

RUSSELL SANDHOEFNER'S ADVENTURES WITH THE 459th BOMB GROUP

These young men placed their lives on the line over and over again—perhaps less due to lofty ideals or overwhelming philosophical conviction than simply because it was the right thing to do. Their efforts contributed mightily to the destruction of Nazi Germany, a feared and thoroughly hated regime that was a menace to human freedom everywhere.

Formations of bombers jamming the skies of Europe, unpressurized aircraft with windows open to the moving air slipstream, air crew members thrust into combat with the mere rudiments of training. They commandeered southern Italian estates into heavy bomber bases. This was a unique period in history and it is now long gone; but for words placed in diaries and photos shot despite stringent prohibitions, their story largely would be lost. We are indebted to the men of the 459th Bombardment Group both for their deeds and for the manner in which they recorded them. Russell actually traded his wristwatch for a camera while in Italy. His buddy thought that was foolish, but we are truly grateful he did, for we have photos of his own plane in the air, of his tent, and of his buddies. What a treasure.

The days are quiet now. More than 50 years have slipped away since the last Liberator lifted off the rock-strewn gravel runway at Giulia, tucked away its wheels, and lumbered into the skies over southern Italy's plain. The B-24 Liberator was a four-engine bomber. In excess of 18,000 were built—more than any other US military aircraft ever. The Ford Company built them in Detroit along an assembly line, and every 55 minutes another one rolled out the door! Russell's plane was named "Ford's Folly".

The tents, equipment shacks, mess halls, hardstands, and even the runway itself, are all long gone, having returned to the vineyards and orchards from whence they sprang. Only the winery and its adjoining stately Roman residence remain, and their current occupants have neither memory nor knowledge of the exceptional series of events that unfolded here during a few brief months so many years ago.

The tale of the 459th Bomb Group is a tale of men and machines, of heroism and sacrifice, of hope and despair, of everyday living in the midst of extraordinary danger. It is how Depression-era Americans, many scarcely out of high school (Russell was 19), carried a war right to the heart of Adolph Hitler's Nazi Germany, striking over and over at his armies, his supply lines, his factories, his oil. It is irrepressible youth, managing somehow to find humor in the midst of gnawing fear and personal tragedy—and growing up, almost overnight. It's an incredibly exciting tale of airplanes and adventure. And it's all true.

Trouble hit the 459th Group even before they all assembled in southern Italy. Just getting there was hazardous in itself. This was a mere 16 years after Lindbergh's epic Atlantic crossing. Equipment was far from reliable in today's sense. Navigational aids and electronics were in their infancy. Weather prediction was more an art than a science, and even the aviation maps depicting many parts of the earth were sparsely and sometimes incorrectly featured. Procedures ensuring the safe operation of aircraft were in the early stages of development. And consider that most of the pilots, navigators, and other crew members had been high school students a few years earlier, and had never been on board an airplane. They lost 38 precious young lives enroute to Italy, surrendered mostly to the warm waters of the Caribbean Sea and South Atlantic. A dozen or so were seriously injured. Eight brand new aircraft were destroyed, and others damaged. (And this was just *getting to* Italy to start their missions!) The men who finally began their mission had already developed among themselves a comradeship and trust that would serve them well in the rigors of the combat that lay ahead. A few weren't able to take the pressure as the missions began. One of Russell's crewmates, Kevin Bowers, only lasted 1-2 days of flying. His position was down in the ball turret. During oxygen checks, he never responded when he was supposed to. He was taken off the crew and they never saw him again. Another buddy, Ole Olson from a Minnesota town close to Russell's, was shot down after a few missions. He managed to escape the Germans and make his way back, but unfortunately it all got to be too much for him and he committed suicide on his return.

GET ME OUT OF HERE

As Russell's crew was coming over from the U.S. to Italy, They had a stopover at Taranto, Italy. In the evenings, half of the crew was allowed to go out at a time. They drew straws to see who could go out each night. As Russell went into town, it was the first night out in a long time. They headed for a liquor store. The owner couldn't speak English at all. They were trying to figure out how to communicate with him when 3 British soldiers from the front lines with the 8th Army walked in. One of the men already was drunk. He walked right through all the men and demanded liquor from the shopkeeper. He was infuriated when the shopkeeper couldn't speak any English. He pulled out a hand grenade, unclipped it, and put it up to his teeth. Dad and his friends got the heck out of there. The two British buddies picked the guy up and took him out.

ANOTHER STOP

Another stop on the way to the airbase was Tunisia, Africa. They stopped and ate out of their mess kit under the trees. Several bugs kept getting in the food as they ate. They used sand to scrub out the bowls, and then rinsed them. For decades later, Russell would make a toast by saying, "Here's mud in your mess kit."

ARRIVAL

Russell's group finally arrived in Cerrignola near the end of September, 1944, and they were flown to the airbase by a pilot familiar with the area.

GIULIA FIELD

Giulia Field was an airbase, if you could call it that. It was a collection of vineyards and orchards in an ancient winery, with a scattering of buildings, many in disrepair. Grapes were brought by horse-drawn carts and then pressed for wine by barefoot Italians right in front of 459th Group Headquarters. Enlisted men were assigned 6 to a tent. Water and mud invaded tents not built on high ground. Damp conditions bothered everyone. The dirt floors made everything damp. Every time they touched the tent in the rain, it would begin to leak at that spot.

THE BARE NECESSITIES

On missions, they would carry a 45-caliber pistol, an escape kit containing money and information of the country they were bombing, and a small box containing K-ration food. These contained crackers, cheese, Vienna sausages, and a small box of about 4 cigarettes, enough for 1-2 days if hiding on the ground after a bailout. Sometimes the cigarettes were moldy but the food was welcome and even tasted pretty good on the way home. One man got so tired of the Vienna sausages that he got an idea. He knew they had seriously bombed Vienna and had lost many planes over that city. So he reportedly wrote a letter to the mayor of Vienna asking to make a deal: we'll stop bombing your city if you will stop making Vienna sausages...

MIDNIGHT REQUISITIONS

At first the tents were staggered in combat formation with fox holes next to them because German aircraft would strafe (shoot at) the tents. Later, when the Germans were gone from the area, the colonel called the men together and ordered them to fill up the fox holes and move the tents into a line according to military regulation. They were to make a floor for the tents with whatever they could find. One man raised his hand and asked, "Where are we supposed to get the supplies for all this?" The colonel simply answered, "Haven't you ever heard of midnight requisition?" This simply means they were to steal anything they could find.

CREATIVITY FOR SURVIVAL

Each man was issued one blanket and one folding cot. No clothing or bedding was available from supply. The men soon became very creative in making their temporary home more comfortable. All sorts of items were pressed into service. Helmets and peanut tins became wash basins and containers to hold hot water for shaving or a sponge bath. Showers were available in the nearby town of Cerignola, but it was inconvenient to lug a change of clothes and then stand in a long line waiting your turn. The lineup could be a block long for a 5-minute shower. Showers on base consisted of cold water pumped into barrels, another poor option. Russell never took an official shower the entire time he was there—opting for sponge baths using his helmet and water warmed from the stove.

Odd pieces of plywood formed tent doors, desks and chairs were made from shipping crates, and any suitable material that could be scrounged was used for flooring. One officer had been a brick mason, which came in handy for their tent. They used a huge 6x6 military truck and drove up to Foggia. Along a creek was a stone bridge. They dismantled the bridge brick by brick, figured out a way to make cement, and laid a great brick floor for their tent.

After awhile, as the missions were completed, and planes were shot down with their crewmen, others would go into empty tents and take what they needed. It was heart wrenching to contemplate as they went into the tents to grab badly needed items....were they killed in the bombing event, incarcerated in a German prison camp, beaten to death by irate civilians, or deep under the waters of the Adriatic?

Eventually Russell was able to build a wooden bed with a straw mattress and a straw pillow. Electric power was scarce and undependable, so kerosene lanterns lit the tents on long dark evenings. Oil-burning stoves were rigged and placed in the center of each tent. They would take a round steel drum, and cut a little metal door on it. Large rocks were placed in the bottom. A metal pipe was inserted through a hole in the top of the drum and took smoke out the top of the tent. They would sprinkle 2-3 drops of 100 octane aviation fuel on the rocks, step back, and wait for the “whoosh” as it lit up. They figured out how to make a control valve for the gasoline. The flue pipe got red all the way to the top. The squadron probably burned down about 6 tents with these rough “stoves”, but the men were able to stay warm due to American ingenuity.

GOING INTO TOWN

As the men walked around in the small town of Cerignola, many of them would be smoking cigarettes. Little Italian boys would follow them around. The minute a cigarette would be tossed away, the boys would all dive for it. They would very carefully unwrap it, discard the paper wrapper, and place the unspent tobacco in a pouch. Russell never knew if they sold it or just brought home to papa. On his original trip to Italy, Russell had purchased cartons of cigarettes at a stop in Newfoundland for 25 cents a carton. He later sold them for \$20 a carton in Italy.

SQUADRONS

The 459th Bomb Group had 4 squadrons, each of which had 7 planes. All 28 flew together on each mission. They took off one at a time on a steel-plate muddy runway. In the sky, they would all circle around the cathedral until the whole sky seemed full of planes. They each had 12 500-pound bombs aboard, all heading for the same target designated by briefing that morning. For part of the journey to the target, the formation of B-24's was joined by P51 and P38 fighter planes, which fought off any nearby German fighter aircraft. These Tuskegee airmen were supremely talented, and their planes were superior to German fighters (until the Germans invented the first jet plane that traveled 550-600mph at the end of the war), so their bomb group didn't lose any planes due to German fighters. The main purpose of the bombers was to stop the German force from proceeding in their advance. So they targeted oil refineries to stop fuel production for planes and trucks, aircraft factories, aircraft on the ground or in the air, and railroad yards. Before Russell's arrival, the 459th Bomb Group was part of the months of scrupulous preparation for D-Day, the Normandy invasion (June 6, 1944).

WHO'S ON FOR TOMORROW

Every evening the men would check a large blackboard inside the squadron operations office, showing what personnel would be on the mission the next morning. There was never a set schedule way ahead of time. There were many complicated factors deciding who went on the missions. First, the weather was always unpredictable, and this weighed heavily on the scheduling. Next, the planes were always brought back shot up, and it was never a certainty how many they would have ready to go again. Also, the seriousness and size of the mission influenced how many planes and men would be involved. The Vienna oil refinery was such an important and huge target, they bombed it 3 days in a row. Also, the availability of men also factored in. Many would get injured on the bomb run or get sick and have to recuperate. On very easy missions, the higher ranked people would go—they called them “milk runs”, which were safer.

Russell knew the Commander in Charge, Colonel Christy. They said he had ice water in his veins and loved the worst of missions. But he liked Russell and seemed to watch out for him. Some nights Russell would be playing in a band for the guys until late, and if he ended up being scheduled for an early morning mission, he would ask the Colonel to reschedule, and the Colonel would yell out to his assistant, “Scratch Sandy” (Russell’s nickname), so he could skip it.

Russell actually ran into the Colonel on the ship’s crossing to come back to the U.S. Some men saw the Colonel as they entered a room and saluted him, and the Colonel said, “Knock it off...the war’s over.” Then he offered Russell a swig of whiskey.

FORMAL PRESENTATIONS

On occasion, the squadrons would assemble at the headquarters on the field for special presentations in formal formation, such as for presenting medals or for special inspections. Upon Franklin Roosevelt’s death, they had a formal formation, and Russell was asked to play “taps”.

On one of these special formations, one of the pilots decided, either on a dare or just to show off, to “slow roll” a B-24 right over the event. This means he rolled it 360 degrees in the air. A B-24 is not designed to do this, and they later had to replace all the rivets in the wings. He was rewarded with six additional months of combat duty for his crazy stunt!

THE BRIEFING

The briefing room was set up in a large whitewashed wine cellar with an arched ceiling. Each morning before dawn, the briefing officer would gather the men for the details of the day’s run. A huge map of southern Europe stood before the men behind a big curtain. Each day after the men were seated, the curtain would be drawn, and a string of red tape was revealed for the day’s mission, with loud moans and groans. It always led to some God-forsaken spot loaded with flak towers ready to shoot at them. They issued a course to go in a certain direction, and then at an exact time, to turn in another direction, continuing until they reached the target. Movement was over the Adriatic Sea as much as possible, for there were no guns shooting at them from the sea. The destination was the IP—initial point. They would come up from the south. When they got to the exact IP, they stayed on the button to the target no matter what happened. From IP to target, controls went from the pilot to the bombardier since he had the exact place set up to hit the target. It was a very scary time since flak was hitting the plane from all over, and the bombs aboard the plane could go off. Germans had smoke pots all over to hide the bombsites from the bombardiers. When the crew finally heard “bombs away”, they sighed with a huge relief. The plane was much safer if hit with flak after the bombs had been released.

Then the men would be issued their meal of SOS (s__t on a Shingle), of a slice of bread with beef and gravy. They assembled their heavy suits, parachutes, and got ready to go.

CONTROL TOWER

The “control tower” for the airfield was a wooden shack on stilts, sort of like a tower used today for park rangers to spot fires. From this perch, an operations officer signaled to the planes with colored

flares: “engine start”, “taxi”, or “takeoff”. And from there, he would direct efforts of rescue personnel following crash landings of stricken Liberators returning all shot up. The tower held a special spot in the heart of every 459th air crewman. It was the mark of a safe arrival home after a harrowing day spent in the hostile skies of southern Europe.

At first, the main shortcoming of the runway was its gravel surface dotted with large rocks. Contacting one of these could tear a tire apart, especially if the plane was carrying a load of bombs and fuel. A number of take-off and landing accidents were attributed to tire blowouts. One time Russell remembers a tire blowout that felt like an atom bomb when it blew. A dozen planes were waiting right behind them to take off, and everyone had to wait while it was quickly fixed.

Later, they improved the runway by laying long sheets of connected metal to create a runway over the mud. Next to the runway and taxi strips were hardstands, where the planes were parked. Like the runway, the taxi strips and hardstands were metal sheets, and could become soggy messes in the rainy season. Mud seemed to be everywhere, but other Italian airfields were even worse, with men waiting knee deep in mud to enter a mess hall.

Ground crews would rev up the planes’ engines overnight, getting them ready for the next day’s mission. Then in the morning, the engine oil would settle down and had to be mixed up into the pistons, so the air crews took turns turning the prop a few rotations to mix the oil back into the pistons before the mission.

Take-off and landing crashes were commonplace. Many of these accidents were tragic. But surprisingly often, the 459th’s airmen managed to beat the odds and escape what appeared to be certain death. Since there was no control tower assistance, one man would stand up out of a top hatch actually telling everyone where to go and which planes were close by. Finally the plane would turn onto the runway and they would run the engines wide open until the plane almost shook to pieces...then, release the brakes and let her go. She would struggle to gain speed and finally lift off the ground...sometimes scraping the olive trees at the far end of the runway. Take-off was always “a sweat”...

Landing was always hazardous due to muddy runways and horrible weather. The control tower, nicknamed the “coffee tower” from a radio code, only could reach one mile away in radio communication. Farther than that required Morse code.

Most of the time, the planes had no radar whatsoever, for there was only 1 radar-equipped “Mickey” plane for each squadron, since radar technology was so new. These were saved for the most inclement weather. Russell had been trained for night crew missions to be used at night and in bad weather. On these mickey ships, the radar screen was placed in a dome in the ball turret, and it was easy to follow the land formations below by looking at the screen.

Landing without radar in bad weather was done “VERY VERY CAREFULLY”. The operations officer in the tower had to wait to visually see the planes returning from a mission. The pilots always looked for the huge Medieval cathedral in the town of Cerignola to help find their way to the airstrip. If a wounded man was aboard a returning plane, one of the air crew shot up a “very flare”, which was a pistol with a red flare attached. This was seen above the plane so the ground crew could assemble rescue personnel upon landing.

FLAK

Flak: the word that always struck a wave of sheer panic and fear in the heart of every crewman on a B-24. Huge concrete Flak Towers were constructed all over enemy territory. Upon these were stationed 128mm anti-aircraft guns (cannons). When the formation flew over the flak towers, the cannons were shot up at them. They were set to explode right at their altitude, after which an eerie puff of black smoke was seen. When the flak exploded in the air, shrapnel (metal pieces) were shot out in all directions. Many times these pieces shot right through the fuselage exterior of the plane. If there were enough of them, and if they were close enough, the plane would go down. There was so much flak as the formations flew over these towers, the entire sky was filled with shrapnel and black

smoke until it was like looking through a looking glass in another world, and it felt like you could get out and walk on it.

One time Russell's plane lost its oxygen supply as the tanks ruptured from flak. Then some flak buried itself into the rubber life raft on board, and set it on fire. Russell saw smoke going up in the plane and figured out what was on fire. The pilot calmly said, "Tell them to throw it out." They opened the side of the plane, picked up the burning raft, and threw it out. We wonder now how in the world these boys could keep their cool under such frightening circumstances. Russell says it is because they were very well trained.

The Europeans didn't know what to do with the imposing Flak Towers after the war. They tried to destroy them several times with explosives, but only succeeded in blowing out the windows of homes for blocks around. One was made into an apartment building.

JUST LIKE CHRISTMAS!

About halfway through each mission, the crew would begin throwing out packets of strips of tinfoil-like materials called chaff. The wind would tear the packets open, scattering the foil pieces. They were just like Christmas tree tinsel. These strips would give the enemy radar false readings for shooting their flak. When the flak was just outside their window, the men tended to throw this stuff out really fast!

IT'S COLD UP THERE

Bone-chilling cold was the constant companion of every Liberator crew member. Missions were flown with the waist windows open much of the time, and, of course, the bomb bay doors were open during bomb runs which typically lasted ten or fifteen minutes. Temperatures at 20,000 to 25,000 feet varied from 0 to as much as 70 degrees below zero. Only the flight deck (the very front) was equipped with heaters, and their operation was erratic. Crew members wore electrically heated suits, including gloves and slippers—the forerunners of electric blankets. These failed frequently, so it was always advisable to wear heavy flying suits and boots over your electrically heated suit; severe discomfort and frostbite could be the result of not doing so. Light silk gloves were worn under the electric gloves, because they had to work their gun. If they touched their gun without a glove in those freezing temperatures, the hand would instantly freeze to the gun.

LIKE CLIMBING EVEREST

The high noise levels within the plane tended to isolate crew members, especially those in turrets. A crew member could suffer anoxia without his buddies knowing. More than one B-24 returned to base with a dead gunner in his turret, the victim of a faulty oxygen system or an incorrect oxygen hookup. To combat this, the crews conducted regular oxygen checks, usually initiated by the bombardier, when flying at altitudes above 10,000 ft. Without oxygen for 10 minutes, a person would just quietly fall asleep and never wake up. During training back in the U.S., they would simulate going up to 35,000 feet. The instructor would ask for volunteers to take their mask off in the simulation, and write down the words to "Mary Had a Little Lamb." Later, they looked at the paper, and it said, "Mary had alittle.....and the guy was already unconscious.

I GOTTA GO TO THE BATHROOM

In keeping with their total disregard for crew comfort, the airplane designers gave little thought to the need for urination, though mission lengths frequently exceeded 8 hours. Most planes had relief tubes at the pilot's and copilot's stations; some had them in the ball turret and in the waist. There were no such provisions in the nose of the Liberator, so most navigators, bombardiers, and nose gunners just held it!

Any use of the relief tubes at altitude during a mission was likely to bring on tirades of vulgarity from the ball and tail turret gunners, because urine discharged from the tubes would swirl in the moving air slipstream and freeze on the turrets, obstructing the gunners' views. Crew members

seldom used the relief tubes anyway because their layered clothing and other items such as parachute harnesses made it very awkward. Also, the urine instantly froze in the tube. They figured out how to simply use a 5 gallon pail held in the waist area. The urine instantly froze in the pail. After they would land, they took turns taking the pail out and turning it upside down to thaw on the hardstand.

Going #2 in the plane was nearly impossible. When his plane flew over the Atlantic, the longest leg was from Newfoundland to the Azores Islands off the coast of Africa. They had a huge temporary gas tank put into the bombay so they would have a big reserve of gasoline to get over the whole ocean. About halfway across, Russell had to relieve himself. He came up with the idea of using a box carton that was storing items in the plane. He folded up the box and went up to the cat walk. It was about 8 inches wide in a B-24. The bombay doors rolled up like a desk drawer. He went up to the forward part of that and reached the lever to the bombay doors. Now he is standing 8,000 feet above the Atlantic, going about 160-180 mph. He took the box and threw it down as hard as he could to get past the slipstream of air. It just barely cleared the back end of the bombays. A little later, the pilot called on the radio asking him how he did it, because he had to go, too. So he got a box and emptied it of its items and also used it. Then he went up to the bombay and crept along the 8 inch catwalk. But instead of throwing it down really hard, he just dropped it. The slip-stream got hold of it and tore the box into shreds, and the contents flew all over the inside of the plane. The next day they landed in Marrakech, Morocco on the desert. It was very hot there, and they had to hose out the brand new plane because it got to smelling very bad. Everyone thought that was super funny.

NAVIGATING—NOT SO EASY

Navigation aboard the B-24 was not an easy task, given the lack of sophisticated technology. Russell's navigator, Lyle McCarty, was an intelligent man who learned quickly the nuances of navigation in this plane. Many planes were lost due to less able navigators, with search and rescue in constant surveillance of lost craft. There was no time for thorough training. The war was losing so many men; they had to get more in very quickly. When traveling from Newfoundland to the Azores to get to Italy, it was a tricky business traveling the length of the Atlantic. McCarty had a note taped to his map onboard to "ask Sandy"—Russell was the radio operator, and had a radio compass on the fuselage. Using regular radio broadcasts, he was able to make a determination of position. This was cross-checked with the navigator's position findings in order to determine the exact position over that wide open sea.

FROZEN MUD

Giulia Field's gravel runway and ever-present mud introduced a complication. On the takeoff roll, mud would be thrown up into the bomb bay door tracks; as the formation climbed to altitude, the mud would freeze. Then, 2 or 3 hours later as the formation reached the IP (initial point), and the bomb run began, bombardiers would find the frozen mud prevented the doors from opening. The initial solution to this problem was simple enough: drop the bombs through the closed doors. But the poor aircraft mechanics nearly went crazy replacing bomb bay doors each night when the group returned from a mission. Ultimately, the problem was eliminated by exercising the doors as freezing temperatures were encountered during the climb to altitude. This dislodged the mud as it was hardening, and the bombay doors then worked flawlessly when the group turned from the IP toward the target—just as their designer intended. This does not mean the bombs necessarily were released as they should. It was one thing to get the doors open with frozen mud; it was another to get the bombs released. Many times Russell had to carefully walk along the 8" wide catwalk beam over an open bottomed airplane to manually kick the bombs free, hanging of for dear life with his oxygen tubing and heavy gear ready to topple him over. When the bombs were all released, they heard "bombs away!", which gave everyone a sigh of relief. The plane was much safer from flak *after* the bombs were gone!

CATCHING MICE

It was a fun way to pass the time—try to catch the mice and rats. Most of the time they used traps. Russell made a little notch on a wooden door every time he caught a mice or rat. He had 2 columns, one for “confirmed”, and one for “probable”, making a joke on the Dog fights shooting down German fighters. One night he was not quite asleep, and there was still a little light in the tent. He saw a huge rat under a buddy’s bed. He pulled out his Colt 45 issued pistol and wanted to take it out right there. He thought against it since the buddy was sleeping right above!

ON FIRE

Russell participated in a practice mission with only the pilot, copilot, engineer, and radio man. The engineer, who reads the air speed indicator, sat right next to him. Russell saw a flicker of light just past the engineer, and looked out the oval window. Engines 3 and 4 were ok. He looked out the other oval window, and saw engine 2 on fire. He yelled out, “#2 engine is on fire.” The pilot replied, “We’ll feather it.”, which means turn the engine off and turn the blades into the wind to help keep the plane going. As they approached the runway, a severe crosswind was blowing them off the edge of it. They were too close to the ground to bail out. They folded up the radio table and assumed the crash position with their hands behind their head.

The engineer went out on the catwalk. Russell jumped out of his seat to go over to the catwalk and told him to turn off engine 2. He said he did. Russell pulled the lever to open the rolling Bombay doors and expose them to the ground below. They saw the ground and the plane being blown off the runway by the crosswinds. The landing gear came down and they saw the wheels touch the ground. He waited a minute for the plane to slow down slightly, and then he jumped off, right in front of engine 3. The engineer jumped out and pushed Russell very hard out of the way of the engine, saving his life! Russell ran in between the spinning propeller and the landing gear and over to the mud. They all expected the plane to blow up. The engineer was six feet behind him running as well, and all of them got into the mud. Fire trucks came up immediately, but the fire had stopped when they turned the gas off the engine. They were able to take a week off after that landing to recuperate!

BACK ON THE GROUND

Immediately after landing after a mission, they would be taken to the headquarters to be interrogated by the intelligence officers. Each man had to report anything unusual that he saw on the mission, and everything was written down. Then the Red Cross would give out coffee and donuts.

NOT THE 4TH OF JULY

One night in October, 1944, Russell was in his tent and began to hear a series of popping sounds. He ran outside and saw the whole sky lit up like a huge orange explosion. He heard, “Hit the dirt”. They felt the concussion of explosion, with no explanation of what was going on. They later learned it was “Norma”, a B-24 simply sitting on its hardstand near the runway overnight. It was fully loaded with 10 500-pound bombs and 2,750 gallons of fuel ready for the next day’s mission. In an instant, nothing was recognizable but machine gun barrels found a quarter of a mile away, and a crater 15 feet in diameter and 10 feet deep. Several planes next to it were also damaged or destroyed. No one ever found out what had caused the explosion.

DELAY ACTION

One of their bombing targets was railroad yards, so they could stop transportation by the enemy. However, The Germans would use Italian slave labor to begin patching up the stations immediately after a bombing. The Allies responded by creating “delay action” bombs, which would bury themselves 5-6 feet under the ground, and explode at different delayed times. The slave labor was extremely frightened to work on the railroad yards after that!

DITCHING

Ditching was a forceful landing in a body of water. This was almost always fatal, because a B-24 would invariably break in half at the bombay section of the plane upon impact. During one flight, Russell saw a plane going down into the Adriatic Sea, and sent an SOS for them. They were at a very high altitude, so they couldn't see the actual crash into the sea of the other plane. The Navigator gave Russell the coordinates for the SOS. The British employed air-sea rescue operations throughout Europe to look for planes such as this.

One story of a successful ditching concerned Clement Pless, a tail-gunner in the tent next to Russell's. His plane got shot up over the target. As the plane headed back to base, he still was able to shoot down a German ME109 fighter with his tail gun. The plane crash-landed into water. Pless was rescued. He broke his back, but after a hospital stay, was able to complete his last missions.

PLANE DOWN!

Mission No. 162, on December 12, 1944, was to bomb the oil refinery at Blechhammer, Germany. Bad weather prevented the mass formations of bombers that were the norm, and as a rule, only 2 radar-equipped planes were sent up to harass the enemy, and hopefully to do some damage to the refinery. That day, for some unknown reason, Russell's crew was assigned to fly the radar-equipped aircraft nicknamed the Blushing Virgin, based across the field at the 759th Squadron. They were taken by truck to the waiting aircraft, only to be told they would not be allowed to use it. With reasons unknown, they were taken back to their 757th squadron to use a radar equipped aircraft based there.

Take-off was risky and dangerous as they tried to stay close to the Blushing Virgin as they climbed up through the heavy weather, half the time not being able to see her right next to them. However, rising above the cloud cover, it was bright sunshine, and they settled down for the long flight. The flight plan took them to the East, over the Adriatic Sea, and soon over the German/Russian battle lines. There they turned north, flying over Russian-held territory. They wore special American Flag Arm Bands to be identified by the Russians in the event that they would have gone down in their area. Somewhere over Poland they turned west, back over the German/Russian battle lines and continued on course to the target.

Above the clouds the weather was clear and they could see the Blushing Virgin droning along to the right of them, and a hundred feet or so lower than them. At that point, one of their crew called out there was smoke coming out of one of the Blushing Virgin engines. All of their crew members watched closely as their pilot moved the plane a little farther away. Should that plane explode with a full bomb load, they didn't want to be too close. The smoke continued for about five or 10 minutes, and then she caught fire. Roaring flames reached back to the tail section. Soon they saw the crew members bailing out, and watched as their parachutes opened, and they drifted down into the clouds. The now-doomed Blushing Virgin, flying on auto pilot, slowly lost altitude, and drifted to the left and passed below them, with a raging fire, and disappeared in the clouds. They continued on course to fulfill the planned mission to hit the target. However, shortly the radar officer announced the radar set had failed to function. This made it impossible to hit the target through the clouds, and it was decided they would try to find a hole in the clouds and hit a target of opportunity.

About that time, their engineer who monitored fuel consumption was yelling that they better drop the bombs and head for home, or they will run out of gas. They did finally find a target, dropped the bombs, and headed for home. The incredible events of the day didn't end there, as they were attacked by eighteen enemy fighter planes, and after a few short bursts, they dove into the clouds and lost them. They continued their flight, avoiding known flak gun areas, finally reaching the base. On their final approach to their runway, one of the engines ran out of gas and the second one stopped as they touched down, and the last 2 quit before they reached the end of the runway. They all believed that surely the Lord was with them that day. Later they learned that all the crew of the downed plane had gotten to ground safely. The navigator, Lt. Levine, was Jewish, and this showed on his dog tags. Christian military had a cross on their dog tags and Jewish had a star. The Germans shot him the next morning. The others were briefly held as POW's and later released.

CHEK TROUBLE

One day two Czechoslovakian pilots decided they had enough of the war and tried to land on the Giulia Field airstrip. The ground control wouldn't allow them to land on the strip, so they landed along the mud next to it, crashing into a stone wall. The military police took them as POW's. Allied POW camps treated the prisoners very fairly and decently. There were also POW camps in the U.S., including one near Russell's home town of New Ulm, Minnesota, probably because many people in the town could speak German. They didn't even have a huge fence to keep them in, just a single wire indicating the exterior edge. Several POW's returned to live in the U.S. after the war because of the positive interaction they had as prisoners. The camp in New Ulm later became a Girl Scout Camp.

EAGLE'S NEST

Hitler had a "summer getaway" called the Eagle Nest, at Berchtesgaden. On the way back from a bombing mission, Russell's crew begged the pilot if they could each take a shot at the building just for fun, even though it wasn't on the list to be bombed. The pilot agreed. Later, in 1985, Russell and his wife visited the area on vacation. He wanted to try to get to the roof to see if he could find any shot marks. It is almost impossible to reach the building. It is a restaurant today, but in order to get to it, you have to climb a curvy mountain road by car, then park it in a certain parking lot and get on a bus, and then finally upon exiting the bus, you enter an elevator that actually takes you up through the middle of the mountain. That is the only way to reach the building!

PROTECTING THE INNOCENT

On Dec 18, 1944, they took off for an oil refinery target in a Polish town called Ausweisen. Russell lay on the floor of the hatch ready to drop the bombs. During the earlier briefing, they were given strict orders not to drop the bombs until exactly over the oil refinery, but they didn't say why. Later Russell learned that it was very close to the Auschwitz concentration camp, so his superiors didn't want to harm the prisoners with the dropped bomb. An airplane right next to them in the air got hit pretty heavily with flak. They had to bale out over the mountains in the southern area of Poland. One fellow was of Polish descent and spoke the language fluently, so he was picked up by the freedom fighters. One of these rescuers would later be named Pope Paul.

WHAT IN THE HECK IS GOING ON

They had Italian prisoners of war working in the mess hall. There was a rumor that one of them had dropped a bar of soap in the coffee urn. At about 2am, everybody, including Russell, had to run to the latrine. So many people got SO sick they didn't even make it to the latrine. They had to ground a whole mission of 27 airplanes fueled and ready to go, and there was an investigation, but everyone knew it was a bar of soap! Later in the afternoon, they scheduled an extra mission when people were feeling better, to drop fragment bombs on Germans in the front lines. The bombs exploded in the air just above the troops. No need to waste a day despite diarrhea!

CRAZY OR JUST DARING?

On Russell's last mission, Denny Colbert was the pilot. There was heavy cloud cover; a radar plane was in the lead. The rest of the formation followed tightly along. Their goal was to bomb bridges at the beginning of Brenner Pass in the Alps, to stop vehicle transportation through it. They circled through the heavy clouds after hitting their target, slowly descending over the relative safety of the Adriatic. There was no way to actually see the ground in cloud cover so they descended over water. All of a sudden, Colbert broke out of formation. It was his last mission, too, and no one knew what in the world he was thinking. He went back to northern Italy, and came upon the Tuskegee Air base. It was Sunday morning, and the men were in church. Colbert "buzzed" the church, which means he flew extremely low and barely missed the steeple. With all 4 engines roaring at max capacity, the sound was deafening and the men below were scared out of their wits. Someone took note of the tail insignia of the plane and reported it. Colbert and the whole bomb group got a good bawling out, but

since it was his last mission, he was never formally reprimanded. Russell had been on his hands and knees on the plane praying “Let’s just get home for Heaven’s Sake!”

WE’RE GOIN’ HOME!

Russell boarded the USS Mariposa on May 9, 1945, for a 10 day crossing home. As the ship finally entered the Boston harbor, the 5,000 men onboard were very anxious to get home. The ship was designed as a cruise ship for 500 passengers. They used every square inch to make bunk beds out of piping.

Russell’s friend “Brownie” was a gambler, and he had saved Russell’s life, so Russell lent him \$90 on the boat. Russell had traded his lira in for U.S. dollars in a replacement Depot in Naples as they were waiting 2-3 weeks to board the ship to go home. There was lots of gambling on the ship. In the library area was a huge crowd of guys. Brownie shoved some cash in Russell’s pocket and said, “Save this for me so I won’t gamble it.” It was \$2,000 he had already won on the ship. Later, he gave him another \$2000 for safekeeping. He was a good card player! Brownie then went around to all the guys to pay them back his loans. He gave Russell back the \$90 plus \$20 for his kindness. Russell tried to find him after the war, but was not able to find him.

Russell was in his cabin getting his gear packed and ready at the end of the 10 day journey. He started noticing the ship was listing (leaning over) to one side. He dismissed it, figuring there were tug boats moving the ship into the harbor. The feeling got more pronounced, and finally there was a loud roar like a crowd at a football game. So Russell finally decided to go up to the deck to see what was going on. It took him awhile to get to the upper deck. For safety reasons, the ship’s windows and exits were all blacked out. The men couldn’t even light a match which could be seen outside by enemy submarines. The ship was leaning so bad that when he got to the wet wooden deck, he slipped all the way to the railing. He finally was able to see the cause—in front of the building on shore was an attractive young woman. The men onboard hadn’t seen an American girl for 5 years, and everyone wanted to get a look. The authorities finally ordered everyone back to their quarters so the ship could balance itself out again!

Immediately upon exiting the ship’s ramp, they boarded a train bound for Camp Miles Standish. They were the first soldiers back since the German surrender, so they were treated like royalty, with fresh milk, ice cream, and steaks.

A BIG SACRIFICE

During its 14 months of combat operations, 82 members of the 459th Bomb Group were killed in action, 129 were wounded, and 1,021 were missing in action. In addition to these personnel casualties, they lost 160 B-24 aircraft.

Only the airmen of the 459th Bomb Group truly know the sacrifices they experienced as close buddies sometimes never made it back to their tent. Vivid memories would stay with them for as long as they live, and endless stories come to mind as veteran friends in their 80’s gather to share and remember, grateful to be alive. They daily celebrate the freedoms they fought for, and remember that more men were killed in the air over Germany than all the soldiers on the front lines in World War II.

The generations to follow will look on in wonder as they read the colorful stories of danger and fear experienced by this generation of brave young men. Most of all, the 459th Bomb Group would like future Americans to carry on their heritage of patriotism and loyalty to the greatest country on earth, and to never take our freedom for granted.