col. Wilson R. Wood of the Air Corps in a special message to the Independent Reporter said that Staff [actually Tech. Sgt] Sergeant G. Poulin will return home in a short time for a much needed rest. The Sergeant has been in combat operations as a B-26 Marauder engineer-gunner for many months in the European Theatre of Operations. His commanding officer says in this communication:

“During this time he has flown over 65 missions against Nazi-held targets in France, Holland, Belgium and Germany. Many of these missions were carried out under difficult conditions and his devotion to duty played an important part in their successful completion. Before the invasion our planes attacked railway marshalling yards, airfields, rocket plane installations in the Pas de Calais area and vital bridges. When allied forces landed in France the bombing switched to enemy troop concentrations, gun installations, fuel and supply dumps and special strong points.

“For achievements on the many missions in which the sergeant participated he has been awarded the Distinguished Flying Cross, the air medal, two silver and one bronze oak leaf cluster to the air medal.

“Throughout his stay under my command Sergeant Poulin’s conduct has been of the highest caliber and a tribute to the air force now blasting Germany in the final campaign phase. I am writing you this letter so you may inform Sergeant Poulin’s family and friends of his achievements in the European Theatre of Operations.”³¹⁶

* * * * *

Back in northern Europe the battle raged on. The 323rd Group tried desperately to fly through the cloud cover to the relief of the beleaguered Americans on the ground, sometimes taking off and landing on sheer ice and flying through 10/10 (complete) cloud cover. Finally the clouds cleared and ‘The Bulge’ became a massive air battle as well as a ground fight. Finally after a week of being grounded by weather, on the 23rd, the Air Forces came up to the skies en masse. German efforts to counterattack in the air came to naught.³¹⁷ The Ninth Air Force put up 625 mediums to harass the enemy but due to c logistics most of them went in without fighter cover. The 391st Bomb Group lost 16 planes.³¹⁸ Without fighter cover the German pilots had a turkey shoot.



Manfred Blumenthal

So it wasn’t just the infantry that had been caught by the Nazi surprise, and it wasn’t just a ground war as most people think of it; it was a great air battle as well. Luckily, the 453rd was not one of the groups hit by enemy fighters and they lost only one plane. The *Circle Jerk/Louisiana Mud Hen* 41-31896 VT-G, piloted by Lt. Joseph S. Bostick, was hit in the left engine by flak and went down in flames over Germany.³¹⁹ “MIA were 1st Lt. Joseph C. Bostick, S/Sgt A. C. Carrell, 1st Lt. Howard Detel, 2nd Lt. James E. Hodges, S/Sgt Robert E. Hohimer, and S/Sgt Albin W. Les.”³²⁰

Manny Blumenthal remembered getting ready for this mission, “I was driving a jeep to our plane, *Heaven Can Wait* [after the briefing]. Lt. Bostick asked me to take him to his plane. His shoes were not tied. I told him [he’d better tie them because] he might have to walk back, just in jest. We were flying in the same box when he got a direct hit. Lt. Davis called me [at his tailgun position] and asked if there were any chutes. I told him, ‘Hell, No!’” Incredibly, Fred Mingus told me that Lt. Bostick was able to recover control of the plane in time to crashland on enemy ground. I believe he and his crew were captured. As for other 453rd men, Chester Gist and crew landed safely with one engine. One man had been shot up (name unknown) and one plane (identification unknown) couldn’t get the main gear down and had to bail out.

³¹⁶ Gus Poulin’s Scrapbook.

³¹⁷ Hastings, *Victory in Europe*, 110.

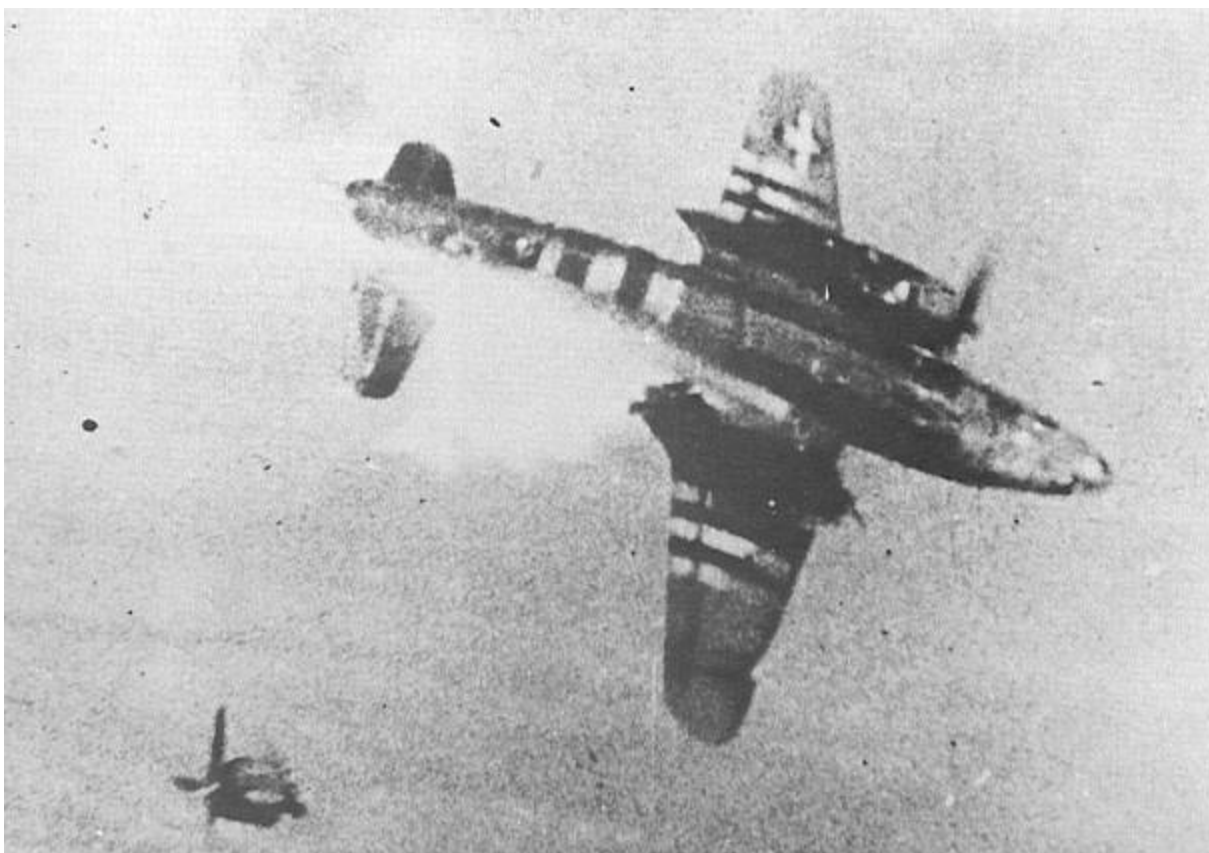
³¹⁸ Perret, *Winged Victory*, 356-357.

³¹⁹ Alf Johanneson, aircraft researcher

³²⁰ Moench, *Marauder Men*, 298.

Everyone made it down OK.³²¹ The Ninth lost the equivalent of three squadrons that day, with 39 missing, two abandoned, six destroyed or written off on landing and 120 with battle damage. After this crews were more careful about having fighter escort.³²²

“Two men were known to be killed, 227 were missing, 30 were wounded and two were injured.”³²³ According to Gen. Anderson’s oral history, the reason the fighters did not rendezvous with the bombers that day was because 9th Air Force command did not believe the weather report that Anderson had acted upon and the fighters were alerted too late.³²⁴



One of the most famous photos of the air war...*Circle Jerk/Louisiana Mud Hen* #41-31896 VT-G upside down and beginning its dive towards the earth. A flak hit shot off the left engine [falling away at lower left corner] and knocked the wing upward, which, combined with the pull of the right engine, flipped the plane over. (photo courtesy of Manfred Blumenthal)

* * * * *

The next day, on Christmas Eve, Casimier Sochocki flew his first mission. The Group put up three boxes to the Trier Railroad Bridge. Eleven returned damaged and the results were judged to be good. That night the men at the base could see flashes on the horizon. They wondered if the Germans would arrive the next day, Christmas. The constant gunfire kept many men awake.³²⁵ The men of the 323rd Group were very nervous at this point as it was reported that German paratroopers had dropped into their area. The guard was doubled at night. For the first time in the war the airmen were in more danger of getting shot by a nervous guard than by the Germans. As General Moench relates, going to the latrine at night became a serious business.

³²¹ Moench, *Marauder Men*, 298.

³²² Freeman, *B-26 at War*, 142.

³²³ Moench, *Marauder Men*, 299.

³²⁴ Moench, *Marauder Men*, 299.

³²⁵ Moench, *Marauder Men*, 300.



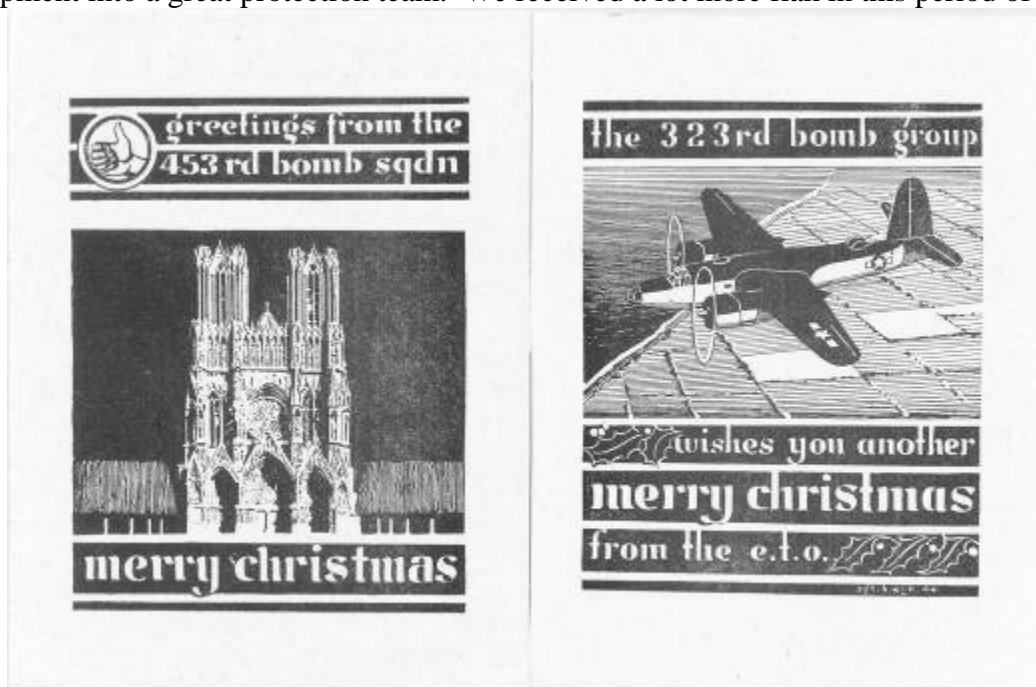
Casimier Sochocki

Sochocki remembers one amusing incident.

“All of us had to stand guard at one time or another,” he wrote. “This particular night the weather took a turn for the better and the moon had shown itself. I was walking guard by the airplanes and the other guard was walking toward me. As we met, the guard, a southern man, incidentally with little knowledge of astronomy, said to me, ‘Hey Sochocki, is that the same moon that we got back home?’ Surprised as I was, I said, ‘Yes,’ and continued to walk my beat – snickering a bit.”

I asked Sochocki if he remembered any particular missions.

“I flew with eleven different crews and as you can see on my mission list I really didn’t have a crew of my own. As for remembering any particular mission, I’d say they all were real bad missions. As the Germans were being forced back into their country, they took all their artillery, tanks, etc., with them - they had a smaller area to protect from the USAAF, but they compiled all that equipment into a great protection team. We received a lot more flak in this period of the war.”



The Poulin family received this card from the 453rd Bomb Squadron in December 1944. (*Scrapbook*)

For the next four days the Marauders kept flying – Sochocki flew again on Christmas day, the 25th. The weather was clear. The 323rd Group launched a maximum effort loaded with 1,000 pound bombs and headed for the Nonnweiler Railroad Bridge. In the afternoon another flight took off, this time with smaller bombs, to destroy St. Vith, a German command point. Sixteen planes were damaged and one man of the 453rd was wounded, Sgt Ramsey J. Landry.³²⁶

Gen. Moench states that German batteries were beginning to be placed in strategic concentrations where they could fire at the Allied planes in the air as well as at the troops on the ground. Unfortunately the ground troops did not always know what the Air Force did (or wouldn’t listen and/or perhaps wouldn’t ask) and advanced into some heavy concentrations of artillery. But even though the Air Force knew where the German batteries were, they still had to fly straight over them at times to get to their targets. Nevertheless, despite the fighters and anti-aircraft artillery, the Marauders racked-up some impressive results. Beginning on the 23rd the Ninth Air Force had

³²⁶ Moench, *Marauder Men*, 300.

flown 2,196 bomber sorties. Nineteen communications centers and thirteen railroad bridges had been hit with the majority of targets destroyed.³²⁷

Meanwhile the Americans on the ground were still suffering terribly. Losses were high and the suffering due to the weather was paramount. General Patton, who was fighting on a different front, managed to turn part of his army north to assist in the defense, and they force-marched for three days in the snowstorms. The infantrymen holding the line were taking it on the chin. But if they wondered where the Air Force was, the Air Force was thinking about them too. They wanted to help.

* * * * *

January 1945

By New Year's Day the German offensive had virtually ground to a halt, due as much to American stubbornness as to the fact that they had run out of gas. After much loss and suffering, the Germans were defeated. But even though it was a victory for the Allies, the offensive had set back the Allied advance into Germany by at least six weeks, and as usual, Hitler's great plan had done nothing for the German cause and probably hastened its demise. The Germans fared badly and most of their losses could not be replaced. It had been a disastrous mistake as their high command had guessed.³²⁸ In taking the brunt of the attack the Americans had outdone themselves and proven their skill and commitment to victory.³²⁹

* * * * *

Gen. Moench states that by the end of the year only a handful of the original aircrews were still left in action in the 323rd Group - and they would soon be leaving. Gen. Moench also notes a dramatic shift in attitude towards the Germans at this time. Apparently chivalry was dead. The reports of mass executions of prisoners, Americans at St. Vith, and Polish near Lodz, infuriated every man in every unit.³³⁰ Once again, the Germans were their own worst enemies, causing the Allies to take a very hard stand against anything and anyone German. Unfortunately for the hapless Germans, the majority of them had never been members of the Nazi party. However at this point, after all the suffering and death, to the advancing Allies, Germans were Germans.

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Gus was sent to Plattsburg, New York.

"I spent 4 months in Plattsburg," Gus said.

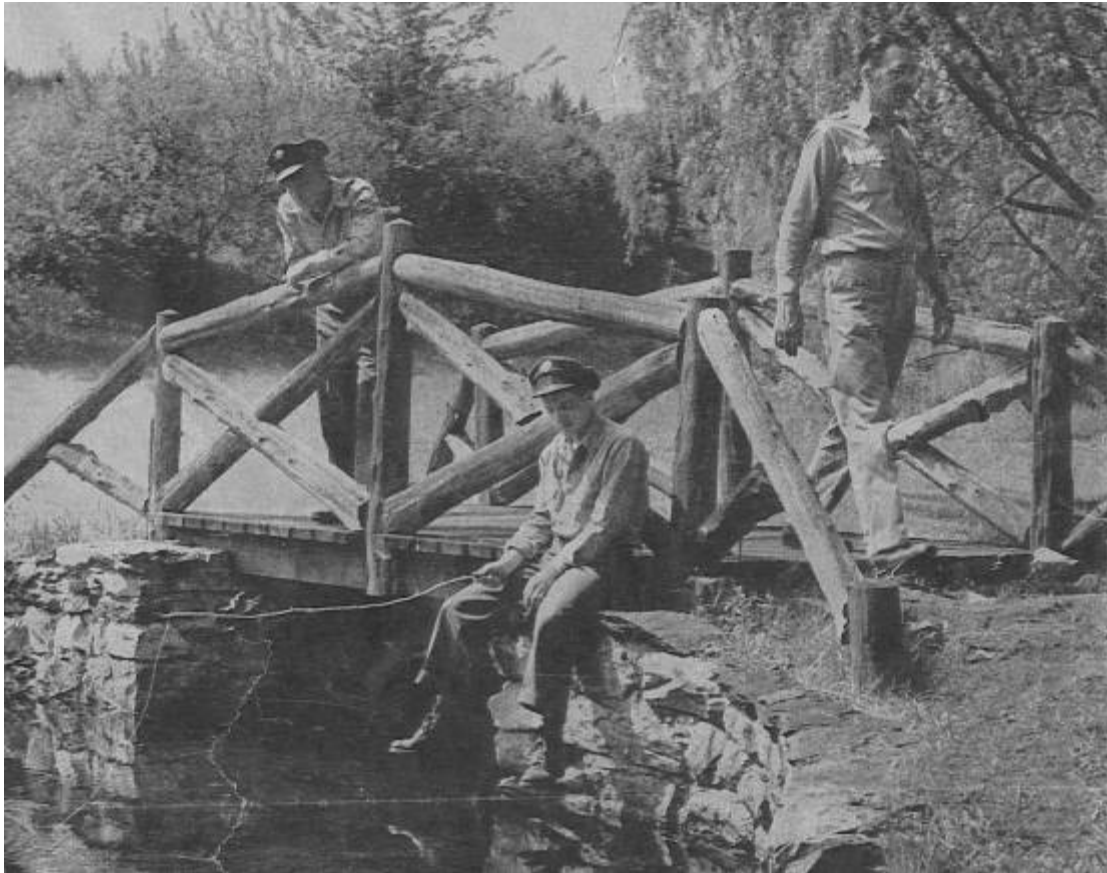
Gus didn't say much about his time in Plattsburg. I believe this was the rest home part of his service. He didn't talk about it at all, but included in the scrapbook was an article with pictures from a magazine about a rest area for airmen in Pawling, NY. Written in the margin was a date: July 17, 1944 issue – it was most likely from Life Magazine.

³²⁷ Moench, *Marauder Men*, 301.

³²⁸ Hastings, *Victory in Europe*, 113.

³²⁹ Hastings, *Victory in Europe*, 113.

³³⁰ Moench, *Marauder Men*, 315-316.



Flak-happy airmen recovering in a bucolic atmosphere. (*Gus's Scrapbook*)

AIRMEN CONVALESCENCE – Bucolic life in new air force hospital helps speed recovery.

To speed the recovery of its casualties, the U.S. Army Air Forces have enlisted the therapeutic power of life in the open country. At Pawling, N.Y. (Thomas Dewey's home town), the AAF has taken over 700 acres of rolling Dutchess County land, including the grounds and buildings of a private prep school. Here it has set up a center for convalescent airmen who no longer require formal hospital treatment. Coming from the indoor doldrums of hospitals, the patients get a tremendous boost toward recovery simply by being given the run of the place equipped with tennis courts, bridle paths, trout streams and a full bucolic roster of cows, chickens, pigs, barns, farmland and gardens. More than 90% of Pawling's patients return to active duty, physically and psychologically restored. Set up as an experiment, the center has made such a good record that it may become the model for a whole group of similar institutions across the U.S.³³¹

I'm not sure why this article was in the scrapbook, but it is interesting that it was there. The men in the pictures appear to be officers. This comment had been released by Air Force command a year earlier.

With the intention of achieving equal results in the rehabilitation of the wounded, sick, and war-weary men, the Army Air Forces is establishing seven rehabilitation centers in the U.S. Every known facility is being used to aid these physically and psychologically wounded soldiers to make a new place for themselves in military or civilian life. Our interest and responsibility do not stop at the moment our men drop their bombs on target.³³²

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For those who did not come home the war continued. The 323rd Group flew numerous short range missions and on the 14th of January, a 453rd plane piloted by Captain Robert H. Adams,

³³¹ Gus Poulin's Scrapbook.

³³² Army Air Force report dated January 4th, 1944 – online USAF Museum.



John Baird (KIA)

was hit by flak and spiraled down in Belgium.³³³ This is likely when S/Sgt John E. Baird, one of the ordnance men who had volunteered to become a togglier, was killed.

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February 1945

Still in France, the 323rd Group moved again, this time to Denain near Valenciennes. It was a short move, but probably just enough to keep bombing ahead of the advancing armies. Sochocki simply notes: “Left Laon A-69 at 3:10 P.M. 2/8/45, arrived at Denain A-83 at 3:50 P.M.”

On February 14th 1945 the 323rd Group was ordered to destroy the bridge over the Rhine River at a town called Remagen, Germany. Sochocki also flew on this mission. Complicating this raid was the fact that eighteen Marauders had been damaged and two had been lost just the day before. However, with 20 planes down, the group still managed to put 36 aircraft in the air. They flew to the Remagen Railroad Bridge and failed to destroy it, a failure that would soon be termed a lucky break. Fifteen planes were damaged.³³⁴

Two days later, on the 16th of February, the Group was ordered to bomb a German jet aircraft component factory at Solingen. Another 453rd plane was lost on this one. By this point in the war, the German ability to get fighters in the air was so nil that the Marauders began to fly without any fighter escort. On the way back Lt. Virgil Keffer, flying on one engine, ran out of gas and ordered his crew to bail out. He was able to land safely behind our lines but the crewmen were all captured. They were S/Sgt Vernon L. Berg (an armament man who had volunteered to be a togglier), T/Sgt Carroll P. Doss, T/Sgt Sven E. Larson, S/Sgt Chester R. Michalowski and 2nd Lt. Milton J. Mosowitz. Mosowitz, a Jew, was badly treated; Berg and Doss were taken to Stalag 7 near Nurenberg. On the way there they were spat upon and had hot tea and coffee thrown in their faces by German civilians.³³⁵

* * * * *

March 1945

First, the Marauders had been bombing marshalling yards and bridges in Germany to keep the Nazis from reinforcing any point at which the Allies would try to cross the Rhine. The strategy had been to isolate Axis forces in northwestern Germany. But now the Allied problem was how to find an undestroyed bridge by which to move the ground troops into the heart of Germany. In a controversial strategy, General Montgomery was again given the go-ahead to mass troops and equipment for another push that was codenamed Operation Plunder. The American Generals were furious. They were supposed to hold back while Montgomery moved into the heart of Germany – the goal of nine months of fighting. While Montgomery gathered his forces, the Americans in other sectors responded by pushing harder. Patton’s tanks punched through the Germans. His men passed through the Seigfried Wall slogging through snow and difficult terrain. Groups of Germans surrendered without a fight. The Sixth Panzer Army had seemed to disintegrate. Patten’s men reached the Rhine River. Most of the bridges had been destroyed but the First Army captured the railroad bridge at Remagen before the enemy engineers could blow it up. Eisenhower stopped the Americans there and Montgomery held the American Ninth Army. They both believed the northern route into Germany was far better as they had already planned it. But Monty still wasn’t ready yet to go ahead with that attack. Unfortunately this gave the Russians time to advance even further.³³⁶

³³³ Alf Johannessen, aircraft researcher.

³³⁴ Moench, *Marauder Men*, 325.

³³⁵ Moench, *Marauder Men*, 325.

³³⁶ Hastings, *Victory in Europe*, 129-131.



Nose art on *Couchez Avec...?* painted by David Goss. That's Casimier Sochocki patting her bottom (Moench 284).

Patton used the delay to clear the west bank of the Rhine. On the 22nd he moved his men across the the river at the city of Oppenheim. There was little resistance. There were only five tanks to oppose them and they were still 100 miles east of the river. The US 3rd Armored Division entered Cologne in the north on the 5th of March and they were stunned by the devastation they saw. The entire area had by turned to rubble by Allied bombing.³³⁷ On March 7th, when US troops captured the intact bridge over the Rhine at Remagen, the men of the 323rd Group must have felt very glad that they had not completely destroyed it three weeks before. Sochocki and the 323rd facilitated expansion of the bridge-head by bombing the nearby Medda Airdrome on the 11th.

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Sometime during March David Goss began working on another masterpiece of nose art. In a letter to Joan he wrote:

“When the crew asked me to decorate their plane, I asked them-- ‘What do you want her to look like?’ --It was a foregone conclusion that they wanted a pin-up. So they used gestures to help describe their dream girl, ‘We want a real cute

brunette, in a blue negligee, on a chaise lounge, and we want to name our ship *Couchez Avec.*’ I tried to picture it and told them, that it wouldn’t fit very well on the pilot’s armor plate. It would be too small and wouldn’t look like much. But they objected with, ‘Aw come on, can’t you see it? Just spread it out, the bigger, the better, we want the krauts to see it when they come after us.’ So I told them since they put it that way, ‘OK.’”³³⁸

Then just a bit later, David had another harrowing experience on a hard stand.

“...about a week ago I went back to work on *Couchez Avec* and heard a lot of shouting on the hardstand across the way. I went over to see what was going on, and found the bombs dumped onto the hard stand. The pilot came out and told me the bombardier had accidentally tripped ‘salvo’ and when the bombs dropped they had all scattered, not that it would have helped because that’s a very sensitive explosive compound in the bombs. Anyway, he said his was lead ship in the flight but now he would have to take over another plane. I told him, ‘Maybe not Captain, if we can get a couple of them reloaded in time, you’re still in business.’ He told me he could give me ten minutes because time was getting short, and, ‘We’ll help you.’ Well, they were willing, but not until I had removed the fuses from the bombs. The tail fuses had broken, and I wasn’t sure how touchy they might be, but when I got them all out and over in a hole off the hard stand, suddenly I had more help than I could use. We got two of the bombs reloaded the hard way with only nose fuses, but they would drop all right, and signal the other planes to drop. It felt good to see that ship lead the squadron.”³³⁹

David received an official letter of recommendation for that. They would have given him a Soldier’s Medal, but he already had one.

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³³⁷ Hastings, *Victory in Europe*, 132.

³³⁸ Goss, *Meant to Be?* 135.

³³⁹ Goss, *Meant to Be?* 139-140.



L-R: Herbert D. Stallings Jr. (Pilot), Herbert G. Kravitz (co-pilot), Casimier V. Sochocki (bombardier), Joe T. Bouknight Jr. (engineer-gunner), William S. Nelson (radio-gunner), William M. Sanders (tailgunner), Laon Athies, France 1944. Note the steel plank runway installed by Air Force engineers. (Photo courtesy of Casimier Sochocki)

OPERATION PLUNDER

Finally, Field Marshall Montgomery's ponderous preparations were ready to move. Set for March 24th, 1945, the last great push on the western front was about to commence – Operation Plunder. The 21st Army Group with 11 American, 11 British, and 8 Canadian divisions was massing for a blow to the German industrial area in the north. This ponderous operation would execute a crossing of the Rhine coordinated with an airborne drop and massive air support. The operation was so huge that it was compared to the troop and service concentrations of D-Day. The medium bombers of the Ninth Air Force were called out in a strenuous effort to prepare the way for the advance. In fact, March was so busy for the 323rd, that Sochocki flew seventeen missions this month alone. On one of his missions on the 21st of March, one of the 453rd Squadron aircraft was damaged. The hydraulic lines had been ruptured on the aircraft flown by Captin B. F. Buk. He made it back to base but could not lower the gears. His men bailed out near the base but he flew to the coast and crashlanded near Dunkirk.³⁴⁰

As the Operation continued preparations, more air support was needed, and the Marauders didn't let up. Starting on the 20th Sochocki flew six days in a row with the 21st being a double-header. The Battle for Germany's eastern frontier, the Rhineland, was over and now would begin the battle for the heart of Germany. The Battle for the Rhineland ended on the 21st of March. It had officially begun on September 15th. During that period the 323rd Group had flown 3,543 sorties

³⁴⁰ Moench, *Marauder Men*, 358.

and dropped more than seven thousand tons of bombs. Crews were exhausted. The end of the war had to be soon. The ground troops now celebrated the airmen as they reviewed the destruction and saw the planes still flying overhead every day.³⁴¹

The mission of the 24th, the day of the big push, was a spectacular event with the air armada taking two and a half hours to fly over the American Ninth Army on their way to their targets. The flying armada consisted of 889 fighters, 1696 transports, and 1348 gliders carrying 21,680 men. They were followed by 240 Liberators that dropped their supplies. A second air armada contained 2,153 fighters, 2,596 heavy bombers and 821 medium bombers attacked strategic points.³⁴²

Montgomery's ground troops began their crossing on the night of March 23, support by 3,000 artillery guns and more bombing from the air. Amphibious tanks led the assault. Five days later the encroachment was thirty miles deep and twenty miles wide. Still, Montgomery refused to order them forward until he had more tanks and men on the other side. Their chief antagonist was not the Wehrmacht. It was the rubble created by bombing and shelling.³⁴³



Manny's pilot, William T. Davis, at the controls of *Heaven Can Wait/Miss Satan* 41-37809 VT-H.
(photo courtesy of Manfred Blumenthal)

Despite Montgomery's best planning, massing of troops, and priority of manpower and supplies given to him by General Eisenhower, the American First, Third, and Seventh Armies managed to make their own crossings of the Rhine and to penetrate further and quicker into Germany than his troops did. The Americans wouldn't be held back. Once the hard outer line of defenses had been penetrated, Germany itself, cracked like a nut and the Allies began to pour through the breaches. Although the Allied Air Forces strategic bombing plan hadn't won the war by itself, when the ground forces reached the interior of Germany they found almost everywhere a vast, burned-out shell of a country - unable to fulfill Hitler's insane vision of a great heroic German

³⁴¹ Moench, *Marauder Men*, 358-359.

³⁴² Moench, *Marauder Men*, 360.

³⁴³ Hastings, *Victory in Europe*, 133-134.

last stand in which the German people would fight to the death of every man, woman, and child. Not far to the east, Russians were pushing hard in their race for Berlin.

* * * * *

In the Pacific, on March 3rd, the fighting finally closed in Manila, Philippines, and on March 26th, the fighting also ended on the island of Iwo Jima.

* * * * *

April 1945

The mission load for the 323rd Group did not yet begin to let up – they kept flying as usual. At this time the flights would break up to hit multiple targets in a day – sometimes as many as eight or twelve. But the end really was near and Sochocki only flew four more this month before his tour was over. On one of these missions, a mishap occurred.



Casimier Sochocki

“Now I remember that this happened in April, 1945,” he wrote. “It was a beautiful day. We all assembled [in formation] and were on our way to the target. Just a few minutes before reaching our target I heard a crash in the nose of our aircraft and felt a hell of a pain in my right hand. The plexiglass nose had a big hole in it and the wind was really gushing in. By that time the pilot called me on the throat mike and wanted to know where all the air was coming from. I pulled my glove off my hand and it was really swollen, and at the same time, looking down in the lower part of the nose, I spotted a 50 caliber live shell. Evidently, the gunner in the aircraft above us had charged his gun and a live round penetrated the nose of our aircraft.”

“I answered the pilot that someone in the ship above us charged a gun,” he continued, “and ‘bingo’ we stopped it. The pilot comes back sharply and orders me out of the nose and he wanted me to give him a course back to the field: I told him to make a 180 degree turn. He claimed that if we went to the target and I opened the bomb bay doors, this would create a drag on our aircraft, and we wouldn’t be able to keep in formation. So [because of the drag on the plane’s airspeed] we returned about the same time as the rest of the squadron. We came back with the bomb load. The engineer-gunner shot a red flare so we got to land first. To our amazement, I suffered no fractures, just pain and swelling, and was back on ‘ops’ the next day. We got credit for that mission.”

* * * * *

One morning, David Goss and his friend Jim (Langley?) were trying to relax with a cup of coffee after a hard night of loading bombs. They didn’t expect what occurred there.



David Goss

They watched one of the men on KP duty trying to start a fire in the cooking range. He had laid the kindling and put the flame to it, but the fire had apparently died. Frustrated, the man fetched a cup of the always available gasoline, and tossed it into the stove where there were certainly still some live embers. David and Jim had anticipated the impending disaster, so they had already sprung into action when the resultant explosion threw the burning gasoline all over him. Jim caught the man while David ripped the jacket off another man in passing. Together they wrestled the poor man down and smothered the flames. At that, he had second and third degree burns. Neither of them got more than minor burns on the hands. He was quickly taken to the hospital, and they settled down to a fresh coffee. They placed the incident among forgotten things, except for a visit to the man in the hospital.³⁴⁴

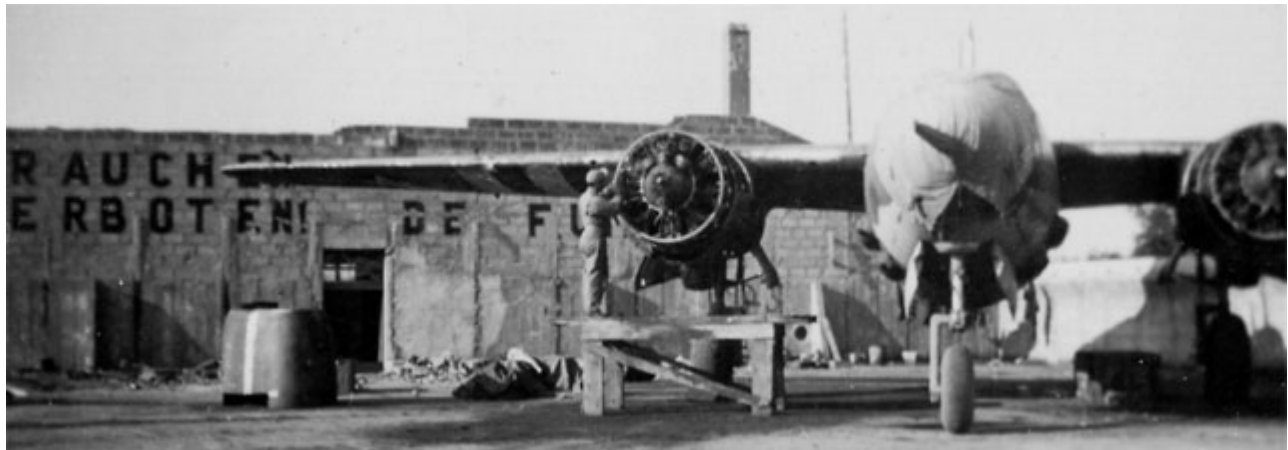
* * * * *

Gen. Moench writes that the men could sense the end of the war drawing near, “...the men began to laugh and the pressure of combat seemed to fall off their shoulders.”³⁴⁵ But their spirits

³⁴⁴ Goss, *Meant to be?* 142.

³⁴⁵ Moench, *Marauder Men*, 366.

were soon dampened by some national bad news. President Franklin Delano Roosevelt's health which had never been strong, was deteriorating fast. On April 12th, 1945, he died of a brain hemorrhage while convalescing at Warm Springs, Georgia. The nation mourned his passing. He never saw the end of the war. Vice-president Harry S. Truman stepped into his place, and Truman's ascendancy had a strange repercussion on the Marauder men. An order came down to the men at the 323rd Group's base to get rid of the Truman comments and caricatures on the planes. Since it was an order the men had to comply.³⁴⁶



Nelso Cassano working on the engines of the *Truman's Folly*. Nels said, "I replaced 5 [sets of] engines on this airplane during this period [since November 1943 to April 1945] due to airtime on the engines." The writing on the wall says 'no smoking' in German and in French. (Photo courtesy of Nels and Ronni Cassano)

* * * * *

On the 21st Soviet troops reached the outskirts of Berlin, and on the 25th, Russian and US troops met at last, 60 miles west of Germany's capital city.

* * * * *



Richard Inman

The very last mission of the 323rd Bomb Group to Erding Airdrome took place on April 25th. Captain J. O. Moench and S/Sgt R.H. Inman (one of the 453rd ordnance men who had volunteered to become a Togglier in December) were on the final loading list. It was Inman's daughter who had organized the reunion in Colorado Springs. Sochocki had already flown his last mission on the 20th - he had flown thirty-four missions in four months.

Gen. Moench summed up the accomplishments of the 323rd Group. They had made 11,424 sorties dropping 15,067 tons of bombs. Thirty-four aircrews had been lost. The casualties were 17 men killed, 192 missing, and 146 wounded (since the records were incomplete the number of wounded was higher. There were also casualties from accidents (including Willie).³⁴⁷ Even so, the casualties amounted to less than .5%. The B-26 Martin Marauder – the 'Flying Coffin,' the 'Widow Maker,' the 'Baltimore Whore,' had shown itself to be one helluva warplane.

* * * * *

When the fighting was over, many Air Force groups now gave their ground crews touring flights over the Reichland so they could see the devastating effect of their years of hard work. By the war's end, 9,700 USAAF planes had been lost over Europe – 4,300 were lost to Enemy fighters and 5,400 to anti-aircraft fire.³⁴⁸

³⁴⁶ Moench, *Marauder Men*, 68.

³⁴⁷ Moench, *Marauder Men*, 365.

³⁴⁸ Perret, *Winged Victory*.

* * * * *

At last, the 323rd men who had been shot down and made POWs began to be liberated in April, 1945. Arnold J. Mandiberg [453rd], who had been shot down in February of 1944, had been in prison for 14 months. Many others had been in captivity for much longer than that – some British had been in since spring 1940! Arnold J. Mandiberg described his experience. He had been interned at Stalag 1 which had about 800 POWs. By the time they were liberated by the Russians there were 5,000 POWs there. One day the commandant of the stalag told the leader of the POWs, fighter pilot Hubert Zemke that the guards would evacuate at midnight. It was known that the British were a short distance to the west but it was the Russians who arrived first. They wanted to send the men to Odessa on the Black Sea but Zemke refused. He insisted on speak with Allied command and soon, Allied transport planes were hauling the men west to Camp Lucky Strike in France.³⁴⁹

Whatever cruelty the Germans were capable of, it is a testimony of their ability to do the right thing when they wanted to; only four percent of the Allied POWs died in German captivity, while in the Japanese camps, forty percent died.³⁵⁰

* * * * *

Meanwhile, amid promising world headlines, Tex was already working on his future.

“I was determined to win Dessie for my wife and within a month after meeting her popped the question. She consented and I was the happiest man alive. I wasn’t able to get a three-day pass to get married so I arranged with a lady Justice of the Peace to marry us. I bought her a wedding ring on credit and asked Sgt. Harry Compton, a friend, to be my best man and we were married in Westlake, LA, on 27 April, 1945.”

* * * * *

Hitler committed suicide on the 30th of April, 1945, the first good idea he’d ever had. Although he had intended for every German man, woman, and child to fight to the death in one last great stand, he himself did not go down swinging. Being absolutely nothing like the Germanic heroes of old that he worshiped, he killed himself. There was nothing to admire in the man. But once again he had helped the Allies by providing a great psychological advantage. When the German people found out that he did not fight to the death himself, many of them lost their belief in him and decided to stop fighting.

To the tune of Colonel Bogie’s March:

*“Hitler has only got one ball,
Goering has two but very small,
Himmler is very similar,
And Goebels has no balls at all.”*

(British Marching Song)

³⁴⁹ Moench, *Marauder Men*, 385; Postwar comments of Arnold J. Mandiberg.

³⁵⁰ online

More photos courtesy of Manfred Blumenthal:



Manny Blumenthal (right) and crew in training. The pilot was evidently court-martialed for some reason and Manny and the rest of the crew were sent over to England as replacements, arriving shortly before D-Day.



Manny, center, and his pilot Frank Cuneff, right, at a reunion.
Manny wrote, "He recognized me" [after all those years].



Top left: Manny on detached duty with an artillery crew during the Battle of the Bulge. Top right: Manny helps to fire a gun. Bottom left and right: Manny's tent at Lessay, which he called the 'Waldorf Astoria.'



Manny 'with the infantry' and bottom right: riding on a tank.



Top left: "Stopped by M.P.s." Top right: "I'm sitting on a jeep (cold as hell)." Bottom left: "Lt. Davis and crew." Bottom right: more snowscapes. The Davis crew had been sent to the Huertgen Forest area on exchange duty.



Manny in an air raid trench.

Chapter 9 – Victory Europe, Victory Japan May – December 1945

May-July 1945

On the 5th of May the 323rd group moved again, this time to Maastricht, Holland. A few days later, May 8th, VE (Victory in Europe) Day was proclaimed.

“Our beloved President Franklin Roosevelt died,” Tex said, “Adolf Hitler had committed suicide, Italian partisans had disposed of Mussolini and Germany had surrendered unconditionally to the allies. Also in the second week of May, I was advised that I was eligible for discharge from the Army if I so wished. With Germany’s surrender the United States would not require the numbers of men that were now in uniform so a point system was implemented to demobilize some of the armed forces. The point system favored those servicemen who had been overseas the longest and had been directly engaged in combat with the enemy. Points were given for the total time in service, time overseas, battles fought, missions flown, wounds received, and etc. My 78 missions made me eligible for discharge in the first group discharged under the point system. I was issued orders to proceed to the Fort Sam Houston Separation Center in San Antonio, Texas by private conveyance to be mustered out of the Army Air Force. So my bride of less than a month, and I loaded our meager belongings in our 1940 Ford and went to San Antonio. This trip was for us the honeymoon that we didn’t have. We went to Boling, Texas, on the way and visited with my Uncle Beryl and Aunt Imogene Jones and my dear cousins Patsy, Martha, and Jeanie. While visiting with them we acquired our first household appliance. It was a small radio that would not play and needed repair. We were happy to get it because new radios were not available, as was the case with many consumer goods during the war years. We had it repaired when we got to San Antonio and enjoyed listening to it for several years. I received my honorable discharge from the Army at Fort Sam Houston on 20 May, 1945, after being a serviceman for three years, one month, and three days. I was now a civilian again.”

* * * * *



David Goss

On the 21st of May the 323rd moved once again from Maastricht to Rosieres. From this point on, they would be involved in the dismantling of the remnants of the gigantic German war machine. It was discovered that David Goss was the only man in the squadron who could speak German so he was assigned to accompany the officers on their rounds. Their task was to visit selected sites and order the destruction of war material. German citizens and prisoners of war would carry out most of the demolition. Moench notes that the airmen were not entirely suited for this work, but went at it with their usual vigor. David was enthusiastic also; however, he soon found that the destruction went far beyond war material. The Allied armies were determined to take Germany apart one piece at a time. They would finish on the ground what the bombers hadn’t done from the air. Eventually, David did not find his post war assignments to be very invigorating at all. In fact, he became sick of the senseless destruction of even non-war materials that was occurring everywhere. He wrote in a letter to Joan:

“...I’ll probably get chewed out if the wrong person reads this letter, if they’re still doing it. I am getting so disgusted I don’t care. The place manufactured barrage balloons, that’s all. They told me to inform the boss German to destroy everything. When the officers went outside to wait for me, I told the man not to look pleased. ‘I mean it! Look sad.’ Then I told him to break up the broken sewing machines and hide the rest, and chop up some of the material and cut the rest into strips usable for making raincoats, so that when the inspectors return they’ll see that the destruction orders were complied with. Good Lord, do we have to destroy everything?”

Besides being the interpreter for the initial inspections, he was directly involved in the follow up inspections to ensure that the directed disarmament was properly carried out. For some of these efforts, they had a truckload of the men accompany them to carry out the directed work. German prisoners of war carried out most of the physical work under supervision of the Squadron's men. It was his task to speak to the Germans and explain the orders.

His last assignment was at the NAZI archives in Munich. Positively against his will, he had to participate in the burning of books and documents that historians would have given anything to have. He considered that the mania for destruction was an illness that time alone might cure, but he really could not believe that even time would correct such a basic flaw in human nature. He picked up a few small documents like 'slave labor' rosters and maps in German. One book of maps was Baedeker's "Gross Britania." He packaged them and sent them home for safekeeping.³⁵¹

In August, David finally finished his duties as an interpreter. By that time he had covered all the autobahns and most of the towns in Bavaria and had become quite proficient in 'Bayerne Deutche.' He was very exhausted emotionally. The war and its aftermath had gone on much too long.

* * * * *

On the same day that the 323rd moved to Rosieres, and one day after Tex was released (on the 21st of May) Willie mustered out at Fort Douglas, Utah.

"Why I didn't stay in the service I'll never know," Willie told me. "Probably your dad asked himself the same question. We could have stayed in the service with a permanent rank of buck sergeant, three stripes. I had a choice of taking a discharge or going to the Pacific. That wasn't a hard decision – it took me about two and a half minutes. The clerk said, 'why don't you go over and check at the hospital, they'll check you out' and he filled out a card for me. I asked, 'Well, how long will that take?' He said, 'Oh, about two to three weeks.' So I asked, 'How long will it take to get my discharge if I don't?' 'Oh, two to three hours.' You know what ole' Brainard did, probably the same thing your dad did. I decided to take the discharge. At that point that's what I wanted to do."

* * * * *



Gus in 50-mission hat and Toid Boird flight jacket. (Photo courtesy of Diane Poulin).

Willie was correct. By this time Gus had also lost his enthusiasm for Army life.

"From Plattsburg I was sent to a beautiful place called Courtland, Alabama," he related, "which is like Norridgewock, Maine (real small). There I was still grounded so I got a big job driving a truck. The nearest town was 32 miles away. I mean the nearest decent town. I stayed there about four months doing nothing. They gave me a truck but said, 'Don't go anywhere.' I was a Tech. Sgt. and so I sat in the NCOs center, big deal, eh?"

"I lost my flying pin" [the right to wear it?]

"Why?"

"Because I couldn't fly."

"From Courtland, Alabama, I was sent to Fort Sam Houston, Texas. Texas is a great land. That's all I can say about it [sorry Tex]. I'll tell you why. For one thing, I didn't care for it. Try taking a cold shower out there. Turn the cold-water tap and out comes very hot

water because the pipes are only 3 or 4 inches in the ground. The sun hits it and that's how they get hot water. It was hotter than the hot water. One night I came into barracks when the lights were out. I didn't want to turn them on so I grabbed a coke from the cooler - the cooler, which I didn't

³⁵¹ Goss, *Meant to Be?* 148-149.

know, had been shut off. Boy, I opened up that bottle of coke and thought I was going to get something cold. It was very warm soda, real hot. I almost gagged on it.”

“I was disgusted because I wasn’t allowed to fly. I went to see my C.O. He asked, ‘What’s the matter? You tired?’ I said I wasn’t going to drive any more trucks. Finally, he had to give me my discharge because I had more points than anybody else on the base. General Moench noted that many of the veterans had similar problems with their new assignments.³⁵²

“How’d they decide on the points?” I asked.

“Oh, medals and all that crap.”

“The young lieutenant asked me, ‘Sgt. Poulin, don’t you ever take orders?’ I answered, ‘No more than these guys do.’ There were only about 150 men out there. ‘Well,’ he says. ‘Somebody has to.’ I says, ‘You take ‘em.’”

“What did he do?”

“What could he do? He couldn’t do a darn thing. He just said, ‘Forget it.’ I said, ‘All right. Get off my back, and I’ll get off yours. Otherwise, we’ll go see the Colonel.’ Well, he knew better, but he thought he might be able to pull something.”

“At that time the boys were being discharged by points, and the majority of them had probably 100 to 115 points. I had 152 so I says, ‘Let me out. That’s it.’ They answered, ‘Oh, you don’t want to get out now; we’ll give you another grade.’ I said, ‘I don’t want to be a master sergeant.’ Do you know where they were going to send me? Up to Washington State, fighting forest fires... from the Japanese fire-balloons they had.”

“What were those?”

“Well they had these balloons that would come over and they’d drop down and bingo! You had a fire in the forest. I wasn’t about to do that. Well, for one thing, the men they were giving me were all returnees, you know - all waiting for their chance to get out. So you can imagine those guys didn’t care about anything.”

The Japanese balloon assault was called Operation Fugu. They sent about 3,000 ballons toward the United States using the prevailing winds to carry them. Only a few actually made it to the US and some exploded in the American Northwest, in Washington State I believe. A few people were injured and some were killed – ironically a couple of them were of Japanese descent.

Dad’s enlisted record shows that on the day the first atomic bomb was tested at the Trinity site in New Mexico, July 16, 1945, he mustered out after three years and nine months of service, one year and eight months of which were spent overseas. The rejected man who flew in a rejected airplane finally went home.



Fred Mingus

“I never knew he felt like that,” Willie said.

* * * * *

By this time, Lt. Fred Mingus had been transferred to Del Rio, Texas. He had received a French Croix de Guerre and a Silver Star earlier in the year. On the 14th of July, 1945, he mustered out of Service.

* * * * *

August 1945

The war in Europe was over, but the war in Asia and the Pacific was still raging. US commanders were making plans for an invasion of the Japanese main islands.

Tex wrote, “It was clear that the Japanese were heading for defeat but Americans were anticipating the necessity of invading the mainland of Japan and suffering heavy casualties while

³⁵² Moench, *Marauder Men*, 348.

fighting a fanatical enemy. Then in the first week of August 1945 it was announced that atomic bombs were dropped on two Japanese cities causing extensive destruction.”

On August 6th ‘Little Boy’ was dropped on Hiroshima, matching or exceeding the combined destruction of the 1200 heavy bombers at Dresden, with only one plane carrying one bomb. A few days later, on the 9th, ‘Fat Man’ was dropped on Nagasaki with similar results, precipitating the Japanese surrender on the 14th of August.

The many Americans who today believe that we committed an immoral act by dropping the atomic bombs on Japan need to consider the fact that many of us would not have been born, if the United States had had to take those main islands by storm. Some estimates of expected losses were up to one million men. Another chilling thought is that Hitler was also well on the way towards developing a German atomic bomb, but the research was interrupted by the severe bombing by the Allied Air Forces as well as sabotage by Scandinavian underground forces.

Tex said, “Shortly thereafter the Japs surrendered and everyone was celebrating the end of the war. My family didn’t celebrate. We, like thousands of other families who had lost loved ones, had paid too high a price for victory to be in a mood to celebrate, but we were happy for the victory and for the millions of families who had loved ones that would be coming home soon.”

* * * * *

Gus arrived home and began to think about the future.

“When I finally got my discharge, I went home,” he said. “I went into the shoe shop [factory] to see the boys there, and I heard the noise in there. They offered me a good job but I couldn’t see it. Clankety clank, clank! ‘Let me out!’ I thought, and so I went out. Then that was it... a lot of running around, didn’t do anything real wrong as far as that goes. I had a good time. I went to on-the-job training through the V.A. (Veteran’s Administration). They did leave me my pension when I got through, and then they took it away.”

* * * * *

September 1945

VJ Day (Victory Japan), September 2nd, 1945, was when they finally signed the surrender agreement. It took some time to demobilize an armed forces of 16 million men. Casimier Sochocki, still with the 453rd, writes that demobilization for him began in early September when high-point ground and flight personnel left for the States.

“Left Rosieres [airfield] B-87 8:20 A.M. September 5th, 1945, arrived outside of Paris at Boulogne 11:10 A.M. [that day],” he wrote.

Men of the Group that had 85 points or more were transported, as General Moench reports, they, “left in one of the most disgraceful (but unpublicized) machinations of the war.” They were transported in the same “cattle cars” that were used by the Germans not only to move cattle but also to transport Jews to the concentration camps.³⁵³ Moench notes that some of the men were very offended while others, just glad to be headed for home, shrugged it off and tried to make the best of it. He states that some of the men who had considered a career in the military now gave up the idea. David Goss, George Fewell, John A. Foutcyh, Robert M. Chestnut, and Lucien W. Kidd were traveling in a car that had a gaping hole in the middle of the floor. But they had smuggled two small kegs of beer from a brewery at Augsburg, a wheel of cheese and some bread, as well as K rations.³⁵⁴ It took them two days to reach the Staging Area at Le Havre.³⁵⁵

Sochocki, with the other group, continued his trip home shortly after that. They left Boulogne on the 13th and arrived in Paris station twenty minutes later, and left there about one o’clock P.M., arriving near Camp Lucky Strike the next day at two o’clock in the morning.

³⁵³ Moench, *Marauder Men*, 416.

³⁵⁴ Moench, *Marauder Men*, 416; Postwar comments of David A. Goss.

³⁵⁵ Goss, *Meant to Be?* 151.

“Walked in from the station about 5 miles and hit the sack at 5 A.M. Left Camp Lucky Strike [in France] in big semi trucks at 3:05 P.M. September 28th, 1945, and arrived at [the port of] Leharne 5:30 P.M. [that day]. Boarded the S. S. Mariposa 6:50 P.M. and left Leharne 12:15 P.M. 9/29/45. Pulled K.P. all the way back to the States.”



David Goss

Meanwhile the second contingent was following the previous one. David Goss describes the miserable conditions he found at Camp Lucky Strike:

It was at Camp Lucky Strike that the situation turned sour. That camp was a miserable mud hole that equaled Laon – if not worse. Further, food was both in short supply and of poor quality. To supplement their diet, some 323BG men, after finding the onion storage point at the camp mess hall, appropriated onions and mixed them with powdered eggs. The result was more than bad breath – the onion-eaters did not get the head colds that roared through the camp.³⁵⁶

[David] had to describe the place to Joan, “...Camp Lucky Strike, the staging area, is a mud hole tent city, with plank walkways to the mess hall and latrine facilities. There are no showers. The mess is a cook house with plank tables to stand up to out in the rain, and it just keeps raining. Rations are very short. The only response we get is, ‘Quit your bitching! You’re getting fed, ain’t you?’ Almost directly after being assigned to our tents we received a delegation from the people who run this place demanding our beer and cheese be surrendered for common use. Naturally, we refused in a way they understood. They knew better and backed off. For all we can tell, the people who run this place couldn’t care less about the men they’re detailed to ship home. Their attitude indicates we’re just another type of material to be salvaged and shipped out.”³⁵⁷

They were sent by LCI troop carriers to Tidworth staging compound in England. The men were not allowed to visit their wives in England but were allowed one phone call. David called Joan but she didn’t catch up with him until they had been sent to Liverpool. Then she could only talk to him through a fence. She was treated badly by the Americans, as if she were a camp follower. Joan would have to find her own way over which was probably for the best since the troop ships were so crowded. Then David was shipped to the States.³⁵⁸

October-December 1945

Nels Cassano had also arrived home but he doesn’t remember how. He wrote, “In 1945, I had 120 points but had to wait five months in France for a ride home. It was on the *Sea Porpoise* to New York. I was discharged at Camp McCoy, Wisconsin. I met my wife, Ronni DiFiore, in Chicago where she was in nurses training.”

Ronni wrote, “We met while I was in nurses training and he was stationed in Tampa, Florida.”

Nels continued, “She graduated in October, 1944, and joined the Army Nurse Corp in February, 1945 and was shipped to the Philippine Islands. She came home on Emergency Leave in October of that year and a judge in the Court House at Akron, Ohio, married us on October 19th, 1945. On December 2nd we were married in a church in Chicago, Illinois. Imagine, sixty years ago! Seems like only yesterday.”

Sochocki continued his travelogue:

“Arrived at Boston Port of Entry 4:10 P.M. October 4th, 1945. Left station at 6:10 P.M. and arrived at Camp Miles Standish at 7:10 P.M. [that day]. Left Camp Miles Standish [Massachusetts] October 6th, in seat cars [cars that had seats – they could finally sit in a seat instead of on the floor]

³⁵⁶ Moench, *Marauder Men*, 416).

³⁵⁷ Goss, *Meant to Be?* 150-151.

³⁵⁸ Goss, *Meant to Be?* 152.

and arrived at Camp Atterbury 5:30 P.M. on the 7th and was processed on the morning of the ninth and was discharged at 2:30 P.M. October 9th, 1945. Left Camp Atterbury at 3:45 P.M. 10/9/45, arrived at Indianapolis at 5:30. Left Indianapolis at 6:10, arrived at South Bend at 10:35, home at last at 10:55 P.M. 10/9/45.”

David Goss described his arrival in New York.

From Liverpool, he crossed the Atlantic in the Queen Mary, crowded as the Queen Elizabeth was when he first crossed the ocean going East. At New York, he shouldered his duffle bag and took his place in the line with the others leaving the great ship. The weather was pleasant when he set foot again in his own country after two and a half years on the other side of the Atlantic. There was no hooting of whistles, no crowds waving flags to welcome them home. Complacency in New York had already set in, but that didn't matter. He had a train ticket to Baltimore where an Army truck picked him up with other men returning to their mustering station at Fort Meade. Since the Air Force had been recognized as separate from the Army, his mustering out at least was not handled by the Army. He was tired of being treated like excess baggage and pleased to receive his severance pay and Honorable Discharge certificate.³⁵⁹

The 323rd Group, reduced to a skeleton command structure, was officially deactivated in December of that year.

* * * * *

Looking back, Gus remembered the men he had served with.

“Thinking of all the guys,” he said (laughing). “Captain Travis couldn't have picked a worse group than the bunch he got (laughing)... but no dubs; we came out with a pretty good record... a pretty good squadron. We flew our missions like we were told, and that was it.”

Miraculously, both brothers, Gus and Guy, had come home. Both had been in primary combat occupations and had survived without any serious wounds. Of the 295,000 Americans who died in WWII, 65,000 were airmen; 50,000 of which died in combat; 36,000 were killed in the European/Mediterranean Theater and the other 14,000 died in the Pacific Theater. Fully 15,000 men died in training or in stateside aircraft accidents. Almost one in five of the American deaths in WWII were Air Force personnel. These figures do not include the wounded. In all, 65,200 aircraft were lost, one third of which crashed in the United States.³⁶⁰ In the European Theater the Germans had shot down 9,700 planes – 4,300 by fighters and 5,400 by flak.

* * * * *

Finally, after talking almost all night, Dad said nothing for a moment, and then changed the subject.

“Let's hit the racks,” he said. “Oh, you'd better shut that doggone thing off (the tape recorder). What are you laughing at?”

It was four o'clock in the morning!

The last thing he said that night was, “I hope you hang on to your picture of one of my airplanes.”

Je me souviens. (I remember). Here it is Dad.

³⁵⁹ Goss, *Meant to Be?* 153.

³⁶⁰ various online websites.



The *Toid Boid* in flight, shortly before it was shot down over IJmuiden, Holland. Gus's head can be seen in the turret (*Scrapbook*).

* * * * *

On the way home from the reunion, Willie asked me, "I wonder what happened to those airplanes we flew in."

I was surprised that he didn't know. "They blew 'em up," I replied.

"What!?" Willie had no idea.

Towards the latter part of 1945, except a few B-26s that were given to the French, the planes were flown to the Landsberg Storage Depot. Moench wrote, "It was as if someone had wanted to obliterate all the evidence of one of the greatest combat aircraft successes of the time."³⁶¹

"Ya, I replied, "They lined 'em up in neat rows in a big field in Germany and blew them up," I said. "Then German work crews took them apart for scrap metal. It's in Moench's book. That's how much the government hated your plane. Actually it was probably Truman. He was president by then..."

Then I had a suspicion. "Willie, Truman must have seen the nose art on your plane, *Truman's Folly* – so it was all your fault."

Willie laughed, "Ya, we made him look pretty clownish, with that dunce cap on his head. Actually, come to think of it, a picture of the plane with the nose art did show up in news reels at the movie houses in the States."

Then he paused.

"I never liked that guy," he said, expressing the sentiment of thousands of Marauder men. The Glenn L. Martin Company managed to arrange for one B-26 to return to the U.S. It was "Flak

³⁶¹ Moench, *Marauder Men*, 419.

Bait” of the 322nd Bomb Group. It was given to the Smithsonian Museum in Washington D.C. “Undeclared in war, the B-26 Marauder went to its death at the hands of policy-makers,” Moench declared.³⁶²



Nelso F. Cassano presenting his proud work and truly amazing accomplishment, the *Truman's Folly* with 177 bombs painted on the side – from Nov. '43 to April '45, 177 missions had been flown without a single mechanical abort! Eighteen months of very hard work! (Photo Courtesy of Mr. & Mrs. Cassano)

Tex wrote, “Nels [Nelso Cassano, the crew chief who had named the plane] told me that the rumor about the scramble to get the name and nose art removed when Truman became president was not true. He said that he knew for a fact that the plane was sent, after wars end, to the base where the Marauders were destroyed and the name and nose art were still on it.”

Nels wrote: “After it [the *Truman's Folly*] went into service for 2 ½ years in the European Theatre during the War, it ended up with the best record of any other bomber in Europe. During this period, they were taking movies of combat crews, including me, and we were scheduled to go to the States on a Bond Drive. In the meantime, President Roosevelt died and Truman became president. The Bond Drive was cancelled and I was asked to remove the name, but I refused. It was very gratifying to see *Truman's Folly* go on 177 missions and come back every time. I was awarded a Bronze Star for maintenance on *Truman's Folly* for going on 50 missions in a row without any mechanical problems... no ‘clusters’ even though it went out 177 times without a problem.”

³⁶² Moench, *Marauder Men*, 419-420.

This plane and others should have been sent to a museum for posterity, but instead it was destroyed – as equally unwanted as a German fighter. Perhaps there are more surviving German fighters than B-26s. As a result, people like me have never seen a complete B-26. I went to the Smithsonian in Washington DC and saw *Flak Bait*, but it was only the nose section which is better than nothing. But I wanted to see Dad’s turret, Willie and Tex’s tail section, the bomb bay, and Zip and Ketcham’s radio compartment too. Gen. Moench points out that, later, as if to erase even the memory of the B-26 entirely, another aircraft [the A-20 Havoc] was designated a B-26 bomber. But no matter what they do, they can’t erase the legacy of thousands of Marauder men.

Bombing from medium altitudes of 10,000 to 15,000 feet, the Marauder had the lowest loss rate of any allied bomber – less than one-half of one percent. By the end of WWII, it had flown more than 110,000 sorties and had dropped 150,000 tons of bombs, and had been used in combat by British, Free French, Australian, South African, and Canadian forces in addition to U.S. units. In 1945 when B-26 production was halted, 5,266 had been built.³⁶³

* * * * *

At the reunion in Colorado Springs, the men talked about Zip, William Zipperling, saying that he went back to Germany to check on his parents. Lillian Zipperling told me that Zip was very apprehensive about going back to his home country. He didn’t know what he would find; whether his parents and sister were alive or not. His mother and sister were still there. His father had died, but after the war, so they all had escaped the fire-bombing of Hamburg. No doubt they had suffered a lot. Zip asked his family not to tell his mother and sister that he had fought in the war.

* * * * *

Willie was ready to move on, “I had read about the G.I. bill. So I went to school for one year. Then I decided that school wasn’t working for me. I wasn’t getting good grades. Then I went to work for a rancher there [in Montana]. Ranching wasn’t too bad. Two-fifty a month. I ran all the equipment; of course I had to do chores and whatnot. And I went to town on Saturday nights like all the rest of the guys. Did a little drinking and dancing in the bar, you know. But it didn’t quite satisfy me. I tried out for this and that. I was working for the railroad. I stepped off a train to throw a switch. I stepped in a hole and this left leg of mine really gave me a bad time. I’d been in the hospital at Madigan General on the base at Fort Lewis for a short while. They wanted to operate. You know what they had to do to that knee? It would’ve put me in traction for six weeks with another walking cast for six weeks – twelve weeks! You know what that would do to a good healthy knee? Stiffen it up! I said, ‘No, you’re not doing that, I don’t want a damn stiff leg.’ ‘Well, that’s what we do – that’s regulations,’ they said. But that’s what got me started on my pension. The VA started to check into my background and they found the records up at Fort Lewis – all the x-rays. That Colonel determined that this was an injury that was sustained in service. I gave them my health record. Do you know they didn’t want to accept it?”

“Why not?” I asked.

“Damned if I know. The clerks and doctors and lawyers did their thing and stamped it, ‘Denied.’ They’d only do one thing. Pick up that old stamp and mark it, ‘Denied.’”

“You’d think they couldn’t have done that,” I said.

“Ya, they like to have that power. But that went on for while. It took my wife years of telephone calls and letters. We finally found out that my records were at Fort Dix. They weren’t in St. Louis where they had that fire. That was a standard excuse of the V.A. that the records had been destroyed by fire.”

I found a place online where I could request my dad’s records. I didn’t really believe that I would actually get an answer, but I did. Willie was right. They said the records had been

³⁶³ USAF online museum.

destroyed in a fire. Funny thing was, they wrote to me that records H-Z (first letter of last names) had been destroyed. Brainard starts with a "B." Apparently, fighting for your country was one thing – trying to get something from your country was another – even if it was just information. I just wanted to know what had happened to my Dad.

"Keep trying," Willie said.

* * * * *

In February of the following year, Willie wrote to Frenchie trying to get information on his accident. His wounds were beginning to catch up with him. This is Gaston's reply:

Feb. 16, 1948

Hello Willie,

You could have knocked me over with a feather when I received your letter yesterday. I thought of writing to you often but I didn't know if you were home or still in the army. I was certainly glad to hear from you. So you went to college, good deal. How come only one year?

I took G. I. Training on the job and learned Upholstering. When we were together I never had any idea I would end up in this business. Although it is a pretty good racket. I opened up my own shop about a year ago, and haven't been doing too bad at all. I am my own boss and the work is the easiest thing in the world.

Sorry to hear about your operation, I guess nobody thought anything like that would happen, at the time of the accident. Look Willie, I remember the accident alright but I can't remember what year or month it happened. So if you will drop me a line and give me the approximate date, I'll write up a verification letter and have it notarized and send it to you.

There was a guy here yesterday and he told me I would have to remember the date as near as possible. Sorry Willie, but I can't remember Ketcham's address. I got an X-mass card from him. I wrote to him but he never answered me. He is married and going to some college in Maryland. I think it is a little place outside of Baltimore. I think the name of the place that Ketcham lives in is Bell Arms, Maryland. I am not certain.

Well, Willie as soon as I get your answer, I will take care of that letter for you. Hope to hear from you soon,
Frenchie

* * * * *

Willie was a school teacher for 23 years. "Can you imagine that?" he asked Tex at the reunion. "How in hell did I become a school teacher (laughing)?"

Tex laughed. "Jim Siegenthaler was a school principal," he said. Speaking about Satterwhite and Haller, he wrote, "Our paths crossed several years after the war was over. I managed jet engines for the Air Force and Satterwhite became a Colonel and Director of Material for the 5th Air Force in Japan at one time. I visited with him there at Fuchu Air Base in Japan and he came by to see me at Kelly AFB, in San Antonio just before he retired from the Air Force and I retired from Civil Service. My pilot, Haller, took part in the Nuremberg trials, served in Korea, and later became Director of Material at Andrews AFB. He led the Air Force section in the parade for President Kennedy's inauguration."

Colonel Thatcher became a General of the Air Force in charge of NORAD for many years.

Fred Mingus wrote, "I was a boomer and went where the work was in construction for about five years. Then I went into the automotive business as a service manager for Dodge and Plymouth, and a Lincoln-Mercury dealership. I went to work for AC Nelson marketing research and retired from there after thirty years as a director of Engineer Purchase."

Nels Cassano said, "I spent my working life with two partners in Chicago in our heating and air-conditioning company. I was also involved in thirteen Hardee restaurants with my brother in Wisconsin for seventeen years. I retired in 1982 and moved to Southern California. Love living here. Our daughter, Cheryl lives near us, but our son, Frank, is still in Illinois. We have four grandchildren and are expecting our first great grand daughter the end of June [2005]."

Willie remembered Kenny Class. “Kenny had gotten married just before he left for the service. His wife was a nurse. He had his disability – a full pension. With her in company he took up piano playing. He was a musician. He played kettle drums for a philharmonic in Iowa.”

Sochocki went to work for a trucking company in Indiana, but soon realized his true passion. He wanted to keep the spirit of the 453rd alive and well – and he did.

“In 1949,” he wrote, “I had an idea for getting the 453rd members together for a reunion. I had a list of a few 453rd men. I wrote to all of them and asked them to send me all the names and addresses of any and all of the 453rd men that they had. I got a good response to this. In addition I wrote to all of these new addresses and came up with quite a roster. After consulting with Nelso Cassano and Howard Odom we decided to hold our first reunion in Chicago in 1950. Here is a list of our reunions:”

- | | | |
|---------------------------------|-----------------------------|--|
| 1. Chicago, IL 1950 | 15. Madison, WI 1974 | 29. Norfolk VA 1988 |
| 2. Cleveland, OH 1952 | 16. Myrtle Beach 1975 | 30. Colorado Springs, CO 1989 |
| 3. Pittsburgh, PA 1954 | 17. Dayton, OH 1976 | 31. Myrtle Beach SC 1990 |
| 4. Columbus, OH 1956 | 18. Nashville, TN 1977 | 32. New Orleans, LA 1991 |
| 5. Ft. Wayne, IN 1958 | 19. Moline, IL 1978 | 33. Tampa, FL 1992 |
| 6. Detroit, MI 1960 | 20. Clearwater, FL 1979 | 34. San Antonio, TX 1993 |
| 7. Memphis, TN 1962 | 21. St. Louis, MO 1980 | 35. Las Vegas, NV 1994 |
| 8. St. Louis, MO 1964 | 22. Latham, NY 1981 | 36. Cincinnati, OH/Covington,
KY 1995 |
| 9. Moline, IL 1966 | 23. Scottsdale, AZ 1982 | 37. Albuquerque, NM 1996 |
| 10. Atlanta, GA 1968* | 24. Baltimore, MD 1983 | 38. Kansas City, KS 1997 |
| 11. Houston TX 1970 | 25. Rancho Cordova, CA 1984 | 39. Moline, IL 1998 |
| 12. Windsor, CT 1971 | 26. Harlingen, TX 1985 | 40. Flint, MI 1999 |
| 13. England/Holland/France 1972 | 27. Pittsburgh, PA 1986 | 41. Irvine, CA 2000 |
| 14. Madison, WI 1974 | 28. Seattle, WA 1987 | 42. Colorado Springs, CO 2003 |
- *and Chicago, IL an ‘in between’ reunion 1969



Casimier Sochocki at one of the reunions (*Photo courtesy of Casimier Sochocki*).

With the help of Richard Inman, Sochocki published a newsletter to keep the members informed of news and events. Sochocki was also instrumental in organizing “The Return of the Marauder Men” to Europe in May, 1992. The reception they received in each country was outstanding and the only complaint was that they had so little time to spend in each place. The first place they went to was Earls Colne (of course), then to Lessay, France, and on to Paris. Among the 200 people who attended, people mentioned in this story were Lewis Williams, Ronni and Nelzo Cassano, Fred Mingus, John Bragg, John O. Moench, Roger Freeman, and Trevor Allen.



General Moench and Casimier Sochocki prepare to raise the American flag once again at Lessay, France on May 4, 1992.

* * * * *

Twenty-five years later, Dad was still upholstering by day and re-living the war by night. While my sister and I were growing up, we would sometimes be awakened by a crashing sound in the middle of the night. The next day, one of us would jokingly say, “Dad bailed out of bed again last night.” We thought it was normal – to us, it was the price of victory. General Moench confirmed that even 40 years after the war, some men still had “disturbing dreams.”³⁶⁴

“Why do I still dream of missions?” Dad said. “How do you erase it? How do you forget something that’s sitting in front of you like a picture? You don’t forget that kind of stuff, Dave. Gee whiz, it’s impossible. I don’t give a damn who it is.”

His postwar fatigue was just as involuntary now as it was during the war itself. I asked Willie how he coped with it all.

“I have this mechanism in my head,” he said, “anything bad that happened gets shut out. I’m lucky that way.”

Tex tried to work with the V.A. to get some compensation. He wrote in an email:

“Dave, I think all of us who were combat crew members suffered from combat fatigue. I’m sure it was recognized by our flight surgeons and others but in many cases undocumented when we were overseas. You know, prior to the invasion and after old Brereton cancelled our 50 mission tour he had promised us, they tried to give some rest to high mission crews but before that program was completed it was cancelled because of mission requirements in preparation for the invasion. I don’t remember it being referred to as combat fatigue. In my case, after returning stateside, the VA called it ‘anxiety, moderate severe.’ I got VA compensation in the amount of 10% disability for a few years and they cut me off completely. I tried to fight it but was unsuccessful so I just said to hell with it. As far as I was concerned, I felt that the VA did not give any great concern that combat fatigue was of any major concern to veterans. I think they rated flat feet, or something of that nature, as being more debilitating than combat fatigue. Maybe they have given it more consideration in later years, but I don’t know. The one that championed our cause for a tour was General Sam Anderson. I personally overheard him tell General Hap Arnold, after we came out of

³⁶⁴ Moench, *Marauder Men*, 348.

the meeting (on June 13th 1944), that unless we had a tour, many of the crews would not be able to rehabilitate themselves after the war; and that he had sent many memos to Brereton to establish a tour for us, all to no avail. BRERETON ----- I hate that S.O.B. until this day.”



Reunion at Moline, IL in 1966. Front row L-R: Mrs. Casimier Sochocki, Theresa Poulin; standing: Casimier Sochocki, Gaston Poulin, Gen. Thatcher and Guest.

By saying Dad had combat fatigue I don’t mean to say that he was just a shell of a man because of his wartime experience. He raised a family, ran a business, and even served a couple of terms in the Maine State House of Representatives. But rather, I mean that his quality of life had been diminished by it – as in the words of Private John W. Haley of the 17th Maine regiment after the Civil War:

“Here we are, some with whole skins, and some not so whole. Others have been left behind. For myself, I can only wonder that there is a bone left in my carcass when I think of the wholesale carnage through which I have passed. My bruises are inward.”³⁶⁵

Even at my age, I often reflect that Dad is still one of the toughest men I have ever met. I don’t mean that he would clear-out bars and take-on all comers in a brawl. I’m talking about the way he went to work every day when he should have gone to a hospital. He continued to fulfill a man’s responsibilities, no matter how difficult it was. He really was ‘one of the hardest ones.’ He, along with Tex, Willie, Sochocki, Inman, Zip, Cassano and the many, many others, was, as General Moench would say, “A Marauder Man!”

Tex wrote, “You know Dave, your Dad was a highly respected person and combat crewman. Every one I knew, including myself, had the highest regard for “Frenchie.”

Thanks, Tex. Sochocki expanded on that.

“I really am honored to be included in the story, it was a pleasure serving our country with men like your Dad, Willie, Tex, Pechon, Inman, Zipperling, Boling, Odom, Roy, Benson, Crowe, Ramey, Smith, Ketcham, Cassano, and Siegenthaler, just to name a few.”

* * * * *

Just before he died in May 1988, William Zipperling told his wife Lillian about a poem he had kept close to his heart all those years since he started flying.

She wrote in his eulogy, “Bill Zipperling was a stubborn German but he had a soft heart that could transform trash into treasure [he was a collector] and make a maddening man more precious than gold. When he decided that the kind of life he was living was no life at all, he gave it up. Bang. Cold turkey. Just like he gave up smoking and beer. But he did not leave without giving Lil the prayer that he had kept in his heart ever since before the war, for just this occasion. All those years he never told anyone this prayer that he learned as a flyer, perhaps because having been close to death before, he knew better than the rest of us the awe of God on the day of reckoning. This is the prayer:

³⁶⁵ Ruth Siliker, *The Rebel Yell and the Yankee Hurrah*.

*When the last flight is over
And happy landings past,
I'll swing her nose to the ceiling;
And the great God of all flying men
Will smile on me
Kind of slow
As I stall my crate on the field
Where all flyers go*

(William 'Zip' Zipperling)

* * * * *

The Reunion

Well, Willie and I - oops, I mean Lee and I - got up enough gumption and drove to the last reunion of the 453rd Bomb Squadron, October 5, 1993.



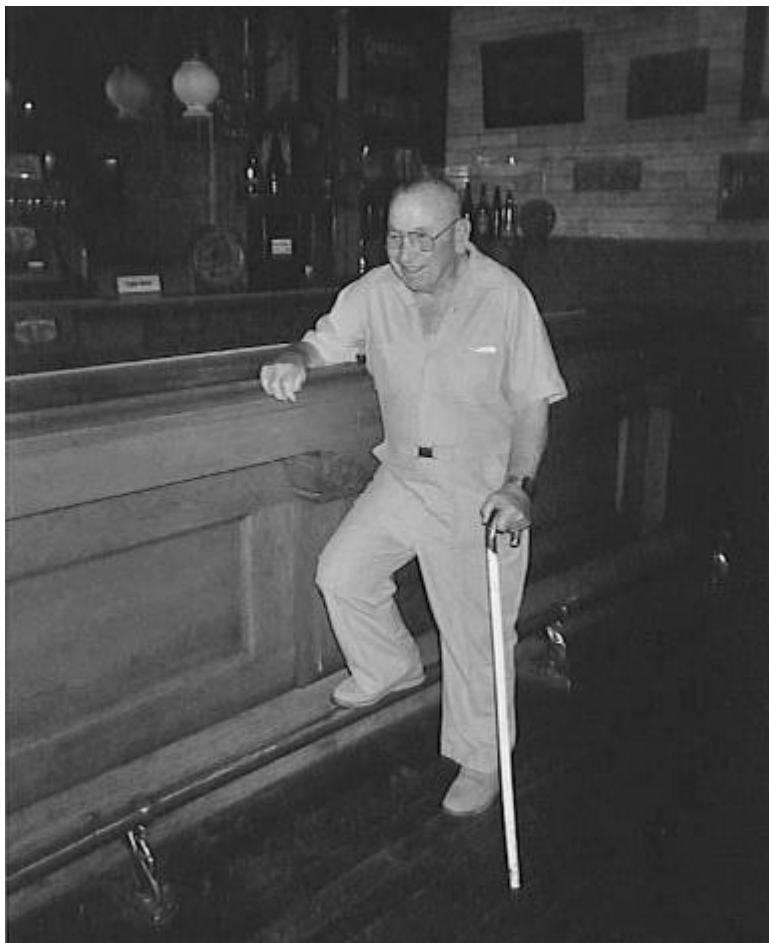
Lee and Dave, intrepid travelers.



In Colorado City, October 5th, 2003: On this day, it was the stories that were flying. L-R: Lewis Williams (maintenance chief), (unknown), Casimier Sochocki (ordnance/togglier), Samuel "Tex" Findley (engineer-gunner).



L-R: Tex Findley, Horace Chriesman (pilot), Oran Begay (pilot), Lee “Willie” Brainard (engineer-gunner).



Like a duck to water, Willie sidles up to a bar at an oldtime museum in Colorado City.
“I think I still remember how to do this,” he says with a chuckle.



L-R: Calvin Coates, Robert Gregor, Nels Cassano, Richard Inman, Lewis Williams, Oran Begwin, Cas Sochocki, Horace Chriesman, Henry Dunston, and Sam Findley. Missing from Photo is Willis Brainard and James Hargrove. The men are standing at a wall of commemorative plaques at the Air Force Academy at Colorado Springs, Colorado.
(Photo courtesy of Ronni Cassano)



The plaque installed by the 323rd Group at the Air Force Academy in Colorado Springs in 1989.

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- Production Flight Test Procedure for the Martin B-26*, O. E. Tibbs, Chief Production Test Pilot. This booklet was also found by Micheal E. Smith and presented to the Cassanos.

Research

- Trevor Allen – mission lists and research in the 323rd Bomb Group records.
- Alf Johanneson - aircraft lists of the 453rd Bomb Squadron and photos.
- William Gr. – photos of wreckage at the probable crashsite of the *Toid Boid* and photos of the grave sites of several of the Reese Crewmen.

Websites

- b26.com* – Trevor J. Allen and Michael E. Smith – pictures and stories – check out Dad, Willie, Sochocki, Cassano, and Tex on that site
- b26tailgunner.com* – pictures and anecdotes on the B-26 Martin Marauder. Lots of good pictures.
- b26marauderarchive.org* - a wealth of b26 information
- worldwar-2.net* – an exhaustive timeline of the entire war
- 390th.org* – a web site dedicated the 390th Bomb Group and their museum at Tucson, AZ.
- USAF Warrior Studies* – Richard H. Kohn and Joseph P. Harahan, General Editors – an online book at (globalsecurity.org/military/agency/usaf/9af.htm)

Oral and Written Histories

These were taken from post-war interviews, telephone calls, letters, and emails. Gus's testimony had been taped and transcribed 40 years earlier. Willie Brainard provided voluminous verbal recollections and fond memories of 'Gus and Willie' in personal interviews at his home in Rio Rancho, NM. Much of Tex's testimony came from his post-war memoir, reproduced here with his permission; the rest came from his emails. Throughout much of the course of writing this book Tex was an avid advisor to me. He died during the writing, so he never saw the finished version. Casimier Sochocki offered use of his travelogue style service period diary, sent pictures, letters of recollections. He also helped identify many of the men in photos. Nels and Ronni Casano volunteered pictures, text, and identification of many men in the photos. Ronni asked surviving Squadron members and families if they would like to contribute. Fred Mingus gave oral testimony on the phone, letters, pictures, and newspaper articles. Manny and his wife gave cheerful support with photos and letters of recollections. I can still hear them yelling over the phone as they looked for their memorabilia. David Goss died a few days after agreeing to contribute to this book so his testimony, necessarily, came from his own book, *Was This Meant to Be?*

Gaston G. "Frenchie" Poulin
Samuel F. "Tex" Findley
Nelzo F. "Nels" Cassano
Manfred "Manny" Blumenthal

Willis Lee "Willie" Brainard
Casimier V. Sochocki
Fredrick "Fred" J. Mingus
David Goss

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Samuel Findley
Willis Lee Brainard
Lillian and Lee Zipperling
Casimier V. Sochocki
Ronni and Nels Cassano
Manfred Blumenthal
Frederick J. Mingus
Mrs. Mark Sprague
Frank E. Larkin III
David Goss (from his book, courtesy of Ronni Cassano)

Barbara Denny – the information in the section on Leo Myron Denny was sent to me by his niece Barbara. She hoped I could find a veteran who remembered him, but I couldn't.

(Sorry if I didn't remember everybody. After working on this for four years in my 'spare' time, it's all a blur!)