NOT A GOOD DAY

July 21st,1944, started one of my bad days at the usual ungodly time of sometime before dawn. Breakfast of eggs, S.O.S., (still one of my favorites), black tar coffee, and then to the old stone stable that had been converted into our briefing hall. Our Wing's target was a big manufacturing plant at Brux, Czechoslovakia. I can't remember what they made there, but I do know it was over five long hours away up the Adriatic Sea, over Yugoslovia, Austria, and into central Czechoslovakia.

After the briefing, we were off to the chute shack where I got my first inkling that this wasn't my day. After hearing all the wild stories of trying to escape if your're shot down, I had decided to be prepared, by sewing a small bag to my parachute harness and putting in a couple pairs of socks, some packs of cigarettes, matches, and a spare lighter. When I went to my rack where we stored our gear, some "character" had taken all my gear including my special harness and chute. Man, I was madder than hell, so I went over to the corner of the shack and grabbed a harness and old chute from the equipment rejected pile and stomped out of there.

In June and July, our Squadron had been hit pretty hard and in order to fly a twelve ship Sqd. flight, many crew members were selected to fill a vacancy in a scheduled crew. Of the four officers in our original crew, I was the only remaining one left on flight status. On this flight, I was assigned to fly with our Sqd. C.O. Col Lanford. Amazing but true, all of the original enlisted men of our crew had survived and were on this trip.

I can remember the long trip to the target was quiet and tiring. On the target run, the flak got thicker and thicker and more accurate. Just after we dropped our bombs, we took a hit on # 3 engine and things began to get pretty exciting. We gradually drifted out of the formation and started the long trip home by ourselves. Then number # 2 started to cut in and out, and we were now a sitting duck. I've thought many times how lucky we were not to be hit by fighters.

Near the Austrian/Yugoslavian border, we flew over an unmarked heavy flak battery at around 13,000 feet and all hell broke loose again. (After the war, I've talked to B-25 and B-26 medium bomber pilots, and they said to stay away from 12 to 14,000 foot bomb runs as the flak was altitude deadly.) We were the only plane over the battery, so they really had a field day. I know that we took at least 2 or more hits, another hit on or near # 3 engine and one just in front of the instrument panel. This hit blew the instrument panel all over Col Lanford, myself and the cockpit. I've got to tell you a humorous story on Col Langford. He had the wheel when the hit came, and when the wing started to drop, naturally he started turning the wheel to bring up the wing. After a full rotation of 360 degrees, he looked at me in complete disgust, spun the wheel and said, very calmly, "S. O. A. B ".

We had no control of the plane and it was starting to slow roll. The auto-pilot panel was just hanging by a piece of aluminum and a few wires. and with no controls, I figured that we had nothing to lose, so I flipped the auto-pilot switch on and "walla" - it worked; at least for a few minutes. The old wounded bird wobbled back to almost level flight, and we still had a chance of going home. We staggered along for a few precious minutes, and then the auto-pilot gyro's ran down, so we were back to #1 and #4 engines to bring up the wing that had started down and the beginning of an "out of control roll". Carl Loiocano, out Engineer and Top Gunner broke up this routine by announcing that the right wing was beginning to break-up and that we could "explode" at any moment. Guess what, "time to sample the outside air". Col. Lanford gave the order to bail-out and the scramble began to get everyone out.

I'm really not clear what happened the next few minutes. I do remember a voice from the rear and I thought that it was from Curtiss, the Waist Gunner. "Hey skipper, we're all going out in the rear". I talked to Carl Loiocano a week ago after getting Gus's letter with the addresses, and he cleared up one thing I've wondered about all these years. I had always thought the plane blew up just as I bailed. Carl's version is as follows. "Quote", "You and Col. Lanford were scrambling around up in the cockpit looking for something. I saw that you didn't have your chute harness or chute snapped on, so I helped you get them snapped on and went out the bome-bay. What Col. Lanford and I were trying to get was the escape kit bag that I had tossed behind my seat. One of us finally grabbed the bag, and we each took an "escape kit" and headed for the bomb-bay. The plane was bouncing and rolling around, and I had a devil of a time getting down to the bomb-bay. Finally, I got to the bomb-bay catwalk, and heard a "big bang", the plane started a complete roll, and I was pinned to the catwalk by centrifical force. I'm sure now, that what I heard, was not the plane blowing up but the wing blowing off of the plane. I've heard many times that when you are really scared, you can have super strength. I remember reaching up with both hands, and grabbing some pipes that ran along the bomb-bay, and putting both feet on the catwalk, and pulled with my hands and pushed with my feet. Man - I came out of the bomb-bay like I'd been shot out of a cannon. I found the chute ring and started to pull the ring, when " Holy Jesus", I remembered that I had on an old greasy condemmed chute. To make it more interesting, I heard a " SWISH - SWISH ", I looked up and saw the burning right wing was about 500 feet above me and slowly making a neat little swishing circle. I delayed pulling the chute ring for maybe a minute and then pulled the ring; " Gott in Himmel " it popped open, and believe me I knew when it popped open. Remember I didn't have my own chute and I had never adjusted the harness straps. The leg straps must have been down to my knees, so when the chute popped open,the straps snapped up to the "family jewels" and it was "Canary talk time for awhile".

As I floated down, I saw the plane hit about 5 miles away, and a few moments later, the wing hit near a wooded area about a mile away. My chute opened around 5,000 feet, so I didn't have too long to "enjoy the beautiful scenery" before crashing down into about a 50 foot tall tree. I learned another lesson, "always miss a big tree when you are parachuting". Sometime later, I came to, and I was swinging in my chute harness up to my chest in a stream about 10 feet deep and about 20 yards wide. My head and knee hurt like the devil, so I just hung there for awhile to kind of get my thoughts together. I felt something running down my forehead and cheek, Yep-bleeding; touched my forehead and a stick was up there where it shouldn't have been. I pulled it out and that wan't too good either. The blood started gushing out; so being very calm, collected and remembering my Red Cross expert training, I promptly stuffed the stick back in the hole.

Finally, I decided to get out of the water; un-snapped the chute and drifted downstream until I washed up on the bank. When I tried to stand up, I found out my right leg was pretty screwed up. I did a fairly good job of re-setting my right knee, and made a sprint out of my undershirt and a few sticks. Then I cut a decent crutch with my boy scout knife (now called a MacGyver knife), and headed south, and maybe "home someday". I"m quite proud that I still have the chute ring, the escape kit compass, and the gold seal $5 dollar bill.

I played cowboy and Indians for the next week, staying almost all of the time in the edge of the woods, or in the corn fields, and slowly made my way south. No food just berries and water. One afternoon, I picked up an automatic 9 mm Mauser and 6.35mm small Hungarian pistol along the way in a cornfield, but that is another story. My luck finally changed one chilly afternoon, when it had been misting and I was hungry, cold and miserable. I decided to risk a decent night in a barn that was not too far away. I climbed up into the loft and fell asleep in the warm dry hay. Sometime later, I was awakened by a small boy, about 8 years old who was climbing up into the loft. When he saw me, he was frightened and fell back to the ground. His leg hit a wooden side brace and snapped. He was crying out to his mother and it was all my fault. I climbed down, picked him up and met his mother near the back porch. God, I felt terrible. After he told his mother what happened, things calmed down. I had seen a doctor set a broken leg a few years before, so there was no choice but to try and set the leg. When the father came home, he quickly rode off on his horse for a doctor about 20 miles away. His wife warmed some corn mush, and I had my first meal. She then went back into her bedroom and took a small beaded picture of the "Virgin Mary" from the wall and insisted I take it. I still have the picture to remember this weird day in my life. The father and the doctor got back about dusk, and after examining the boy's leg, the doctor decided not to re-set the leg, so I guess I didn't do too badly.

About 10 PM that night, five of the meanest,tough-looking guys I've ever seen showed up, -"The underground Partizanski fighters". When the farmer had gone for the doctor, he had also contacted the underground and told them there was an Americanski flyer at his farm. One of the group could speak a little British, and since I was very educated and could speak both American and British, my stock went way up. See, I'm not so dumb. I never told them they were the same; Well, almost the same. I followed the group out, and we all left together, to sleep in a small shed someplace not too far away from the farm and a new adventure began.

The underground fighter's job was to ambush German soldiers and to terrorize the area. The group moved to a new place in the woods each night. I found out from the British later on, that the German soldiers were terrified of these roving band of killers, and they had a real morale effect on the Germans. I had no choice but to accompany the group on two missions at night, and earned a Partizanski cap on one rather violent and scary night. The group was given credit for "21 Germani morta" that night. In a few days, their forward tour of duty was finally over and we started south to the hidden Partizanski headquarters somewhere south of Zagreb. A few days later after reaching the headquarters hidden in the hills, the British flew me out at night in a slow wooden-fabric two-engine plane to Bari, Italy.

The British kept me "under wraps" for a couple days, while grilling me on every detail of my "vacation trip" in Yugoslavia, before turning me over to the U.S. hospital in Bari. I spent a couple weeks there getting over some hepititis, malnutrition, some minor knee work and putting some pounds on my skinny frame. I weighed all of 96 lbs when I checked in at the hospital because of all of that "good chow" during this excapade. The doctors finally released me and I was sent back to the 455th late in September for a few more missions.

In mid October, I was assigned to another crew, and after a few missions, I had another very close to "another bad day mission"in mid November. The briefing sounded like a real milk-run and so "away we all merrily go". The target was a seaport near Genoa and it looked innocent enough. On the bomb run we ran into heavy accurate flak from a new battery of 155's that had been brought in at night on some barges. They caught us completely by surprise and our bomb run was not too effective. In fact, I suspect that most of our bombs must have hit from the Mediterrean to the English channel. Several of the planes took hits and our plane only took one small hit just under the bomb bay, but as luck would have it, "it was just enough." A piece of the shell "about the size of a golf ball" went through the transfer lines in the bomb bay and gas started to pour out. There appeared no way to stop the flood of gas pouring out of the gas lines and out of the open bomb bay. The navigator called out there was a small British airfield south of the lines which wasn't too far away. So -"we gambled again."

We went to full throttle and 2500 RPM on all four engines, started a gradual descent and headed south as fast as the old bird could fly. In a few minutes, one of the tanks ran out of gas; our # 2 engine quit and we feathered # 2. We now had three engines left. A few more minutes and # 4 quit and we had to feather # 4. We now had two engines left. The Navigator reported that we were crossing over the front lines and should be near the field in 10 or 15 minutes. A few more minutes and # 3 quit, so we feathered # 3 and we had only one engine left. We went to full throttle, full RPM, full manifold pressure and # 1 was just screaming. We were losing about a 1,000 feet a minute and we were below 10,000 feet, so time was running out. Someone spotted the field and we were going to get one shot for the approach and landing. We planned a high circle approach; drop the gear just as we turn on a very close final and hope the gear would come down and lock. I didn't figure the gear would drag us as much as it did, and we crunched through the top of some branches with the gear on the final turn and squeeked into the short grass field. It turned out that it was a British Bristol Beaufighter squadron's airfield.

" The good lord was sure good to us on that day."

The British were great hosts. They furnished anything that would help repair the fuel lines and helped the crew wherever they could. We enjoyed the evening with their crews, swapped stories and a little "good Scotch". Next day we checked the plane thoroughly, dumped anything we didnt need, and made a full power short-field take-off. It wasn't too bad, but naturally we all sweated out the little grass field take-off. The two hour flight home was very pleasant and for some reason, no one was talking. We were all buried in our own thoughts of our present situation, and we were just thankful that we all would get back to the base with no one even scratched.

In mid December, the Group Headquarters sent me home. I guess I had cracked up my "quota of planes." I got home to California two days before Christmas. So as we all know,

Combat ia a "piece of cake" if you live to come back home.