Mail Call (Continued)

Dear George, April 8, 1998

Thought you might be interested in the article and photo attached. The 454th and 455th BG's were based between our field at Toretta and Cerignola - I think it may have been called San Giorgio.

I was in the 767th Squadron, and we had the tufi-block structure with the tent top on what we called "Chapel Hill". One morning after breakfast, I was outside brushing my teeth with canteen cup in hand, and the 454th/455th were taking off to the south on a mission, east from Toretta. Suddenly the engines quit on a fully loaded plane, and seconds later, there was a loud, lowpitched boom and a gray cloud of smoke rose above the trees.

I thought to myself, it's one thing to go down in combat, but to go down like that would leave an empty feeling your stomach. What a waste!

The story went around that there was a spy on the base, who sabotaged more than one plane. and was subsequently caught and went before a firing squad. Scary! I wondered more than once if the fatal takeoff in the attached picture was part of the same espionage. Stars and Stripes mentioned "accidental application of brakes" - I found that totally unbelievable.

The old Lib was a workhorse of WWII - more 24's were built than any other plane - but it rarely gets the recognition. A fhend of mine, who was on the 8/l/43 Ploesti raid, went by the Air Force Academy. While other planes were recognized on plaques or bronze sculptures, the Lib was forgotten - that is, until he and others brought pressure on some people, and the omission was corrected. (Editor: see article on page 25)

Thanks for keeping the "Liberaider" going.

Regards,
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Editor's Note: The following is a photo and an excerpt from a letter Guyon Phillips sent to the "Briefing", the journal of the International B-24 Club. The photograph shown on the top of the next page was sent along with the letter. It is sad these brave airmen were killed doing their duty with their Liberator but lost their chance to participate in the final victory.

Here is a picture of a Liberator in a one-in-a-million accident. It occurred at the 454th/455th Bomb Group base near Cerignola, Italy in April 1945.

I was a pilot with the 461st BG, which was close by. Early one morning my co-pilot, navigator and I were in a jeep on our way to Cerignola, and as I looked up the road ahead, I couldn't believe my eyes. There was the unmistakable oval fin and rudder of a B-24 high above the dirt road, which made no sense at all. Doing a double take, I realized it was a Liberator standing on what was left of its nose.

At first, we were afraid to approach the plane in case it might explode from leaking gas (of course, the bombs weren't armed, but we didn't want to assume they stiff weren't dangerous). An Italian fanner had been going along the road in a small horse-drawn cart, and the fanner was over in a ditch with the over-turned cart, tending to the horse. The horse didn't seem to be injured. Apparently the farmer had to take to the ditch as the plane came roaring toward him, and ground to a halt just short of the ditch.

You could tell immediately that all the crew on the flight deck had been killed instantly. The plane was one of many taking off on a mission, and although the "Stars and Stripes" account mentioned "an accidental application of the brakes", none of us believed that. From every indication, the plane had an emergency of some sort just before lift-off, and the pilot showered down the brakes - a B-24 with a full load of gas and bombs just won't get in the air without full power.

Unfortunately, he was past the point of no return. After running off the steel mats at the end of the runway, the nose gear sheared off and the nose of the plane ground into the soft earth beyond with such force that it literally chewed off the front of the plane, right up to the engines. How the plane kept from toppling over on its back was a miracle - that may have saved the remainder of the crew.

Mail Call (Continued)



SIX MEN were killed instantly when this 15th AAF B-24 crashed squarely on its nose during a takeoff. An accidental application of brakes is believed to have caused the accident. (MAAF Photo)