



THE 99th Bomb Group Historical Society

Newsletter Vol. 5, No. 4

Jul .1, 1985

SOCIETY OFFICERS

PRESIDENT., Bernice Barr
TREASURER, Walter Butler
CHAPLAIN, Harvey Jennings

VICE-PRESIDENT, Lew Boatwright
HISTORIAN, George F. Coen
EDITOR, George F. Coen

THE PRESIDENT'S CORNER

TOM GAMM and I have started receiving contribution checks for our 99th Bomb Group Memorial Fund. In some of letters were notes from members-I can't quote them all-I will quote bits from some. "Bernie-Thanks for all you & the others who are keeping the 99th alive. Here is a contribution toward our Memorial : You may remember me as the Group Bombardier in Oct. 1944....." Dean C. Kuhn" "Hi Bernie,..... I am all for the 99th Memorial to be erected at Wright Field.....I got my airline tickets and hotel reservations and am all set for Seattle. Enclosed is my check for the Memorial....." Harvey Jennings." "Dear Bernie, I vote yes to establish a Memorial. I enclose a check for that purpose. My Laboratory is a not-for-profit and we cant match gifts. Lots of luck-see you in Seattle." Bob Duffy." "Howdy, Bernie-Your Prez : Received all your welcome info this afternoon in the mail, so having put on the feed bag am getting down to the clarion call of HELP-----enclosed is my first check (more to follow)....Because of my connection the 15th AFA as a Director.. I am confirmed and registered with them.....naturally, staying at the HYATT I will see as much of you 99ers as possible and am hoping there willnot be too much conflict in activities. Anyhow take care...See you soon. My best to you, Doris ,...also the 99th reprobates in the Albuquerque area. Take care.....(this taken from a long letter)" Frank English." "Dear Bernie, Thanks for your letter and the attached business about the 99th Memorial Fund. I think it's a great idea. Please find checks enclosed. I'm planning to^{be} at the 1985 convention in Seattle and have already made my reservations. I enjoy the news letters and look forward to receiving them and getting caught up on the history of the group and what happened before my time there. I believe you were at Foggia during my tour and I am most anxious for the history to get to missions 223 through 296. I am particularly interested in mission 245 of 20 August 1944 to Oswiecim and information as to our target.....Enclosed is a copy of my mission list. Also enclosed is a crew roster of our crew. I flew with Bert Twamley, who unfortunately died last spring....." Fred Hueglin, Jr." (Yes Fred I was there) "Dear Bernie, Thank you for your letter.....I am enclosing my personal check to help the cause. I retired as of Jan 1st this year and will not be able to have the company donate. The newsletters and effort by all of you good people are appreciated by all of us who are not as active but still have a soft spot in our heart for the 99th.....

Thanks for all your efforts." Dick Stack" "Hi Bernie-Thanks for your note and "Loading List" to Russia-I am attaching a check that if 100 other guys do like wise you would have your goal. Hope all is well with you...Come see me-kindest Regards Wilbur Dixon" "Wilbur and I were on the same crew on the mission to Russia.)

"Dear Bernie,.....I was a little luke-warm at first, but as I read the newsletters, see familiar names and places that I haven't thought about in years and reminisce, I've become very enthused..... Forty years seems like a lifetime ago, but I guess now would be a great time to share experiences with those who found themselves in similar situations.....Please accept my contribution.....look forward to meeting you in Seattle. Louis J. Bruno"---"Dear Sir, Your idea on the Group Memorial is a capital idea! So here is a contribution to help out a bit. We hope to be in Seattle and see some of the fellows again. Good Luck-keep up the good Work. Yours Al Wertz."

"Dear Bernie, I think the idea of a 99th Group Memorial is a great idea and am enclosing a check.....My tour with the 348th from Oct 43 to Apr 44-I was the Pilot of the crew and we flew 32 missions in Lethal Lady III.....I certainly hope there will be a good response to funding a memorial. Best Regards, Hal Terry" "Dear Bernie, A memorial for the 99 Bomb Group is a very fine and appropriate idea. The enclosed check (a very generous one) is contributed in memory of Lt. Irving B. Patten, Bombardier, 416th Bomb Sq, 99th Bomb Group, KIA 1 October 1943. Lt. Patten was a member of Lt. Burton English's crew, and the B17 was "SUGARFOOT". All of the officers and three enlisted men were killed on that awful day.....(See Mar 1, 1985 newsletter for Marion D. Pratt's personal account of this tragic event)and please let me know if the fund is successful and meets the set goal, or if it doesn't. The memorial has to be.....Sincerely, Katherine Hack"(Katherine's five page letter further relates to how through our newsletter she is now in contact with the three survivors-Morris King, Dale Pratt, and Joseph Carrol-a terrific letter) Gene Canciglia says that he thinks the 99th B. G. Memorial Fund is a fine thing for all of its members both Air and Ground personnel. Joyce ^{Pinnegan} says, keep up the good work I enjoy the Newsletter as much as my husband. We have contributions from many more members and we thank each one of you. However there are many who have not taken the time to respond to the request for a contribution. PLEASE SEND YOUR CONTRIBUTION TODAY!!! As of today-1st week of June-Tom and I have deposited approximately one third of the GOAL set to construct a really neat monument to the history of our 99th Bomb Group. Please contribute. At our Reunion in Seattle we will try to finalize and get your approval for a memorial to our group. It is not too late for you to send us your ideas on a design, etc.

Peter Bezek points out that we may not have the exact insignias for our squadrons. We do want to be as accurate as possible and if you note any difference in our letterhead designs from one of yours that you preserved over the years please copy yours and send to us. Thanks. We do need a copy of the group insignia, please if you have one-send to me.

I do hope to see you in July at Seattle,

Your Friend,

Bernie Barr

CHAPLAIN'S CORNER

If there is anyone in the 99th Bomb Group who was a Chaplain during the war, or who is a man of the Cloth now, would he let it be known?

Also, if anyone knows of a member of the Group who is ill, or has deceased, please let me know so an appropriate card can be mailed.

Time is drawing near for our reunion in Seattle. I pray the Lord will see to it that each of us have a safe trip. We still plan to have an Inter-Denominational Service Sunday morning, either before or after our breakfast.

See you in Seattle!

Harvey

NEWS, DUES & VIEWS

THE SEARCH

As evidenced in the "FOUND" column, through the cooperation of the Boeing Aircraft Company we are locating an unprecedented number of stragglers. These men are providing further leads to still more 99ers. We repeat that we will immediately send the newsletter to any address with a Zip code number. Other addresses, no matter how old, are used for a postcard search which has about 10% success with a lag of about two months. So send us those 1943 home-towns of record; we use 'em. geo.

Amigos;

Your address label shows in the upper right corner the last year for which you have paid dues. If it reads 1985, relax. If it does not, either send us some wallet ivy or tell us if we have goofed. geo.

Does anybody else remember those early days when the 99th flew low over the Mediterranean enroute to Naples in order to avoid the enemy radar. This took the group at low altitude right over the Island of Ustica where the radar station was located. Upon return I went up to HQ and found that some clod had used a nice blue section of map from some other longitude to fill in that section of the big wall map.

We later arranged for the South African B-25s to visit Ustica just ahead of us in order to tickle them with the 75mm cannon in their noses. gfc.



Dear Mr. Coen:

John F. O'Connell, who was a navigator in the 347th Squadron of the 99th Bomb Group, was kind enough to give you my name and address and as a result I have received the 99th Bomb Group Historical Society's Newsletters for January and February 1985.

In reading Volume 3, No. 1, I was enthralled with the Special Narrative Report on page 28, an account of a mission on March 18, 1944 to Villaorba Airdrome, which was located in the Udine area of Italy, the area north and east of Venice. The Narrative Report states that four B-17's were shot down by rocket fire, one of them from the 99th Bomb Group. I was the bombardier on the plane that was shot down from the 99th Bomb Group and the Narrative Report in the Newsletter is somewhat inaccurate.

While it is correct that we were under a sustained heavy fighter attack, the plane was not struck by rocket fire. We were dropping fragmentation bombs on Villaorba and other airports in the area. The German fighter planes were firing rockets at us from the rear. Almost immediately after I dropped our bomb load, a group of B-17's came over us and released their bombs through us. One or more of the fragmentation bombs hit the tail of our aircraft and blew it off, killing the tailgunner and leaving a large hole in the rear of the plane. The plane went into a steep bank but the pilot, whose name was Jerry Lombard, managed to stabilize the plane long enough for those of us in the front of the aircraft to get out. The gunners in the rear of the plane, including the radio operator, went

out of the middle of the aircraft, except for the two waist-gunners who went out of the hole where the tail was. All of us landed safely and since we went out of the plane over a considerable distance (those in the rear of the aircraft saw what the damage was and immediately left, those of us up front did not know how badly the plane was damaged and left later), the two waist-gunners, who left the plane first, were picked up by Italian Partisans and ultimately returned to Allied Control through Yugoslavia. The rest of us were picked up by either Italian Police or German soldiers.

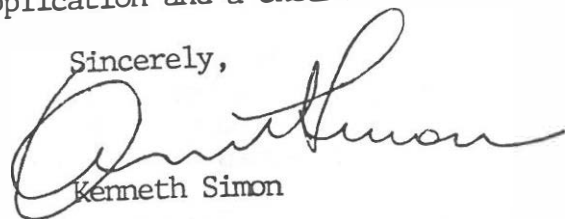
The above is not only from my own observation but also from the eyewitness account of two German pilots who were attacking the group. I saw them on the evening of March 18 at the local Police Station, when they came around to visit. They spoke excellent English and while they were tempted to claim that they had shot our plane down, they admitted they had not done so. They reported that they were firing rockets into the formation, but when we were hit, they were distracted by the fragmentation bombs falling and were not shooting at that particular time. They saw the tail go off the aircraft and immediately saw two parachutes open, one of which was so close to them that they had to pull off to avoid the parachute. Part of the reason the German pilots gave for the intensity of their attack was that they had just been armed with rockets and had not had much opportunity to use them. I asked them if they had lost any fighter planes in the attack. They told me they lost one plane, although many had been hit and partially damaged. Apparently German claims of destroyed bombers were exaggerated as badly as our claims of enemy aircraft destroyed in battle.

There is a famous picture of our plane taken on the mission to Villaorba, copy of which John O'Connell sent you, which appeared in Stars and Stripes, showing our plane with its tail missing and saying it returned to base. Alas, it was not so.

To read about that mission 41 years after the event, stirs mixed feelings and has forced me to consciously remember, with both pride and pain, something I have really never forgot.

I look forward to receiving future Newsletters. Enclosed is my membership application and a check.

Sincerely,



Kenneth Simon

April 29, 1984

KENNETH SIMON
1005 THE PARKWAY
MAMARONECK, N. Y. 10543

Thanks, Kenneth. Steve Birdsall, Author, from Australia, asked about this mission some four or three years ago. So here's our belated answer, Steve! But the story is not yet done. On page 20 you will find yet another chapter by Ed Moore. We are indebted to Ed for the B-17 cartoon displayed at the Muskegon reunion and later reprinted in the March Newsletter. We are further in his debt for a good story. Geo

Hi Walt,

I really enjoyed your latest News Letter. I am sending you one of the 456th BG NEWS which Norv Gage puts together for us, and I'll send you one of the NEWS telling of our trip to Italy last June. We really had a great time, and the Italians treated us like long lost sons. It was unbelievable. I noticed you were corresponding with Gen. Upthegrove, and he was our Wing Commander (304th) when we were over in Italy. Could you send me his address, so I can send him a copy of our NEWS on Italy when it comes out? If it is of any interest to anyone in your outfit, we plan to be in San Antonio June 20-23, 1985, Colorado Springs June 1986 (dedicate a plaque at the academy to our Group) and Washington D.C. Sept. 1987 just prior to the AFA convention if anyone wants to attend both.

Sincerely,

(signed) Jim Watkins

Dear Sir:

Troy, Pennsylvania
October 17, 1984

Please issue membership for my husband who was in the original 99th Bomb Group 346th Squadron. We recently visited Marion J. Larkin in Rapid City, SD. He told us of the 99th Historical Society Newsletters. He sent us your latest.

I enclose \$30. Please issue membership for next year. I also would like copies of old newsletters--81-84. Send to: Emerson T. Billingsley, 0-791552

RD 1, Box 100
Troy, PA 16947

Sincerely yours,

Margaret Billingsley

P.S. Emerson was Navigator with Capt. Evans crew that was assigned to Gen. Montgomery for a while. He also was Navigator on the flight to Italy to sign peace agreement. Several high officers and civilians were on this plane. I recall he mentioned that they were tense on this flight, fearing that some gun placements hadn't heard of the surrender. He served 51 Missions from February to October 1943.

What is the date of the next 99th reunion and where will it be held.?

Dear George:

Being a new member of the 99th B.G.H.S., I just received the Vol. 4, No. 3 issue of the Newsletter. I now have the 5 issues.

Under the article Fortunes of War, 6th paragraph, quote "But back to the 99th Bomb Group. It was the first Bomb Group with Boeing B-17 in Switzerland. Two the same day; one plane, a Mickey ship from the 346 Squadron on February 27, 1945. It was a Boeing B-17 G-55-VE, Serial No. 44-8187. The plane was on a mission to Augsburg, Bavaria. Co-pilot on this mission for Leonard Smith's crew was John Morat. I see he is on your membership roster; and, in Issue No. 5, I see Leon Estes is located. I was Tail Gunner Mission No. 20. Crew members on that mission were:

Leonard Smith, Pilot
John B. Morat, Co-pilot
Al Wilcox, Jr., Navigator
Walter Mucek, Mickey
Paul W. Shank, Bomb. 272 Olentangy St., Columbus, Ohio
B.R. McConnell, Flight Engineer, deceased
Clem Fischbach, Radio, deceased
Leon Estes, Waist Gun
Fred Shorten, Waist Gun
Vic Fab Fabiniak, Tail Gun

I sent you or someone the names and addresses of this crew, all but the Bomb, plus the two regular members Geo. Coffin Ball and Co-pilot C. Headley. I checked with Headley, Coffin, and Shorten and they are receiving the newsletter. C. Headley, Co-pilot, visited me October 13 and 14. We hadn't seen each other in 40 years, and boy, what a great weekend.

I am sending you a picture of Leonard Smith's original crew with B-17 G Bugs Bunny.
Front row, left to right,

Leonard Smith, Pilot
Nick Lykos, Bomb--killed in action December 26, 1944
George Coffin, Ball
Al Wilcox, Navigator
Leon Estes, Waist
Leontes Radio replaced by Fishbach after 7th mission.

Back row, left to right,

B.R. McConnell, Flight Engineer, deceased
Vic "Fab" Fabiniak, Tail
Fred Shorten, Waist
Con. Headley, Co-pilot

The other picture with the Ju 88? are Bianchi, Ferundt, Crice and Fabiniak. I don't remember who is who.

Yours in comradeship,

Vic Fab Fabiniak

Thanks, Fab.

Fellows, I am finding some marvelous Polack stories suitable for telling at the Polish-American Society, of which Fab is prominent member.

Have you heard the one about the Pole who thought that he could divert a German V-1 missile? He set up shop in the attic of a Luftwaffe barracks, brought the missile down onto the Bug River where other Poles drove in cattle to muddy the water against the German search, and then called in a Dakota to airlift the main parts of the V-1 for study in London; all this before the missile had appeared in use! geo

Dear George,

Enclosed is \$10--83 dues. I noticed in Vol. 3, #4, 1 July 83 issue, you listed Whizzer (B-17 aircraft) crashed. It was our plane, Whizzer I. (See attachment.) It crashed 5/4/43 in Lake Bizerte, No. Africa. Our second aircraft was Whizzer II.

Also see you found Harold O. Luther. He was our navigator. He didn't say he had to wade ashore after we crashed to see what side of lake the Nazi's were on. Well, he picked the right side, the British were on it. Found us and took us safely out. Our aircraft commander was Frederick G. Mosley of Virginia. I was the tail gunner.

Thanks,

Harold H. Kling
Sm.Sgt. USAF Retired

Dear Harold;

Thanks for your letter. You may be interested in knowing that we have contacted every Moseley in Virginia who has a phone. We hear that Moseley had custody of film showing the 99th in action. We have so far gotten no response at all from our postcards search. geo

60 Robin Circle
Stoughton, MA 02072
November 14, 1984

Dear George:

Received my November issue of the Newsletter and I must congratulate you for the terrific job. It is so interesting that I read it completely, twice, to make sure I did not miss anything. During many of the Missions out of Tortorella Airdrome, I was in the Control Tower and remember those Missions. The story about Tom Judge during the month of February, I recall most of all because Tom came from Boston, Massachusetts. The late Major Lawrence Seamans was then Group Operations Officer and on the return of Group Mission, he had to be notified by the tower of any major problems. I was in Sandfly Tower that day and I called Major Seamans and he came down to the tower and took over. He understood every problem and did a terrific job advising the pilots of the damaging ships.

Tom Judge was at the Reunion in Houston due to my efforts in locating him and getting him to join the Association. As I read the stories of the various missions, I recalled many of the instances.

Larry Cortesi is coming out with another book in July 1985 about the 15th Air Force and he is going to use some of the pictures I sent to him last year. His first book was prior to the ground crew arriving in N. Africa. We landed there on May 12, 1943 and Rommel's Last Stand was up to April 13, 1943. Larry is going to send me a copy of the new book and I am quite sure he will send one to you for the Group.

Glad you found Joe Celline. I wrote him a letter yesterday and hope he responds. I remember Eddie May (Press Release, Page 12) very well. I tried contacting him, but maybe he has moved since. Remember Maj. Fairbanks and S/Sgt. Bill Brink very well.

Well, George, keep up the good work, but I don't know how you can do so well along with your civilian life. Fantastic job.

Best regards always,

Dick (Dempsey)

P.S. Say hello to the gang. Finally contacted George Frame. He writes frequently. . .

Dear Dick;

Thank you for your continuing efforts, from 1943 to the present. geo.

FACES OF HOPE
By Leroy W. Newby

While appearing on Pittsburgh's WTAE-TV Jack Bogut Show in July to discuss a book I had written on the human side of the bomber's war over the Balkans, a lady called in and said, "I lived in Belgrade and prayed for you American Boys as you flew by on the way to Ploesti (Romania). This is my first opportunity to thank one of you in person. God bless all of you."

War was impersonal to us bomber crews flying over German occupied countries. We fought things and machines--not people. We dodged flak and fighters, never seeing our faceless enemy.

A reader had previously written, "You probably did not see a small American-born boy waving to you on the way to his Budapest bombshelter on July 30, 1944."

We also never saw the upraised faces of oppressed people living under German tyranny--faces that saw in us tangible evidence that help was on its way. We were not privy to seeing the love and gratitude in those faces for American youngsters flying to their potential death.

An Austrian wrote that he cheered from his Vienna basement window on July 26, 1944 as our 460th Bomb Group hit the Zwolfaring Airdrome. I enjoy his Christmas and vacation cards.

A Czechoslovakian wrote that he has visited nearly 85 crash sites of downed American planes, and has devoted his life to lecturing young people on how hundreds of American youngsters gave their lives for the freedom of Czechoslovakia. What a way to say thanks!

The royalty checks and talk shows are nice, but the reward I really cherish is the realization, after forty years, of hope and strength we young bomber crews unknowingly had given to downtrodden people whose beloved country had been overrun by invading troops.

Leroy W. Newby
TARGET PLOESTI: View from a Bombsight
Presidio Press

And now, a reminder that Leroy Newby's book is a very good account of how things really were. geo

1. Unit history of the 99th Bombardment Group (H) Headquarters, for the period 1 March, 1944 to 31 March, 1944.

a. the present designation of the unit is Fifteenth Air Force, through 5th Wing (US).

b. Changes in organization

- (1) No change in unit designation
- (2) No transfer of units
- (3) No change in commanding officer
- (4) On 10 March Lt. Col. Wayne E. Thurman left the Group under orders from 15th Air Force and was succeeded as deputy Group commander by Lt. Col. William J. Headrick, Jr., former CO of the 346th squadron. On 16 March Lt. Col. James A. Barnett was assigned as acting executive officer (SO #59 par 9 5th Wing) in the absence of Lt. Col. William Hampton, who was confined to the hospital. On 15 March 1st Lt. Kenneth V. Weidner was appointed Group ordnance officer. On March 2 Major Jack Hitt, Group S-4 officer was transferred to 15th Air Force, and was succeeded on 3 March by Capt. Gerald E. Van Bergen. On 17 March Capt. Van Bergen was transferred to the 305th Wing (S) #66 par 7 5th Wing) and was succeeded as S-4 officer on 28 March by Major Ellis H. Gray.

c. Strength, commissioned and enlisted

- (1) Month of March
 - (a) 29 officers and 48 enlisted men at beginning
 - (b) Increase of 4 enlisted men
 - (c) 29 officers and 52 enlisted men at end

g. Operations

Bad weather hampered our operations during March, and although our planes started out on a lot of missions, they only accomplished 12. These included sweeps into Austria to strike at Klagenfurt and Fischamond Market, and attack on Toulon in France, a blow at Sofia in Bulgaria and our usual pounding of enemy targets in Italy. Probably our most significant mission was on 15 March when our planes joined virtually every other ship in the MAAF lineup to blast Cassino with 2,500 tons of bombs in an attempt to knock out his German stronghold once and for all. Our planes made one successful trip to Cassino and were on their way a second time when weather closed in and forced them to return with their bombs. Early in the month--3 March--we revisited Rome to blast the Littorio marshalling yards. From an accuracy standpoint, we achieved our best results in pinpoint bombing the Verona rail yards 28 March and the Turin rail yards 29 March.

h. Most of our missions during the month were led by Lt. Col. Lauer and Lt. Col. Headrick, our CO and deputy CO respectively.

i. No headquarters losses in action.

j. Headquarters members decorated during the month included: Lt. Col. William Headrick, awarded the Distinguished Flying Cross 15 March (GO #144 15th AF) for outstanding achievement in leading the 346th squadron on the highly successful mission to Fiume, Italy oil refinery February 24, 1944. For meritorious achievement in sustained sorties against the enemy 1st Lt. Robert L. McCain received the air Medal with eight Oak Leaf clusters (GO #99 15th AF, 5 March); Major Vernon E.

Fairbanks received the second OLC to the Air Medal 9GO #67 15th AF, 1 March); 1st Lt. Ernest D. Bryant received the first OLC to the Air Medal (GO #65 15th AF, 1 March); Lt. Col. Lawrence S. Semans received the first OLC to the Air Medal (GO #87 15th AF, 1 March), and Capt. Philip M. Philips received the Air Medal (GO #99 15th AF, 5 March).

SECRET
HEADQUARTERS 99th Bomb Gp. (H)
APO 520, U.S. Army

5 May 1944

b. Changes in organization

- (1) No change in unit designation
- (2) No transfer of units
- (3) No change in commanding officer
- (4) On April 9, 1st Lt. Ernest D. Bryant of the 416th squadron was assigned as group bombardier, succeeding 1st Lt. Robert L. McCain, who completed 50 missions. On April 16, Lt. Col. James A. Barnett was relieved of duty as acting executive officer and appointed deputy group commander, succeeding Lt. Col. William J. Headrick, who was missing in action from a mission over Belgrade, Yugoslavia. On April 17, Capt. Frank Smith, group armament officer, went home under rotation system. No successor was appointed immediately. On April 29, 2nd Lt. John A. Collins of the 346th squadron was named group bombardier, succeeding Lt. Bryant, who completed 50 missions.

c. Strength, commissioned and enlisted

- (1) Month of April
 - (a) 29 officers and 52 men 1 April
 - (b) Decrease of 1 EM
 - (c) 29 officers and 51 men 30 April

g. Operations

The group accomplished 15 missions in April, most of them against aircraft plants as a part of the strategy to neutralize the Luftwaffe before the western invasion, and against Balkan rails in direct support of the Russian Advance into Rumania.

To accomplish these two-fold objectives, the group blasted factories at Styr, Austria, April 2, and at Budapest, Hungary, April 3, then hit rails at Bucharest, Rumania, April 4, and at Ploesti, Rumania, April 5,. Hardly resting from these gruelling missions, the group then ranged over factories at Fischamend Markt, Austria, Gyer, Hungary, Belgrade, Yugoslavia and Wiener Neustadt, Austria. The attack on rails also included two other trips to Ploesti, to Belgrade, and Treviso, Italy. From an accuracy standpoint, probably the most successful mission was the blow at Wiener Neustadt, April 23, in which the group dropped virtually all its bombs squarely on the target, the importance of this being increased by the fact that all other groups in the wing missed the target.

h. Most of the month's missions were led by Col. Lauer, our CO, by Lt. Col. Headrick, former deputy CO, no MIA, and Lt. Col. Barnett, new deputy CO. Col. Lauer led the highly successful attack on Wiener Neustadt, Austria, April 23.

i. Headquarter's losses in the month were Lt. Col. William J. Headrick, deputy CO, MIA from an attack on Belgrade, April 16.

j. Headquarters members decorated during the month included: Lt. Col. Headrick, awarded the Silver Star (GO #239, 15th AF, April 19) for his work in leading the group on the February 25, 1944 attack on Regensburg, Germany, when the group battled some 200 enemy fighters for almost two hours. On April 26, Brig. Gen. J.H. Atkinson, deputy 15th AF commander, made an impromptu award of Distinguished Flying Crosses to three men of the lead ship on the April 23 mission to Wiener Neustadt. These were Col. Lauer, the pilot, Capt. Benjamin W. Jones, group navigator, and 2nd Lt. John A. Collins, group bombardier.

2. Enclosed is the war diary of this unit for the period 1 April 1944 to 30 April 1944, and historical photographs of the group.

2 Incls:

War Diary
Photographs

For the Commanding Officer:
Vernon E. Fairbanks,
Major, Air Corps
S-2, 99th Bomb Gp.

We apologize for the inadvertent discontinuity in the 99th War Diary. Readers who would like to receive a framed set of excuses should send one short beer to the editor.
geo.

War Diary of the 99th Bombardment (H) Headquarters

April 24 -- In the theater tonight we sat through the longest show on record -- 4 hours -- of a G.I. sex picture, a couple of shorts, the documentary "Battle of Russia," and a feature called "Two Senoritas from Chicago." First show was interrupted momentarily by a red alert but kept on playing. The second show didn't let out until two in the morning. Later we found that the red alert was caused by Jerries en-route to raid Naples.

April 25 -- A USO stage show played in the squadron area this afternoon and featured the usual MC, a girl singer, accordion player, and this time a juggler instead of a magician.

April 26 -- Leaden skies and an all-day rain turned the base into a sea of mud and reminded us of the winter months here. Chilly, too. In the group operations office Gen. Atkinson, deputy 15th AAF commander, presented DFC's to Col. Lauer, our CO, Capt. Jones, group navigator, and Lt. Collins, 346th squadron bombardier, for the outstanding job they did in leading the wing against an aircraft factory at Wiener Neustadt, Austria, April 23. The general flew from Bari in a P-47 to present the awards. Movie tonight was "Behind the Rising Sun," with Margo and J. Carroll Naish.

April 27 -- Rain again all day, and plenty chilly. Our planes were grounded and there wasn't much doing.

April 28 -- The sun came out today and dried up the mud, enabling our planes to get off near noon for a mission. Ground echelon members recalled that on this date a year ago they boarded a transport at Staten Island for the long journey.

April 29 -- This was the anniversary of a year overseas, since ground echelon members left New York harbor early on April 29, 1943. There was no celebration in group, although the 416th squadron threw a big blow out.

April 30 -- A routine day.

Month of May, 1944

May 1 -- Large crowds tonight enjoyed the antics of the Ritz Brothers and the singing of Francis Langford in "Never a Dull Moment." With warm weather the group theater is becoming a sweat box, especially at the early show when the sun is still bright. Since windows and doors have to be closed to keep out the light, the atmosphere soon becomes like a Turkish bath.

May 2 -- A routine day.

May 3 -- Movie tonight was Corvette K-225, with Randolph Scott, a good picture but marred by fading light and sound.

May 4 -- Lot of talk today about the new weather ship, old "Robert E. Lee" of the 416th squadron, which got a coat of bright yellow paint all over its tail, plus two yellow bands around the waist and yellow wing tips. It will go out ahead of the mission to probe for holes in overcast which the bombers can get through. An all-Italian stage show played in the outdoor theater this afternoon. Tonight group officers threw a dance in the combined officers club and EM mess, with the 99th orchestra furnishing the music.

May 5 -- The group "dance hall" again resounded with the music of the 99th orchestra tonight as headquarters EM held a dance. The officers side of the group shower house is now open and being used by all hands until the EM side is finished. A brick building with tile floors, the shower house will have five spray showers when finished, with hot and cold running water.

May 6 -- Major Vernon Fairbanks, long our genial and popular Group S-2, packed up today and departed for Foggia to assume new duties as 5th Wing A-2. Capt. Philip Philips, group photo interpreter, takes over. One of the most enjoyable shows in some time was "True to Life" tonight with Mary Martin, Dick Powell, Franchot Tone and Victor Moore.

May 7 -- A dull Sunday with leaden skies. In the group theater tonight the 99th orchestra gave a concert, followed by a Truth or Consequences game and coffee and doughnuts supplied by the Red Cross.

May 8 -- The first contingent of men left today for the new rest camp at Bari. They will have a three-day stay, in comparison with the week that the Capri rest camp offers. Although at first there was much griping about not going to Capri, it is understood the stay at Bari will be in addition to the week at Capri. Packed house tonight for a good movie, Dorothy McGuire and Robert Young in the former stage hit Claudia.

May 9 -- Leaden skies and a powerful wind made it a miserable day and kept our planes on the ground. In the evening, a USO played at the outdoor theater.

May 10 -- The first contingent of men back from the new rest camp at Bari report it a well-appointed, comfortable place, rivalling Capri, but lacking the latter's glamor and historic interest. A sexy movie tonight was The More the Merrier, with shapely Jean Arthur going over big. The movie, depicting wartime Washington with eight girls for every man, drew loud groans from the G.I.'s.

May 11 -- A routine day.

May 12 -- The mission today took the spotlight as our planes went out in support of renewed drives by the ground forces in Italy. Every available plane was in the air for an all-out support of the offensive. As luck would have it, a heavy cloud blanket obscured our target, which was the secret hideout of the German high command north of Rome, and the morning mission hit airdromes in the vicinity. But we went out again in the afternoon, found the target open, and pounded it squarely with 2,000 and 1,000 pounders. There were dire hopes that Marshall Kesselring was somewhere close when the bombs hit. News of the intensified campaign in Italy bucked everyone up, and although rumors flew thick and fast that the western invasion also was on, these came to naught.

May 13 -- A mediocre movie tonight, Tornado with Chester Morris and Nancy Kelley, sent many patrons away before it was even finished.

May 14 -- A lazy Sunday, and probably the hottest day we've had so far. Many blossom out in khakis, although official day for donning them isn't until tomorrow.

May 15 -- The official day for wearing khakis saw everyone turn out in them and now the place really looks like summer. Big crowds tonight for the show, Red Skelton and Eleanor Powell in I Dood It.

May 16 -- Italian laborers are working on the group theater to turn it into a super movie palace. The thick masonry pillars in the middle which now allow us to use only half the available space inside, will be removed, the roof torn out and a new one substituted that will not require pillars. The Italians already have made the framework of a peaked roof to replace the flat stone out of which the old one is made. Plans also call for a projection booth at the rear and a new lens for the projector that will give us a bigger image. When completed, the theater should be able to take care of most of the group personnel, instead of two squadrons at a time, as at present.

May 17 -- Joe E. Brown, popular with the group since his personal appearance here a few months back, made his appearance tonight in the movie, Casanova of Burlesque.

May 18 -- A routine day.

May 19 -- Days late, the latest Capri rest camp contingent straggled back with a story of being stranded on the island after the Jerries mined Naples harbor. The poor guys!

May 20 -- Headquarters EM held their long schedule WAC dance tonight and a successful affair it was. Music by the 99th orchestra, some dozen or more WACs showed up. Lot of men missing through a wave of G.I.'s sweeping the ranks, variously believed caused by the ice cream we had the other night or the roast pork of last night.

May 21 -- News of the great progress being made in the Italian campaign is finding great favor with the men, and especially the fall of Cassino.

May 22 -- Large crowds for the movie tonight, Sonja Henie in Wintertime.

May 23 -- Italian laborers began to give the S-2 office a cleaning and paint job, and to build a brick addition which will be used to house maps and target charts.

May 24 -- Surprisingly good movie tonight was Louise Allbritton and Robert Paige in Her Primitive Man. The shapely Louise is a big favorite ever since her personal appearance here a few months back.

May 25 -- What might have been one of our most important missions turned into near disaster. The target had been Lyons, France, some 1,300 miles or more round trip and the longest yet scheduled. But crossing Italy our planes inadvertantly got over the front lines at 9,000 feet and were shot to pieces by German flak. The ships scattered to escape, had to limp home without completing the mission. Fortunately no ships were lost, although one landed at Naples on one engine, another had a propellor shot off and a third, landing at home base without brakes, ran wild through the line service squadron, ending up at an embankment.

May 26, 27, 28, 29 -- Routine days.

May 30 -- A Wimpy crashed near our field today, and blew up into very small pieces. Cloudless skies and a burning sun turned it into the hottest day so far. Non-op now for two days, something big is impending for the group. Although rumors fly thick and fast, no one really knows anything about it. Combat and other personnel are to prepare for a show of some kind, taking three sets of clean clothes and other wearing apparel.

May 31 -- Non-op again/the big show, whatever it is, gets closer. Again a hot, burning sun and the theater tonight was stifling as we saw Judy Garland in Presenting Lily Mars.

31 May 1944

SUBJECT: Historical Records

(4) On April 2 2nd Lt. John A. Collins of the 346th Squadron was assigned as group bombardier, succeeding Capt. Ernest D. Bryant, who completed 50 missions. On May 2, Lt. Col. Ford J. Lauer, Group CO, was elevated to full Colonel. On May 6, Major Vernon E. Fairbanks, Group S-2, went to 5th Wing as A-2. Capt. Philip M. Philips, Group photo interpreter, succeeded him. On May 13, Capt. Alphonse F. Sentous, S-2 of the 348th Squadron, was attached to Group as photo interpreter.

c. Strength, commissioned and enlisted

(1) Month of May

- (a) 30 officers and 50 EM on 1 May
- (b) Decrease of 2 officers
- (c) Increase of 4 EM
- (d) 28 officers and 54 EM on 31 May

g. Operations

The group accomplished 15 missions in May, carrying it to 199 missions and the threshold of the 200 mark. Probably the most outstanding operations of the month were those supporting the resurgence of allied arms in Italy, and our first penetration deep into southern France. On May 12, when the allies in Italy started their renewed offensive we helped by blasting airdromes north of Rome and pounding the hideout of the German army command. It wasn't until May 23 that the group hit Avignon rail yards deep in France. The rest of the month's operations were divided among blows at the Balkans, strategic bombing of rails in northern Italy and assaults on German fighter plants in Wiener Neustadt, Austria, area.

h. Most of the month's missions were led by Col. Lauer, CO, L. Col. Barnett, deputy CO, and Squadron commanders Major Schroeder, and Major Schaefer.

i. No headquarters combat losses

j. Decorations

On 22 May Capt. Ernest D. Bryant, former group bombardier, received the Distinguished Flying Cross for his highly successful bombing of the rail yards at Turin, Italy, March 29.

WAR DIARY OF THE 99th BOMBARDMENT GROUP (H) HEADQUARTERS DET.
MONTH OF JUNE, 1944

June 1--Today was one of feverish activity on the part of those going on the hush-hush mission. To flight personnel S-4 issued a new Lineman, readied 33 airplanes, loading them with eight 500 pound bombs (four less than normal) and stocked the ships with extra ammunition and spare parts of all kinds. In addition to the combat crews, the lineup for the mission included all top group officers with the exception of S-1 and 3-4, plus engineering, armament, photo, S-2 and S-3 enlisted men. In the afternoon 5th Wing officers, including Col. Lawrence and Major Fairbanks, showed up at the group, ready to travel with us. In order to accommodate all personnel, each ship was to carry 11 men, and in some cases a waist gunner had to be dropped from the regular combat crews in order to take care of everyone. At 1800 there was a "dry run" to the line of load baggage on the ships. Everything was ready for the big adventure.

June 2--(with the air echelon)--!-hour was 1:40, very early because briefing was scheduled to be long. In darkness we went to the briefing barn by crews, our names checked off by Intelligence officers so only those going on the mission would get in. At the door each man received a card bearing the word "American" in Russian, the star and bar insignia of the USAAF and some simple Russian phrases. Our destination, then, was Russia. Our CO, Col. Lauer, told us we would bomb rail installations at Debreczen, Hungary, and then continue on to a base at Poltava, a Ukrainian city some 200 miles southeast of Kiev. While he went over some of the details of the mission, Gen. Twining, boss of the 15th slipped in. He got up to speak and told us the 99th had been charged with the responsibility of leading the other three groups on the mission. He said it was a vastly important operation because we would be representing the Air Forces, the U.S. Army and the American people to the Russians. We must conduct ourselves like soldiers, he said, and be dressed properly at all times (hence the new clothes). Col. Lawrence also spoke in the same vein. And then we heard from our S-2, Capt. Philips, that the route had been carefully chosen to avoid flak, that coordinated blows by the full strength of the 15th in the same area should draw off enemy fighters. The sun was just rising when we went to the line. Most of the planes were off the ground by 0630. Compared with the magnitude of the operation, the mission itself was almost uneventful. There was no opposition of any kind. We hit the target well and plowed on toward Russia, with P-51's of the 325th Fighter Group going right along with us. Over Russia we hit an almost solid undercast and ended up somewhat south of our base, but we turned and headed for Poltava, having gotten under the clouds. We landed and stopped on Russian soil in a pouring rain. Trucks took us to the base encampment where we were interrogated and billeted in pyramidal tents. It turned out that a complete ground cadre from the 8th Air Force had arrived weeks before by boat, truck and rail to set up the camp. We

stared at the rugged Russian soldiers, both men and women, and the top Red Air Force officers who were there. The place was also infested with Russian and American correspondents and cameramen. U.S. Ambassador to Russia Averill Harriman and his pretty daughter Nancy were there. We saw Gen. Baker, MAAF boss, and learned he had come in with the 97th B.G. which shared the base with us. The 483rd and 2nd Bomb Groups landed at another field while the fighters occupied still another. Only loss on the mission were a 97th ship which blew up from, it was believed, engine fires, and a P-51 which was forced to turn back to Italy and was shot down. We ate chow at a field mess tent, served by Russian women. There were no tables, so we squatted on the ground while newsreel cameras whirred. Word came that it would be non-op for the next day and most of us were glad to hit the sack after a long day. A few diehards, however, went to a movie on the base. It was Judy Garland and Mickey Rooney in "Strike up the Band."

June 3--It took just one night for us to find out that the Russian nights were bitter cold, and most of us shivered miserably under only four blankets on canvas cots without mattresses. The night also was featured by the consistent crackle of gunfire by the Russian guards around the place, and we learned from the base boys that they had very itchy trigger fingers. Today, however, was sunny and warm and we had nothing more to do than find out about Russia. First off we were vastly impressed by the Russian women at the mess, who tossed G.I. cans and sugar sacks around like so much tissue paper. They were fighter pilots taking a "rest" from combat duty. Russian fighter planes buzzed around the base and occasionally we saw C-47 transports with Red Star markings, which the Russian had converted to bombers by adding top turrets and external bomb racks. Some men went to town on a morning sight-seeing truck and found Poltava little more than bare walls standing bleak in the sun--the scorched earth policy. However, there was a beautiful park in the center of town, and this became our focal point. The people this first day were shy, very few of them waving to us. But we noticed they were clean and well fed, although obviously very poor. All dressed up in our new clothes, we hoped we were making a good impression. Those who went on a second sight-seeing trip later in the day reported that some of the Russians had cheered when they saw the Americans. Meanwhile we sweated out long chow lines to get C rations and generally toured the base. It became apparent that the 8th had a complete setup and that all our pains to bring extra personnel and equipment had been largely a waste. We did hear, however, that the base was short on bombs. it was called non-op for tomorrow.

June 4--Cloudy and cold today after another bitter night. Some men tried to keep warm by sleeping in flying heat suits. We roamed the base or went to town, getting acquainted with the Russians, who were now beginning to thaw from their reserve. It was a new experience for us, after North Africa and Italy, to find a people too proud to accept even a package of cigarettes as a gift. Shortly after noon we heard via radio that Rome had fallen to the allies. All day knots of men stood around talking to the war correspondents, who were having censorship difficulties. It seemed the Russians were very particular about what news and pictures went out of their country. But most of us with cameras went around shooting the sights without interference. In the evening the Russians entertained us with a concert at the theater, a bombed out affair except for the stage, which was flanked by huge pictures of Stalin and Lenin. The orchestra was good and the choir of Red Army men better. Non-op again tomorrow.

June 5--Again cloudy and cold. We had nothing much to do except lay in the sack or go to town. Russian mechanics worked on our planes at the directions of base crew chiefs. The latter had their troubles trying to bridge the language gap, using gestures in often futile attempts to explain what they wanted done. In fact the Russian language posed our biggest problem, since it was utterly foreign. We were restricted after 1600 today, and learned at an 1830 briefing that we would pull a mission in the morning and head home. The target was Galati airdrome in Rumania. After briefing we rushed to load our gear on the planes, and returned from the line only to find the mission would return to the Russian base--a sudden switch in orders. So we unloaded the planes. This activity kept most of us from attending a Russian movie at the theater.

June 6--Our planes got off at 0530 in cloudy weather. In mid morning, while sweating their return, we heard of the western invasion, and this was the best news in a long time. At 1230 the ships were back. They had hit the target, encountered no flak or fighters and suffered no losses. Interrogation was again featured by newsreels. Correspondents cornered Col. Lauer, who had led the raid, for comments, and then pounced on Gen. Baker when he showed up. The crews were all excited about the invasion, having heard the news on their plane radios. In the afternoon Gen. Kenin, chief for air of the Russian army, held a concert for us in the theater. Non-op tomorrow.

June 7--The days are now sunny and warm and the nights have warmed up considerably. The correspondents packed up and left, and presumably our little adventure is a dead news item, in view of the invasion. We awaited details eagerly via BBC, and were elated to hear all was going well. Town was packed, and as usual the American G.I. was losing no time in making himself at home. Already the kids had been educated to ask for cigarettes and chewing gum, although the older people were still too proud to beg. In return, we picked up the Russian habit of chewing on sunflower seeds. We frankly admired the Russian women, some of whom were very pretty and all of whom were clean and "stacked up." The town park was a lively scene of G.I.s and girls, trying to teach each other their languages. Our visits to town were becoming a mad scramble for souvenirs, with our cigarettes the chief bargaining item. First object was to get a collection of Russian rubles, but these soon became a drug on the market. At the base life was easy,, since a weather front had closed in over the target areas and was likely to stay for some time. Our planes were loaded with incendiaries since were were to be "tail and Charley" instead of lead group on the next mission. However, it was called non-op for tomorrow.

June 8--Sunny and warm, and again we invade the town. Focal point is still the park, although the town market place is getting a play. The latter is crowded with Russians selling farm produce and a pitiful collection of textiles and household goods. Here the G.Is pick up souvenirs of which Russian cigarette lighters, crude affairs made out of shell casings, are the most sought after. We sample the local beer, which tastes like mud, and the famous vodka, which is plenty potent. Non-op again tomorrow.

June 9--Again warm. Nobody can say we're not getting enough sack time, since this is the chief occupation except for going to town. If only there were more of it, the town would be a G.I.'s paradise, since there are no passes and no M.P.'s. The men are more and more staying in late at night, having overcome their fear of the Russian guards around the base, who are likely to holler "Stoi" (Halt) first and shoot later. The town park is packed in the evening now with civilian girls anxious to meet the Americans. Russian army women are more reserved looking and acting like the soldiers they are, although some will strike up an acquaintance or pose for pictures. At the theater tonight a girl's chorus from Poltava sang for us and presented folk dances in native costume. Afterwards a brass band played some dance numbers and a few men tried their hand at Russian ballroom dancing, without too much success. Someone said, "It ain't runnin' and it ain't walkin'". I don't know what the hell it is."

June 10--Just to show that the army is a funny place, the men are now beginning to grumble about too much sack time. There is a perceptible feeling among them of wanting to get home again. And we are happy to hear it is operational tomorrow, and that we'll head home from the target. This time it's definite, and after briefing at 1930 we load up the planes with our gear. The target is to be Focsani A/D in the Ploesti area of Rumania, and we are told to expect opposition. Some men drifted over to a Russian movie at the theater, but most drifted back again after a short time. The talking was just so much gibberish to us, and the action did not explain itself.

June 11--Up at 0400 and our last meal on Russian soil. Trucks took us down to the line and we had to kill an hour or so while the 97th took off. We got off at 0630 and headed for the target. The mission started out rough early when a heavy flak barrage greeted us over an enemy airdrome far short of the target. It was accurate as hell, but somehow missed us. Then we were over the target and the flak was too close for comfort. Five or six enemy fighters appeared and attacked the rear squadron, the 416th, which was at the tail end of everything. These might have been serious except that the Jerries turned their attention to a 97th straggler which had fallen way back, and shot it down. About this time the good old P-38s showed up and the Jerries departed in a hurry. Shortly after this we hit an intense flak barrage, but it was off to the right. Even near the Adriatic we couldn't relax, since some fighters came up to look for stragglers. A P-51 shot one down into the Adriatic and one of our planes dropped a life raft for the pilot. And then we were back home, landing on our own familiar base. We had suffered no losses although some ships were badly holed by flak. It was good to get back to decent chow and a warm bed.

June 12--It was raining today, thus giving the "Russian Raiders" a well earned rest. Little had happened in our absence. The base was bone dry and very dusty from lack of rain. Construction of the new headquarters theater and briefing room had progressed, and a big new addition had been built on the "E" club. Those who had stayed behind were not exactly glad to see us, since they had had a nice long vacation of swimming and motor trips. At 1100 Col. Lauer called all those on the trip into the briefing room and told us we had acquitted ourselves well, both in the successful missions and our conduct in Russia. In the evening the theater was packed for the movie, "That's Buzzin' Cousin," with Ann Miller.

June 13--Back into the normal routine of the base.

June 14--A stream of commendations from MAAF, Air Force and Wing poured in congratulating the group on the Russian mission. Movie tonight held in the arena outdoor theater because the group theater is now too far torn up to be used, was John Garfield in "Johnny Sparrow."

June 15, 16--Routine days.

June 17--the group received today a HAT-USA General Order in which the 99th is cited for its raid on Gerbini airdrome in Sicily last July 5. This first unit citation stirred up excitement, and group officers immediately started arranging for formal presentation ceremonies. Movie in the outdoor theater tonight was "Knickerbocker Holiday," with Nelson Eddy.

June 18--A new addition to our headquarters installations is a screened in porch in front of the officers club. Covered with a tent canvas top, it provides a cool open air dining room for the officers mess. Group is now virtually complete in comforts, which should mean that it's about time to move.

June 19--Movie at the outdoor theater tonight was "Fired Wife" which had played at the base once before.

June 20--It had been hot and sticky and very dusty, but rain squall today settled the dust and cooled off the night. So far summer in Italy hasn't been too bad.

June 21--Late today we heard that Eight Air Force heavies from England made the shuttle to Russia, presumably landing at the same bases we had. Some 2,000 bombers and fighters hit Berlin, but only "hundreds" went on the Russian bases. Probably four groups of bombers and one of fighters actually went in, like on our mission. Although rain threatened up to the last minute, we were able to see one of the best movies in a long time, "Thousands Cheer," in Technicolor.

June 22--Routine day.

June 23--Our planes went to Ploesti today as part of diversionary attacks to screen the 8th Air Force coming out of Russia to land here on the second leg of a triangular shuttle. We were ready to handle 35 planes, but our ships were long back and the afternoon waned without any sign of the 8th. A German news item had said that the Jerries raided Poltava in "strength", and along about supper time we heard the 8th would not be in, that indeed Russian bases had been strafed and many planes damaged. A strict blackout was ordered for our base, the brass hats evidently figuring Jerry might try something here. Along about 11 o'clock there was a powerful explosion on the line, but it was only another Wimpy going up. Several more explosions in the distance followed. We heard later that three Wimpys and a British Liberator had gone up.

June 24--Movie tonight was a western thriller, "In Old Oklahoma," with John Wayne.

June 25--Again today we expected a group of 8th shuttlers from Russia to land here, but again they failed to show up.

June 26--Today we were advised the 8th would be in from Russia, definitely, and along about 6 o'clock they came in flying a tight group formation. We counted 25 planes and then set out to find out what had happened to them in Russia. It wasn't a pretty story. Seems the Luftwaffe hit their base at night with flares, butterfly bombs and incendiaries. In all, some 65 planes were knocked out, although only a few 8th personnel were killed or wounded. Group photo section developed some pictures taken after the raid and they showed Fortresses battered almost beyond recognition, most of them just engines buried in the ground, or wing and tail section lying around. The 25 planes which landed at our field were remnants of the 95th, 96th, 100th and 388th Bomb Groups.

June 27--Men are grumbling as mess sinks into the summer doldrums. presumably lack of refrigeration is cutting the meat and butter supply. We are getting more and more of the old North African diet of vienna sausage and corned beef.

June 28--The days are getting very hot, so hot in fact that a Wimpy standing on the line burst into flame and went up in a powerful explosion which shattered two others nearby. No one was near the plane at the time. The 8th boys profess to like the sun and heat of Italy after England, although they are uncomfortable in O.D.'s. They have no khakis, since England is chilly the year round.

June 29--Movie tonight was Mr. Big with Donald O'Connor.

June 30--Hottest day we've had so far with a reading of 108 in the shade in mid afternoon. The heat failed to keep many men from going to Foggia this evening to hear Jascha Heifitz play the fiddle. Despite a stifling hall, the performance was superb.

ESCAPE STATEMENT

T/Sgt. Vincent Laybe, 0844496, 99 Bomb Gp., 348 Bomb. Sq.

1. Personal history

Duty: Radio Operator

Age: 23

Mission: 19

Returned to duty: 14 June 1944

2. He left Tunis, Africa on Sept. 2, 1943 to bomb the M/Y at Bologna in a B-17. The plane was hit by flak at the target causing No. 2 engine to catch fire and also a runaway pump. They turned off the target to get back here, when fighters attacked them. By this time they had fallen far behind the formation so the pilot circled and headed the plane for Switzerland. The fighters kept attacking for a good while, but finally left them. The navigator, bombardier and copilot had bailed out in the target area, taking all available maps with them. The tail gunner had been hit and Sgt. Laybe gave him first aid. Due to losing altitude they found it necessary to fly through the valleys of the Alps. The pilot finally felt he was lost, and not being able to find Switzerland, he ordered bailout. The remainder of the crew successfully evacuated the plane at 5000 feet.

3. He was captured by Carabinieri upon landing. They took all of his possession and his dog tags. They attempted to interrogate him, but all questions were very general due to language difficulty. On Sept. 3 and Italian Air Force Capt. and Lt. interrogated Sgt. Laybe. This interrogation showed no forcefulness, but was used to get name, rank and serial number. They also requested his home address so they could notify his people.

4. He had received thorough briefing on escape and evasion. He had his escape kit with him, but since he was immediately captured, it was of no use.

APPENDIX A

Upon landing Sgt. Laybe was immediately captured by the Carabinieri and held another day for an army interrogation. He and the rest of the crew (except the pilot) were taken by bus and later by train, after riding 1-1/2 days, arriving at Prison Camp 54 at Fara in Sabina. They stayed here for 4 days. The armistice was declared and they were released. They hid in the hills before the Germans came to take possession of this camp. He hid in the hills in the vicinity of Monte Libretti for 2-1/2 weeks with the peasants nearby feeding them. They also attempted to feed many other escapees but found it very difficult since the enemy had stolen all the food in this province. The Germans then published an order that if the escapers did not turn themselves in they would be shot. Many British escapers turned themselves over. The Germans also put a price of 5000 Lire on each man's head. Then Sgt. Laybe separated from his crew and with a Sgt. Eddie Joseph, of a B-25, headed south for our lines. They passed Palombarra where the Germans had a large training area. They remained at this town with a man named Gino Montalbotti for two weeks. They then set out walking for two days until they reached Montecelio. Here they met a Signorina Conchata Pisane, who took their names and a note to their families and turned them in at Vatican City. She returned, bringing them cigarettes and civilian clothing from the Vatican City.

He remained at Montecelio for a week to rest. The Fascists then occupied Montecelio looking for escapers. In October, a raid by the Germans caught Sgt. Laybe and many others. During the march to their camp, he managed to slip out of formation and hid in the brush. The Germans passed and he returned to hide in the mountains. The next day he headed for Palombarra. At this time he heard that his crew, which had remained at Monte Libretti, had been taken by a similar raid. They returned to Gino Montalbotti, in Palombarra, and he hid them in the nearby mountains until Nov. 10 when he took them into the village due to the severe cold in the mountains. They remained here until Jan. 15 when Gino was taken prisoner for aiding escapers. During this stay, they had made an attempt to get to Pescara, but were unsuccessful due to the snow in the mountain. They returned to Palombarra and rested for two weeks. They then headed south, skirting Tivoli, and got to Palestrina. Their plan was to go between Palestrina and Valmontone, staying north of Fresinone, head east for between Pescara and Cassino and then head south for our lines. They ran out of food at Palestrina and since it was impossible to get any, they discontinued their planned trip. The people were friendly and gave them directions but no food. They then returned to between Palombarra and Montecelio and hid out, since both towns were heavily guarded.

Sgt. Laybe went into Palombarra and received instructions as to the route to the Vatican city; he planned to enter there and declare immunity. On Mar 17, they headed out for the Vatican City. He left Sgt. Joseph behind and attempted to go to the Vatican with a S. African. They arrived at the Vatican on 17 March and met a priest who promised to help them get in the Vatican. The first attempt was unsuccessful, with the Swiss guards throwing them out. They waited for eight hours, until the guard changed, and then tried again. This time they made the courtyard but were stopped by the guards again. The sgt. and the S. African tried to explain to the guards they were escaped POWs and Americans, but the guards once again evicted them. At this time it was 1730 and since the blackout started at 1900, they had to leave the city. They both returned to Montecelio. They noted that we had bombed a hospital and cemetery in Rome - these had been used by the enemy as storage points and billets for troops. They remained in Montecelio until April 15, when he and Sgt. Joseph left for Rome. They had heard of an organization which was established to aid escapers and they made for it. They were taken by a member of this organization to the Vatican City College, where he met a priest who took him to a friendly home. This was at Via Imperia 12 Int. 9, and was run by a woman named Mr. Chevalier. This served as a clearing station for this organization. They were sent to a billet at Brune Masis on 12 Via Catania.

They remained here 10 days. One day while Sgt. Laybe was getting a haircut, they picked up Sgt. Joseph and two others staying at this house. Sgt. Laybe returned to the clearing house and they sent him to another friendly home at Via Marulan #247 on the 4th Piano. He remained here until the American forces entered Rome. He turned himself over to 5th Army Hq. and was sent to a British repatriation center. Trucks then took him to Naples and was evacuated to Bari by plane on June 14.

APPENDIX B

Prison Camp #54 at Fara in Sabina. The name of the Commandant was unknown. Sanitary conditions here were bad. There was lack of water and the camp was infested with lice, fleas and bedbugs. If it had not been for Red Cross food boxes, the men at this camp would have starved to death. Upon arrival, they took Sgt. Laybe's billfold and watch, but these were returned when he was released at the Armistice. He was not forced to work and was not cognizant of any wages being paid the men. He was allowed to write one letter, but this was destroyed when the Germans occupied this camp. The morale at this camp was high with all prisoners refusing to work and causing continual nuisance.

OFFICIAL ACCOUNT: "Wylie Receives DSC"

HQ XII BOMBER COMMAND

DATE: Oct. 6, 1943

FROM AN ADVANCED NORTH AFRICAN AIR BASE (99th Bomb Group)--A tall, handsome Flying Fortress pilot rose from a sick bed today and had pinned on his purple army hospital robe a Distinguished Service Cross--one of the nation's top awards--for courageous action while severely wounded aboard a B-17 which was virtually shot to pieces by enemy fighter planes over Messina, Sicily.

The pilot was 2nd Lt. John W. Wylie of RFD No. 4, Appolla, Pa., and the man who pinned on the medal was Maj. Gen. James H. Doolittle. In separate ceremonies at Wylie's base, Gen. Doolittle also presented the Silver Star to another member of the Fortress crew, S/Sgt. Eugene L. Cantley of Dry Creek, W.Va., a waist gunner who shot down one of the enemy fighters although badly wounded.

The 25 year old Wylie was confined for a minor illness, but he was all too familiar with hospital beds. He spent two and a half months in one recuperating from wounds received when four 20 mm shells exploded in the cockpit of his Fortress over Messina.

Wylie was copilot of the ship that day. It was one of a large formation of Fortresses which was met by a swarm of enemy pursuit just before it reached the target.

In the first attack Wylie and five others of the 10 man crew, including Cantley, were injured. The copilot was hit in the arm and neck and bled heavily. Placed on the runway connecting the cockpit with the bombardier's compartment, Wylie steadfastly refused aid until other members of the crew had been cared for.

The rudder controls, elevator controls, engine instruments, oxygen, hydraulic and virtually every other system of Wylie's plane was disabled. But, its bombs were dropped, two of the Jerry fighters were shot down, and it headed for North Africa. Two hundred and fifty miles away from the coast it was attacked by 15 to 20 of Germany's fast ME 109s and FW 190s.

The gunner went into action again. Wylie rose painfully from his resting place and helped the turret gunner by feeding him ammunition. It was for this courage that he was especially cited. His efforts were not in vain. The gunners brought down five more planes and the Fortress was crash landed safely in North Africa.

Completely healed, Wylie was ready to carry on where he left off--at 14 missions.

Cantley was cited for remaining at his post despite severe wounds in the knee and back. He managed to destroy an enemy fighter before collapsing from pain and shock.



25 May 1985

Mr. George F. Coen
2908 Aliso Drive NE
Albuquerque, New Mexico 87110

Dear George:

The two letters from John O'Connell published on pages 7 and 8 of the most recent Newsletter led me to send John a rather rambling response about half of which had to do with the loss of a B-17 over Villaorba A/D on 18 March 1944. For whatever it's worth in the loose-ends-tying department here's an attempt at getting that part of my letter onto one page:

We were flying 9- and 10-ship squadrons in those ^{days,} the usual four squadrons to the group, and I was in what seemed to be my permanent position of #9 ship in the 347th, with J. O. Grizzell flying co-pilot. Gerry Lombard and his CP, Dick Miller, were flying the diamond.

The #6 ship turned back and I moved up into that position and Lombard went over into mine.

The four groups of the 5th Wing were supposed to come in at different altitudes, with the leading group highest and first, the next group a thousand feet below and five minutes behind, and so on. Because we were dropping fragmentation bombs we were to go over the target in "company front"; if we stayed in our normal javelin formation we'd be running into the frags from the elements ahead.

As it worked out, even with all these precautions, we came in early -- right under the lead group. Because of our realignment, Lombard was now on my left wing -- the end ship.

We had been under fighter attack -- rockets, etc. -- for a very long time; my memory insists that it was for an hour and fifty minutes. And as I'd flown all that time I gave the ship to Grizzell (he was really a first pilot, just CP for the day) for the bomb run.

I could see the frags on the racks in the open bomb bays above us but as I couldn't really tell which way they were going to drop I felt that I'd be wiser to hold any evasive action until they came out; maybe none would be needed. But when they did drop they were immediately lost against a bright sky. So I waited -- and waited -- and waited, expecting 'em to land in my personal lap. But nothing happened and after what seemed like ample time I looked over at Lombard, heaved a big sigh of relief -- and his tail started flying off.

It was as if some giant, invisible knife took three swipes at him, each one slicing off a few feet of the plane.

I don't know how he kept flying, but he stayed straight and level, then began a slow, descending turn away from us to the left. Five or six ME 109s jumped him but he put down his wheels and they turned away. Then, just before he disappeared behind another 17 group coming in below and behind us, one parachute went out. By then he was perhaps a thousand feet below us and had turned something like 180°.

The picture under discussion was from the series of bomb run photographs taken by the group above; I have a glossy of the original. It also appeared in Air Force Magazine.

As we were in company front there is no way Gerry Lombard could have caught bombs from 99th B. G. planes ahead of him; none were ahead of him. But it was our fault we were where we were at the wrong time.

Sincerely,
EDWARD M. MOORE/ROUTE 2, BOX 740-ANIMATILLA, FL. 32784/904-669-5845

Edward M. Moore

This is the account of Sugarfoot's last flight, on 2 Oct 43, as told by Joe Carroll whom we located in Florida.

THE LAST MISSION

Told by T/Sgt Joseph R. Carroll

At about 12:10 a force of about 20 Me 109's attacked us head-on. King is pretty sure that he got one of them, and I think that I damaged one. Our crew may have gotten more, but we never heard their story.

At 12:25 the 109's concentrated in a head-on attack, one following the other. At the same time, we were being driven over the Swiss border. They fired at us with their anti-aircraft guns. We were flying left wing in our element, and I believe we received most of the fire.

Someone shouted over the interphone, "Here they come." The next instant I felt a burning in my left leg, and I went down on my knees. This undoubtedly saved my life, because just as I went down, a hail of tracers went through the door over my head and passed through into the waist. From their direction, I think they probably killed or wounded the pilot, co-pilot, engineer, tail gunner and probably the bombardier and navigator as well. Either the pilot or the bombardier had enough strength left to open the bomb-bay doors. Immediately after this hail of bullets the plane nosed violently downwards and I was hurled to the ceiling and pinned there by the extra life raft that we were carrying.

The plane seemed to turn over and I was thrown head-first against the command radio set, which dazed me. At first, it seemed very pleasant to lie there and not move. Soon, however, my head cleared somewhat and I knew that I should try to get out. I struggled to reach the radio room hatch, but because of the heavy life raft, I couldn't move. I was fortunate in one respect though, if I had gone out through that hatch, I would have been cut in half by the tail.

Soon however, the plane seemed to straighten out a bit, and I was able to move. The first thing that I saw was the door leading to the bomb-bay. I reached around and opened it. At this time the plane must have exploded. I was thrown through the open bomb-bay doors, clear of the plane. In a few seconds I pulled my rip chord and my chute opened. I could see bits of the plane floating down all around me. I was then at an altitude of about 10,000 to 13,000 feet. I looked around and saw Pratt in his chute about 500 feet above me, although I didn't know that it was him at the time. That was the last that I remember until I came within about 100 feet of the ground. I managed to land in pretty good style and then everything went black again. In a few seconds my head cleared again, and I heard an airplane motor. Thinking that I had landed in Austria I gathered up my chute and laid on it so the pilot would not see me or the chute.

He passed over, and I took off my harness. Looking up, I saw a woman and a boy coming toward me. I waved to them, but when they got close to me they ran back. I supposed that they were afraid of me with all the blood over my face. Soon however, some men came up to me and told me that I was in Switzerland. I thanked God for that.

Soon some military officers came up. They spread my heavy flying clothes on the ground and wanted me to lie down on them. I was still half-dazed though, and refused. They grabbed me by the arms and legs and put me down. I asked for a cigarette and got it. I started then to think about the rest of my buddies. Just then, Pratt came rushing over. He had landed about 150 yards from me. Words don't describe what followed. The Swiss did everything they could for us.

A Swiss captain put us in a car and took us to the military headquarters in Meinfeld. There they patched us up temporarily. A Swiss Red Cross Nurse gave us a good stiff shot of cognac. It helped immensely. They were finally able to tell us there was a third survivor, and that they weren't sure about a fourth. Neither Pratt nor myself could get our minds off the rest of the crew. They brought an oil cooler from the plane up to us to identify. It was full of bullet holes. During this time it seemed that we couldn't smoke enough cigarettes. Our own supply was soon gone. The soldiers there gave us a couple more packs. One of them there offered to write to Ann and to Pratt's Mother to tell them that we were safe. I don't think that those letters ever got through though.

A couple of hours later we were taken by car over to Bad Ragaz, and questioned by some higher officials. There they told us that their own flank guns had been firing at us, and they were sure that they had hit us as well as the Germans. We couldn't argue there

because it was their rights as neutrals to do so. They asked us if we had been given a thorough medical examination. They were surprised when we said that we hadn't had one. They immediately took us to the hospital, Villa Flora, in Ragaz. We met King there. That was another reunion that I'll never forget. Three of us were there together at last, the only survivors out of ten of the best buddies that I ever had.

Dear Mr. Coen,

My mother, Bessie Snitkin, received a card addressed to my late father, Joseph Snitkin, asking if he knew of Louis A. Snitkin.

My brother, Louis, was shot down over Sicily on July 5, 1943. He was declared missing in action and automatically declared dead one year later.

Sometime in 1949, my parents received a letter from the Army that my brother's body along with three other airmen were found. (How they determined this after all those years -- we do not know.) They brought the bodies back and buried them en masse somewhere in Kentucky.

We had tried to contact some of the men that were on the plane with him but received different versions of what had happened. One said he was alive when he jumped from the plane. We never knew what to think. Is there anyone from his flight still alive that might have some further information?

I can't begin to tell you how we felt when we received your card -- after all, it is 40 years.

Thank you for any information you may or can find out for us.



QUOTES

Here is an excerpt from PLOESTI, Dugan and Stewart

In a Bucharest hospital lay Charles T. Bridges, the only crewman left alive from PORKY II in the last Eight Ball wave. The battered gunner was smarting over an incident after the crash. As he had staggered away, half blind and drenched with blood, a German sergeant siezed his escape kit and knocked him down. Bridges counterattaeked and was knocked down again. Now at his bedside there appeared a jovial Roman Catholic priest, who said, "There you are, my son! I'm glad to see you're alive. You know, after I pulled you out of the plane, you sent me to get help for the others, and when I returned you were gone and they were dead."

Bridges said, "You pulled me out of the plane, Padre? Why I crawled out by myself. I don't remember seeing you at all. Some Jerries worked me over, and a big Romanian soldier charged me, trying to throw the bolt on his rifle. I yelled 'Ksmerad!' and he took me to a hut. Next day I woke up here."

"Nevertheless we are old friends, Sergeant," said the holy man. "After I pulled you from the plane, you spoke to me in Latin." Bridges said, "I haven't spoken Latin since high school. I doubt if I know ten words." The priest said, "You asked me to send word to your mother in Andersonville, Indiana, that you were all right." This was Bridges' home town. The cleric said, "I sent her a cable through the Vatican."

Mrs. Bridges had received the cable via the Roman Catholic diocese in Fort Wayne. Two days later she received a War Department telegram announcing her son was missing in action. The poor mother was prestrated by these conflicting messages, but the diocese could furnish no further information; it had simply forwarded the cable sent through heirarchal channels. Nor could the War Department add anything.

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TAPS

LOMBARD, Gerry . . . Gerry passed away a few years ago. He came from Worcester, Mass. and was a member of the State Legislature for a long time.
Dick Dempsey

* * * * *
SIMON, RALPH * Ellsworth Swingen reports that Simon and Vandre *
VANDRE, OEAR * are deceased. *

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