

# Me and Pistol Packin' Mama

by John W. Graham (776<sup>th</sup>)

[Ed. of 464<sup>th</sup> BG newsletter - Frank Ramsey (779<sup>th</sup>) forwarded some info which he received from Master Sargent John W. Graham (776<sup>th</sup>), who wrote the following narrative.]

Recently I received a copy of the 464<sup>th</sup> Bomb Group H Newsletter dated Nov. 4 1994. It was sent to me by a good friend, William H. Barron, Buhl, ID of the 776<sup>th</sup> Bomb Squadron. I was thrilled to find in the newsletter a picture of "Pistol Packin' Mama". I was the crew chief of this plane at Pantanella Hill in Italy.

This picture shows the other (right) side of her. She was the last remaining plane of the original 776<sup>th</sup> Squadron flown overseas by the Air Echelon.

After many missions, she was retired and used as a shuttle plane, flying personnel to Cairo, Egypt rest camp, etc. The original planes had names and logo pictures. Others I can recall in the 776<sup>th</sup> were "Sleepy Time Gal", "Three Cornered Kid", "Pappy's Pride", "Little Lulu", "Toonerville Trolley" and "Little Gismo".

After "Pistol Packin' Mama" was retired, I was assigned to "Red J". It was unpainted as were all replacement planes because they were said to fly a bit faster than the olive drab ones due to less wind resistance. Also, the extra time consumed in camouflage painting may have been a factor.

"Red J" only made 16 missions and by a miracle landed on two engines at home base. The tail assembly was badly damaged and the control cables were cut. The crew had taken the arming wires from the bomb racks and spliced the cables together.

Above the waist doors (windows) the plane was nearly cut into two pieces by a direct flak burst. Gas tanks were punctured but the self-sealing tanks proved their worth. The wings had numerous holes. The aircraft did not return to its 776<sup>th</sup> hardstand but was salvaged for parts.

[Ed. of 464<sup>th</sup> BG newsletter - This apparently was the plane flown by Dave Eppley, of York County, PA, who we have not been able to locate. I recall that it was the 2 December 1944 sortie to Blechhammer South Oil Refinery and that Dave scattered the formation by erratic flying till he recovered control by using the auto pilot. Because our crew had not been re-outfitted as yet after the Monday 20 November 1944 ditching (Blechhammer South Refinery also), I was tower officer that day

and when the red Very signals blossomed above the aircraft that had requested an emergency approach, I grabbed the binoculars and focused on the incoming B-24. As John has said, the aircraft was almost cut in half at the waist windows. The turtle back was cut badly and I was fearful that the fuselage would buckle when it landed. John stated that the bomb arming wires were used to splice the cables, however I heard that the engineer used his shoe laces to do this. His name was and is Tex, but that was because he was from Texas. A picture of this aircraft was published in the January 1991 464<sup>th</sup> newsletter.]

John continues: I was sent to Pocatello, ID, 6 April 1943 to service planes and training combat crews. Was assigned to the 464<sup>th</sup> Bomb Group 776<sup>th</sup> Squadron, Fifteenth AAF. Along with the 464<sup>th</sup> BG Ground Echelon, I left Pocatello in early February 1944, for the week long train trip to Norfolk VA and eventual service overseas.

The 776<sup>th</sup> Ground Echelon departed Norfolk in early March 1944, on the Liberty ship "Henry W. Longfellow". Entering the Mediterranean Sea, after passing Gibraltar, a submarine alert sounded. All personnel were ordered above deck. Almost immediately there was an air alert. German planes came over strafing so back below we went. It was an exciting time. The destroyers were dashing about dropping depth charges. We survived and sailed on. The rumor was that we lost a couple of ships.

After 29 days with the large convoy, we arrived at Naples Italy. In port, we found the harbor filled with sunken ships, the results of recent bombings. Our Liberty ship maneuvered beside one sunken ship and we crossed to it on a gang plank then onto another ship until we reached the pier. The group marched to a nearby college where we spent the night. I remember the hard marble floor with only a blanket for a mattress.

In small box cars, we crossed Italy to the Adriatic side and on 17 April my parents received a telegram announcing my safe arrival at our overseas destination.

Pantanella was not ready so we began operations out of Gioia del Colle.

2 May I was shot in the hand while working on an aircraft - the bullet came from the belly turret of the plane on the hard stand next to mine. The gunner had forgotten to clear his guns in flight and accidentally discharged a burst when disarming the weapon.

After time in the Army hospital in Bari, I went through a repl depl and returned to the 464<sup>th</sup>. My job could be done although I was missing two fingers on my left hand.

The Ground Echelon did not live on the hill but had tents on the flight line, each with six men. M/Sgt. William Barron, S/Sgt. John Booth, M/Sgt. John Olive, Dudley, S/Sgt. Willis Burke and myself lived in tent #51. Olive, Dudley and Burke crewed the first radar equipped aircraft on the field; it was painted a dull gray. Booth and I crewed "Pistol Packin' Mama".

Because of G.I. ingenuity, we had four-foot high side walls of tufa block, a floor made of foot square tiles and a stove made from a bomb fin and an oil drum in the tent. Water was heated on a five gallon 'jerry' can fastened to the back of the stove. The Army cots issued were not very comfortable for 6' 8" Barron or the 240 lb. Graham. Barron was an excellent welder and with scrounged pipe we soon had a 7 foot by 3-foot double deck bunk with rope springs.

At full strength, each squadron had 16 aircraft, making group strength 64 planes. As a crew chief and ground maintenance man, I had (and have) great admiration for the combat crews. It took a special brand of courage to fly day after day on missions, not knowing what fate had in store.

After the war ended in Europe, I went by truck to Naples and loaded on a ship for Trinidad. We were assigned to the ATC (Air Transport Command) and we serviced planes that were returning the Fifth Army back to the States from Italy. I enjoyed the tropical climate but I wanted to go home. On VJ day the natives celebrated with marimba bands and dancing.

Mid-September 1945 found a group of us on a plane for Miami and then by train to Jefferson Barracks, MO for discharge.

20 December 1947 I married Frances Hill and we lived on our farm at Hawkeye for 35 years, retiring to our present address.