

THE LAST MISSION OF CREW 48

(As seen by Left Waist Gunner, Robert Vannoy Black on April 2, 1944)

The following pages are an account of "The Mission", as I remembered it to have happened, more than fifty years ago. It is ironic, but it seemed as if our most important missions to bomb targets were flown on Sundays or Holidays. The weather conditions were always an important factor. The weather determined if we could fly, as well as the locations where we could drop our bombs. It could be clear, at our home base in Italy, but at the target area could have a cloud cover, which could cause us to have to bomb a secondary target.

Our crew had flown our latest mission on March 26th. About two or three days after this mission, I began having a deep feeling of dread, as a premonition that something "terrible" would happen soon. Quite possibly, it could have come from my "Indian Blood", as I am 3/16th. Indian, possibly more. My Indian ancestors have told me that an Indian could "feel or predict" fate. I just couldn't put my finger on those feelings, but I felt that I would soon be hit by "flak", or a German 7-MM bullet, with "my name on it", would tear through me so quickly, that I wouldn't even know that I was "going to die". These feelings were not a "fear", or in any way of being afraid. Even though it describes fear, there was something so differently, that I couldn't describe it. The thought never entered my mind that I would ever have been taken a prisoner-of-war. Even though I had such strong feelings, I would not have even considered missing a mission with my crew-members. When I began training to be a member of a combat crew, I knew that it could possibly cost me my life. I'm sure that every combat man had the same feelings, so I was no different from any other man of combat. My mind was settled to that fact before I joined the Army Air Corps. I feel that no other branch of the service could have been given any better training than we received. Much of it depended wholly on our own skills, and what the brain could absorb during our training. We must "get it" the first time, as most of it would never be repeated.

On April 1st., after we received our pay for the month, I sent all of my money, except about \$30.00, to my Mother, who was banking it for my return. I kept \$30.00 for spending money, in case my premonition was not going to happen. I had a coin collection, which I began when I left the U. S. These coins were from Brazil, Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia and Italy. I put these coins in my soap box and sent them to Mexia, Texas, as a gift to my brother, Glenn, who was twelve years of age. He told me recently, that he still has these coins, and "treasures" them. That night, I went to bed early, to prepare for the early morning "mission-call". "Buddy", my little white and black spotted Italian Shepherd dog, came to my bed. I reached down and picked him up, and put him under the warm G. I. blankets with me. The night was beginning to get cold. I had obtained Buddy from an Italian, who ran the "wine store" on top of the hill, adjacent to the 455th. Bomb Group briefing room. (Or a wine cellar, before the 455th. moved into it.) Buddy had learned his name in a very short time. He was a playful little fellow, and after giving him a drink of John Warren's wine, he became even more playful. John did not appreciate me sharing his wine with Buddy. On cold nights I would let Buddy sleep under the blankets with me. On this particular night, after we had played, we both went to sleep under the blankets together. About midnight, John Warren came into our tent, and to my cot. He awakened me by shaking my shoulder,

saying, "Hey, Blackie, let me have \$100.00." He told me that he had been in a poker game, and lost all of his money. I told him that I had sent all of my money home that day, except the \$30.00. He told me to let him have that \$30.00. I told him, "John, I'm not going to let you have all my money, you will just go back and lose that too." Then he told me to let him have \$20.00. To quieten him, so I could go back to sleep, I gave him \$20.00. He turned, and left our tent. He told me later that he went back to the poker game, won all the money, and broke up the game.

The morning of Palm Sunday, April 2, 1944, we were awakened by the C. Q., blowing his whistle and calling, "Time to get up boys, and get ready for your mission". Oh, how I would liked to have slept longer! It was long before daylight, somewhere about 4:30 A. M. The morning was very cold and frosty, as I crawled from under the blankets. I put on my BRIGHT BLUE electric heated flying suit, with my heavy fur-lined winter flying suit and heavy fur-lined flying boots. (The "fur-lined" leather was sheepskin, with the fur inside, and the leather skin to the outside.) I went to the mess hall to eat breakfast. We had S.O.S. and black coffee. ("S.O.S." was the name which was given to the fried ground beef, then chopped into small pieces and mixed with white gravy, and put on pieces of toasted bread.) I went back through the chow-line and got a second helping and took it to Buddy, who was waiting for me at our tent. He liked S.O.S. too, and ate it greedily. While he was eating, I rubbed and petted him and told him, "Well, I don't suppose I'll see you, tonight." My premonition had grown so strong, that I knew that this was the day it would happen. While he finished the S.O.S., I went into the tent and got my parachute and harness. I reached down and petted Buddy once more. I left the tent, intentionally leaving my .45 automatic. I just had one clip (9 rounds) of ammunition, and the 455th. did not have any more .45 ammo, to issue to us. Nine rounds are just enough to get a man into trouble, if we had to "bail out". We had been told that the Germans were killing the American G. I.'s who had their .45's. There had been quite a few civilians shot in Germany and Austria, by the G. I.'s while trying to make their escape, after being shot down. I walked through the early dawning morning, between the tents. I reached the area where the open-top, 6 x 6, G. I. trucks were waiting to take a load of men, with their equipment to the flight-line. I didn't stop at the briefing room, but went straight to our waiting plane. I had gone to previous briefings, but this one I decided to not go. All of our officers went. When I got to the plane, some of the crew-members were already there. I put my parachute and harness by my "left-waist" gun, then looked around my gun position to see if everyting was satisfactory. It was close to sun-rise when the officers arrived at the plane. Our first question was an eager, "Where today?" When we were told, "STEYR", an audible groan went up from us. We knew Steyr had to be a rough mission, as there were several war-time factories located there. One of the prime targets was the giant STEYR-WALZWERKE", where ball bearings were manufactured. Our navigator, Lt Gottlieb, reached over to me and sort of ruffled my hair, as he had done so many times before. It seemed to be some kind of a "greeting" between the two of us. When I didn't respond, or flash a smile, he asked, "What's the matter?" I simply told him, "I don't know, I don't feel right". He asked if I were sick. I answered with, "no". I don't know if our Lt. Gottlieb will remember that short conversation today, or not. But at the time he ruffled my hair, I was deep into my thought of my premonition. Lt. Gottlieb's ruffling my hair began back in the U. S., while we were on our training missions. I had always had my hair cut short, into a "crew-cut". The "hair ruffling" had

become something of a "friendly greeting" between the two of us. (That was when I HAD hair.)

The usual friendliness and joking between all the crew-members soon gave me an "up-lifted" feeling. I joined in with the usual merry-making and foolishness, as "kids" would do. After all, we were from 19 to 24 years of age, when the crew was formed, except John Warren, who was our "old man" of the crew, at age 27. In a short time, Lts. Pardoe, Patterson, Gottlieb, Costello, and Sgts. Warren and Kimberly entered into the front section of the plane. Sgts. Roberts, Matthews, Leonhard and I entered into the rear section. The forward and rear sections were separated by the bomb-bays, with only a 12" "cat-walk" to go to and from the two sections. The "cat-walk" was used by the two Armor-gunners, Sgts. Matthews and Kimberly, to pull the "pins" from the bombs, so they would explode, when they came in contact with the target.

The "props" were pulled through to displace any oil that could be settled inside the cylinders. A ground crew member was at each engine, with a fire extinguisher, while they were being started. This was in case of an engine fire, when the engines were started. We could hear the familiar "whirring" or "winding-up" sound, just before the starters were engaged to start the engines. When all four engines were started, they were run up to the proper RPM. Soon, the engines were cut off, for some reason. The ground crew was helping John Warren, in trying to start the "put-put". (The "put-put" was an auxiliary generator power "plant", as small as it was. It was used for generating electricity, in case a generator quit working.) The problems of starting the "put-put" caused precious time to be wasted, as all of the 455th. B. G. planes were flying, grouping, and heading over the Adriatic Sea. The attempt to start the "put-put" was futile; it simply would not start. Lt. Pardoe was given the order to go ahead and take off, without the "put-put". This was a bad mistake, as the "put-put" would be needed badly, later during the mission. The engines were started, ran up, and we taxied out to the end of the run-way. The four engines were run up to the maximum, while holding the brakes. The plane shuddered, and pulled against the tightly-held brakes. In the rear section of the plane, we had taken our take-off positions, with our backs against the bomb-bay bulkheads. The O. K. to take off was given, and the brakes were released. There was an immediate surge forward, and up the run-way we went, lumbering forward, gaining speed for the take-off. When the proper speed was reached, the pilot, co-pilot and engineer worked together in the take-off. We were soon up, and on our way for the mission, which proved to be so fateful. The plane was still on full-throttle to gain altitude and speed to catch up with our Group. They were far out of sight. During this "chase" to catch up with the Group, we all fired our fifty-calibers, and put our oxygen masks on, at about 10,000 feet. We always flew over the Adriatic, when it was possible, in order to keep away from any of the flak-guns that we would have to fly over, if over the land. I pulled off my heavy fur-lined flying suit, while we were catching up with our Group. I plugged in my bright blue colored electric heated flying suit for warmth. We caught up with the 455th. B. G. about the time we reached the coast of Yugoslavia. Our position of "left wing-man" to the lead plane had been taken. We had to fly the position of the last plane, on the left, in the formation. The position we were flying was well known to be named "Tail-End Charlie", or "Coffin Corner"! This position was dreaded by all, as it was rightfully named!

When we flew over Yugoslavia, I was always inspired and awed by the beauty of the Alps. I looked at the beauty of the gray-rock peaks, further down down into the green mountains and foothills, and on into the valleys. Among most of the valleys, was a river running between. There were always many small villages that seemed to be "planted" among the mountains. We kept away from the larger cities, unless our route called for us to go that particular route, as the Germans had their flak-guns emplaced in the areas of the cities. As I looked, it never occurred to me that I would soon be afoot among all of this beauty. I was also scanning the skies for other aircraft. I don't remember who called out, "ENEMY PLANES, AT NINE O'CLOCK"!! Nine O'Clock was my position! Far into the space, I could see many German ME-109's and P-38's engaged in fierce dog-fights. But the P-38's were outnumbered! All at once, a ME-109 broke from the dogfights, and began flying in toward our formation. Then another followed him. With us flying "Tail-End Charlie," or "Coffin Corner", he headed straight toward us, firing his 7-MM machine guns and 20-MM cannons. At the same time he began shooting at us, I began firing at him, using my open sights, as I had been taught to do in gunnery school. I found that I didn't have time to use my open sights, as I was firing behind him. I could see the gray smoke from the 20-MM shells, as the bursts came closer and closer, into us. Lt. Pardoe called over the microphone, "Who was firing at that plane?" I told him that it was I. He told me to fire a little more ahead, but I had their altitude. I could see that he was correct. I began "leading" more, using my tracers as a pattern. The next plane was following into our formation, firing his 7-MM and 20-MM's, just as the first. As I was firing, I could see my tracers go into his wing, just before he broke under our plane. I could see smoke coming from him. Our Ball Turret gunner, Bob Leonhard, was undoubtedly firing at him now, as I could hear his guns firing, and his ball turret moving to follow his target. Possibly, we could "share" a kill with each-other, but I'll never know. It seemed that this time, every plane in the German Luftwaffe began attacking us! I could hear the guns, of what sound to be from every position of our plane to be firing at the same time. Things were happening so fast, I just can't describe it. It seems that as one of the 109's was attacking from the tail position of our plane, a deadly blow of a 20-MM went into the main fuel tank, just behind our #2 engine. The hole was about the size of a football. It also punctured our gasoline tank. At first, I thought the gasoline was oil, streaming past my left waist window. I reported it as being oil to Lt. Pardoe. Somebody called out, "I smell gasoline". The #2 engine had already been feathered, as I'm sure that Lts. Pardoe and Costello could read the troubles on the instrument panel, and immediately acted to feather the engine. Lt. Pardoe called to me, "Life your oxygen mask, Black, and see if that is gasoline". I lifted my oxygen mask, and the strong smell of gasoline hit me. I loudly called out, "IT IS GASOLINE". The high-octane gasoline had been pouring over the hot supercharger, and we had to fire through it, tracers, and all. Every fifth round of ammunition was a tracer, which left a stream of fire and smoke, shooting back from each round, so we could see where we were firing. It seems that the main tank had emptied in a very short time. These tanks were made of self-sealing rubber, but I feel that the hole was too large for the tanks to seal themselves. I do not know when we began falling from the formation, and had to turn to try to make an attempt to get back to our base in Italy. The German planes kept their fierce attack, swarming us as angry wasps. I don't know how they could have kept from shooting their own

planes down! We lost our #3 engine during all of this action, which meant that we didn't have a hydraulic system. The hydraulic system furnished all of the power for the controls for the pilot and co-pilot to keep the plane up. We didn't know of all the "happenings" in the forward section of the plane. But we felt that Lt. Patterson had "salvoed" our bombs, in order for us to keep up with our bomber formation. Lt. Patterson had taken the top turret guns, while our top turret gunner, John Warren, tried desperately, but in vain, to start the "put-put" for the auxiliary power we HAD TO HAVE to stay up, in the plane. But still, there was the problem of #3 engine being shot out, and we were losing altitude very fast, vibrating, shaking and bouncing. Lt. Pardoe called through the interphone, "YOU FELLOWS HAD BETTER GET READY TO GET OUT OF THIS PLANE. WE CAN'T HOLD IT UP MUCH LONGER!" Immediately, I ripped off my flak-jacket, and snapped my chest-type "chute". There was another plane coming in, directly to my position. I grabbed my fifty-caliber, and began firing. Again, the white "puffs of smoke" from the 20-MM projectiles came in closer and closer to us. I could see my tracers, as they went into this plane, and it began smoking, before he broke off his firing pattern. I grabbed my interphone, and shouted, "I GOT HIM, I GOT HIM". The interphone had been knocked out during this attack, and no sound came over it. I just HAD to share this with somebody, so I slapped Bill Roberts on the back. When I made the spiraling motion of a plane going down, I held up one finger to let me know that I had got one. Bill Roberts shook his head, "as an affirmative" answer. He made the motion for me to let him have my gun. Having noticed that my ammunition can was empty, and the 50-calibers were dangling in it's chain, I pointed to the empty ammunition box. He immediately proceeded to open another can of ammunition to attach to my dangling 50-caliber chain. My tracers began going in a round and round crazy-like circle. I HAD BURNED MY BARREL OUT! I had been having to fire so profusely, that I could not give it the time to cool off. Before Bill Roberts could get the ammunition can open, we heard the "Dingy-bell" ringing loud and clear, as a signal for us to abandon the plane. Almost immediately, Bob Matthews appeared from his tail gun position, fastening his chest-type parachute. Noticing that Bob Leonhard's ball-turret was still in motion, Matthews tapped the top of the turret, with Bob Leonhard's shoe. A plane was coming in at my position, and I began firing with the last of my ammunition. Pardoe must have "sat down" on the dingy-bell, with a continuous ringing, as a signal for us to "GET OUT, AND GET OUT NOW". I went immediately to the camera hatch and opened it, and sat down on the forward end and hung my feet out. The blast of wind just blew them up. As I sat down, I looked around to Bill Roberts, Bob Matthews and Bob Leonhard. They were all in a huddle, with their arms around each-others shoulders. Bill Roberts kissed Bob Leonhard on the cheek. I looked at my watch, for some unknown reason, at a time like this! It was 10:24 A. M. I glanced at the back of the camera hatch, and knew I would have to roll into a small ball, to clear myself from hitting the other end. All of this was done in a split-second. I rolled myself into the smallest ball possible, at the edge of the camera hatch, and rolled out of the plane. I was met with a mighty rush of wind. I would estimate that the plane was going forward, in a downward glide, with two operable engines, to be about 100 to 120 MPH. As I hit the blast of wind, my fur-lined winter flying helmet, with the earsets intact, blew off my head. I made a grab for it, but it was already sailing end-over-end, into the space below. As soon as I felt that I was clear of the slip-stream of the plane, I pulled the rip-cord. (Sometimes called the D-Ring) For a

short time, but it seemed too long. I began grabbing at the parachute cover, in an effort to pull the 'chute out. It seemed as if it wouldn't open. I know all of this was only seconds, in happening. Just as I was making my efforts to pull the 'chute out, a small "pilot-chute" popped out, pulling the canopy from it's cover. The shroud-strings seemed to just unlatch, from side-to-side. I was stopped by a bone-jolting force, and it seemed as if I were going straight up. At the same time, the parachute harness buckle was jerked deeply inside my right groin, which gave such an intense pain, that it was almost unbearable. I tried to hold the harness away, to release the pain, but there was no way to free myself from the buckle, so I had to continue all the way to the ground with the buckle buried in my groin area. I had loosened the leg straps of the harness while we were on one of our training flights, in the U. S. The harness fit very well, when I was wearing the bulky fur-lined flying suit, but wearing it with the bright-blue electric heated suit, it was much too loose.

Everything seemed so quiet and calm, with no noise, except the quiet fluttering of the nylon parachute canopy, as I was descending. I counted parachutes that were open. There were ten of our 'chutes were opened. It seemed as if we were from 3/4 to a mile apart. I heard a loud, distant explosion. That had to be our plane that exploded! It sound as if it were still in the air! All was quiet again. I soon heard the sound of an approaching plane. I looked to my right, and there was a German ME-109 flying straight toward me! As it seemed that he were going to fly into me, he pulled slightly to the right. He was so close, that I could see his eyes and facial expression, and the markings of a black cross, and swastika on the plane. For some unknown reason, I raised my hand, and waved it, about shoulder high, from side to side, in a slow motion. He waved back, and disappeared as quickly as he had approached. Quite possibly, if I had not waved at him, he could have shot me out of the chute. I'll never know!! My thoughts were interrupted by a puzzling sound of "zing, zing, zinging". At the moment I could not determine what was making the noise. Soon, I began to hear the "rifle reports". They were shooting at me from the ground! I could feel the slight pulls and tugs, as the bullets ripped through my parachute canopy. Luckily, they did not hit me, as I'm sure that they were not allowing for my falling. I could not determine the direction from which they were firing at me. I could see a railroad track below, and a railroad station. There were two or three houses in the close vicinity of the station. On top of the mountain, opposite from where I was falling, there was one house on top of the mountain. There was a wide river along side the rail tracks. But I did not see any people, or anybody shooting at me. I found later, that they were shooting at me from the railroad station. It seemed that the Germans had a detachment stationed there. As I got closer to the ground, it seemed to just SHOOT UP TO ME. It didn't seem as I were falling, but as the ground was "coming to me". My parachute caught in top of the tall trees, with me dangling about 12 to 16 feet above the steep slope. It was about a 45-degree slope. I managed to get to my pocket-knife, which was in one of the front pockets of the BRIGHT BLUE electric heated flying suit, that I was still wearing. I immediately cut all of the shroud-strings, except one. I hesitated momentarily to decide whether to try to close the knife, as I was falling, or to throw it from me. I knew that I could need my knife, in my attempt to escape. Looking at that steep slope below, I knew that I possibly could not close the knife, causing me to cut myself deeply, and inflict another problem to my "list" of problems. So I threw the knife, with the same motion as I cut the shroud-line. I fell to the steep

mountain slope instantly, rolling, bouncing and tumbling. I was stopped instantly and abruptly, as I bounced and tumbled into a tree, about 12 to 14 feet below. When I bounced against the tree trunk, I was struck with a paralyzing blow to my back-bone, just below the lower belt-line. I was momentarily paralyzed, and could not move. I did not have time to think about my injuries to my groin or backbone. I had to put every effort possible into my escape attempt. I quickly unfastened the parachute harness and discarded it. I tried to climb down the steep slope, but my feet would slide from under me, as the needles from the trees were wet from the recently thawed snow, or a rain. I thought about my parachute just "marking" the spot where I fell, leading the Germans directly to me. The parachute was caught so high, I couldn't climb the tree, with my injured groin and backbone. I decided to get as far away from the tree, as possible. So I slid on down the mountain, leaving a trail of disturbed spruce (?) needles all the way from the parachute to the place where I could walk the rest of the way down. My adrenaline was pumping at it's highest! As soon as I got to the bottom of that peak, I began climbing up the next peak, which was a steep slope, also. I managed to climb about half-way up, and found a shallow ditch. I hid as well as I could, wearing that bright blue electric heated flying suit. I laid as low as I could in the ditch, knowing that I could be spotted for miles in the bright blue. I was completely out of breath. I'm sure the shortness of breath was caused from the high mountainous altitude, as well as from scrambling and climbing. I was thinking of trying to wait until darkness in the shallow ditch, then make my attempt to escape. I don't know why I didn't wear some O. D. clothing, as this blue suit was not fit for trying to either hide, or escape. I began opening my escape kit, and removing the contents from the O. D. package. There was a compass, which I would need immediately, to determine which way was south. I knew that I had to go in a direction toward the south. There was a silk map of the area in which we were flying, vitamins, chocolate bar and \$45.00, in gold currency, of U. S. dollars. I had the small thumb-sized compass in my hand, getting ready to read it, when I heard somebody coming up the mountain. My first thought was, "Bill Roberts; I won't be alone." I eased my head above the shallow ditch. Three German Wermacht (Infantrymen) were looking directly toward me, and the shallow ditch that I was trying to hide in. They already had their rifles levelled at me, as I'm sure they had spotted that bright blue flying suit, from below. They called out, "HALTEN!" I had been loose, in my desperate attempt to escape for about 45 minutes before I was captured. In a split-second, I went from a proud American soldier, fighting for my Country, as well as our own lives, to the shock of being captured, and taken a prisoner of war!

THE FOLLOWING TRIBUTE WAS PAID TO OUR CREW BY THE 455TH. GROUP COMMANDER, COL. ALVIN E. COONS AFTER WE FAILED TO RETURN FOLLOWING THE APRIL 2, 1944 MISSION:

"In the course of a running battle, which lasted approximately 30 minutes, this crew shot down 7 enemy fighters. Yugoslav Partisans who assisted five crew members to escape verified this number. The gallant crew fought the enemy fighters until their ammunition was exhausted and their plane riddled with 20-MM cannon. With enemy fighters still coming in, and with the plane losing altitude probably due to the loss of two engines, the pilot gave the order to bail out. All ten crew members got out of the plane....."

We received the Presidential Unit Citation.