

Old Laughabull – The B-24 That Got Us Home!

By T/Sgt. (now Col.) Harry Bell

Editor's Note: In the August issue of "Flight Line," we published a photo of the B-24 diorama in our museum, and asked readers to submit a story based on their concept of what happened to that B-24. Here is the winning entry!

Oh, that B-24! Oh, that dirty old.....Sweetheart!

She got us back to Southern Italy one more time...her last time.

She was parted out in a wheat field, between Cerignola and Foggia, Italy. She had done her best. She, *Old Laughabull*, was my crew's replacement for that shiny, spanking-new Henry Ford B-24. You know, the kind he built one per hour/ twenty-four hours a day/ seven days a week – the kind we destroyed at about the same rate. The B-24 Liberator 4-engine bomber – the most-produced plane in World War II.

Now, guess what? We – my crew of ten, under the command of Lt. Yellow, picked up a shiny new B-24 at Lincoln, Nebraska. We had become a crew a few months before – in Tucson, Arizona. We also discovered there were some beautiful young ladies in Lincoln, and they needed to be picked up, too. Oh, the spoils of war!

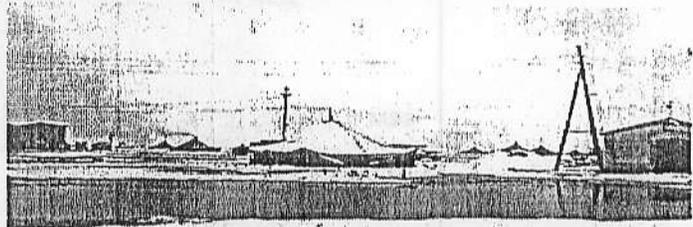
After swinging her compass, and working out a few minor kinks, we were off to "Somewhere." We found out where when we opened the orders. On to Bangor, Maine. It was a very unusual feeling when they ordered us to put all our identification and paper money in an envelope and mail it home. "Just keep your dog tags," we were told. I had ten dimes and they were to be my good luck charms. I soon believed that, as long as I still had at least one dime left, no harm could come to me. Before long, I added 50-mission-long underwear (not to be washed) to my good-luck-charm list. How great they both worked!

Then on to Newfoundland – tons of gas in the temporary bomb bay tanks. Two nights there – sweating out the weather – cold and windy. Then on to the Azores. I spent most of the night flight curled up around the nose wheel, catching short naps. You see, I was just a Corporal waist gunner. I was not the Pilot, or the Co-Pilot, or the Navigator, or the Radio Operator, or the Engineer. They had the important jobs. The Navigator was very busy, spending lots of time in the astrodome, "shooting" stars, and then sitting at his desk, dumbfounded. And the Radio Operator – reeled out his ball antenna, and finally got a signal!

Wow! There, in the morning sun, were mountains sticking out of the big old Atlantic. It had rained, and the ground was wet and muddy. It was about that time that our beloved Pilot tried to land with one wheel on the steel mat runway and one in the mud. Another save by our great

C.O. Pilot, and there were to be many more to come. He was, after all, only a Flight Officer.

The islands were hot and humid. The six of us enlisted men on the crew were assigned to a 6-man tent. That was probably how it was decided how many enlisted men would be on a B-24 crew. We were not permitted to go off the base, so we held up a part of the perimeter fence while our ball turret gunner slid under and headed for the nearest town. He soon returned with arms loaded with champagne. It was hot! It is a funny sight to see a grown man running around with a canteen cup in his hand, trying to catch a stream of bubbly after the cork pops. We probably managed to catch too much of the bubbly.



Six-man tents at the USAF Base in Cerignola, Italy.

Soon we were off to North Africa. We landed for gas, and spent the night in a 6-man tent. We were next to a large prisoner-of-war camp. There were Italian prisoners inside, and African women outside – teasing them. And then we were off to Cerignola, Italy. My stay there was less than five months. It doesn't take long to fly fifty missions if you fly nearly every day. The airfield was cut out of a large vineyard and olive grove. We pitched two tents next to each other. You guessed it – one for six enlisted men and one for four officers. Our bomb group headquarters was in the old winery, where we could watch girls stomp grapes as we were briefed for our missions. Yes, we had arrived at the 757th Bomb Squadron, 459th Bomb Group of the mighty 15th Air Force! It was only about two months before that the German Luftwaffe had been flying JU-88s off the same field. They had built the wooden tower, which we called Coffey Tower – and we continued to use it.

We had delivered that nice, new polished aluminum B-24, thinking it would continue to be ours. Wrong! The C.O. decided it would be his, but, worse than that, I let some smart-ass Sargeant snooker us out of our K-Rations. They would have been good snacks, or a substitute for a missed meal, when you got to sleep in. Guess what happened when the next new "green" crew arrived with K-Rations on board?

We flew our first two missions individually with a seasoned crew. Then we got an old dog of a plane, an olive-drab aircraft, and our crew was back together again.

Now the fun began. Up early – an orderly woke us. Down to the Bomb Group headquarters for our briefing. "And today, gentlemen, you are going to Ploesti (or Munich, or

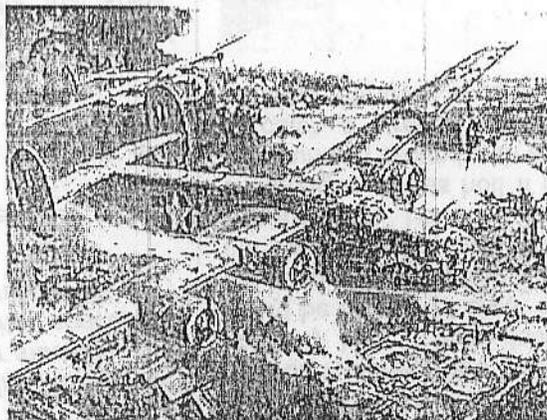
wherever). There is flak here, and fighters there, ...and so on..." as I watched the Italian girls stomp the grapes. And I thought about security and wondered if the girls could pass on anything to the enemy.

From briefing to breakfast. At first it was a picnic, outside, and later we got a shell of a building for a mess hall. From mess we went to a bin in a tent, where we kept our sheepskins, our parachutes and our flak suits. And then on to *Old Laughabull* OD B-24. Pre-flight, takeoff, form up, and climb to 40 below zero (usually about 23,000 feet). We would level off at the assigned altitude following our lead plane. Now it becomes real fun! Oxygen mask on...icicles on your chin...open gun-port windows...nice 140 mph breeze...throat mike...and COLD!

Now this was our twelfth mission, and it was Ploesti Oil Fields – the most heavily defended target in Europe. Yes, we did take too much flak, with too many big holes in our self-sealing gas tanks. Our Engineer got hit, so I got an instant promotion to Engineer. I did a great job of transferring gas from the leaking tanks to the good ones – if you don't mind my patting myself on the back. I also spliced a control cable with a gun charger cable.

On the way home – while over Yugoslavia, we estimated we had enough gas to get over the Adriatic Sea, and decided to press on. Everything not necessary – armor, ammo, flak suits, etc. – was tossed out to lighten the plane. We almost made it home. Just 30 miles short of Coffey Tower, with all props stopped, we bellied into a wheat field. Our hero was our Bombardier, for which he paid a heavy price. He actually survived until about ten years ago. Our wounded Engineer was lying under the top turret. That 800-pound Martin turret had a reputation of falling in a crash. The Bombardier arched his legs over the Engineer and took the force of the falling turret. Our hero also traded his 45 caliber pistol for the use of a farmer's horse to ride for help. An ambulance soon arrived, along with a "six-by" truck. The Engineer was taken to the hospital in Foggia, and the rest of us were driven to our six-man tent.

Old Laughabull had brought us home – just barely! It was to be her last flight.



B-24 Liberators over Ploesti oil fields.