

were damaged by flak. The flight engineer reported a devastating loss of fuel from the wing tanks. Then a second engine quit. Still over the Alps, we could not sustain altitude and fell below our group.

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Now it was a question of ditching in the Adriatic, making it to our secret base in Yugoslavia, or just maybe, gliding into the closest US Fighter strip near Rimini, in northern Italy. The last two engines were under strain and threatened to quit. The fuel gauges showed empty as the plane wallowed almost out of control because of the damaged control system, when the Island of Vis came into view.

There was no time for formalities. We shot red flares and started a steep descent to the 4000 foot strip neatly placed between the sea cliff and a small mountain. With less than a 100 yards to go, both remaining engines quit, we flopped on the undersize runway with a screech.

The field was Tito's headquarters supported by British and American Missions (OSS). For months, Allied aircrews in trouble used this Partisan refuge as a safe base to evade capture by German patrols. Our status changed from Missing in Action, to Delayed in-route.

15th Air Force Headquarters at Bari dispatched a C-47 to pick us up the following day. We spent the night in the attic of a small hotel where we were under the watchful eyes of a lady Partisan in full combat gear, complete with grenades, and burp gun. We were impressed by her attention to the field of fire from the attic window. The American boys were duly impressed.

The war in the air continued, our group was the last in the formation of several hundred B-24's under heavy fighter escort to attack the oil facilities at Lobuau, Vienna. Some thirty minutes before our target, while crossing Lake Balaton, Hungary, we saw a huge dog fight in front and to the left. Focke-Wulfs and ME-109's were dashing in and out of our formation with immense speed and daring. Our fighters jumped in the string of fighters, causing Germans to explode, filling the air with parachutes, flaming wrecks, and last minute near misses.

He came from 11 O'clock high raking us with ma-

chine gun fire, then the ME-109 half rolled and exploded in a huge ball of fire. Our left waist gunner, Joe O'Connell had made the impossible shot.

Now numbers of FW-190's were gaining on us from the rear, their air to air rockets zipped past us on both sides. Our left wing man, J B Johnson and crew blew up right in formation, just as our right wing man, a new crew that hadn't even unpacked yet pulled up to the right and disintegrated in a flash of fire and smoke. There were no chutes.

Our tail gunner, George Koch of New Jersey, caught one FW-190 with a good burst from his twin fifties. and peppered two more. We were alone now but still in the air as successive rows of FW's took their best shots and quickly disappeared with a deft, "flick roll."

The old bus moaned and shook as the firing guns filled the cabin with the smell of cordite. Then, BANG, a rocket blasted a three foot hole in our tail just aft of the ball turret that was the pride and joy of Mathew Jdzik, of Philadelphia. O'Connell was badly cut by flying metal turning his face and arms into a bloody mess. Still he stayed at his post and rearmed his gun blasting at every bogie that came in on his side.

Our own group had disappeared in the smoke ahead, nor were the others trailing far back of us to offer mutual cover. Now it was time to get out of German air space without delay. The engines were ragged, two turbos out, (the original cause of our sagging position at the tail end of the formation). The wings were streaming gas, but we held our altitude as best we could to make it possible to join other home bound formations. Looming up were the fearsome Alps that we still had to cross.

Staggering out of Vienna was a scorched and tattered formation of B-24's. Large hunks of these airplanes were falling off, yet they flew on. As we cut them off by turning southwest, I could see these ragged warriors forming painfully into combat boxes, and I joined them eagerly. As we crossed into Northern Italy near the Udine area, the crews were lightening their aircraft by discarding through the waist window: radios, guns, ammo, pieces of gun turrets, and the normal miscellany that air crews found comforting on long combat missions.

We touched the old bus down gently at Foggia Main which was close to the general hospital where Joe would get the best care. Later we returned to Torretta, shook, tired, and completely spent with our meeting with Herman Goring's best. The war was to continue on.

The End