

## **The Three Cornered Kid**

By Arthur B. Robertson, Jr. (776<sup>th</sup>) – as told to his son, the original "Three Cornered Kid"

I would like to share several war stories that were told me by my father Lt. Col. Arthur B. Robertson, Jr. He was stationed at Panatella AAB, Italy, May 1944 to February 1945 with the Fifteenth AF, 464<sup>th</sup> BG, 776<sup>th</sup> & 777<sup>th</sup> Squadrons.

Dad was born in 1914 and his lifelong love with flying started at a young age – hearing about the WWI brand new phenomena of "fighter pilots," and the exploits of barnstormers, Rickenbacker, Lindburg, Earhart, etc. He got in trouble at school in Ashland, Ohio making paper airplanes and testing them by flying them out the open classroom windows. Dad got his pilot's licence in 1937 flying a Luscomb at Deland, Florida. He got the student name "Crash" when he ground-looped his

plane on his first solo landing.



*From the collection of A.B. Robertson III.*

**Crew of the "Three Cornered Kid"**

**Standing (left to right):**

Lt. McCord "Mickey" Marshall, Co-pilot (the original co-pilot, Lt. Paul E. Griffin killed in M/C accident at Panatella AB, Italy, 1944); Capt. Arthur B. Robertson, Jr., Pilot; Capt. Walter H. Rose, Navigator; Lt. William D. Soderland, Bombardier.

**Kneeling, front (l to r):**

Unknown; Unknown; Unknown; Sgt. Reino W. Menne (?), Radio-Op/Gunner; Unknown; Sgt. Ralph V. King, Gunner. Also on this crew were T/Sgt. Albert P. Pederson; S/Sgt. Randolph P. Duhamel (KIA?); Sgt. Sol Rabinewitz and Sgt. Victor A Fulco; (First name unknown) Burslein; (First name unknown) Weaver and Lt. (First name unknown) Gouse.

A.B. Robertson's 776<sup>th</sup> crew with the Three Cornered Kid.

He entered the USAAF in the summer of 1941 and did primary and basic flying (and met my mother) at Curtis Field, Brady, Texas. He got his wings in the AT-6 at Brooks Field, San Antonio, Texas. in October 1941.

Dad was assigned to anti-submarine patrol duty with the 66<sup>th</sup> Obs GP, 118<sup>th</sup> Obs. Squadron. at Charleston, South Carolina from December 1941 – July 1942 flying the O-52, P-46 and P-47. From August 1942 to October 1943 with the 45<sup>th</sup> BG, 433 Squadron. and 26<sup>th</sup> Anti-Sub W, 10<sup>th</sup> AS Squadron. at Galveston, Texas.

There he flew the B-34, B-18 and the "new" B-24. He said, "I flew ASP for two full years and I never saw one sub!" He didn't sink a sub but he got valuable stick time and was promoted to Captain. Military flying is risky business – war zone or not – he lost several buddies to engine trouble, weather, navigation errors and to over-bold pilots (flying under bridges, turning too low over water, and "grandstanding"). Dad pranged one himself – belly landed a nav errored, fuel starved B-34.

## **The Big Jump**

After being transferred from anti-sub duty at Galveston, Texas in October 1943 and going through training with the newly formed Fifteenth Air Force at Pocatello, Idaho, Dad's group, the 464<sup>th</sup> BG "swung the compass" at Lincoln, Nebraska and left there with their new B-24Hs on 29 February 1943 for their new "home" in Italy. I was in Lincoln as a 9 month-old baby with my mother and grandparents as they watched the departing Group fly over their hotel.

The Group had to fly to North Africa first because Europe and the Mediterranean were still Hitler's "playground" and there were no airfields built in southern Italy yet (the Germans still controlled Italy from Rome north). They flew to Miami Beach, Florida, first, then a hop over the Caribbean down to Belen, Brazil to top off with every drop of 100 octane they could squeeze into their fuel tanks. At least one A/C was lost during this flight, fate of the crew unknown.

The crews had been assigned their aircraft at Pocatello (Dad's was B-24H-16-FO, serial number 42-52453). They would be bonded together from there on out – as long as both could last. It was at Belen that Capt. Robertson (Dad) found a local painter and had the nose art put on the aircraft. They named it the "Three Cornered Kid" (three crewmembers had newborns – me; Li'l Rob and Li'l Griff of the Co-pilot, Lt. Paul Griffin and Li'l ?, unborn of the navigator Lt. Walter Rose). The artwork was a baby being held up by a winged diaper and about to drop a bomb. Dad said he thought that Belen was also where he picked-up malaria by sleeping outside in an open cot.

The one shot-dead stick trip across the Atlantic was the cause of a lot of "nail biting." They went one at a time, Dad was sweating it out and hoped his navigator knew what he was doing. From Dad's flight records, I think this flight was on March 3<sup>rd</sup> and took 11 hours – the last 2 in darkness. Much to everyone's relief the

crew finally saw land. Dad said, "I couldn't believe it, we not only found land, not only found North Africa, not only found Oran in northwest Africa, but ole Rose brought us right down main street, right over the very top of the airfield's control shack! I never sweated out nav problems again or even questioned Rose after that."

### **The Mystery Messerschmitt**

Dad and the growing Fifteenth AF were assembling and training in Ouada, Africa while waiting for air bases to be built in Italy. The convoy that was bringing the ground echelon and supplies for the new air force had to run the U-boat gauntlet in the Atlantic and U-boats and the Luftwaffe in the Mediterranean. They were attacked in the Mediterranean by the Luftwaffe's ME-109s and JU-87s. Several ships were lost with their cargo of valuable parts and supplies. The Group had to live on powdered eggs and marmalade for a long time. Dad always said that was why he hated marmalade – he never ate it again for the rest of his life. He said fresh eggs were a great delicacy at that time and the Arabs would sell them to the troops for \$1 per egg!

One day a scouting party came back with the news that they had discovered an abandoned Messerschmitt 109 out in the sand dunes. It looked like the pilot had successfully landed it after running out of gas. It was sitting there, on its wheels, in perfect condition and no one to be seen anywhere. The next day a salvage party was put together to bring it back to base. When the party arrived at the site – it was gone! It had completely vanished, no one ever found out what happened to it. Did the pilot return with gas and vamoose? How did he find friendly natives, how did he get gas and how did he transport it to the plane?

### **The Cow That Jumped Over the Alps**

"464<sup>th</sup> Air-drops Food Package to Nazis!" You wouldn't believe that the USAAF would be aiding the Nazis would you? Wellllll...they didn't, but they helped out for their own morale anyway they could – both officially and "off the record."

Dad always loved telling this story. One day as the Group positioned itself for the final bomb run to target (I wish I could remember which target – I think it was Vienna), all was well. Dad was watching the aircraft in front of him (the bombardier controls the plane on the final bomb run). Much to the disbelief and amusement of Dad and everyone else – when the call came out for "Bombs Away,"

instead of bombs falling out of the bomb bay they were watching – a dead cow fell out! Dad didn't give me the plane or crew ID. I have always wondered how they got "ole Bessie" up in the bomb rack? Did they get in trouble for it? Wonder what the Germans thought?! Gives a whole new meaning to "Bombs Away." It also set the bar for stress relieving pranks. It was quite the story around Pantanella for some time.