

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.¹

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).²



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.”

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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

¹ Moench, *Marauder Men*, 287.

² 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.

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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.³

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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.⁴

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.⁵ 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.⁶ 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.

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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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³ Hastings, *Victory in Europe*, 95.
⁴ Perret, *Winged Victory*, 354-355.
⁵ Perret, *War to be Won*.
⁶ 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.”⁷

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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.⁸ 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.⁹ 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.¹⁰ “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.”¹¹

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.

⁷ Gus Poulin’s Scrapbook.

⁸ Hastings, *Victory in Europe*, 110.

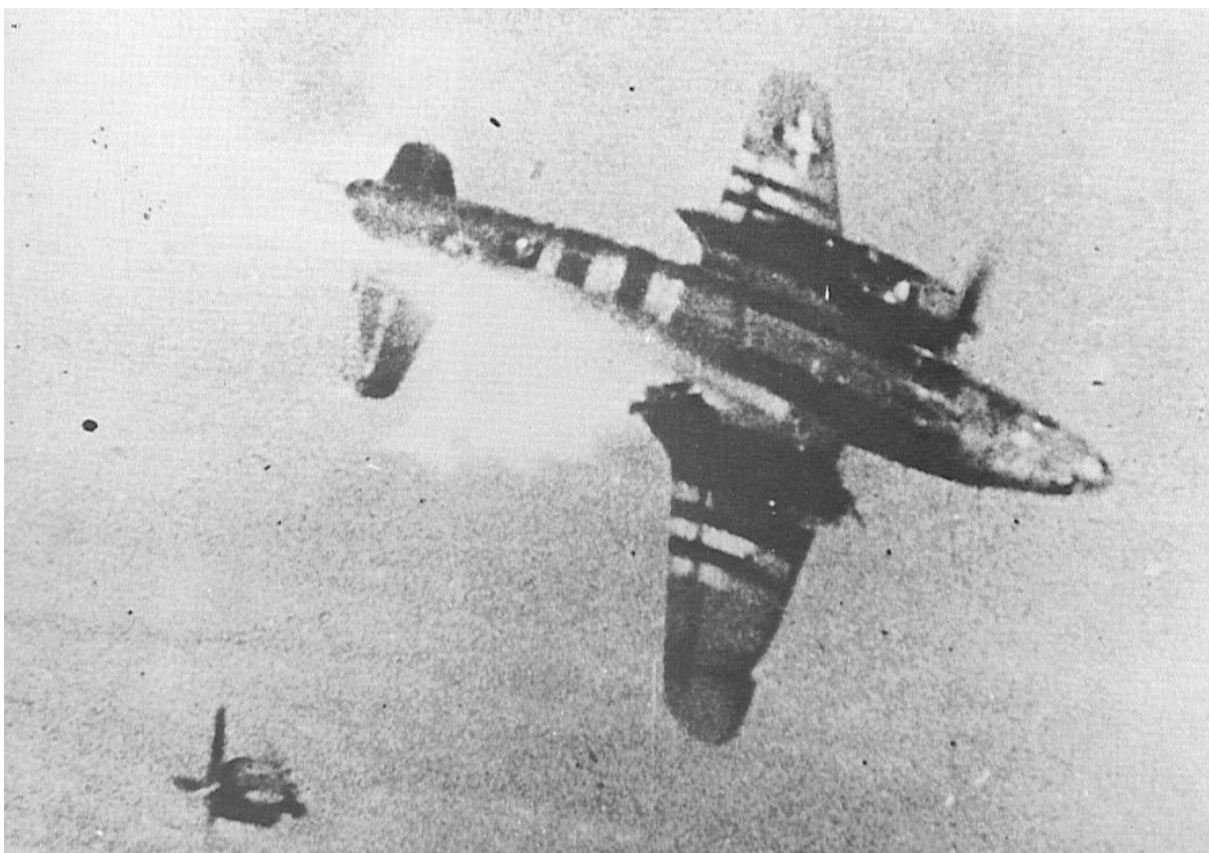
⁹ Perret, *Winged Victory*, 356-357.

¹⁰ Alf Johanneson, aircraft researcher

¹¹ Moench, *Marauder Men*, 298.

Everyone made it down OK.¹² 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.¹³

“Two men were known to be killed, 227 were missing, 30 were wounded and two were injured.”¹⁴ 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.¹⁵



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)

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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.¹⁶ 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.

¹² Moench, *Marauder Men*, 298.

¹³ Freeman, *B-26 at War*, 142.

¹⁴ Moench, *Marauder Men*, 299.

¹⁵ Moench, *Marauder Men*, 299.

¹⁶ Moench, *Marauder Men*, 300.



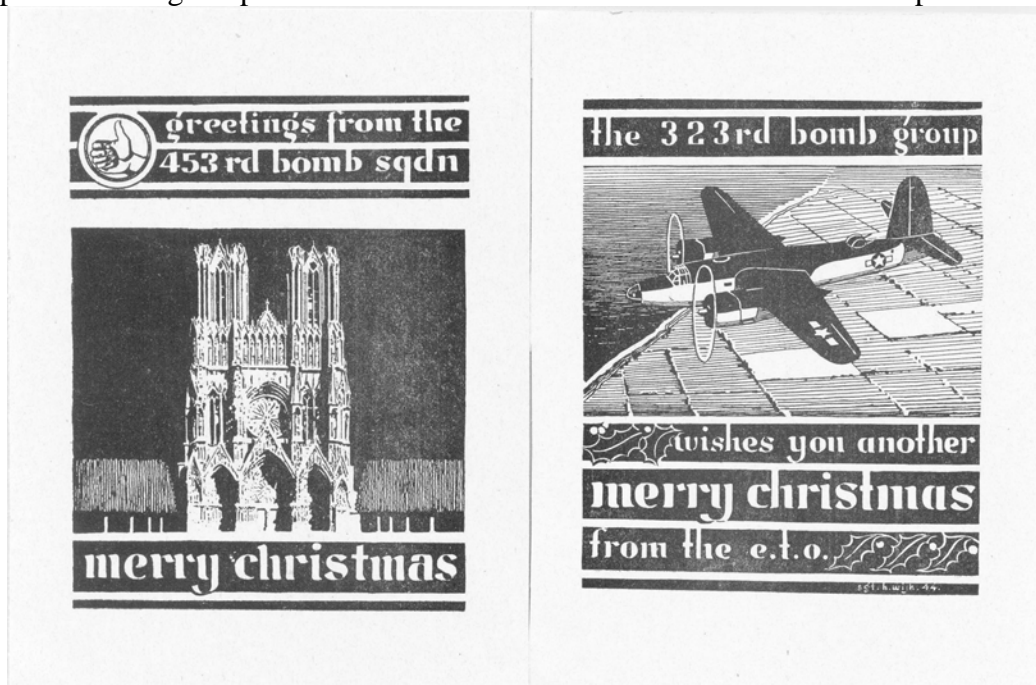
Casimier Sochocki

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.¹⁷

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

¹⁷ 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.¹⁸

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.

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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.¹⁹ In taking the brunt of the attack the Americans had outdone themselves and proven their skill and commitment to victory.²⁰

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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.²¹ 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.

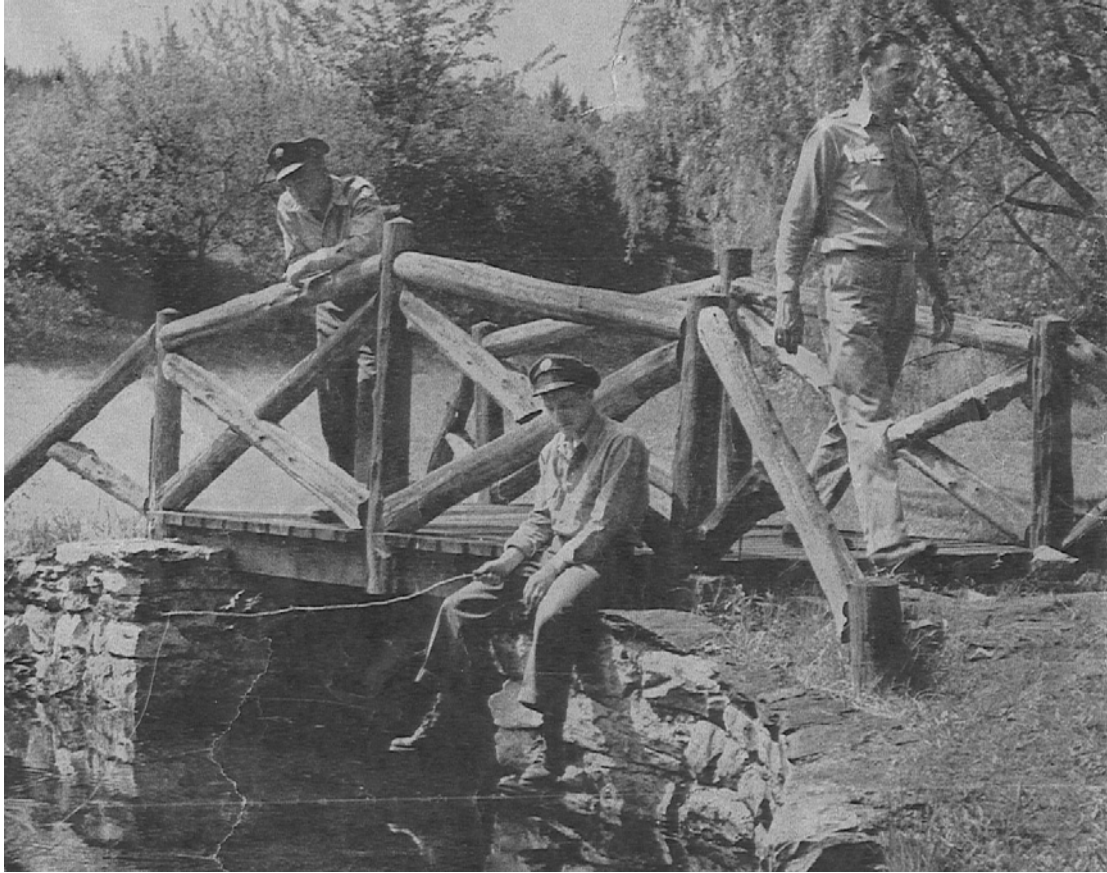
Gus didn't say much about his time in Plattsburg. I believe this was the rest home part of his service. He didn't talk about it at all, but included in the scrapbook was an article with pictures from a magazine about a rest area for airmen in Pawling, NY. Written in the margin was a date: July 17, 1944 issue – it was most likely from Life Magazine.

¹⁸ Moench, *Marauder Men*, 301.

¹⁹ Hastings, *Victory in Europe*, 113.

²⁰ Hastings, *Victory in Europe*, 113.

²¹ Moench, *Marauder Men*, 315-316.



Flak-happy airmen recovering in a bucolic atmosphere. (*Gus's Scrapbook*)

AIRMEN CONVALESCE – 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.²²

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.²³

My aunts say that Gus became engaged to be married while he was at Plattsburg, but it didn't work out. They seemed happy about that.

²² Gus Poulin's Scrapbook.

²³ Army Air Force report dated January 4th, 1944 – online USAF Museum.

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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, was hit by flak and spiraled down in Belgium.²⁴ 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

In February, 1944, Prime Minister Churchill ‘pushed’ the civilian war again, and this time the Americans joined in. He wanted to bomb targets in eastern Germany, hoping to swamp the Germans with refugees. Obliging the Eighth under General Spaatz bombed the city of Berlin with 1,000 heavy bombers. Three thousand civilians were killed and 120,000 were made homeless. General Doolittle declared that this strategy amounted to terrorism. The morality of such tactics had long been debated by Air Force commanders. But General Spaatz went ahead with it anyway. The Next target was Dresden, which with its arms factories was considered to be a legitimate target. The RAF sent 800 heavy bombers on the 13th. Half their bomb load was incendiaries. A firestorm, similar to Hamburg occurred. The next day the Eighth sent 400 heavy bombers, and on the 15th they came back to Dresden as an alternate target. The city was destroyed.²⁵

Some estimates of the number of people killed ranged from as much as 130,000 to 200,000 in the holocaust following the firebombing. This was considered to be the most destructive air raid of the war in Europe. The Brits had finally won the ‘civilian’ war, and then some.

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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.²⁶

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.²⁷

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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

²⁴ Alf Johannessen, aircraft researcher.

²⁵ Perret, *Winged Victory*, 369-370.

²⁶ Moench, *Marauder Men*, 325.

²⁷ Moench, *Marauder Men*, 325.

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.²⁸



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.²⁹ 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.’”³⁰

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

²⁸ Hastings, *Victory in Europe*, 129-131.

²⁹ Hastings, *Victory in Europe*, 132.

³⁰ Goss, *Meant to Be?* 135.

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."³¹

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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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

³¹ Goss, Meant to Be? 139-140.

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.³²

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 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.³³

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.³⁴

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.³⁵

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 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.

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³² Moench, *Marauder Men*, 358.

³³ Moench, *Marauder Men*, 358-359.

³⁴ Moench, *Marauder Men*, 360.

³⁵ Hastings, *Victory in Europe*, 133-134.



Manny's pilot, William T. Davis, at the controls of *Heaven Can Wait/Miss Satan* 41-37809 VT-H.
(photo courtesy of Manfred Blumenthal)

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.

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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.

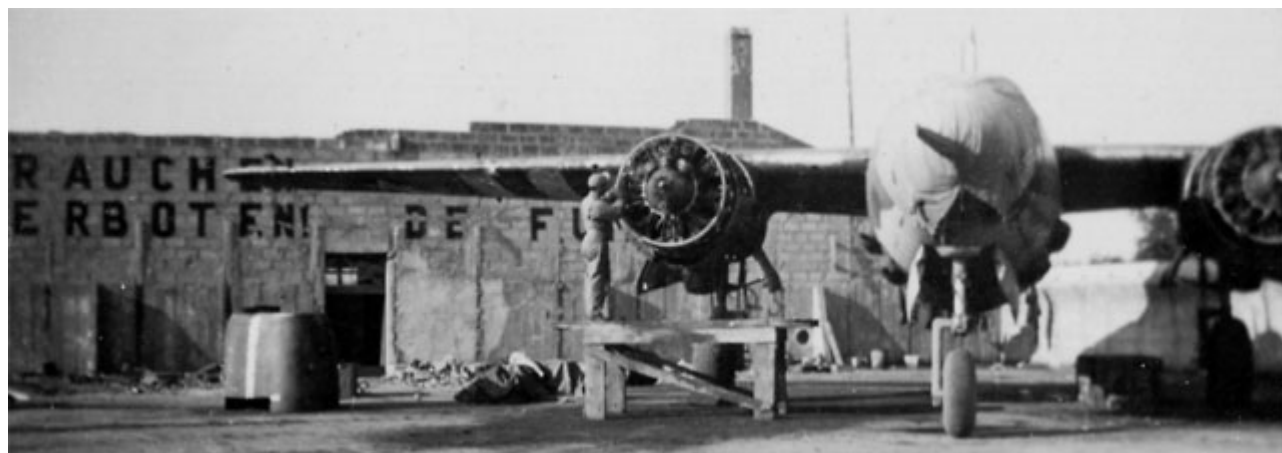


David Goss

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.³⁶

* * * * *

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.”³⁷ But their spirits 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.³⁸



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.

* * * * *

³⁶ Goss, *Meant to be?* 142.

³⁷ Moench, *Marauder Men*, 366.

³⁸ Moench, *Marauder Men*, 68.



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 Toggler 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).³⁹ 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.⁴⁰

* * * * *

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.⁴¹

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.⁴²

* * * * *

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

³⁹ Moench, *Marauder Men*, 365.

⁴⁰ Perret, *Winged Victory*.

⁴¹ Moench, *Marauder Men*, 385; Postwar comments of Arnold J. Mandiberg.

⁴² online

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:

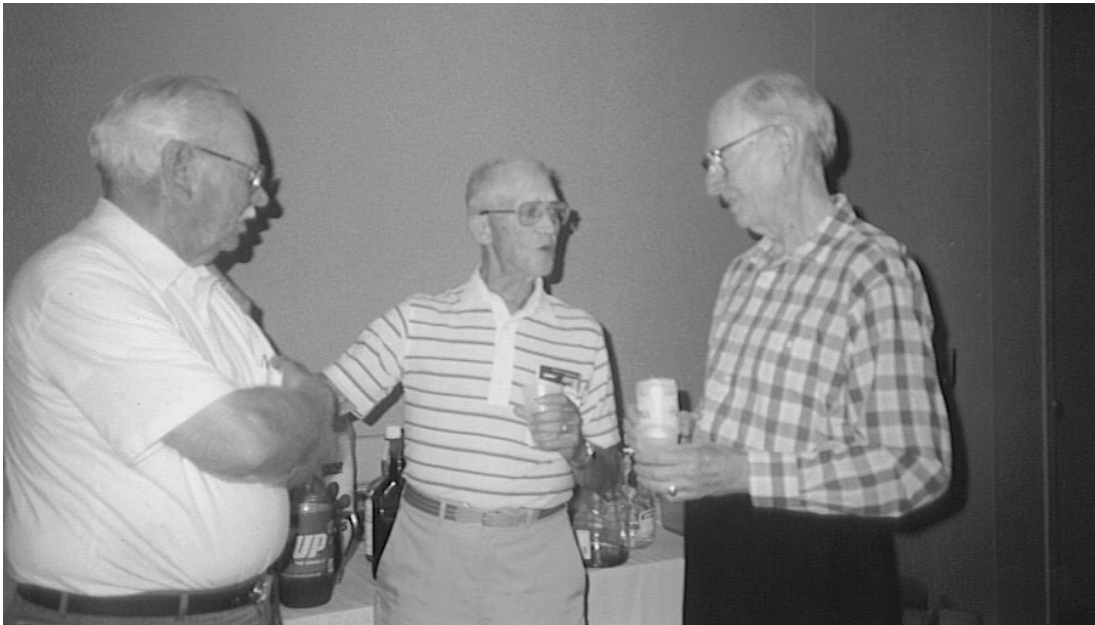
*“Hitler has only got one ball,
Goering has two but very small,
Himmler is very similar,
And Goebels has no balls at all.”*

(British Marching Song)

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.