

# Loss of Aircraft 42-97913

by

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from

Harry Whye

483<sup>rd</sup> Bombardment Group

815<sup>th</sup> Squadron

Blank crew

On 28 August 1944, my father, Harry Whye, and nine other men climbed into B-17 42-97913 at their base in Sterparone, Italy. Only three would return.

Not many months before, the airfield had been agricultural fields, but the Americans arrived, turning plowed land into tents, a metal runway, storage depots and a large farmhouse into the headquarters of the 483<sup>rd</sup> Bombardment Group.

On this mission, the men, lead by Captain Jonas Blank, were going to fly the new B-17 on its first combat mission. Designed by Boeing, it was built under license by the Lockheed-Vega company in Burbank, California.

This mission, along with 26 other B-17s from the 483<sup>rd</sup> Bomb Group, was to bomb a Nazi-operated oil refinery at Moosbierbaum, Austria, about 20 miles northwest of Vienna.

A few hours into the flight and nowhere near where the crew expected German fighters or anti-aircraft fire, the flight engineer approached Harry Whye, who was the navigator, to ask for the fire extinguisher near where he sat. Only then did Whye catch a whiff of smoke. A fire had broken out near the top gun turret, an electrical wire had broken, sparking a hole in an oxygen line which started to flame and that set the grease around the turntable of the gun turret to blaze. With a host of oxygen containers nearby, the situation would become deadly fast.

Dad reached for where the fire extinguisher should have been, but it wasn't there. **Actually, none were in the plane.** All had been stolen by the maintenance crew chief of another B-17 to replace what had been used in his plane for another reason.

With his plane dangerously on fire, Capt. Blank maintained radio silence as he dropped his plane from formation, put it into a large circle, set the auto-pilot and

turned on the alarm bell, signaling everyone to bail out. All got out okay and came down within about two miles of each other in an area about 35 miles southwest of Zagreb, of then - Yugoslavia.

Despite how close they were to each other, seven of the crew were captured soon after they parachuted to the ground. Because of how Yugoslavia was a checkboard of Nazi occupiers and anti-German forces, Harry Whye, the tail gunner and another gunner were fortunate to be met by partisans within moments of landing. In fact, the first man to approach Whye spoke perfect English. He had worked in the Pittsburgh steel mills for 15 years before returning to Yugoslavia to get his wife out before the war began.... although that obviously didn't work out.

Whye and the gunners remained with the partisans for 13 days until one night when a C-47 cargo plane operating for the OSS (a forerunner of the CIA) landed to drop off supplies and suddenly found themselves carrying the Americans back to their Italian base.

The first thing the three Americans did upon landing in Italy was to douse themselves with DDT (inconceivable now) to get rid of their accompanying lice and bed bugs. When Dad returned to his tent, he found men packing up his things to send to his parents....no one at the base had any idea he had linked up with the partisans and stayed with them until he returned to the base that day, surprising them. Everyone had thought the entire crew had been captured or were dead.

The other seven members of Whye's crew spent the rest of the war in hardship in German POW camps. All men returned to their homes in the U.S. at the end of the war.

Two ground crewmen were busted in rank because of the missing fire extinguishers.

The tents at Sterparone were struck after the war ended, the buildings torn down, the steel runway matting collected to be melted with all other metals, and crops again began growing where the bombers had been.

In all, it was, as Whye put it, one of the stories of the war.



The photo is of the crew when on rest and recreation in Naples in July 1944. Capt. Blank, the pilot, is front row left. Whye is third from the left, front row. I don't know who all of the others are. Seven of these men did not return from the mission of 28 August 1944. Whye and two others did.

Whye said when he and the gunners returned to Sterparone and told during their debriefings the reason the plane went down, the commander brought in two crew chiefs. One was the thief who removed the fire extinguishers and the other was a crew chief overseeing the plane (which was so new she didn't have an assigned ground crew yet) and failed to note the extinguishers were missing from their racks. The commander, said Whye, told the men they should have been court-martialed but they were needed so he busted them to the lowest rank possible and told both they had to remain at posts in Europe until those particular POWs were back in the U.S. Whye said he believed (but wasn't sure) the commander put them on reduced rations for a week so they could have a feel of how much food the

POWs were eating. Whye said the commander was furious when he learned about the missing fire extinguishers and the loss of a crew and plane.