

1944

24 August



The Personal Story of B-24(H) Liberator 'Little Gismo II' Engineer/Top Gunner Elton Ankney

The Air Battle over the Jindřichův Hradec Czechoslovakia region resulted in the crash landing of four B-24(H) Liberators from the 15th AAF 464th Bomb Squadron – this is the story of one of the eight-men that survived a Liberator crash near Cimer, Czechoslovakia.

The Personal Story of B-24(H) Liberator Little Gismo II Engineer/Top Gunner Elton Ankney

By Elton W. Ankney

I was drafted in Lewiston, Idaho and inducted into air corp in Salt Lake City, Utah. I was told if I wanted to go to the Air corp that during my interview all I should say was air corp, so that is what I did and I ended up in the air corp. Went to basic training in Mississippi and aviation mechanics training at Kestler Field. I went to gunnery school at Laredo, Texas. I was sent to Mountain Home Idaho for the first phase of my training. Then on to Pocatello Idaho for the second phase of training. We then went to Lincoln Nebraska where we got a new airplane then to Florida from there we went to Trinidad, then to Brazil then to Northern Africa Tunis and then a base in Italy. I was with the 15th Air force 464th bomb group squadron 776. Our first pilot was Lt. Robert Jares. Our first plane was Ain't Miss Behavin Minnie (later the ain't was dropped). When we flew from Brazil to Africa the navigator missed the runway by 40 feet he was pretty upset though.

When we got to Africa and were flying to Tunis a British bomber came up to the window of our plane flipping his wings and radioed the pilot telling him to have your people sitting their positions and they better be watching because this country has been known to have Germans in it. We were probably sitting down in the flight deck visiting or something.

Our missions from Africa then Italy disrupted the German oil supply and manufacturing in the Baltic area as well as Eastern Europe. We would bomb the factories, oil storage, and refineries. Then as they built them back and got ready to restart them we would bomb them again. We basically ran them out of gas and oil. The Baltic area is where they got their oil.

We were first shot down on May 29, 1944 at 11:53 a.m. over Jelisinovci Yugoslavia our target was an aircraft component factory in Atzgerdorf, Austria the bombs hit their target before we were shot down. Six of us got back and 4 were taken prisoner. The six that got back to Italy are, navigator William Girardeau Jr., bombardier Paul Moore, Eng.-gunner me Elton Ankney, Eng.-gunner Tomas Monacelli, gunners Kenneth Moore and Benard Atkinson. The four taken prisoner of war were Pilot Robert Jares, Co. Pilot Ray Simpkins, Rad. Oper-gunner Robert Balliet and Gunner Joseph Maer.

In Yugoslavia 6 of us got met up with Tito's underground. They moved us from town to town and finally to their headquarters up in the mountains. They fed us this big round cake of cornmeal with sour milk poured on it everybody ate from the same plate.

Ben Atkinson was from Tioga, Louisiana, when he bailed out he had his shoes tied to his parachute harness you were able to fly in just these cotton socks, Anyways when he pulled his ripcord his shoe strings broke. They got him a horse to ride had never been on one so Tommy Monacelli and I got one on each side of him and one of the Yugoslavian people lead the horse.

Don't know for sure how long it was but we got to the camp in the mountains. It was a gathering place for people who were shot down, escapees, and who ever there were 24 of us there.

There was one Englishman with false teeth who was washing his teeth in the water hydrant. There was a kid about 12 years old who we called Charlie, he was a runner for this camp his job was to deliver messages from one camp to another anyways that night he was peaking around the corner watching this guy wash his teeth boy that was strange for him to see this guy take his teeth out to wash them.

When we left we tried to trade him our 45 for a German luger and he wouldn't trade it. He said he couldn't get ammunition for it and that he wanted a German luger and that all he had to do is kill a German to get ammunition for it.

They brought in a C47 it landed in a meadow. We built fires down the middle of the meadow and he straddled these fires. It was at night and about half of the fires got covered up with ground fog. This caused him to land in the middle of the meadow and ended up in a swamp at the end of a railroad run. The plane settled down clear up to its wings. That night we cut evergreen branches and set them up all around the plane and took mud and covered up all the windows. The next night they brought in 17 yolk of oxen which is 34 head of oxen there was a glider pull on the C47 and they hooked on to it and couldn't get it to budge. But there were 17 yolk of oxen and 17 drivers and they couldn't get them to pull together. Finally they dug trench for the wheel and took half of the oxen four abreast and would pull sideways on tail, block that wheel then dig a trench for the other wheel and pull the other way and block that wheel. They did this until the plane was pulled up on the flats. The next day they pulled it up on top it didn't hurt the props or anything so they preflighted it and loaded up all 26 of us along with all their crew it was way overloaded. We took off the next night and headed back to Italy. We didn't have the colors of the day or the code for the day so we landed in Bari Italy. We landed and down the runway they came with this halftrack with machine guns on it and guys on the sidelines with machine guns for protection to make sure we were who we said we were, Anyways we were taken to the hospital to be checked out. They gave us Red Cross packages and I don't know how much candy was in them but Ben was quite a candy eater and he hurried up and ate all his candy and was begging everybody else for theirs all the time so they doled it out to him a little at a time. It took us 14 days to get back to Italy.

When we got back to Italy they sent us to the island of Capri for a week of vacation. After that week we needed a vacation. They had this drink called a B-29 there weren't any B-29s in the area but this drink was a shot of everything behind the bar about 2 of those was enough. Was the only place I ever had campaign for breakfast. They had square corks in the campaign bottles with a string tied around the cork when you cut the string the cork blew out of the bottle.

When we first landed in Italy the runways weren't finished in Pantella yet so we flew the first few missions out of Gioia

Ben was a real clean boy from Louisiana was the only Christian on the crew. They had rock walls all around with sidewalks all around on them. On your days off were allowed to go visiting out on them they would dig out the good wine. Ben at first wouldn't drink much but after while it got to where you had to walk him home he wouldn't go with us much after that.

Our latrines were split trenches along highways. The Italians would come along with their buggies and there we would be straddling the trench going to the bathroom they would wave real big and we would be there with our butts hanging out.

When we got back from the island of Capri 3 of us were assigned to another crew(Little Gizmo II), the navigator William Girardeau was assigned to the 79th squadron, and 3 were assigned to same crew the tail gunner, the nose gunner and myself I was top gunner and engineer. Captain Virgil Leverett was our pilot.

On the flight we were shot down the second time the nose gunner Benard Atkinson got Russell Bucher to fly for him. Ben was going to visit Frank Ramsey who was in the hospital after being shot down.

Second time I was shot down was August 24, 1944. We were shot down near Hermance Czechoslovakia our mission was an oil refinery in Pardibice Czechoslovakia. All were taken prisoner. Three were killed, Richard Hinkley the waist gunner, Peter Sucher the waist gunner and Raymond Bloxsom the ball turret gunner. Tommy got shot in the left calf and got sent to

hospital in Germany. I got shot in the right knee the wrapped it up with sulfa powder a pad and wrapped tissue paper around it for a bandage they left shrapnel in. when I got to prison camp and saw a dr. there. We were sent to Stalag Luft 4 I was in compound A and 2 crew members from my first crew, Joseph Mares and Mike Balliett were in another compound.

While in the prison camp we got ½ a Red Cross package once every two weeks but all the cans had holes punched in them so had to eat everything right away cause didn't know how long they had been sitting. Didn't anybody get sick but could have. The prunes and crackers and stuff were ok though. When in the prison camps I got one letter and one package from home they were from my sister Zelma. There were probably more but didn't get them

For roll call they lined everybody up in lines of three or four deep and one guard would count from the front and one from the back. One of them knew how to count to 10 in English so after ten it was whatever number he thought of. He always made sure he got done first then he would ask the other guard what number he got and then he would say that's what I got.

The prison camp was made up of four compounds with a fence running between each one so you had a compound a fence a run a fence and another compound. There were dogs in the runs between the fences so if you were trying to tunnel out the dogs could here you. Our latrine was a concrete tank. They would come in and pump it out. When they were bombing England with rockets they were z-1 rockets when they came to pump it out we called it V-2 they would get really mad.

There was one guard we called Dirty Gus. When we walked around the compounds we flipped our cigarette butts in the runs between the fences. Old Gus would look all around and grab big handfuls of gravel and sort all the butts out to smoke later. The German's always called themselves the superior race but I don't know about that. We got cigarettes in all the Red Cross packages whether you smoked or not so always had lots of cigarettes. We had all different kinds of them the English cigarettes were real stout. The German cigarettes looked like a bunch of brown dried stems of tobacco oh boy they were strong you couldn't smoke them.

In early February of that year we started marching for 84 days. They headed us towards Berlin, they headed all prisoners that way. They figured if they had Air force prisoners they could use them for bargaining power for an unconditional surrender. We stayed out in the open mainly sometimes in barns overnight or abandoned POW camps. We traded stuff for potatoes. Instant coffee was a good trading item soap was another. We had this soap called swans soap it had a groove down the middle to break it in half for bathing. To bathe had to use your helmet with cold water weren't many baths taken everybody had fleas and lice.

When they first started the march they opened all the Red Cross packets and you could take what you wanted. My partner, who's last name was Hess, and I took instant coffee vitamin pills vitamin c strips and nonperishables. We made packs by taking a shirt and sewing the sleeves to the bottom and sewing up the front and bottoms and wearing it for a pack. Everything went in pack which you wore. Never did get sick over there not even a cold. Some of the other guys did. Some of them didn't make it because they didn't know how to survive. I grew up in the woods and knew how to make do with what I had.

We had a kitchen wagon for 2000 men we saw it about every ten days. You got a liter of hot soup from the kitchen. We got a loaf of black bread once a week it about a quarter of a loaf about two to three inches high they cut it in half and you got half and your partner got half.

Most of the time the allies kept track of us marching. Sometimes they would send down a fighter pilot like he was strafing they told you to stay in the middle of the road and not to bunch up. That was hard to do. Most of us were 20 years old and pulled a lot of tricks on the guards who were mostly old guards from World War 1. One guy packed this big old machine gun it was water cooled it was a big old thing he packed it one day and somebody else did the

next day. About 2 or three times per week he had to carry the gun. We would kid him by saying what are you doing with that big old thing for we are going home so you don't need that thing. We made him so disgusted that he threw it down he got to carry it every day for a week. After that when he saw us he just grinned. Some crazy things happened.

We ,liberated' a lot of stuff along the march if it loose it was "liberated". Can remember one time there was one town with this wagon full of leaks like onions they were all ready to plant they didn't have many left when we got done. Another town had horseradish roots we ate them they were terrible. They had these little burgs which were a little place where the farms cornered each other. This is where they kept their animals. If a chicken ran across the farm yard he didn't make it, he went in with the potatoes. We couldn't build fires (they people other than prisoners tend the cook fires) so if you couldn't get the chicken done under the potatoes you ate it half raw. When I got home just the smell of chicken made me half sick and it seemed like everybody wanted me to come for chicken dinner with them.

The roads were all cobblestone with ditches on either side of them where they drove there buggies the roads were so rough you couldn't drive on them. They wouldn't drive on the cobblestones. They had pits along the roads where they stored cabbages and potatoes if you were in the right place in line you could reach the pit and grab cabbages and potatoes.

In the burgs they had a big pig in a crate and a little pig in a crate right behind him. They fed the big pig first then the little pig rooted his food from the manure of the big pig. The civilians didn't have anything more than what we did, they had to turn a lot into the government every week.

Just be for we were liberated all the German guards left. A British officer parachuted in and took charged of the camp. He assigned some of us to guard the camp and keep us all there for when the truck convoy came to liberate us. I was chosen to be one of the guards.

After we were Liberated we stayed in old army training camps where they had barracks we slept in rooms. There were army vehicles parked around everywhere every one of them had c-rations and k-rations in them. We "liberated" a lot of them. Hess's father had told him all you ever get out of life is what you eat. Hess told me when he saw the rations I am going get a lot out of life tonight. Everything edible we ate some of it was not edible but we ate it anyway

We were liberated may 6 and the armistice was signed on May 8. We stayed in old prison camps on the way to camp Lucky Strike in France to wait to be transported home. Most of us were on special diets, soft diet before regular diets. Our stomachs got so sore we couldn't button our pants

In France the mess hall was this big tent the people working in the mess hall were German prisoners. One time we had stewed tomatoes the guy ahead of me in line wanted seconds they told him no seconds. He told them there was no such thing as no seconds in this army and reached across and grabbed that German by his shirt front he got seconds. The next guy said he didn't want stewed tomatoes the German dumped a whole ladle on his plate so he took his whole tray and threw it on the German. Here came the lieutenant and took after the guy well slips out the back door with the Lt. right behind him shortly thereafter here comes the Lt. with the guy right behind him with a German luger in his hand. Also every time they served meals you also got snacks. General Eisenhower came to see us at Camp Lucky Strike. He went to the Red Cross tent and asked are you getting enough food? Someone shouted we aren't getting enough food .Then Ike replied to him why don't you bitch a little.

Finally they put us on a liberty ship and we headed for New York. All of us were in the hole of these liberty ships had hammocks three or four high and I don't remember how many exactly. There was one kid on this ship that got ahold of this record of this song," rum and Coca Cola" there was a victrola down there and he would play that song over and over every night. Finally somebody got mad and broke over his head.

I didn't stay in the hole long. Made friends with a sailor and he let me bunk with him. One night he had to stand wheel watch and took me with him. We went to the wheel room and asked if I could come in they said yes if I stood over to the side. There was a big compass on the wall in front of the wheel so you could keep on course. Anyways I stood there for a while then the Capt. Said let him drive. So they let me run the wheel. You would have thought I did some evasive move or something I corrected the wheel then a little more and the wheel took off. We went back and forth for a while. It was not as easy as it looked.

Finally we got home to New York harbor. There were these young girls on another ship and they were hooting and hollering. One of the guys jumped overboard trying to get on that ship. We saw the Statue of Liberty. Went to mess hall they told us we could have whatever we wanted to eat. A lot of the guys ordered steaks they were so big couldn't eat them all.

Any ways I went home to Fort Lewis We then went R&R for 30 days to Santa Monica , cal. Then back to hospital at Fort George Wright in Spokane Washington. While in Santa Monica Ziggy Zadigan (whom we met while a POW and whose home was close) met us and gave us the grand tour of Santa Monica.

Anytime you go to a foreign country you find that it is so different from here and what a privilege it is to live here.