

“Answering the United States Call to Arms: WWII Vets Tell of Bombs, Battles & Beauty”

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By Worthy Evans, Staff Writer

Stories of John White and Miss Conduct

[Note: This story was transcribed from the original newspaper article. Slight changes to the original article and some additions have been made to promote understanding and accuracy. – R. Hodges, friend to John White]

The B-24 heavy bomber, nicknamed “The Liberator,” is known to those who flew the bulky-looking plane as “The Flying Boxcar.” Winnsboro Residents John R. White and W. J. “Dub” Davis flew in B-24s in the European Theater during 1944-45. They didn’t know each other before or during the war, but they served in Fifteenth Air Force bomber crews at bases near the spur of Italy. “John’s wife is a distant cousin,” Davis said. “Just after the war we talked a little, now we’re fairly close.” While sitting on Davis’ side porch with the two veterans, one gets the feeling that they were close even before they knew each other.

While White was a nose gunner in the 456th Bomb Group, Davis served as a waist gunner and radio operator with the 451st Bomb Group (part of the 49th Bomb Wing flying out of Castellucio, Italy).

Miss Conduct

As the war in Europe escalated and allied air bases maintained round-the-clock bombing, the Army Air Corps made devastating and dangerous raids into Germany and Central Europe as a regular part of a standard 35-mission tour. “My first two missions were raids over the Ploesti Oil Fields in Romania, where the anti-aircraft fire was the roughest going in Europe,” White said. “Instead of tracking us and taking bombers out one by one, the Germans would put up a blanket fire, which was just miserable. We were flying through black smoke and flak during the whole bombing run.”

He had to fly those missions and five more like them in a war-weary plane his crew inherited when they first reached Italy. [Note: S/Sgt. John White flew his

first six missions in a B-24 named “Heavenly Body.”] “We came across from America in a shiny new B-24,” he said. “But when we got to Italy my crew got transferred to one that had already been shot up pretty bad. It was a wreck. There was no door to my turret up in the nose. I very nearly froze to death on those missions,” he said.

The former crew left specific instructions for the new crew to keep the original nose art: a leggy bathing beauty named “Miss Conduct.” “We honored the request,” White said. His A-2 bomber jacket was stenciled with the design, which today is as alluring as it probably was on a heavy bomber in southern Europe. “I can’t complain. As shot up as she was, she took us there and got us back,” he said.

White said he went on raids throughout Germany, Italy, Romania, France, and Greece. While on a raid in Athens his bomber wing [the 304th Bomb Wing] caught the Germans napping. “Just as we showed up, we found 18 enemy airplanes taking off,” he said. “Our guys got every one of them.”

“Sometimes we weren’t so lucky. One of the other bad target areas was Munich. They had jet fighters over there, which could shoot us down without any trouble,” he said. “Munich had the jets and over 300 guns on the ground shooting at us.” German anti-aircraft artillery fired shells that burst at a bomber’s altitude. The shrapnel or ‘flak’ had a shotgun effect on the target. Flak could screw up planes so badly that they would return to their bases as almost unrecognizable heaps of metal, if they returned at all.

“All that flak in the air sounded like heavy hail hitting the plane. One piece of flak hit my gunner’s seat in the nose turret and threw me up into the top of the plexiglass canopy. On that same raid the Germans shot out one engine and we lost the hydraulic system. In order to land we had to jettison everything that wasn’t nailed down and rig all of our parachutes to the waist gunner windows on the sides to help stop the plane,” he said. “Just as we stopped the brakes went through the floor.”

Training

White joined an ROTC horse cavalry unit while attending school at the University of Georgia before the war. “The horses knew more than the men did,” he said. He learned to fly in the Navy Air Corps when the war broke out. He was stationed at

times in Washington, D.C. (Anacostia Air Field) and was a flying cadet at the training base in Pensacola, Florida. “I was only at Pensacola a few weeks when I was washed out. They had too many men and had to get rid of some of us. They offered me a commission to be a navigation instructor, but I refused it and took a discharge instead. This was a big disappointment to me because my flying was not bad. I marked timber for the U.S. Forest Service between the time that I went from the Navy Air Corps to the Army Air Corps,” White said.

By 1943 White was an Army Air Corps trainee and a volunteer for flight duty. After completion of basic training in Mississippi he was sent to the aerial gunner’s school at Tyndal Air Force Base in Florida. “At Tyndal we learned to shoot machine guns from the ground at moving objects and also in the air. “At first we shot skeet in stationary positions. Then we shot while riding on the back of a truck, at different angles. By the time we were through we could all break down a .50-caliber machine gun and reassemble it while blindfolded.”

White then went to Charleston Air Force Base (SC) for training with his newly-formed crew. “We practiced bombing and working together as a crew. There were ten of us. [Note: a list of the crew members is included at the end of this article.] One morning we were going out on a practice mission and I came out to the plane feeling sick. After getting up in the air, I got sick to my stomach, and one of the boys held me by the heels while I hung out of the escape hatch,” White recounted.

From Charleston AFB the crew departed for Westover Field, Mass. where they picked up a new B-24 bomber to fly to Europe. According to White they flew to Newfoundland, then the Azores, then Morocco. White recalls that “While we were flying across the ocean the tail gunner had to have a bowel movement and since there was no bathroom on the bomber, we used a cardboard box for a toilet. After using the “toilet” he called the pilot and asked him to open the bomb bay so he could throw it out. But instead of going out, the box flew back into the waist of the plane and interrupted a card game that was going on. Everyone rushed to the front of the plane.” Some 21 hours after departing Newfoundland the crew arrived at a captured and converted air base just south of Rome.

White says, “We were assigned to the 456th Bomb Group in Italy. The air base was located on the plains of Foggia. We had to give up our brand-new bomber and fly our missions in an old war-weary shot-up plane. The first two missions that I

flew were to the Ploesti Oil Fields. This was one of the roughest targets in all of Europe. The flak made a solid black cloud that you had to fly through.

W. J. "Dub" Davis, an aerial gunner assigned to the 451st Bomb Group, entered the Army Air Corps in June 1943. He was first sent to Camp Biloxi, Mississippi and later to gunnery school followed by radio school at Scott Field, Illinois. "In order to pass you had to copy Morse code at a rate of 18 words per minute," he said. "Some other guys and I flunked it. The instructors there gave us another chance to pass the test, and as an additional incentive they said if we failed this time, we would get sent to an infantry unit. The next day I passed with flying colors. I must have studied all night through," he said. After radio school Davis went to Westover Field, Mass. where his B-24 crew was formed. By September of 1944 he was in Italy on his first mission, which took him into the south of France.

The Raid on Udine

Davis flew his first three missions as a waist gunner. "Thereafter I flew as a radio operator right behind the co-pilot," he said. During his first combat mission Davis said he had his first close call. "I was a waist gunner at the time. The plane's mechanic was also a waist gunner, and he was only a few feet away from me at all times," he said. "During the middle of a run we were firing away, and then the mechanic started tapping me on the shoulder. I looked at him and he pointed at the floor. There was a large hold in the plane's floor where a 50-millimeter shell went right between us. We were lucky it didn't explode," he said.

Davis, who said he was a religious man before the war, especially looked to his God for comfort before a bombing run. "Fifteen minutes before each bombing run I would have to hold radio silence," Davis said. "During that time, I always read the 27th Psalm. That comforted me." His faith helped him through the "worst day of his life," Dec. 29, 1944, when his squadron was assigned to bomb a railroad depot in Udine, Italy. "We had seven planes in our squadron. We only had three left by the time we got back. I remember our plane having hundreds of big and little flak holes all around, but especially where the radio room was," he said.

“There was oil everywhere. The hydraulic system was out. When we were coming back none of us thought we’d make it. We were all lined up for a parachute jump when the pilot wired us to say the engineer got the hydraulic landing gear working again,” he said. “When we reached the ground, we headed straight for the tents to take off our flight gear. No crewman was allowed to look at the crippled plane’s exterior. A cousin of mine served with me, and was on the ground when we landed. He counted the holes.”

As Davis made way for the tents an Italian boy the squadron befriended saw him and ran towards him. “Little Lorenzo was so upset, he was crying. Over half of his friends had not made it back,” he said. Four planes and 40 men of Davis’ squadron did not survive the raid, a casualty rate of more than 50 percent. “Sometime after we landed, I wandered across a hillside toward a flock of sheep, where I knelt until sundown and thanked God that I had survived, but I felt so sad that 40 others had not,” he said.

The Missions

“Every mission was dangerous,” White said. “There wasn’t a one we didn’t get shot at.” Each mission lasted about eight or nine hours, depending on how far away the target was. To survive a mission first meant putting on dozens of pounds of issue clothing and protective suits to protect from below-freezing cabin temperatures. “You couldn’t touch anything up there (without protective gloves). The heated suits helped a lot, but it was still cold. The oxygen mask would freeze to your face and your nose would run non-stop.” Fifty missions were required on each tour in south Europe, 25 in northern Europe. White and Davis both returned to the States after amassing 35 missions.

Every situation posed a threat. “We were going on a mission over Vienna when we ran low on fuel,” White said. “The pilot ordered us to throw everything out, machine gun bullets and all. He called in a P-51 escort for assistance, and this red-faced boy in a Mustang flew us right close to the enemy lines, landed us, helped us refuel, and got us out fast,” he said.

White recalled another time when a strange plane entered their formation and didn’t identify himself. “The Germans caught a bunch of B-24s and would use them to infiltrate formations, sort of shoot us down from within. When that plane didn’t identify himself after a while our pilots got suspicious. They weren’t far

from radioing some fighters to shoot the plane down, that is how close those men came to dying. They didn't even know, either," he said.

If a plane was shot down the possibility of death was very high. In the cases that pilot and crew safely ejected, White and Davis said most of them eventually returned "thanks to the partisans and the resistance." A bomber out of formation was risky. "If a plane flew or dived out of formation, a German fighter would be there and get him right quick," White said. All of their assigned targets were military: "oil fields, freight yards and factories."

A mission's success sometimes left a bitter-sweet taste. "We were on one mission somewhere in Germany, and everything went well; we got shot at but not too badly. But in the wave of bombers behind us 18 planes went down," White said. "That's just the way it was, there was nothing much you could do about it."

Ironically, the closest both men came to death was due to lack of oxygen. "We were making a run when we took a hit," Davis said. "I hit my knees against the radio and the impact knocked out my oxygen supply. I was revived on the emergency supply." Likewise, White recalls, "I was getting ready for a bombing run when I was reaching around to get something and must have somehow unplugged my oxygen supply line. I realized the air didn't smell right in my oxygen mask and I looked down and saw that I was disconnected. I immediately reached down and reconnected the line just before I blacked out. That was a very close call that day. I was just lucky I didn't black out, otherwise I would have died," White said.

The crewmen said they liked what they saw of Italy during the war. "I went to Rome three times during the war, and to Capri a couple of times," Davis said. "I think I would have enjoyed it more had it not been for the war."

Sergeant White recalls a visit to town. "The Italians made cognac. This drink would make an angel mean. It seemed that everyone who drank it wanted to fight. We were in a nearby town and the crew had been drinking heavily. One of them was in the bathroom and I happened to be passing by the door when he came out. He shoved the door wide open with great force and it hit me square in the face, cutting a big gash in my left eyebrow. He came out and saw the blood gushing out and started to laugh. I drew back to hit him but saw that he was drunk and decided

against it. I went to the first aid station across the street and had them stitch up my eye. They had a hard time doing it and I was pretty disgusted with it all!”

By the time each crewman’s tour was over he had sweated through 35 missions holed up in a flying tin box. “The first two or three missions, you’re thinking, “I’m not going to make it,” so you don’t care as much. Then when you get to the last few missions, that’s when you really sweat it out,” White said. T/Sgt. Davis agreed, “I remember on my crew’s last mission, the pilot broke every rule in the book. He was buzzing the treetops and just flying like mad.” White remembers, “There was one gunner whose crew had been shot up, and he had gotten separated from them. He was “flak happy”, and some of the crews wanted him to fly with them because they thought he’d bring them good luck. He flew as a tail gunner for us one day. Suddenly, we heard the machine guns in the tail going wide open. He was shooting at the fishing vessels in the water below.”

Davis recalls, “When we got through with our tour, we had a choice: to go home by plane or to go home by boat. That was no trouble for me, I took the boat; I figure I’ve survived my 35, why take a chance on another. A lot of guys thought that way. The only trouble was, to get home you had to get through the Strait of Gibraltar, which was guarded by German subs.” White also chose to return to the States on a troop ship. Back in the U.S., White was assigned to teach new aerial gunners the workings of the B-29’s remote-controlled gun sights.

Both men used to keep up with their crewmates but have lost touch with most of them. White said the co-pilot of his crew is the only one he keeps in touch with. He lives near Atlanta. [Note: Robert L. Maher, co pilot of “Miss Conduct,” passed away since the writing of this article in 1996.]

Addendum: During World War II, the White Family supported the war effort to the fullest. John’s father did defense work. His sister, Bernice, was an Army nurse and her husband was an Army company commander who was wounded in combat three times. John had three brothers: the eldest, Pete was a B-24 pilot (14th AF - China); Walt was a cavalry officer and did his combat tour in Europe; and younger brother Bob, like John, was an aerial gunner on a B-24 (USMC Photo-Recon aircraft). Three men of the White family were B-24 air crew members during WWII.)

[Note: I have known S/Sgt. John R. White as a friend for about 15 years. We're in the Winnsboro Lions Club together. The above submission is the result of transcribing a news story written by a young local staff writer for our county's weekly newspaper (The Herald-Independent), a review of John's written remembrances, and numerous conversations with John. Please forgive any inaccuracies; it's sometimes difficult to work from multiple sources and the memories of events that occurred more than a half century ago are, at times, difficult to recall. In any case, I count it a rich privilege indeed to have known both John and Mr. "Dub" Davis, crewmembers of Fifteenth Air Force bombardment groups (the 456th and the 451st). They answered their country's call to the best of their ability; they had a job to do and they did it. I, for one, am thankful. – Rev. Richard B. Hodges, Blair, SC]



U. S. Army-Air Corps -- Fifteenth Air Force, 304th Bomb Wing -- 456th Bomb Group (Heavy)
Crew of the "Heavenly Body" and "Miss Conduct" – B-24 Liberator
(as identified by S/Sgt. John R. White)

Back Row L-R: Mike Goldstein (B) Scarsdale, New York; Robert L. Maher (CP) Avondale Estates, GA (Deceased); Barry Colton (N) Providence, Rhode Island (Deceased); Leland Gare (P) (Deceased)

Front Row L-R: Bates B. Legrand (E/TG) Richardson, Texas; Richard L. Krodel (WG) Jasper, Indiana; Frank E. Pinto (RO/WG); S/Sgt. John R. White (NG) Dillard, Georgia/Winnsboro, SC; Charles Tippet (TG) Texas; James W. Ford (BTG) Norborne, Missouri (Deceased)

Special thanks to Rev. Hodges for sending along this info for all to share.