

# A 60<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Surprise

By David Pulcrano

On 5 February 2005, I unexpectedly received a forwarded E-Mail via Stefan Theil, (Newsweek - Berlin Office), via Wendy Butler (464<sup>th</sup> website), from Mrs. Christina Oppermann-Dimow, of Vienna, Austria. I was surprised and amazed that someone I had never met had information regarding Teddy and was trying to contact me. The content of this message was hard to believe. This excited my curiosity and I was eager to respond to this communication. But, I am getting ahead of myself. Please allow me to lay the foundation, upon which to explain to you this singular circumstance and unusual turn of events.

During my genealogical research of the families, a cousin of mine, 2<sup>nd</sup> Lt. Theodore David (Teddy) Toscano, who had served during World War II, with the 464<sup>th</sup> Bomb Group, 779<sup>th</sup> Bomb Squadron, Fifteenth Army Air Force, at Pantanella, Italy, was shot-down over Heiligenstadt, Vienna on 22 March 1945. Eight of the nine crew-members perished, while Cpl. George R. Frazier, Jr., the ball turret gunner was the sole survivor. He and the eye-witness reports stated that Teddy's B-24 (serial number 44-50332) took a direct hit in the bomb bay area, and became engulfed in flames, spiraled down and crashed into a wooded area, in the vicinity of Neuwaldegg and Dornberg. Being anxious to obtain information concerning Teddy and of the 464<sup>th</sup>, I had sometime earlier placed an inquiry on Wendy Butler's message board. The effort was fruitful, and as a result, I was able to receive the forwarded E-Mail.

Now, Mrs. Oppermann's message contained specific information, that her brother Wassil Dimow and his friend, who as teenagers, visited the crash-site sometime around 1960. After some 15 years later they discovered some artifacts. The wooded area is designated as restricted to the public. The area then, as now, is protected by a fence and a historical marker has been placed there citing the incident on 22 March 1945. This may account for the artifacts still remaining in their original location. However, being 'boys!' they explored these woods. Mrs. Oppermann sent me a description of the location, photo copies of maps, both of Vienna and the crash-site area, and of the artifact.

Upon receipt of her E-Mail, I immediately contacted her, identifying who I was and how I was related to Teddy. Then, unexpectedly Mrs. Oppermann called me from Vienna to inform me that her church, which was damaged by (we believe,

from Teddy's salvoing his bomb load prior to the crash), had held a 60<sup>th</sup> Memorial Service and that the priest had spoken about the incident; citing the names of the crew-members that were lost. Also making mention that George, who with the aid of the local Austrian Partisans, provided medical attention to his burns and wounds, and were instrumental in his being repatriated with the Allied Forces.

The logical question arises, "How do I know it was Teddy's plane that 'salvoed' the bombs?" Well, I (we) know by the eye-witness reports from the other crew-members from at least two other aircraft, saw one chute blossom and bombs falling from Teddy's burning inferno. The local residents of the town who saw and reported the incident, and stated that the aircraft crashed in the cited location. There were no other aircraft being in a similar situation at that moment in time. Also, I believe it is customary practice, when an aircraft experiences an in-flight fire, that it is standard operating procedure to salvo the bomb load; in an effort to reduce the possibility of an on-board explosion. Whether or not Teddy or the bombardier actually released the bombs, is obviously unknown. From the moment the plane was hit by flak, fire erupted, which started in the bomb bay and extended to the empennage section (tail assembly), and there was no chance for any of the other crew-members to 'bail-out'! George stated that his flight suit and hair were on fire when he left the aircraft.

Further, no other aircraft were seen to have dropped any bombs in this vicinity of the church. Upon compiling this information with what I had already found in my research, I discovered these several trivial coincidences: Teddy was the pilot and was on his 13<sup>th</sup> mission; 1<sup>st</sup> Lt. Edward Cockerham, Flight Leader of Teddy's box formation, flew his last mission. Another individual, Lt. Roy Wehman, co-pilot, was also shot-down over Heiligenstadt, he became a guest of the German hospitality for the duration. Both providing me with valuable information. One friend, S/Sgt. Robert H. Hoskinson, tail-gunner with the 778<sup>th</sup>, who had flown on several missions, as did Teddy, was most instrumental in assisting me with obtaining the MACR and accident reports.

On this very day, 13 planes were reported lost-downed! Trivial coincidences perhaps, but here's a few more that might interest some folk, who might consider to be an omen from numerology, or might enjoy reading about these unexpected tid-bits. For instance: on the 19<sup>th</sup> March, three days before the fatalities, Teddy was taxiing to the runway when the left landing gear collapsed unexpectedly! The nick-name of this plane was "The Flakman!" The serial number was 42-95332.

And, the renowned Tuskegee Airmen, who escorted the 464<sup>th</sup> to and from the target area on numerous occasions, was the 332<sup>nd</sup> Fighter Group. And, it just so happens, that the last two digits in the year of my birth is 32! Now, recall if you will, the serial number of Teddy's plane was 44-50332!

At the last two Unit reunions in Nashville and Mobile, I had the pleasure to meet and/or correspond with these fellows who, at one time or another, flew in "The Flakman": Lts. John Klika, pilot, and Don Sherard, bombardier; Sgts. Don Harder, radio operator, and Ernie Neal, nose gunner; all of whom are members of the 779<sup>th</sup> and assigned to four different crews. John, Don and Ernie each reported that "The Flakman" was 'ventilated' by flak on several occasions and that no one was wounded. "The Flakman's" reputation reflected and lived up to its name!

Oh! I almost forgot the most important part of this story! The artifact that was found was Teddy's Dog-Tag! Other articles found were: flight suits, boots, aircraft wreckage/parts, and a class ring, which contained a ruby stone and inscribed "St. Joseph's." It was not stated if this was a high school or college ring. And now, you know the 'Best of the Story'!