STORIES FOR THE 455TH

Fifty three (1944 - 1997) "Years of Remembrances"

For approximately the last 40 years I"ve had a knawing at my gut that we flying crews owe a big "toast" a (good Brandy) to the dedicated engineers and maintenance men. Long days, long nights, rain, cold and then the long awaiting hours for their planes to return from the mission.

Our crew flew 43 missions and never had to return to our airfield because of aircraft failure. (That should explain why I have had such good thoughts of the engineers and maintenance crews).

A few days ago, Col. Lanford and I were "B S" ing and he pressured me to write a few stories that had occurred after our lives separated over Yugoslavia when our plane took a second direct flak hit and we all bailed out just before it blew up.

For about 15 to 20 days, I hid and dragged through the forest hills headed south-east where we had been told in briefings that we could find friendly Yugo's in this area.

I've never been proud this event.

Late one afternoon I got careless and started across a big corn field to take a shorter route. I happened to see a young German soldier strolling across the cornfield.

" Thoughts" Did he see me ? Was he out to capture me ? Would he shoot me ?? Be quiet, hide quickly, maybe he was just out walking. I hid under a pile of corn leaves and held my breath until he was about 20 feet away. He had a small Mauser machine gun so I figured out that he must be out for some aircrew that had been spotted. I'll never forget the event. This small German boy was about 14 to 16 years old. Strolling along, humming a tune and evidently he was bored with this silly search. I shot him with my 45 CAL directly in the middle of his rib cage. He staggered backward, fell and never moved or made a sound. We were so close that no one could have missed.

When I left Yugo, I gave the 45 CAL and the German Mauser to the Yugo Partisanski and kept the small pistol the boy had in his pocket. (Still have the small pistol and the pocket size compass we were all issued.)

A few days later, I wandered out of a forest and saw a small isolated farm house and sneaked into the barn loft at dusk time and had a warm, soft hay bed for the first time in several weeks.

The small farm boy living there found me in the loft the next morning. He hollared to his Mom and ran to the house. I climbed down from the loft and walked to the house. His mother gave me a couple bowls of soup. It was my first food for quite a while. After convincing the mother and her husband that I was a Americanski airman fly man, the man rode off on his horse to find some friendly Partisanski.

After dark, a 5 man, 1 woman Partizanski search squad showed up. They looked and proved later on that they were really rough and tough. I found out later the Germans were really afraid of these squads that blew up trains and bridges plus sniped one or two German scouts. One of things that interested me was that the leader"s name was Joseph and the woman was his wife and her name was Mary. Small world isn't it. I covered the story in my previous stories in the 741st book where we were trapped on a cliff and we clobbered 21 Germans with German hand gernades. I still have a stamped piece of paper that states 21 Germani morta by Partizanski. By the way, I want more respect because they thought that I was very smart and educated. After I spoke both British and American. The squad plus me wandered south east toward Zabgreb for about a week where a small British twin engine plane landed in a very small field between two mountains in the black of night.Two little flashlites at one end and three flashlites at the other end.I think that I hail Mary'ed on that take off. By early morning he landed at a Brit airfield near Bari, Italy. The Brits fed me for about three days and they then turned me over to a U. S. airforce hospital at Bari, After two or three weeks, they sent me back to our squadron at Cerignola. Remember Col. Ken Cool. I have always thought that he was the smoothest best Sqd, Group and Wing leader I ever flew with. He kept me awhile testing the old birds that had had major repair. Again I thank the maintenance personnel. None came apart but a few engines pooped out. This we expected and didn't bother me much. After all, I'd like to find a pilot that has flown test planes and didnt have a few engine failures. Before sending me home to Calif in 1945, I had two incidents that you might enjoy. A "Wing wheel", called me and said that the Wing was in a bind. One old bird had been re-built from two planes, "I guess ". that had been banged up pretty good. They had re-built, tested and re-built and tested several times but the plane just couldnt stabilize and fly in a formation. So we were to fly this wreck to Naples and leave it there forever and they would send the B-25 to pick the three man crew. Pilot, cO-pilot and engineer. The next morning we flew to Naples. For some reason, On the final we lost two engines on the same side and the gears started to sneak back into the plane. We gently skidded along on the grass runway. Needless to say the plane was really a wreck now.

The old plane would never again threaten a squadron in formation. A few days later, our favorite wing told us that we were to cooperate on some crazy idea with the Artillery radar controller and he would guide the plane in line with the runway. The pilot would be Gus Wendt, myself and a engineer. Gus was to be hooded and the engineer and I were to be the safety eye's. These approaches were more like a circus. One-half mile off the runway over the tent area. Wonder how many nappy poo's were ruined this day. We made several over the grape fields before the controller finally found where the field was and we started out to find a way to guess the altitude. On one of these approachs the engineer and I decided to test Gus. We waited until it was pretty close then we hollered to pull up and miss the tall trees dead ahead. Needless to say, Gus didnt think this was fun and would you believe he spoke some nasty words. Nine months later, the new Air Force assigned me as an Operations Officer at Hamilton Field. About 30 miles north of San Francisco, Calif. I soon found out why of this assignment. The artillery radar tests had been put in my records and so the Air Force assigned me to cooperate with the Navy at Moffett Air Field Naval Station. Moffett airfield is about 20 miles from Hamilton airfield across the big bay. A new radar gizmo had been developed that could accurately guide altitude approaches and complete landings. (They said). The air force gave me a choice, a C-47, (gooey Bird.) or a C-45. A smaller twin engine plane. Before I had had a choice they said a C-45 was available. Probably becasue a C-45 wouldn't have made such a big mess. It didnt take me too long to dislike this assignment. A hooded full approach landing sure didnt sound too good. Two days and six landings, six hail Mary's and six years older proved that in a critical situation, it was possible.

How about this: The 455th had a hand in the development of a world wide G.C.A.

In a few months, the Air Force sent me to an Air Force airfield at Victorville, Calif. to fly B-24's to assist training Mickey B-29 operators for the Pacific war.

(Listen up you maintenance engineers). I had more engine failures in a few months (about 50-60 flights), than in my 455th GP time. My last thought:

I have had the following B-24 landings to remember :

13 - 3 ENGINE LANDINGS

5 - 2 ENGINE LANDINGS (1 of the 5 also had #4 on FIRE.

1 - 1 ENGINE LANDING. After this all, we must agree that the ole B-24 was a real tough bird.

BEST THOUGHTS: Lew Nixon