

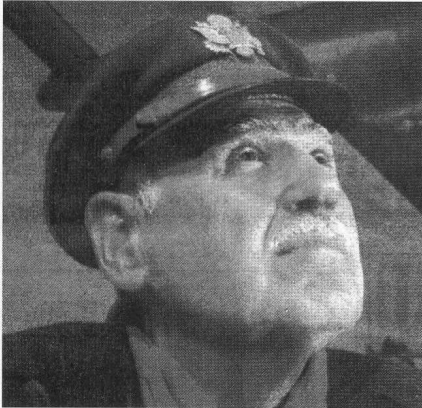
Newport Beach, CA

Dear Bud:

I thought you would like this story that appeared in the Los Angeles Times earlier this year.

Best regards

Mike Hartunian, 825 sq.



*Mike Hartunian at a recent visit to the San Diego Aerospace Museum.*

More than 50 years after bailing out of a crippled B-24 bomber over Austria and being taken prisoner, Mike Hartunian can finally put World War II behind him.

The war did not end for the 74-year-old woodworker in 1945 when Germany surrendered and he was liberated from a prison camp. For more than five decades, Hartunian has been obsessed with finding the farm village and field near Vienna, where he landed on a bitter cold Jan. 15, 1945, after completing his 15th bombing mission over the Austrian capital.

On Tuesday, Hartunian and his family leave for Kirchberg where he will be reunited with a retired postal worker, who as a 13-year-old boy in 1945 saw the American drift down, from the sky and the B-24 Liberator crash nearby.

Franz Dechant, now 64, was among a group of villagers who apprehended Hartunian and another flier and detained the Americans until they were taken prisoner by two German soldiers. Hartunian, a bombardier in the 825th Squadron 484th Bomb Group, remembers Dechant as the young boy who ran into the farmhouse where he and the other crew member were being held, showing off a silk parachute used by one of the Americans.

After the war, Hartunian returned to East Los Angeles and became a successful furniture manufacturer before retiring in Newport Beach. His business prospered, and he and his wife, Viola, live a comfortable lifestyle. The couple's two daughters manage the business built by Hartunian, who relaxes by doing woodworking in his Tustin shop.

Despite his business success, the war left a yearning that could not be purged, Hartunian said. Over the years, the need to visit the place where his life changed in an instant became stronger. The need turned into an obsession that intensified after he finally learned in 1994 that his plane, which was hit by anti-aircraft fire, had crashed in Kirchberg.

That year, the Hartunians traveled to the Austrian village but could not find anybody who remembered the day that his shot-up plane crashed there. Disappointed they returned to Orange County not knowing that Dechant had noticed the couple in the village

square and wondered what the two Americans were doing.

Hartunian told his story to Rosie Hofbauer, a village official, who promised to ask around and write to him if she found any witnesses to that important event in his life. A few weeks later, Hofbauer wrote to Hartunian and told him about Dechant.

Dechant sent Hartunian a photo of the bomb hoist salvaged from the plane by a villager and which has been used as a winch for more than half a century. He also included photos of the field, a vineyard, where Hartunian's parachute floated to earth.

"Dechant and I have been corresponding for two years now. He's sent me birthday cards and letters. He's become a good friend. I can't wait to see him and give him a hug," Hartunian said. Until he received Dechant's letters, Hartunian had little hope of ever finding the exact place where he landed and the farmhouse where he was taken by villagers.

"I used to go to Germany every other year to buy machinery for my business and always thought about when I was shot down," Hartunian said.

He was taken prisoner about four months before Germany's surrender and taken to a Luftwaffe interrogation center in Frankfurt where he was questioned for two days by an English-speaking officer. Hartunian was amazed to learn how much the Germans knew about his life. "They told me what high school I attended in Los Angeles, and what camps I'd trained at in the United States. They impressed me with what they knew about me, but I never knew how they got that information. Of course, they also knew what air base we flew out of in Italy," he said.

The tail gunner was the only one of the bomber's 10-man crew—six enlisted men and four officers who did not survive the jump, which was the only one Hartunian ever made. Hartunian, who was a second lieutenant, has stayed in touch with only the other three officers.

More than just his pride was injured when taken prisoner, he said, when jumping out of the plane, his parachute opened and yanked his body upward, causing the straps to pull tight along the crotch, Hartunian said. Anticipating a soft landing on the snow-covered field below I landed on top of a fence pole sticking out of the snow instead.

"I landed on top of it, buttocks first. Lucky for me, my heavy flight suit prevented it from doing much damage. But I remember hurting immensely at both ends as I attempted to loosen the parachute," Hartunian said with a laugh.

The entire village is anticipating his visit. In a recent letter, Hofbauer said officials "will organize some people who remember the history of your airplane crash. We think this will be a great and interesting time for you."

P.S. The Hartunians, Mike, wife

Viola, daughters Debra, and Patricia did travel to Austria and were warmly received by the Franz Dechant family. Franz who was twelve years old at the time is now a 63 year old retired post office employee.



*Franz Dechant*