Art bailed out over northern Italy

Arthur Mattson was a gunner on the Liberator bomber* Leakin Deacon, *455th Group, 15th Air Force, that was downed June 9, 1944, on the return from a raid on Munich.

He has documented his experiences in ART'S WAR, 1940-1945.

He has granted AFEES permission to publish extracts from his book.

By ARTHUR MATTSON
Houston, Tex.

Looking from the right waist window, I saw oil bubbling from the top of No.4 and the propeller slowing down. With No. 4 out and the superchargers of No. 2 and No. 3 not working, it was impossible to maintain altitude and stay with our group.

Before arriving over the Po River in Northern Italy, Lt. Catlin called over the intercom that we were losing more altitude, were at 500 feet and to bail out.



Arthur W. Mattson in 1945 photo

The four of us in the rear, tail gunner Robert Skinner, ballgunner Earl Bodenhorn, radio op William Lycan and I already had our chutes snapped to our harnesses.

A few minutes later, Sgt. Lycan would be dead; his chute did not open. Sgt. Skinner broke his leg on landing and Sgt. Bodenhorn would be captured and held prisoner for the next 11 months.

I did two pendulum swings and landed on my butt. With my chute gathered in, I buried it and ran 90 degrees from the flight path; those were our instructions. After a short distance, I found Sgt. Harold Linneweh, our engineer, who told me Skinner had broken his leg and that Lt. James Paurice was with him.

Linneweh had an Italian boy, maybe 16 or 17, with him who had taken English in school but never had the chance to speak it to an Englishman or an American. We did understand that soldiers were arriving and we should follow him.

Linneweh and I did our best to follow him as he ran through ditches and crossed roads. When he understood we were thirsty, he stopped at a farmhouse and the farmer came out with a bottle of wine and two glasses. Finally we got to a wheat field where our young guide hid us in the two-foot tall growth.

We understood that when the sun went down, he would bring food. We lay in the field until dark when we heard a whistle and we whistled back. The young fellow had bread, cheese, sausage and wine, but no water.

We were told that three airmen were captured and one was "mort" (dead).

After our meal, the young fellow moved us under a tree where we spent the night and the next day. On the third day, our helper brought us to meet Lt. Paurice and Sgt. Gus Mazoros. Paurice told us the underground picked up Skinner the night before and took him secretly to a friendly hospital. Mazoros had been hidden in a haystack.

With Paurice and Mazoros were five nervous Italians with bicycles and civilian clothing for us. We took off our uniforms and put on the Italian civvies. One fellow gave me his hat which I wore for the next 135 days.

Our young leader said we should have a space of 100 meters between bikes and if we were stopped, he would not come back for us. Our route took us through the town square of Reggio, where a German company was camped. We passed within 10 feet of a German soldier who was checking his vehicle. What a close call!

We traveled about 24 km where they hid us in a straw stack. About sundown, a couple of them brought us food and said, "Eat fast." Paurice knew some Italian and understood the fellows were being followed. After eating, we ran down a brush-covered ditch. A few minutes later, we heard a truck circling the straw stack we has just left.

That night we were taken to a doctor's home for our evening meal. He told he was also a captain in the medical branch of Mussolini's army, but that he was helping the underground movement.

The doctor's wife prepared and served us a delicious meal of soup, ham, pasta, bread, cheese and wine. She had butter for our bread that we understood was served only on special occasions.

The doctor knew some English and asked for our names and army serial numbers; in a few days, he was going to Switzerland and would communicate our names to Allied headquarters.

After a wonderful meal, the guide took us back to our hiding place. The next night a farmer came to hide us on his farm. Infiltration of spies in the underground was a problem and for the farmer's safety,

the guide told the farmer that we were part of the crew that parachuted from the U.S. bomber at Guastella on June 9.

Within a week, it began to rain and continued for several days. We were then moved to the barn where we slept in the hayloft.

After dark, these brave people brought us into their home for the evening meal. We ate with the men; the women and girls stood behind us and passed the serving bowls. Paurice was recalling more of his Italian so he did the talking for us.

Several nights later and raining again, a band of partisans came to take us a hideout in the hills. Linneweh and I each got a backpack containing rice and beans. Then a German grenade was hung on my belt. Paurice was given an ammunition belt and I believe a pistol to carry. We traveled at night, heading for Villa Minozza.

In the foothills, the partisans had secret bases in wooded areas where they ate and slept during the day. There were no buildings or tents, only a campsite.

In a Partisan hideout, we met a Dutchman (an escaped POW) who said he was a doctor. He was serving as an underground courier, going from camp to camp. I also remember an Italian who had lived in Scotland; his Italian had a Scottish accent. They were several Englishmen from South Africa captured in the North African campaign who had escaped. Other prison escapees were a Frenchman, a Canadian and a Russian. All had banded together.

Several days after July 4 we arrived at Villa Minozza and were told it was Partisan country and that Germans never came there. Next day we crossed a ridge east of Villa Minozza and entered a basin area about 12 miles across. Mt. Cusna was on the south and there were hills to the east.

Mt. Cimone was visible about 40 miles away. In the basin were several settlements or communities consisting of 10 or 12 houses, all constructed from stone taken from the foot of Mt. Cusna.

People in these settlements had acreage and plots where they raised wheat, rye, vegetables and potatoes. Most of them had a flock of sheep that their sons herded on the slopes of Mt. Cusna.

We were taken to Monteorsaro, the largest community in the area. There was a Catholic church, a residence for the priest and a cemetery. The priest was Father Don Vosco. At one time he had lived in New York and he remembered some English.

Just outside the settlement was a building occupied by a band of partisans.

Here we met English Major Williams and Sgt. Roberts, his radio operator of the British Strategic Service. They had been dropped by parachute to coordinate partisan activity against the Germans in an effort to help the Allies.

The major took our names and Sgt. Roberts radioed them to 15th AF headquarters. Later, the major and his sergeant moved to Villa Minozzo.

Two days later, we were taken to Italia Bertini's place in the Febio community, about two miles west of Monteorsaro where we were introduced as the four U.S. airmen not captured who had parachuted from their bomber at Guastella.

A group of curious women came to see us; some were in tears. Paurice understood them to say "the poor boys" and one said Hitler was a devil. Some of these were the same age as our mothers.

(TO BE CONTINUED)



Art Mattson with his sister and his nephew, a member of the RCMP, pose for a photo in Edmonton, Alb.

NEXT:
Life in Febio

Gunner buried at Arlington

WASHINGTON (AFPN) -- The remains of an Army Air Forces crewman from World War II have been identified and were buried with military honors on April 12.

Staff Sgt. Robert McKee of Garvey, Calif., was buried in Arlington National Cemetery.

On Dec. 17, 1944, Sgt. McKee was a gunner on a B-24 that took off from Pantanella, Italy, on a mission to bomb enemy targets.

The aircraft crashed in Hungary.

barn.

"They came out to get me in the field. All they asked me was where I had hidden my chute," McGinley said, chuckling. "The women over there had trouble getting silk, so they wanted my parachute for that."

He was housed with a fellow crew member who had landed nearby. They didn't know the whereabouts of another crew member who had jumped just before them.

"We saw him jump from the plane," McGinley said, "and we didn't see him again until Sept. 15, when all of us hidden by the underground were reunited."

McGinley said they were moved from one location to another often, sometimes after a few days and other times, after a few weeks.

He worked at various jobs, driving trucks, delivering furniture and several others.

He said the Belgian people who were part of the resistance gave to the effort in many ways. People who grew things or worked with food supplied things to eat. Others provided shelter. And some helped financially however they could.

Once, McGinley said, he was asked by his host if he wanted to meet some gangsters. He told the man that he would, so he was taken outside town into a quarry. There, he met a small band of men, one of whom was introduced as the light-heavyweight boxing champion of Belgium. They hid in the quarry when they weren't doing their day jobs -- robbing banks for the resistance.

"They would tell the town banker to have his money out," McGinley said, "because they were coming by the bank the next day to rob him."

There were close calls with the Germans.

"Once we were eating at a miller's place -- we stayed near there because he had more food for us -- and the miller's wife came running up the street saying, 'the Gestapo is coming,'" McGinley said. "We hurried out the back door and got away through an alley. I saw him about two weeks later, and I didn't recognize him because the Gestapo had beaten him up so badly."

Just before the evaders were moved to Paris and their eventual freedom, he was summoned to Brussels. He and his guide boarded a streetcar and headed for the Belgian capital.

"At the second stop, a member of the Gestapo got on the trolley," McGinley said. "About that time, we rolled past a field where a shepherd was working with his dog to round up his sheep. The dog was making such a racket that everyone on the trolley stood up to see what was happening. When they did, we slipped out the other side and walked the rest of the way in. I told you my mama was praying for me."

Near the end of his time on the run, he was sitting in a cafe when a German company of troops rushed through town in retreat.

"Some of the Germans came into the cafe, wanting food," McGinley said. "The owner said no, but the troops left in a hurry to escape from the allied forces. One left his pocketbook, and I have photos from that wallet in my scrapbook to this day."

When it was safe, the allied airmen were moved to Paris, and then a day later, to London, where he wired his mother with news of his safety.

The Air Forces Escape and Evasion Society still meets annually in a U.S. city, where members honor the underground "helpers" or their descendants. Anne Brusselmans was often among them until her death in 1993. McGinley said he used to attend regularly.

"I don't get to see them much any more," he said. But he said he thinks of them often, especially as another Veteran's Day approaches.

Otherwise, he spends his time playing golf and visiting with his family. (He met his wife, Bonnie, at a Little Rock USO club shortly after he returned from the war.)

And, whenever he's asked, he visits schools, clubs and other groups to tell the story of the brave people of the resistance underground who risked their lives to help him and his fellow airmen so many years ago.

ART'S WAR, 1940-45; Part II

Leading the simple life in Febio

Art Mattson was a gunner on *Leakin Deacon,* a B-24 downed June 9, 1944 over Northern Italy.
In Part I of his story in Summer issue, he told of being helped by Italian partisans.

By ARTHUR MATTSON
Houston, Tex.

Febio was a community of about 10 stone houses on a low hill. The streets were cobblestone and at the edge of the villa was a pipe flowing with mountain spring water where young girls filled their buckets and carried them home on their heads.

Water from the pipe flowed down the hill to a rock-bottomed pool where women washed their clothes and hung them on barbed wire to dry.

Italia Bertini had a mother and a young child. Her husband had been captured and taken to Germany as forced labor. Across the valley from her house was the barn where, on the lower level, she kept her cow and its calf. The room above was our bedroom, containing two double beds.

It was our first time in a bed

since Cerignola and since we all had lice, it didn't matter whom we slept with.

We never used the outhouse toilet, sinced it smelled so and was inundated with flies; the nearby wooded area served as our cover when Nature called.

One family had a stinky male goat that you could smell for a quarter mile when the breeze was right.

When barns needed cleaning, the manure was carried to the field plots. One day I watched a man and his wife clean their barn. Neighbor ladies said the wife had a sick head. The man filled a homemade willow basket measuring about 30 inches in diameter and 12 inches high with manure and then called a neighbor to help him lift the loaded basket onto a pad on his wife's head as she kneeled on one knee.

The men then helped her to her feet and she walked down the cobblestone street to their plot of ground; her husband walked ahead carrying a pitchfork with which to spread the manure.

Febio had a community bread-making oven of stone and located conveniently for all families. The oven was about six feet high and six feet wide. Smoke escaped through a hole in the top and there was a two-foot opening in the front.

On bread-making days, women put dry tree branches inside the oven and set them afire. When the fire died down and left hot coals, the loaves were placed on a long board and slipped into the oven.

In an hour or so they had fresh-baked bread.

All four of us went to the Catholic church in Monteorsaro. Paurice, being Catholic, attended most Sundays and I went with him.

One Sunday, we were surprised to see the captain of the local Partisan group at the pulpit, wearing a robe over his clothing that was a British army officer's uniform. I didn't understand his message except he frequently said, "RESIST, RESIST."

The partisans received parachute drops containing weapons, ammo, shoes, clothing and sometimes food. Since both Paurice and Mazoros needed shoes, they each received a pair. I got a woolen U.S. Army shirt.

One day when the partisans were late bringing Italia our rations, a neighbor woman brought a lamb to Italia's place. While I watched, the woman cut the sheep's throat and Italia caught the blood in a bowl, into which she stirred in flour and let it set. That evening, when the blood and flour was firm, Italia sliced and fried it for our supper; it tasted a little like fried liver. The neighbor took the dead lamb for her family.

Another day while wandering in the area of Mt. Cusna, we found a cherry tree full of ripe fruit. We all ate so many we got the most painful bellyaches and yet, the next day, still hungry for fruit, we ate cherries again and got another belly ache.

One day a fellow from Villa Minozzo came to Febio with a camera. Cameras were a novelty in Febio and everyone wanted their picture taken. The man asked if he could take our pictures, saying he would have prints in a couple weeks. At the time, we had no objections and said okay even though we were hardly presentable for a photo.

About two weeks later two squads of Germans came over the ridge on their way to Febio and when they were about a half-mile away, we grabbed our things and rushed to the east side of Mt. Cusna. That night we saw tracer shots in Febio and just knew the Germans were killing the people who had been helping us.

Then I remembered the guy with the camera; obviously he was a spy and gave our photos to the Germans. Later we went into a tree shelter and got some sleep.

As time passed, my fellow evadees talked about turning themselves in to the Germans as POWs so they could get something to eat. I had read that the SS troops forced prisoners to talk when interrogated and then shot them; that once they obtained information about the places and people who helped you, they would execute them as well. This would expose the underground members. There was no way I was going to allow myself to be captured.

One day I left my friends and walked to a clearing where I saw a sheep grazing about 25 feet away. I ran out, caught the sheep and dragged it into the trees where I clubbed it an axe and slit its throat with my knife.

With some parachute string I had in my pocket, I tied its hind legs to tree limbs so I could skin it. I was about half through skinning the sheep when my three fellow evaders came out of our shelter and asked what I was doing.

I replied that we would be having mutton for supper. That evening Paurice and Linneweh built a small fire and placed the live coals between rocks; when the meat was done, we had a feast, quite a change from wild blueberries.

After two or three days of our meat diet, we decided to explore the area to the east. We found a burned-out house and another empty building. The Germans had been there and torched the place but since they were no longer there, two of us went to the potato patch. Paurice found a large kettle and some over-ripe tomatoes in the house, all of which we took. That night was lamb stew and boiled potatoes.

Four days later we had eaten all the meat and needed another sheep. The next day I saw another one near our hideout and performed another butchering job. The fellows asked where I learned how to butcher and I told them I had been raised on a farm.

After our evening meal, Mazoros went for a walk; about a half-mile away he met a partisan sentry. It so happened the sentry was an ex-Greek POW who had escaped. Both being Greek, they spoke the language and the sentry told Mazoros that a German unit was camped 600 meters up the mountain from us and that the

partisans had been firing guns all day to keep the Germans from moving.

Mazoros returned and told us about this and within minutes, each of us grabbed a lamb quarter and followed Mazoros to the partisan camp. We gave them the meat and stayed with them until the Germans left two days later.

We then headed back to Febio. We went through Monteorsaro and found the community building had been gutted by fire. Before entering Febio, a nervous woman met us and said we should not come back. If we did and the Germans returned, they would burn their houses and people would be killed.

They told us to stay at the foot of Mt. Cusna and they would bring food every. After four or five days of one meal a day, Linneweh and Mazoros decided to leave and head south to the Allied line. On the way they planned to attach themselves to another partisan band.

I liked the idea but Paurice wanted to wait until the Allied line moved north and passed Febio. Not wanting to leave Paurice alone, I stayed with him.

Following sheep shearing and grain harvesting, potato digging was our next job. We worked for a lady and her son, Johnny, who had been a shoemaker in Genoa before the war. Johnny had us digging potatoes in patches about one-third mile from their place.

Potatoes were dug with a spade like it is done on the farm in Saskatchewan. We dug, picked and packed them in bags weighing about 90 pounds and carried them to the barn.

On evening, Johnny's mother read a letter from her other son who was a prisoner of war in the U.S. In his letter, he said the food was good and they were treated well. She was so thankful he was a POW in the United States and not in Germany for forced labor.

On Oct. 12, a formation of B-24s passed over Febio at 15,000 feet, headed toward Bologna. The locals were crying; they believed many in Bologna would be killed.

An earlier BBC radio broadcast announced that German forces north of the Arno River were withdrawing. Paurice told them the target was not the city but a concentration of Germans retreating from the Florence area.

At our 455th Bomb Group reunion in St. Louis in October 2001, I met a member of the 741st squadron who was on that mission.

(TO BE CONTINUED)

NEXT: Walking to the Lines



Yvonne Daley poses with a pair of international friends at the New Orleans reunion: Tom Wingham, Suffolk, U.K. (left) and Raymond Sherk, Toronto, Ont.



DUNCAN J. McNABB

Duncan McNabb nominated to head AMC

SAN ANTONIO (AFPN)-- July 13, 2005 --President Bush has nominated Lt.Gen. Duncan J. McNabb for the rank of general and to command Air Mobility Command at Scott Air Force Base, Ill.

General McNabb is currently the director of logistics for the Joint Staff at the Pentagon. Before that assignment he was the Air Force deputy chief of staff for plans and programs.

A 1974 graduate of the U.S. Air Force Academy, he has held command and staff positions at squadron, wing, major command and Department of Defense levels. He is a command pilot with more than 5,400 hours in a variety of aircraft, including the C-141 Starlifter and C-17 Globemaster III.

Duncan J. McNabb, an honorary member of AFEES, has attended many recent reunions and has been a valuable contact in reunion arrangements.



Lt. Catlin's crew, 743rd Sqdn.,455th BG, May 1944: From left, standing: Sgt. Lycan, Lt. Paurice, Lt. Greenquist, Lt. Catlin, Lt. Singer and Sgt. Linneweh. Kneeling: Sgt. Mattson, Sgt. Bodenhorn, Sgt. Skinner and Sgt. Mazoros.

ART'S WAR, 1940-45; Part III

After 135 days, back with the Allies

Art Mattson was a gunner on Leakin Deacon, ***a B-24 downed June 9, 1944, over Northern Italy. This is the conclusion of his story of being helped by Italian Partisans. Parts I and II have appeared in earlier editions.***

By ARTHUR MATTSON
Houston, Tex.

During grain threshing and potato digging season, work quit about 4 p.m. This allowed me time to go to the B-25 evaders' hideout to listen to BBC London at 5 p.m. on the clandestine radio left there by Major Williams and Sgt. Roberts.

When I returned to Febio, the community was waiting to hear the news and they always asked, "Arturo, cosa nuova?" (What's New)

By this time I was quite fluent in Italian and could tell them the news. I used my silk map of Europe to show city and river locations. They were especially interested in news about the Italian front.

Since I worked with them and brought them the 5 p.m. war news, the Febio people considered me an okay guy and were all very friendly. One day I had this conversation (in Italian) with Silvia, a girl about 17:

Silvia: Arturo, will you take me to America?

Art: Silvia, you know before I can take you to America, we have to go to Father Don Vosco in Monteorsaro.

Silvia: Well, we can go.

Art: But Silvia, I do not have a ring for you.

Silvia: We can use my grandmother's ring!

Art: Silvia, if I take you to America your mother will cry.

Silvia: Oh, we can take her with us!

I don't believe she was serious, yet most people wanted to come to America.

On Oct. 17, James Paurice and I were told that a fellow from south of the combat line was in Monteorsaro. He told us he had been sent by the 15th Air Force to guide us. This sounded too good to be true.

About 15 peoople from Febio went with us to Monteorsaro to meet the guide in the residence of Father Don Vosco. After a few questions, we believed he was legitimate, since he knew the location and numbers of our squadron and bomb group.

He was leaving the next morning with about 13 escaped POWs and the two B-25 men.

After the meeting, the Febio men lined up on one side of the room and the women on the opposite side; they were ready to wish us well and tell us goodbye.

The next morning, there was a light snow and some sleeting rain. On passing a flock of about 100 sheep, we saw that Silvia's mother was leading them. She was carrying a pack and a blanket. It would take several days to reach the line.

Sheep had to be moved from the snow area in the mountains to the Arno valley south of the line.

Our route took us along the east side of Mt. Cimone and then south to a point about 40 miles west of Florence; it took four days.

Two nights, we slept in the shelter of trees. The third night was spent at the habitat of two hermits, but we slept outside on some hay. After breakfast, we continued on our way south.

In the afternoon, we suddenly found ourselves under an artillery barrage. The question: is the German army here and was the barrage for them? We were afraid of being hit and ran out of the area where shells were dropping; it was a close call.

Since we soon learned that it was Allied shelling, we knew the line was a short distance away. At dusk, while descending a tree-covered hill, we stopped before crossing a road that curved to the right. While we were surveying the area, a German patrol passed and when they were out of sight, someone said, "Let's Go."

Being ex-infantry, I called out in a loud whisper, "No! Watch for the rear guard!" Two minutes later, the rear guard came around the bend; he was carrying a light machine gun that could have killed all of us.

When the rear guard was out of sight, we scampered across the road and walked about a mile. By now it was dark and an Allied sentry called, "HALT!"

We were ordered to approach one at a time; our guide went first. As we advanced, our guide vouched for each of us. Paurice and I were taken to a British artillery unit; I don't know where the others were sent.

At last we were with Allied friends and free after 135 days. The date was Oct. 22, 1944--Paurice's 21st birthday.

The British welcomed us with a shot of whiskey and a cigarette. We told them we had dodged an artillery barrage earlier in the day and they said they had fired their daily quota to keep the Krauts backing up.

Since we had not eaten all day, they served us leftover corned beef, potatoes, bread and tea. After not having tasted salt in four months, the first bit of corned beef really shocked us. Since we were infected with lice, we were not offered a bed so it was another night on the ground (our last).

Having been hunted by the Nazis and Fascists for 4 1/2 months, it was difficult to describe how it felt to be free and secure. There were numerous close calls of being captured. Being dressed in civvies, traveling with partisans and carrying ammo made us partisans and all captured partisans were shot. It was such a relief to be safe and secure.



Art Mattson holds a .50 cal. waist gun with ammo belt during an air show in 2002.

The next morning we were interrogated by British Intelligence who asked about partisan activity and whether we had seen German units moving to the north. We told them we met Major Williams and Sgt. Roberts in Monteorsaro in July.

That afternoon, Allied HQ in Florence sent a truck with an armed guard to pick us up. The guard stood up front by the cab and ordered Paurice and me to stay at the rear.

After the friendly morning with the British, we thought it strange that the Americans treated us like a couple of prisoners.

On arriving in Florence, we were ordered to enter a stockade full of questionable individuals. Needless to say, we objected and raised hell.

When we asked to see the commanding officer, we were told he had retired for the day but that didn't satisfy us; we continued to insist on seeing him.

Paurice mentioned that his senator in New York would hear about this when we got back to the States. With our continual protests, the commanding officer finally came.

He offered no apology other than to say that all who crossed the line had to be cleared. After showing him our dog tags and answering a few questions about U.S. geography, he ordered our release.

Next day, Oct. 24, we were interrogated and legally cleared back into U.S. service. I was given a pair of army pants to replace the threadbare Italian pants I had been wearing for months.

Transportation for Paurice and me to the 455th Bomb Group was by B-25 from Florence to Foggia and then by B-17 from there to Cerignola.

Once we received our travel orders, we were flown to Naples with about 12 others on a C-47 equipped with side bench seats.

On Nov. 29, 1944, I was taken to the port of Genoa to board ship for the United States.

THE END