

WWII EXPERIENCE OF SSGT NEPHI MICHAEL "MIKE" LUKER  
VETERAN B-24 Crew #6181 - 757<sup>th</sup> Bomber Squadron - 459<sup>TH</sup> Bomber Group  
304<sup>th</sup> Wing - 15<sup>TH</sup> Airforce United States Army Air Corps  
Giulia Field, Cerignola, Italy

By Lynn M. Luker, son of N. Michael Luker

Nephi Michael "Mike" Luker, was born in Pocatello, Idaho on Thanksgiving day, November 26, 1925, the youngest child of Brazill and Wilhelmine Weger Luker. His youth was spent in the small farming communities of McCammon, Readyville and Inkom, Idaho, and later in Pocatello, where he attended Jr. High and High School. Life was challenging during the Depression, but he enjoyed hunting with friends, riding the family horse, working at a local dairy, and participating in boy scouts and earning his Eagle Scout award. Mike was an excellent student who loved writing, but he was restless with the war on, and in the spring of 1943 he left Pocatello and the 11<sup>th</sup> grade to live with his older brother Ed in Salt Lake City.

Mike described the beginning of his military service as follows:

*In November, 1943, just before my 18<sup>th</sup> birthday, I joined the Army Air Corps Enlisted Reserve. I was called to duty on January 21, 1944 at Fort Douglas, Utah and received basic training at Buckley Field, Colorado. I attended flexible gunnery school at Kingman, Arizona and graduated 8 May 1944. I completed air combat training at Biggs Field, Texas on August 10, 1944.*

In early March, 1944, Mike wrote to his family from Buckley Field, Denver Colorado, and described a little about his basic training:

*We're just about through with our Basic training now and they're really making soldiers out of us. We drill all day long practicing close order drill formations, column movements and battle tactics. Once or twice a week we pack our field equipment and march 20 miles to an open campsite and spend two or 3 days performing field maneuvers. It's a pretty long trip and plenty tough and tiresome. Lots of fellows can't take it but for those who were scouts or boys who liked the out-of-doors, it's just another hike. I think we'll be leaving Buckley Field some time this month. I don't know where we'll go from here.*

He quickly learned about his next training stop. When he wrote his next letter on March 17, 1944, he was in Kingman, Arizona:

*Boy it's swell to be in a warm climate again. Kingman is a little town close to the California border. ... We're right out in the desert but the place is really quite nice except for the dust storms. ... Right now the weather here is just right but pretty soon it will be hot as blazes here. . . . I ran into a couple of fellows I went to school with here. It sure seems good to talk to friends you know for a change. Tomorrow is Sunday so I guess I'll get up early and go to the first church service. It's just across the street from our barracks here.*

A month later, still at Kingman, Mike wrote on April 20, 1944:

*We've been practicing simulated combat flights at Yucca, Arizona, and boy oh boy you can't find time to do anything. Yucca is right out in the middle of the*

*desert a hundred miles from anywhere. It really gets warm there too. . . . I did start to write you a letter on Easter Sunday, but I just couldn't get in the mood. I was feeling kinda low that day – maybe I was homesick. Anyhow after writing one page I decided it was useless to try so I tore it up. It rained all day Easter too – the first rain I've seen in 4 months. Maybe that's what caused my melancholy mood. Well we all have our bad days now and then but like the song says:*

*There's a silver lining  
Through each dark cloud shinning –  
And sure enough I soon came out of it.*

*We sure got a big let down the other day though. I'm in class 44-19 which means it's the 19<sup>th</sup> class going through Kingman in 1944. Up until now all classes have received a 10 day delay-in-route after graduating. We will graduate about the second week in May and everyone has been looking forward to that time contemplating what fun he'd have at home for 10 days. And then it came – an order from General Arnold canceling all furloughs, leaves, and delays-in-route until further notice. Needless to say we were all plenty mad. Some men haven't had a furlough in 18 months. Others had planned to be married then and some had even bought their tickets in advance.*

*About then rumors started to fly thick and fast. The most popular one was that we were being sent across to resume training in or near a combat theater. The commanding officer finally cleared things up by telling us that we will not go overseas yet. When we graduate from here we will go to an operational training unit for 150 hours of flying time under simulated combat conditions such as we have been preparing for the last couple of weeks. After that the POE (Port of Embarkation) which means we'll be going over in the not-so-far distant future. It's easy to detect a certain uneasiness-a hustle bustle, hurry up attitude all through the army.*

*They're getting ready for the big push over there and they need men badly to back up the spearhead of the invasion. Well someone has got to win this war and the more men and equipment they have to do it with the sooner the day of victory and peace will come. So we can't expect anything – We're ready to go anytime. The average class going through this school has from 400 to 500 students. And when you stop to think that it takes a whole class to replace the men lost in a single raid over Europe, one begins to realize the seriousness of this business.*

After Mike graduated from gunnery school at Kingman on May 8, 1944, and despite the hold on furloughs, he and his classmates did receive a few days off. They were then sent to Lincoln, Nebraska, for what was to be a short stay. Nevertheless, Mike did not arrive at Biggs, Field, Texas until early in the morning on June 15, 1944. Later that day he had time to write home:

*Well we're finally settled at our new station and for the first time in 3 weeks I've got a little spare time so I'll scratch off a page or two. . . . When we arrived at Lincoln from our furloughs they asked us not to write out because we would only be there a very short while. But for some reason or other they held us over there for almost 3 weeks and during this time we were on K.P. and details constantly. Needless to say we were glad to learn last Tuesday that we were shipping to El Paso. We arrived here today (Thurs 15<sup>th</sup>) after bidding good-bye to all our old buddies in Lincoln. They split us all up so everyone had to go through the old*

*process of becoming acquainted with new fellows again. Most of my old buddies went to Gowen Field in Boise about two days after we left. I don't know why I was picked out to come down here but that's the army for you. I certainly would have liked to be sent with that bunch though. Gee I could have come home on a 3 day pass every once in awhile and right when the fishing is good too. Yeah I was sure gyped.*

*We arrived here at Biggs Field about 5 a.m. this morning and what a sight greeted our eyes! This is the biggest army camp I've ever seen and I've seen some pretty big ones. It's really 3 army camps all together. There are about 60 or 70 thousand men in the anti-aircraft division about ½ west from here. On the other side is another army ground force camp and in between them is Biggs Field. It's about the finest field I've ever been to. The barracks are big modern two story buildings with lots more room than the cramped quarters we've been used to so long. There are plenty of recreation facilities including a swell swimming pool, a fine gymnasium and of course theaters, service clubs, etc.*

*But boy does it ever get hot here in the daytime! I guess we'll get used to it before long though. We'll be stationed here until August 28 training for combat and then we'll go overseas to one of the combat theaters. All my previous training has been on B-17s but for some reason I was shifted to a B-24 detachment. Boy this next two months is really going to be rugged. We'll be on the go all the time. When we're not flying we'll be going to school and making an intensive study of combat operations.*

Mike's graduation from gunnery school at Kingman must have also brought a promotion to Private First Class, as his return addresses changed from Pvt. to Pfc. with this first letter from Biggs Field. Additionally, specific crew assignments or crew mates were not mentioned in his letter, however, his return address also noted that he was assigned to Crew #6181. That was the crew he remained with through his service and which he referred to with trust in his next letter. The D-day invasion on June 6<sup>th</sup> created optimism, however, the crews knew little about their final destination. This is evident from Mike's surprise about being assigned to B-24s and was also reflected in a letter he wrote at the end of June, 1944:

*Well we're doing our best to help get this war over in the shortest possible time so we can the sooner go back to our homes . . . And the way things have been going these past few weeks it looks like we're right on their heels, huh? I don't think Germany will still be willing to fight any longer after the invasion is well under way. Perhaps that's being a bit optimistic, but the majority of us feel that we'll be marching through Berlin by Christmas. Let's hope and pray for it anyway.*

*The commanding General of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Air Force addressed us yesterday and from what he said it looks like our chances of getting a furlough before we go over are pretty slim. Among other things he said that due to the great strain put upon our Air Forces in the U.K. more and more replacements for heavy bombardment crews are being called for. In fact he remarked that we should not be surprised if we should be called before our training period is complete. So judging from what he said we stand a good chance of flying the high skies over England by next August or early September. Of course no one can tell where we'll finally end up. Personally, I would rather go to the South Pacific theatre, but we don't have anything to say about that. . . .*

*Well goodbye for now and may God grant that we'll all be home with our loved ones soon. Remember us in your prayers and don't worry ever. I have*

*faith that the Lord will bring us safely thru the trials which lie ahead. I'm with a very good and competent crew and I think we'll do all right over there. So until that day when once again men shall live in peace, I remain your loving son Michael.*

The reason for Mike's preference for the Pacific theater was not stated. Perhaps it was a desire for sand and palm trees, or maybe it was because a brother-in-law Richard Oliver, married to older sister Linda, was serving in that theater in B-17s. There could also have been an unmentioned sadness about dropping bombs on his mother's homeland. His mother Wilhelmine Weger Luker was born and raised in Würzburg, Bavaria, Germany. Having accepted the message of Mormon missionaries as a young woman, she was baptized in the Main River in Frankfurt, Germany, and then emigrated to the United States in 1904. However, whatever the reason for his preference, Italy was not on his list of possible assignments. Mike would not end up in either England or the Pacific, and he would help drop bombs on Germany.

Simulated combat training at Biggs Field was not without danger. In a July 12th letter home Mike wrote:

*Well we've got to fly again in about an hour so I'll close for now and dash over to Briefing. A couple of our crews cracked up on the 4<sup>th</sup> of July. Some were killed and all were pretty seriously injured. If we had been flying that day we would have been in one of the planes.*

Another letter home written the end of July added more color about the training, his crew and life around Biggs Field in Texas:

*It's 2 a.m. Saturday morning now and I'm not very sleepy so I thought I'd write a few letters. We just came in from a night bombing mission – been upstairs at (20,000 feet) for 6 hours. It was my first night mission and it was quite an experience. We were on oxygen from the ground up and it was really cold up there. We haven't been issued our heated suits yet so we had to use our light summer outfits. Our pilot was practicing "blind" flying on instruments only and he really does a good job too. We've got a pretty good crew all together. I'm the Assist. Radio Operator on our ship but I don't really know what I'll be assigned to overseas. If we are sent over as a group I'll be with my crew, but if we are sent as replacements it's hard to say where I'll go or what I'll be.*

*It has been raining for the past couple of hours and for once the air is cool and breezy and refreshing. Too bad it didn't rain all night. Tomorrow it will be hot and sultry as usual. I went to El Paso yesterday. It's quite an old town but there are lots of places too. El Paso is right on the border of Mexico and there are lots of Mexicans in the town. Juarez, Mexico is just across the Rio Grande River, but I haven't been there yet. I want to visit Mexico before we leave here though.*

*. . . Guess the garden is all up by now and radishes and lettuce ought to be ready to eat by now, huh? Yesterday we had watermelon and corn on the cob. Boy! was that good. They really feed us the best down here – just the same as the officers get only they have to pay 45¢ per meal for it.*

*Tomorrow we have to practice "ditching." That's what your crew does when the ship crashes into the sea. Each ship has two life rafts and provisions for keeping 10 men alive for as long as a month but some men have survived for even longer periods than that. . . . Guess I'll go take a shower and turn in.*

Mike departed Biggs Field with his crew and arrived at overseas Port of Embarkation, Camp Patrick Henry, Virginia Sep 8, 1944. He arrived at the Port of Debarkation, Bari, Italy on October 8, 1944. His B-24 Crew #6181 piloted by Lt. John T. Cobb, was assigned to Guilia Field. Guilia Field was situated about 6 miles northeast of Cerignola, Italy and was part of the Foggia Airfield complex made up of over 20 allied airfields within a 25 mile radius. Guilia Field was assigned to the 459<sup>th</sup> Bomber Group flying B-24 Liberator heavy bombers for long range strategic bombing of Italy, France, Germany, Czechoslovakia, Austria, Hungary, Romania, Bulgaria, Albania, and Greece.

Several squadrons of B-24's were part of the 459<sup>th</sup> at Guilia Field, including the 757<sup>th</sup> squadron of which Mike and his crewmates were part. The B-24s of the 459<sup>th</sup> were identified by a distinctive yellow and black checkerboard on the lower portion of the rear stabilizers, and a black diamond on top. The airmen of Crew #6181 with their initial assignments and ranks upon arrival at Guilia Field were: Lt. John T. Cobb – Pilot; Lt. Kenneth Robertson – Co-Pilot; Lt. Richard Santure – Navigator; Lt. Elmer Blackmon – Bombardier; Sgt. Howard D. Hansen – Engineer / Gunner; Sgt. David Odenath – Radio Operator / Gunner; Cpl. Robert E. Himmelberger – Gunner / Asst Engineer; Cpl. Henrey Kukulinsky – Armorer / Gunner; Cpl. Michael Luker – Ball turret gunner / Asst radio operator; Cpl. Carl J. Dobrenic – Tail gunner / Asst Armorer.

In his first note home from Italy on October 16, 1944, Mike wrote:

*[W]e had an exceptionally long voyage and . . . have moved several times since we landed here in Italy. . . we've finally gotten settled. It is still warm in the daytime, but at night we use 5 blankets because it really gets chilly. We live in pyramidal tents 6 men to a tent and all in all they are quite comfortable. The food is very good considering the fact that we are in a combat zone. In fact conditions here are better than many fields in the states. Well Mom, tomorrow I fly my first mission over enemy territory. The boys have really been going to town lately blasting important targets in Austria, Germany, and northern Italy. Maybe you read about this big raid on Bologna. Our group took part in that raid and it was a highly successful mission. I guess the Fuehrer is beginning to realize that he bit off more than he could chew.*

The next day October 17, 1944, Mike flew his first mission striking an industrial area near Vienna, Austria. His first few weeks were busy with regular bombing runs. In a letter home on November 6, 1944, he wrote:

*I meant to write to you soon, but we have been flying so much the pas week I've hardly had time to pick up a pen. . . We have been hitting targets throughout southern Germany and Austria quite consistently. So far the missions haven't been particularly bad because there has been heavy cloud coverage over the targets. (It is possible to bomb a target quite accurately even though it is completely obscured by clouds.) But on some of the larger targets such as Munich and Vienna, the centers that are vital to Hitler's southern defenses, we have encountered a good deal of opposition. As yet I haven't had the opportunity to shoot at any enemy fighters (an confidentially I don't particularly want to!) but no doubt I will have occasion to before we complete our missions. The fellows who flew these ships before us had to complete 50 missions before going home. Recently they changed it to 35 "sorties." That might sound better but in some*

*ways its not. A “sortie” is one complete raid but it was originally possible to get two “missions” out of one “sortie” if the target was far enough into enemy territory. Well dad I’m a Sergeant now – our ratings came through the first of the month. That means more money, but it doesn’t do me any good over here ‘cause there is nothing to buy. I’m sending a money order for \$110.*

Shortly thereafter, the following article appeared in Mike’s hometown newspaper, the Pocatello Tribune:

### ***Luker on Duty With Squadron in Italy***

*FIFTEENTH AAF IN ITALY – Cpl. N. Michael Luker, 20, who has trained as a ball turret gunner in a B-24 Liberator, has arrived in Italy and taken up his duties in a heavy bomber squadron of the 15<sup>th</sup> air force. The veteran organization to which he has been assigned is well past the 100-mission mark, and its crews have dropped thousands of tons of bombs on oil refineries, airdromes and railroad yards in German-held southern and central Europe. Cpl. Luker, son of Mr. and Mrs. Frazill [Brazil] Luker of 439 North Fourteenth avenue, Pocatello, joined the air corps in November, 1943.*

The article was incorrect in listing Mike as age 20. He was actually just turning 19, celebrating that birthday in Italy on November 26, 1944.

While clouds may not have stopped a mission, more serious weather often did. In a letter a few weeks later of November 29, 1944, Mike wrote:

*“The mission scheduled for this morning was cancelled on account of the weather and since we’re just laying around in our tent I thought I’d write a few letters. . . . It’s very rainy and muddy over here right now and we haven’t been flying much. I have 10 combat sorties now but I would have had 18 missions if the system had not been changed. We’ve been hitting targets in Germany, Austria, Czechoslovakia, Hungary, Yugoslavia and north Italy quite consistently. I will receive the air medal soon as I am eligible for it now.”*

In reviewing the sorties flown by the 459<sup>th</sup> from October 17 to November 29, there were 23. Other than the Vienna mission identified by Mike for October 17, it is not known at this point which specific missions Crew 6181 participated in, however, by the numbers it appears that Crew 6181 flew just under one-half of those missions. The 23 included 4 missions to bomb Munich railroad marshalling yards, 3 to bomb Vienna marshalling yards and refineries, 2 to Linz, Austria marshalling yards and refineries, 4 other Austrian strikes to Graz, Klagenfurt, Wels and Leoben, 2 to the Gyor, Hungary marshalling yards, 3 Italian strikes at Ossapo, Vecenza and Verona, 3 to Yugoslavia to bomb Yugoslav troops in Mitrovica and Visegrad, 1 strike of Regensburg oil storage on 10/23/44 and 1 at Hedonin, Czechoslovakia marshalling yards on 11/20/44.

Packages from home were important, especially at Christmas. On December 1, 1944, Mike wrote:

*I received your nice package today and it doesn’t appear to be damaged at all. . . . We are going to rig up some sort of a tree for Christmas and put all the presents under it. We’ve got quite a few already and if the rest get here by Christmas eve we’ll really have a big time.*

Some letters are unfortunately missing, but on Valentine's day, February 14, 1945, Mike wrote:

*Well here it is Valentines Day again! How the time has flown! A year ago I was just becoming acquainted with Army life but now I am so thoroughly familiar with it that regimentation is almost part of me. .... We have been having beautiful weather here the past few days but it's starting to cloud over again. So I guess we're in for more rain. I haven't flown since January. Three of us are Gunnery Instructors now and we only get to fly 1 mission a month – just enough to keep up our flying pay. Oh well maybe its for the best. We've got so many crews in our squadron now that we only get to fly about 1 or 2 missions a month anyway, what with the weather and all. I have enrolled for two courses under the Army Institute system which has just been started over here. I am taking Spanish and Business Principles and I go to school 4 nights a week. It's a pretty good deal because when you have finished the courses you get a certificate of proficiency which can be used for high school credits. We had quite a sad experience a few days ago. Someone shot our Blacky [dog]. There are some "Dagos" [slang for local Italians] who work on the field here and she hated them all [dogs]. She never let one get near our tent or even close to us. Maybe that's why they did it. Well we have her puppies yet anyway. Did I tell you? She had 6 of them but two died. The other four are almost a month old now and they're cute as the dickens. I wish I could bring one home with me. Oh yes, in one of your letters you asked about the fellow who was hurt – He's the boy who is standing on my right in the group picture, next to the radio operator. We got a letter from him a few days ago and he is improving now, but it was a very nasty wound and it might be a long time before he will walk again.*

The reference about the injured fellow was probably a reference to Mike's crewmate Sgt. Carl J. Dobrinec. The tail gunner was seriously injured on a bombing run against the marshalling yards at Verona, Italy on January 4, 1945. Sgt Dobrinec received a purple heart and silver star. The citation states:

*Approaching the target his aircraft encountered intense and accurate enemy anti-aircraft fire which severely damaged the plane and seriously wounded Sgt Dobrinec. Despite intense pain, shock and loss of blood, though knocked from his position, he made his way back to his guns to defend his aircraft against possible attacks by eight unidentified aircraft. With complete disregard for his personal safety, displaying outstanding courage and fortitude, he remained at his position until all threat of enemy attack ceased and only then submitted to first aid treatment. (Quoting GO #609, HQ Fifteenth Air Force, 11 Feb 1945)*

Although Mike rarely spoke of his actual flying experiences, he did mention to his son Lynn a few times about the tail gunner in his crew who was hit and seriously wounded on a very tough run. That particular mission was part of a broader coordinated attack:

*January 4, 1945 STRATEGIC OPERATIONS (Fifteenth Air Force):  
In Italy, 370+ B-24s and B-17s bomb marshalling yards at Verona, Bronzolo, Vicenza, Padua, Trento, and Bolzano, and station sidings at Trento; 200+ fighters accompany the bombers; 54 P-38s attempt high-level bombing of Cismon del Grappa but fail to hit the target. 9 B-24s drop supplies in Yugoslavia.*

*P-38s and P-51s fly reconnaissance and escort operations.* (Quoting Combat Chronology US Army Air Forces Mediterranean – 1945, <http://www.milhist.net/usaaf/mto45.html>).

Another letter of March 20, 1945 carried less news, but indicated Mike was very busy. He also referenced his brother-in-law Don Stout who was serving in the US army infantry in Germany:

*I don't find too much time for letter writing of late 'cause they're keeping us pretty busy. I always try to get at least one letter a week off to you and oftener when I can but with flying and school and instructing gunners etc. sometimes its pretty hard. . . I got another letter from Don the other day and he seems to be doing all right, wherever he's at. From the sound of his letter he must be right up on the front lines. He says that when one of their big guns fires at the enemy it's just like hitting them with one of our B-24 bombers. Well the boys are rattling their mess kits now so I better close now and get some supper. I'm Sgt. of the guard tonight – have to stay up most of the night.*

Shortly thereafter, Mike was promoted to Staff Sergeant. A news article in the Pocatello Tribune reported:

*FIFTEENTH AAF IN ITALY – N. Michael Luker, 20, of 439 North Fourteenth, Pocatello, has recently been promoted to the grade of staff sergeant, according to an announcement by his group commander, Col. H.K. Mooney of New Orleans, La. A ball turret gunner, Sgt. Luker is stationed in Italy with a B-24 Liberator heavy bombardment group which has flown more than 225 combat missions. He has participated in many of his outfit's bombings of oil refineries, railroad yards and assembly plants in German-held southern and central Europe. Before joining the air corps in November, 1943, Sgt. Luker was employed by J.C. Penney Inc., as a stock clerk. A veteran of more than 20 missions, Sgt. Luker has been awarded the air medal and one oak leaf cluster. His sister, Sarah, is serving with the Waves.*

Mike finished his 35<sup>th</sup> sortie on April 24, 1945, just two weeks before the war against Germany ended. That run was to hit a railroad bridge at Bassano, Italy. He wrote a few days later on April 28, 1945:

*This is the last letter I will write to you from Italy. I have finished my thirty-five sorties now and will be coming home soon. I should arrive in the United States about the third week in May unless we are held up at the Port of Embarkation. . . Gosh! I've lived in this old tent so long that it's grown to be just like a home to me and it doesn't seem quite right to be leaving it behind. But needless to say I am glad to be coming home and I can hardly wait til my feet will be on good old U.S. soil once more! We had a little excitement here today. General Arnold, the U.S. Airforce commander inspected our squadron and we all felt very honored. He's a five star general you know, and a very dignified looking person. He is always smiling though, and for that reason he is nicknamed "Hap" (happy) Arnold. We received another battle star.*

Mike left Giulia Field, Cerignola, Italy to return to the United States on May 7, 1945. The war in Europe ended on May 8, 1945. He departed Naples, Italy May 31, 1945 and arrived at

Newport News, Virginia on June 19, 1945. He received an honorable discharge at Gowen Field, Boise, Idaho as a Staff Sergeant on October 18, 1945. For his service he received the EAME (Europe, Africa, Middle-East) Ribbon with 6 battle stars for six offensives including Rome-Arno, Air Combat Balkans, Central Europe, Air Medal with 3 oak leaf clusters, and the good conduct medal.

Mike re-enlisted in the U.S. Airforce on March 11, 1946 as a private and was assigned to Wheeler Field in Hawaii. Due to his experience he quickly regained his Staff Sergeant rank and served as an intelligence specialist until February 3, 1949. He then joined the 116<sup>th</sup> Engineer Combat Battalion with the Idaho National Guard on November 14, 1949 and was called to active service as battalion Master Sergeant in the Korean conflict from August 15, 1950 to April 3, 1952, but that is a story for another day.

Mike married Betty Ruth Schild of Pocatello Idaho in April, 1947 while serving at Wheeler Field. They had one son Lynn. Mike worked at the Atomic Energy Commission in Idaho, for NASA in Florida and California, then retired and returned to Pocatello, Idaho in 1972, where he worked for the Idaho State Police for 5 years before retiring again. He lived a full life, grateful for his opportunity to serve his country and to safely return home twice in the cause of freedom. He passed away just short of his 83<sup>rd</sup> birthday at Pocatello, Idaho on November 17, 2008.