Kenneth F. Hosterman
2nd Lt. Navigator, B-24s

CRASH LANDING

On Ken's 29th mission, he was assigned as bombadier/navigator on another crew whose pilot was flying his first mission as pilot. He had flown as co-pilot on four other flights, making this his fifth mission. His name was Lt. Guyton. The co-pilot was Lt. Bob Hawke who was flying his 35th and last mission. All the other crew members were on their first mission. They were to fly to the Linz-Steyer, Austria, area to bomb a tank factory at St. Valentine. Their Initial Point (the place where planes would start a straight line run to the target) was Freistadt, Austria. The area was always a dense anti-aircraft area which meant heavy flack. Their plane was located as number 4 in C Box. They were flying at 24,000 feet, and the temperature was -35 degrees Centigrade.

Their plane never reached the I.P. (Initial Point) because between Vienna and Steyer, the #3 engine became a runaway engine which means the propeller was loose and was going faster than the other three engines' propellers. The co-pilot pushed on the rudder to keep the plane from going into a spin to the ground. The B-24 lost altitude and Ken had to guide Lt. Guyton to Lake Balaton where the pilot hoped to land in Russian territory on the South side of the Lake; the Germans were located on the North side of Lake Balaton. The problem with this was that from the intelligence report during Ken's briefing, he learned that the Germans were repairing downed B-24s and flying them over Russian territory for military purposes. Consequently, the Russians had begun to shoot all B-24s flying over their land. When Ken and Lt. Hawke informed the pilot of the situation, they decided to try to make Zara (now named Zarad), a Yugoslavian seaport town with a friendly airfield.

Their crew lightened the load by jettisoning all bombs and equipment they didn't need. They did not pull the bomb's pins, so they would not explode and kill innocent civilians. The co-pilot, Hawke, stood on the rudder, changing feet to keep pressure on it so the propeller would not spin wildly and send them in circles to the ground.

Ken gave them a new direction from Southeast to Southwest. Using a mercator chart, he plotted a line to Zara which was close to an island called Prkos. It had an emergency landing strip controlled by Yugoslavian forces favorable to the U.S. In this situation, the problem Ken faced was getting the crippled plane over the Yugoslavian Alps. The maps the Army Air Force used were color-coded topographical maps the British cartographers had provided them. They were excellent, dependable guides, and Ken counted on them to get the plane over the lowest of the Alps. He picked the lowest mountain to go over and bcause the plane had lost much gasoline because of the engine problem, it safely cleared the mountain he had seleted to cross.

Ken again used the maps to guide the pilot across the alps at the lowest places he could find. He gave Lt. Guyton a compass heading west toward the seaport town of Zara. When they got over the alps, they could see the Adriatic Sea before them. All of the crew took crash landing positions as they prepared to land. When they landed, the runway was lined with firetrucks and ambulances. When they questioned why, they were told that all four engines were on fire while they were landing. The co-pilot had cut off the engines' power when they hit the ground, or it could have been very serious.

There was a U.S. AAF transport plane at the air strip and the crew was quickly put on that plane and flown across the Adriatic Sea to the seaport town of Bari in Italy. That is where Ken's troop ship had landed when he first arrived in Italy. They were kept overnight in Bari and driven to their Cerignola airbase in the morning.

When Ken walked into his tent, the other officers were loading his foot locker with his personal articles to be sent home to his parents. He had been listed as missing-in-action when his plane failed to return from the mission to bomb the St. Valentine tank factory.

On Ken's twenty-ninth mission, he crashed-landed at an emergency landing strip on the coast of Yugoslavia. The date was March 23, l945....two years to the day that he had left State College, Pennsylvania. He was twenty years and four months old.