



William F. O'Neal's Crew

Top Left: Mauri J. "La Pelt" Pelto, 2d Lt., Navigator. William F. "Willy" O'Neal, 2d Lt., Pilot. Bernard J. "Bernie", Harrington 2d Lt., Co-Pilot. Raymond A. "Benny" Bennicoff, 2d Lt., Bombardier.

Lower Left: Michael J. "Mike" Horvath, S/Sgt., Tail Gunner. Charles E. Little, Cpl., Radio Operator. Joseph C. "Joe" Ciancio, Cpl., Waist Gunner. Anthony W. "Tony" Kramer, Cpl., Engineer. John E. Guerrieri, Cpl., Ball Turret Gunner. William L. Drew, Cpl., Nose Gunner.

Missing from the photo is George E. Browning, F. O., our original Bombardier. George was assigned to Group Headquarters soon after he arrived with the rest of us in Italy. He was replaced by Raymond Bennicoff.

O'Neal's Crew Is Shot Down

(As recalled by Mauri Pelto in the following paragraphs in 2006).

I, (Mauri Pelto), didn't fly much with my crew after the first several missions. I was tapped to be a "nose navigator" and was therefore frequently assigned to fly in lead planes of the squadron, which always

carried two navigators, one in the nose turret. That was why I missed out on the big adventure that befell my crew on one of the last missions we flew over there.

“It happened over Trieste on the Pola Peninsula in north eastern Italy. I can't remember much of the mission except that flak was quite heavy, but mostly behind me as I was in the lead aircraft.

“When we got home, my original crew, Willy O'Neal's, was reported missing. Pola is not very far from our base in Cerignola, so that day's mission was short; we were probably in briefing by 1500 or so, when I heard the news. I don't recall my reactions. Quite likely I was simply glad I wasn't with them. And guilty. As it turned out, happily, they were back at Guilia the next day.

“The story that they told was hair raising. They took a shell, which failed to explode, right through the main fuel tank, over the bomb bay. The fuel sloshed around the bomb bay and sent vapors throughout the ship. John Guerieri, in the ball turret when they were hit, came out immediately with his clothing wet with gasoline. After damage assessment, Willy O'Neal ordered everybody to just stay quiet, not even touch their microphone buttons for fear of sparks - and to pray. He then set a course for Yugoslavia, about an hour or so away. He knew there was a British mission there, among some Partisan militia. He hit their field right on the money. (Who was their navigator)! There, they all bailed out and landed safely, to be picked up by either the Partisans or by the British. A British C-47 brought them back to Bari or Brindisi that same evening. I can't recall whether they got home the same night or the very next morning.

“The only injuries were to the nose gunner, Willy Drew, and ball turret gunner, John Guerieri. Willy suffered a bloody nose on landing in his parachute. John's injuries were much worse. His parachute dragged him through an olive tree and he was hospitalized for a few days”.

The above are a combination of my recollections over 45 years and correspondence with Mike Horvath's son in about 2002.

Mauri Pelto