

The Saga of the Spare Gunner

by Paul F. Lester (776th)

The following was transcribed from the handwritten recollections of Paul F. Lester's World War II experience. Paul was from Dover NH, he was born 29 August 1925, he died 21 December 2004. Paul enlisted in the Army Air Corps after his junior year of high school in Manchester NH in 1943. He was assigned to the Fifteenth Air Force, 55th Bomb Wing, 464th Bombardment Group, 776th Bomb Squadron. Paul was stationed at Pantanella AB, Italy from August 1944 to March 1945.

Once upon a time some kids went to war. Ten of us did it by flying in a Consolidated B-24 bomber. After training our crew picked up a brand new plane at Mitchell Field in Hampstead out on Long Island N.Y.

I alerted my dad, who was working in Hartford CT, and my mother back home in Manchester, NH. My dad, mom and younger brother came by train. My older brother somehow got enough gasoline stamps and drove down from Lynn, MA with his wife and daughter.

On their arrival, I informed them that I had just been told that there would be one more stop before leaving for overseas. Grenier Field in Manchester NH was my point of embarkation (P.O.E.). I recall at Hampstead we were issued olive drab (O.D.) underwear and were required to turn in all white underwear. When I got to Grenier field I was able to have my mother visit me on base one more time through the efforts of the Red Cross leader. I had no leave and asked to be able to have a pass to go home. The base Commander, Col. John I. Moore spoke with me but denied the request. It was thought to be a risk, that should I desert, it would break the integrity of the crew gained from training together. This would be proved to be a false assumption by later events in my career.

The 14" deep dish apple pie my mother had baked was totally consumed by the six enlisted personnel as we flew to Gander, Newfoundland. The weather at Gander caused us to be held over before embarking on the next leg of the trip to the Azores. On take-off we saw the smoking hole left by a Boeing B-17 that had crashed - providing us with ten lessons on the wastefulness of war.

The uneventful flight to the Azores off the coast of North Africa spoke well of our Navigator. None of us knew at the time that he was a graduate of Harvard. After the war, he worked for the Baltimore Sun. Rea A. Murdock died on 13 September 1989 at the age of 68. The pilot Robert Gordon sat the big ass bird down more gently than most pilots. He had been a flight instructor. From the runway, it was a steep climb up a rocky hillside. GI's had rubber soled boots, but Tommy Graf's had hob nails which made it much harder to climb.

That night we watched the movie "Gaslight." Secretary of the Treasury Morgenthau's C-54 was also with us. We were issued US gold certificates to use as currency while in North Africa. I should have kept them. I volunteered to stay with the aircraft as security watch over night. I used an aerosole insect spray from tail to nose - an aerosole way back in 1944.

Marrakech Morocco was to be our next stop and from there Tunis. The hop to Tunis didn't take long and the flies were there to greet us. There was no avoiding the flies, the natives didn't bother to swat them but we had a full-time occupation. They put the whole crew up in the officer's quarters. None of the enlisted men wore shirts with any rank and it seemed our silver wings on the shirts avoided any challenge.

The next stop was a short flight across the Mediterranean to an airfield near Taranto, Italy. The British manned the anti-aircraft guns. I asked a couple of them how much action had taken place recently and they replied very little. Apparently, I looked very young as they asked me my age. I told them "18." Due to the decimation of British youth in WWI they did not take anyone that young.

Finally our crew was assigned to the 776th Squadron of the 464th Bombardment Group in the 55th Wing of the Fifteenth Air Force. The base was called Pantanella. It was located between the towns of Lavello and Canosa, with Canosa being the closest.

Upon landing the ground crew suggested that we take the 14 cases of K-rations to our tents. We did not know why, but we did and placed them under the six canvas folding cots. Our tent was the former home of the "Sleepy Time Gal" crew who had been shot down (later it was learned the plane landed in Switzerland). Although it was August, we smoked up the tent with a fire.

We "stood down" for a few days before flying a mission. Our crew chief, Anthony Travaglino, volunteered to fly with another crew on a raid to Ploesti. We flew our first mission on 15 August 1944 in support of the invasion of southern France. Our target was a bridge to be knocked out to slow the escape of the retreating Germans. All of the squadron's 136 five hundred pound bombs hit the center of the small French town on the far side of the bridge. The mission was one of the few where P-51 escorts were in close.

On the return leg we flew over the invasion fleet in the Ligurian Sea which made the four aircraft carriers take standard evasive maneuvers even though they knew we were "friendly." It was a spectacular sight. No German fighters and no flak, but we were now veterans. I flew in the nose turret on the early missions.