

# **Flight to Combat End**

by Chester Schmidt, Col. Ret. (779<sup>th</sup>)

With my crew once again intact, we were given our orders to proceed on the 19<sup>th</sup> of January 1945 to the overseas processing center at Grenier Field near Manchester, New Hampshire.

During our daylight flight, east we lost partial electrical power which included our radio and navigational equipment. By using our maps and observing the ground, we knew generally where we were but could not find Grenier Field, so when we saw a large military runway; I circled the field while my radio operator fired red flares indicating that we had an emergency.

We landed and found that field to be Westover Army Air Corps Base in Massachusetts. It took only about an hour to fix our electrical problem and then we flew up to Grenier.

We stayed at Grenier for four days processing which included immunization shots required for overseas, making out our wills, etc. We finally got our orders for our destination which was Genoa, Italy via the North Atlantic route which included stops at Bermuda; the Azores Islands; Marrakech and Tunis, North Africa, and then to Genoa, Italy. We would not know the combat unit we were to be assigned to until we got to Genoa.

We departed Grenier on the 24<sup>th</sup> of January 1945 on a night flight to give our navigator the best opportunity for celestial navigation over water. Since airborne radar only existed for bombing purposes on a few B-24s, our only means of navigation over the ocean was by celestial means. Major stations like Bermuda did have a radio range system and a radio compass system but those were for short range navigation. Our trip took 7 hours and our cruising altitude was 8,000 feet (above 10,000 feet oxygen was required).

Everything went well until about 2 hours out of Bermuda where we encountered a heavy overcast that prevented Karl from seeing the stars for celestial navigation. Shortly thereafter, we could see lightning flashes ahead of us. With no airborne radar we could not see the thunderstorms ahead of us and could not pick our way through the worst part of the thunderstorm. We plunged right into the storm. Because it was night, the flashes of lightning were blinding so we turned on the

thunderstorm lights in the cockpit. The bright lights minimize the lightning flashes.

Then we hit severe turbulence and it was so violent that it took both Bob, my co-pilot, and I to control the aircraft. We were, at times, climbing and descending. Our airspeed indicator and vertical speed indicator were going crazy so all we could do was to try to keep a level attitude. I knew we had to descend to get out of the worst part of the storm so I pulled the throttles back and down we went fighting the B-24. Finally, at 2,000 feet, we broke out under the storm and into the clear. During our encounter with the thunderstorm, we did not know for sure where we were. I kept the B-24 generally on the last heading Karl had given me. We had the radio compass tuned to the Bermuda station but the electrical storm made our compass needle go crazy.

When we broke out in the clear, we saw the bright lights of Bermuda at about 10 degrees off our left nose. We were only 10 miles out and we landed at Kinsley field without further problems much to the relief of everyone on board. We had our first encounter with thunderstorm flying and we had survived.

We spent one day at Bermuda getting our crew rest and refueling. We proceeded on to the Azores the following night. We lay over one day and then went on to Marrakech, North Africa, and then on to Tunis, North Africa and then to our destination to Genoa, Italy. We spent two days there, getting our combat unit assignment which was the 464<sup>th</sup> Bomb Group, 779<sup>th</sup> Bomb Squadron located in the Pantanella valley in central Italy. The area contained other B-24 and B-17 units at different locations. The base had two parallel runways shared by the 464<sup>th</sup> Bomb Group. Our housing units and facilities were located on a hill to one side the runways and the 465<sup>th</sup> facilities were located on the opposite hill.

Upon landing at our new location on the 8<sup>th</sup> of February 1945, we were greeted by our new Operations Officer and he soon asked me if we were going to keep our boxes of K-rations (put on every plane that was sent overseas) and the way that he looked at the boxes and the way that he asked about them made me suspicious so I said that we would keep them. Our crew officers and airmen were located in different areas so I split the boxes between us. We were later glad that we kept the rations as the food there was terrible. We had Spam for breakfast, lunch and dinner – fixed different ways but it was still Spam. I cannot eat it to this day.

We were housed in tents that had floors and walls of what they called "tufa block" which was cut with a saw in mines and hauled to the site. It is a soft rock material that our house unit was made of, the roof with a canvas tent.

The four officers had one tent in the officer's area and the 6 airmen were in another tent in the airmen area. Our heater was an oxygen bottle sitting on a bomb fin and the flame was aviation fuel brought in via a copper tube (with a valve to control the fuel flow). We slept in sleeping bags on Army cots. Each tent had an Italian house boy whom we paid out of our own pockets.

We had an Officers Club and a Mess Hall. Our booze ration consisted of one bottle of hard liquor and six bottles of beer a week, so many consumed the Italian vermouth which I dislike to this day. I will not touch Spam either.

## **Combat - World War II**

On my first combat mission, I flew as the co-pilot with an experienced crew to familiarize myself with combat operations. Our target was the railroad marshalling yards in Vienna, Austria and it scared the hell out of me. We encountered heavy flak (anti-aircraft fire) over the target. During the final bomb run, the flak was bursting all around us and we sustained about two dozen holes in the B-24 but it took it in stride. Fortunately, none of the aircraft in our formation were shot down.

On my second mission, I flew with my own crew. Being a new crew, we were assigned the "Tail End Charlie" position in the rear of the formation. The more experienced crews took the forward positions or the lead position. On some days the unit flew practice formation when the weather in Northern Italy or Austria prevented a combat mission. On those occasions, our wing commander came up in his P-47 fighter and flew around us making comments about our formation. More than once he called and said, "Schmidt, get your ass up tighter." I learned the hard way how to fly formation.

On our 5<sup>th</sup> mission, we were out over the Adriatic Sea on our way to the target when we lost our number 2 engine and had to abort and turn back. We had a full load of bombs and most of our fuel so we were very heavy. I called the tower at our base and asked what I should do with the bombs, whether to salvo them in the ocean or bring them back. After a few minutes, they told me to bring them back but to drop my gear and some flaps to create enough drag which would require a

higher engine power setting to burn off more fuel. After about three hours, I was ready to land.

The runway was 5,000 feet long and the surface consisted of interlocking steel mesh laid over packed dirt. This type of steel mesh was used throughout the world for temporary runways during World War II. It does not provide as good traction as concrete. At the end of our runway, there was a gravel overrun which stretched out about 1,000 feet. There was a drainage ditch around the runway with a culvert leading to an underground pipe under the overrun. There was a roadway that crossed the overrun that lead to the bomb dump.

On my landing, I had to increase my approach speed because of the weight of the B-24 (with the bombs aboard). I touched down on the end of the runway and pulled the throttles to idle and thought I was doing OK until about halfway down the runway - when I realized that we were not losing enough speed. I began to apply as much brake as I could without skidding the tires and causing a blowout. As I approached the end of the runway, I saw that I could not use the overrun because there was a flatbed truck parked there. It was full of Italian workers who were observing my landing. I decided to try for the taxiway in front of the ditch. I applied full right brakes, but the B-24 skidded sideways and I hit the concrete culvert with the nose gear. The nose gear sheared off and the nose of the B-24 went down in the ditch with the main gear on both banks of the ditch. We were almost at a stop when we hit the culvert so the B-24 did not go far down the ditch. We shut down the engines and immediately evacuated the airplane.

All of the emergency vehicles arrived immediately and shortly thereafter, the wing commander arrived. After I told my story to him, he said, "Schmidt, you didn't hurt anyone and we can have the airplane flying again tomorrow. When I find out who told you to bring those bombs back, I'll have his ass." I did not receive any disciplinary action, but every time I encountered the wing commander after that, he would make a good-humored remark about me plowing the drainage ditch.

### **The Escort**

I wrote an article about one of our missions that was submitted to the "Wings" magazine, which I am including, here.

At 0330 on the morning of 26 April, 1945, I was shaken awake by the squadron CQ who, while waking the other 3 officers of my B-24 crew, announced,

"Breakfast at the O' Club and briefing at 0500." We donned our appropriate flight gear and stumbled out of our tufa block and canvas tent located on the southern hill above the double runways in the Pantanella Valley in south central Italy. We staggered through the dark to breakfast which was, as usual, Spam; reconstituted, dehydrated eggs and potatoes; and Italian bread. At some breakfasts, we brought our own eggs which we purchased from our houseboy. (Each tent hired their own teen-aged Italian houseboy who took care of housekeeping chores. Sometimes, their duties included guiding the drunks back to their tents from the O' Club bar). After breakfast, we went back to our tents to pack the rest of our flying gear, then we proceeded to the briefing room.

Our unit was the 779<sup>th</sup> Bomb Squadron (H), 464<sup>th</sup> Bomb Group (H), 55<sup>th</sup> Bomb Wing (H) of the Fifteenth Air Force. After the preliminaries were completed at the briefing, the Operations (Ops) Officer opened the curtains over the wall map and announced that our target that day was the railroad marshaling yard at Linz, Austria. There were more than a few groans from those crews who had been there before as they said later that the flak gunners there were the instructors for the flak crews in the rest of Germany and that they were known to kill at least one B-24 out of every group over their target. The mission of the 55<sup>th</sup> Wing that day was to cut the rail supply line from Germany through Brenner Pass, south to Italy. General Mark Clark's American 5<sup>th</sup> Army and General Montgomery's British 8<sup>th</sup> Army were fighting their way north through Italy and it was essential that those German troops be denied their supplies. After briefing, we were picked up by bus and taken to our B-24's where the rest of the crew were pre-flight checking their equipment. The navigator and bombardier remained for target study, they joined us later.

Because of the requirement to maintain radio silence, start engines and taxi directions were controlled by Vari-pistol from the tower. Take-off was directed by a flag officer on a flatbed truck located between the two runways. We used both runways alternately. After takeoff, the squadron leader flew straight ahead for about five minutes and then started a slow climbing turn. Each of the seven aircraft in the squadron cut off the turn and established a loose formation until we got over the Adriatic Sea where we test fired our guns. Our 779<sup>th</sup> Squadron was in number 3, or lower left, position (Charlie Squadron) and being one of the new crews we were assigned the number 7 or "Tail End Charlie" position.

Our personal equipment included electrically heated flying suits and gloves as the heaters in the B-24 never worked properly. As we climbed through 10,000 feet, we donned our oxygen masks. Being on oxygen required discipline as moisture from our breath would collect in the bottom loop of the hose and turn to ice, so we had to occasionally squeeze the hose to crush the ice. Prior to entering enemy territory, we donned our flak suits and helmets. At these extremely cold temperatures, if you took off your gloves and touched metal, the moisture in your hand froze and your hand was immediately welded to the metal. One of the solutions to loosen your hand was to urinate on it. Those of us that smoked would get a cigarette and lighter ready and then turn the oxygen regulator to 100%, take off the mask, turn the valve on briefly and light the cigarette in the free oxygen. I did not have a mustache then!

On our way north, over the Alps, we had to climb to 28,000 feet to get over some weather and it was difficult for me to maintain formation as acceleration and deceleration were extremely slow. I was either at full power or near idle to slow my rate of closure and it would take forever to accelerate. This was my first experience at flying formation at high altitudes and it took time to learn.

Our 464<sup>th</sup> Group was the first of the 55<sup>th</sup> Wing over the target that day and after we passed the IP and turned toward the target, there was, at first, only a few flak bursts which increased in intensity and accuracy until the flak was bursting within the formation. We could see the fire within the burst and feel the shock waves. We were to release our bombs on the leader's drop. Just before "Bombs Away," there was a loud bang on our right side and below, our B-24 lurched to the right. I managed to straighten us out and my co-pilot yelled that our #3 engine had quit and he was feathering the prop. At this time, the bombardier yelled, "Bombs Away," the formation made a diving turn to the right to get away from the flak, but being on the left side, and with only three engines, I could not keep up and fell out of formation.

I had no more than gotten the B-24 under control when the bombardier informed the crew that we had not released all of the bombs. We were carrying very dangerous (to the crew) 20# (20 pound) fragmentation bombs that were strapped together in clusters (the clusters would break apart after release). We decided not to close the bomb bay doors for fear that the frag bombs would inadvertently drop on the closed doors. I started a descent while the bombardier and flight engineer used walk-around oxygen bottles to go into the bomb bay, they eventually tripped

the bomb shackles with screwdrivers and released the clusters. As one cluster fell, it broke apart and two of its bombs collided and detonated about 1,000 feet below us.

We were finally able to close the bomb doors which was absolutely essential as the gunners aft of the bomb bay were suffering from the cold. (Number 3 engine contained the hydraulic pump and the two accumulators that provided emergency pressure for parking brakes and bomb bay doors.) After all of this, I was flying on a heading south that my navigator had given me, and when we had an opportunity to look around, we discovered that the formation was nowhere in sight. In fact, it took a few minutes to realize that we were all alone in enemy territory. Our next problem was getting home.

When we tried the radio, we began to discover that we had many electrical problems – including inoperable radios. Our fighter escorts were P-51s and P-38s. We had heard their radio chatter going to the target but, now, we could not call for their help, nor could we call our own formation leader. After what seemed like an eternity, the left waist gunner reported that he saw some dots in the sky, way off to the left. A few minutes later the tail, left, upper turret and belly gunners all reported the dots to be aircraft, probably fighters but...whose fighters? Our own P-51s and P-38s or the German ME-109s and FW-190s? As we watched, the lead fighter broke off and slid closer to us and performed a 90 degree bank to give us a plain view of his wing profile. He leveled his wings and slid in closer, then again he performed the same maneuver as he came closer – apparently hoping that our gunners had paid attention in their aircraft recognition classes. I am sure he was nervous as he realized that five gunners had their guns trained on him.

It was agreed upon, by now, that the fighters were P-51s and that they would be our escorts. I wagged the B-24 wings and two fighters took up a position above and behind us. Two dropped below and behind us and another two slid in under our wings. The one under my left was obviously the formation leader. He approached to within a seemingly few feet, took off his mask and grinned at me. The oxygen mask and helmet were a dark gray color – when he grinned at me with his white teeth, I suddenly realized he was black. With that and the tail markings of their P-51s, we knew that our escorts were from the renowned all African-American 332<sup>nd</sup> Fighter Group. We knew, then, that we were in good hands.

The P-51s seemed to know where the German fighters would most likely come from and they positioned themselves in that direction but they were never out of our sight. They stayed with us until we were again in friendly territory. When they departed, each fighter pilot accelerated past us, peeled off to the left and performed a victory roll. It seemed appropriate because they were good...and they knew it.

With our electrical and hydraulic problems, we got our landing gear down but could not get our flaps down. I had to make a flaps up landing, which resulted in our landing roll ending up in the gravel overrun... but, that's another story...

## **END OF WORLD WAR II**

Because I had not gotten into combat until January of 1945 my crew flew only 13 combat missions. Germany surrendered in May so our combat missions stopped on the 2<sup>nd</sup> of May. On the 3<sup>rd</sup> of May, I celebrated my 21st birthday and received orders promoting me to 1<sup>st</sup> Lieutenant. Nice birthday present.

On the 25<sup>th</sup> of May, our unit began its deployment back to the U.S. We flew the same mule back that we had used going over except instead of going from the Azores to Bermuda, we flew from the Azores to Goose Bay, Labrador – then to Bradley Field in Connecticut which is where we left our B-24. We did not have the new B-24 that we had taken to Italy because it was shot down on its 5<sup>th</sup> mission (the crew bailed out and spent the rest of the war as prisoners of war in a war camp). Still, being a junior crew, we flew the oldest, beat up B-24 in the unit – but, it got us home. The trip back to the U.S. was pretty hectic because there were so many others coming home at the same time. Twice we had to sleep in our airplane because of the lack of sufficient quarters.

I parted with my crew and went home on 30-day leave. I reported to the Personnel Replacement Center at Greensboro, North Carolina for reassignment.

Consolidated Aircraft was flight testing a new B-32 bomber and I was slated to go to that program but when the B-29, "Enola Gay," dropped the nuclear weapons on Japan, the B-32 was suspended...

It was determined that I would become a B-24 instructor pilot and I was given a choice of the base I wanted. I chose Liberal, Kansas because my brother Harry was a B-24 Instructor Pilot there. Harry had completed a combat tour with the 93<sup>rd</sup> Bomb Group, Eighth Air Force in England. When I got to Liberal Harry and I

bunked together for over a month. I never became an instructor pilot there because the war was over and many people were being discharged. During that lax time, I went up to Topeka, Kansas twice to see Bonnie. On the second visit, she agreed to marry me when I got out of the service.

On the 27<sup>th</sup> of October 1945, I was discharged at Fort McArthur, California and went home – to Madera, California. Bonnie came to California and we were married on my father's farm on the 1<sup>st</sup> of December. My brother Fred was also discharged from the Army Field Artillery and he and I leased my father's farm. I did stay on Active Reserve status.

Presentation of the Legion of Merit by Lt. Gen. R.M. Hoban, Deputy Cmdr. 2 <sup>nd</sup> Air Force	Col. Chester "Chet" Schmidt and his wife, Bonnie, at his 1974 retirement ceremony.
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