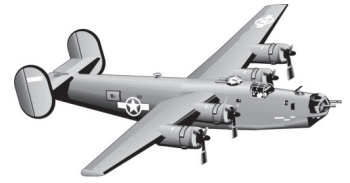




# Flightline



Newsletter of the 780<sup>th</sup> Bombardment Squadron of WWII

March 2023

***"The finest freshman mission ever flown by the 15<sup>th</sup> AF"***

## 780<sup>th</sup> enters combat; works hard, plays hard

*This is part four of the official history of the 780<sup>th</sup> Bombardment Squadron, drawn from unclassified military records obtained from the Air Force Historical Research Agency at Maxwell-Gunter Air Force Base in Montgomery, Alabama, and 780 Memoirs, the squadron history book. - Editor*

In our last issue it was the end of April 1944 and Major Cook had arrived at Pantanella to resume command of the reassembled squadron. The squadron had spent months in training stateside, weeks getting everyone across the Atlantic, and yet more months building the airfield and moving the flying echelon from North Africa to the completed airbase. Now the question on everyone's minds was, "When will we become operational? When will we be in combat?"

On 5 May the Squadron would fly its "freshman" mission. Excitement and confidence was high.

The 780<sup>th</sup>'s first target was Podgorica, Italy. Ten Squadron aircraft were sent. The mission proved so successful that 15<sup>th</sup> Air Force Commander Maj. Gen. Nathan F. Twining issued these words of

commendation: "It was the finest freshman mission ever flown in the 15<sup>th</sup> Air Force."

The squadron flew a total of 18 combat missions in the 26 days remaining in May, nine of the missions during the final ten days of the month - a

tribute to the skill and stamina of the combat crew personnel.

High Command sent many commendatory messages during this period as a result of the fine bombing record being compiled by the 465<sup>th</sup> Bombardment Group in its initial month of combat. It should be noted that the Group flew 15 combat missions without a loss of a single airplane and with but slight injury to two of its

personnel. The Squadron completed all 18 of its May missions without casualty of any type to personnel or equipment, a rare feat in itself.

As combat commenced construction continued. The Officers' Mess building got underway in earnest. The foundation to the Enlisted Men's Day Room was laid and it was hoped that these two



*"Beer Bust" opening of the Enlisted Men's Day Room, June 1944*

*continued on page 3...*

# Your News & Letters

Hello Kathy,

My name is Beth Houser, and I was given a copy of your Flightline newsletter from one of your subscribers, Jerry McMann. Both of our fathers were in WWII on B-24 Liberators. Jerry's dad was in Italy with the 15<sup>th</sup> Air Force and my dad served in Guadalcanal in the South Pacific with the 13<sup>th</sup> Air Force, 5<sup>th</sup> Heavy Bomb Group.

During the war my dad kept a diary of his 45 combat missions, and I wrote the book, *Scootin' Thunder*, named after his Liberator. Jerry suggested that I contact you and maybe some of your readers might be interested in reading this story of the war in the Pacific.

In 2018, I was able to attend a special event at the United States Air Force Academy in Colorado Springs with the sole survivor of Dad's crew, Lt. Col. Oscar Fitzhenry, USAF, Ret. His history with the academy goes back to the opening day celebration when he flew a B-36 in formation during the inauguration.

I have enclosed a copy of my father's crew card and my business card in case anyone might be interested in obtaining a copy of my book. It may be purchased on Amazon. The back of my card lists a few

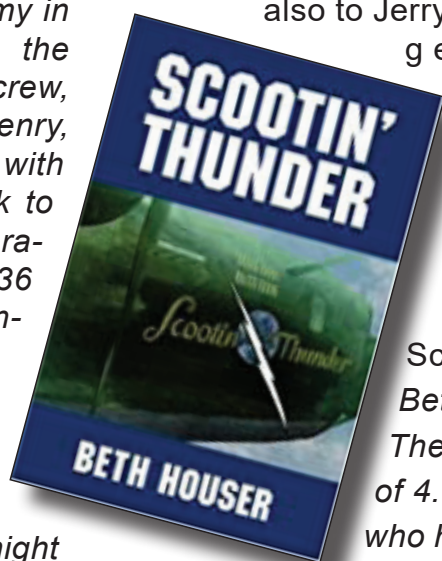
of the videos that describe *Scootin' Thunder*, my dad who was the co-pilot, and Lt. Col. Fitzhenry. (It can be watched on YouTube. I would recommend the 12-minute video I presented to the Long Beach Aviation Club in September 2010. My dad was there and received a standing ovation at the end.

Either way, it is nice to contact another person who shares a deep interest in the young aviators from WWII and wants to make sure they are never forgotten for their commitment to ensure our freedom today.

Best regards,

Beth Houser  
author, *Scootin' Thunder*

Editor's note: Thank you for your letter, Beth, and thanks also to Jerry for suggesting that you



*Scootin' Thunder* (book cover at left, by Beth Houser, is available at [Amazon.com](https://www.amazon.com). There are 13 reviews with an average rating of 4.8 stars out of 5. One example: "Those who have a war veteran in their family often wish that they would have chronicled their exploits. We are fortunate that in this case one chronicle made it from obscurity into publication."



write. You are absolutely right that we share the desire to tell our fathers' (my case grandfather's) stories so that they aren't lost to time. We have another fact in common also. My father-in-law served in the 13<sup>th</sup> Air Force in Papua New Guinea. Like my grandfather my father-in-law was a B-24 tailgunner. He was more fortunate than my grandfather and survived the war. I encourage anyone who wants to know more about our fathers' war experiences to get Beth's book. One, history books don't have all the details, down to the airman. And if they do, sometimes those details don't pertain to where our fathers served or occupation. Two, there are books like Beth's that fill this information gap - but not many. And three, with fewer of our WWII veterans around there are less opportunities to get their stories firsthand. Again, it's nice to know another daughter of The Greatest Generation is documenting their story for posterity.

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structures would be completed in a short amount of time.

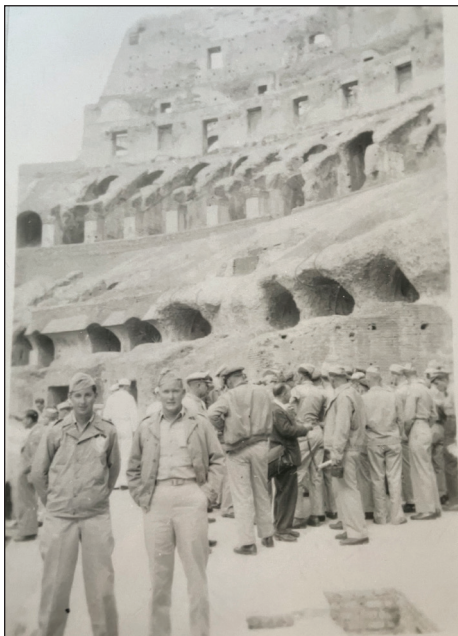
High Command stopped in for visits during this time. Major Gen. Twining and the 55<sup>th</sup> Bombardment Wing's Col. George R. Acheson both expressed pleasure at the fine record being established, as well as the appearance of the airfield and Squadron quarters.

With warmer months ahead precautions were taken to minimize malaria which was prevalent in the section during the summer. Mosquito "bars" (mosquito netting for cots) were installed in all tents, atabrine tablets issued at all evening meals and extra precautions taken to provide for the highest degree of sanitation possible. Showers were installed - no small achievement under the conditions.

Morale remained high as the month of May witnessed an unusually large number of promotions, especially in the enlisted grades where the Squadron was rapidly attaining its full T/O (total operational) strength.

During the month of June the Squadron flew 17 combat missions. Those, together with the 18 mis-

sions flown in May, made for 35 combat missions flown without a casualty of any sort to personnel or aircraft. As the 780<sup>th</sup> men continued to compile this record, day by day, mission by mission, interest throughout the entire squadron intensified until the exploits of the combat crews overshadowed every other activity in the Squadron, and



*These photos are from the Howard Precup collection. They are unmarked but could show 780<sup>th</sup> men on leave. The photo at left appears to be inside the Colosseum in Rome. At top the view could be from Villaggio Mancuso.*

was the subject of conversation wherever men gathered.

It should be noted that poor flying weather limited the number of missions flown in June compared to the previous month. Even though the freshman mission wasn't flown until 5 May, the Squadron completed 17 missions in a shortened May as compared to 18 missions in the entire month of

*continued on page 4...*

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## Your News & Letters *(con't.)*

*Hello.*

*My name is Ken Sokody and my dad's brother was John A. Sokody. John was in the 465<sup>th</sup> Bombardment Group 780<sup>th</sup> Squadron. He was selected as one of the Lucky 13 for the B-29 group. I can't seem to*

*find any pictures of the squadron he was in. Can you help with any info or pictures?*

*Regards,  
Ken Sokody*

Editor's Note: The only information I could find for John

Sokody was his name and address in the squadron roster and his name on a list of men receiving the Good Conduct Medal in 1943. Does anyone else have information? You can contact Ken at [kenso-kody@gmail.com](mailto:kenso-kody@gmail.com). Ken's been added to the Flightline list.

...continued from page 4

June.

Even though the 780<sup>th</sup> had been in combat only a little more than a month many personnel were racking up medals, credits for downing enemy aircraft, and furloughs.

One hundred and sixty-three officers and enlisted men were awarded Air Medals, denoting a minimum of five combat missions flown. Eleven gunners received credit for damaging or destroying enemy aircraft in the month of June. Two of these gunners each destroyed two German aircraft - both credits occurring in one mission for each! And promotions were awarded to 25 officers and 85 enlisted men, again reflecting the fine work the squadron was doing.

After the capture of Rome it was possible to send men on leave to the historic city. Officers and enlisted men also were sent regularly to rest camps at the southern Italian mountain resort of Villaggio Mancuso, the Isle of Capri, the seaside resort of San Spirito near Bari, and daily runs by truck to the beaches near Barletta.

While the boys were getting some much deserved R&R base conditions continued to improve. The Officers' Club and Mess formally opened on 17 June 1944 with a celebration. An orchestra was brought in and invitations were extended throughout the bombardment group. The 780<sup>th</sup>'s Officers Club and Mess was regarded as one of the finest clubs overseas. The outstanding feature was the "unusually fine decoration." The following day the officers moved into the building for their first meal in an environment scarcely thought possible under field conditions.

The Enlisted Men's Day Room progressed and

as the month grew to a close the building was sufficiently completed for a preview in the form of an old-fashioned "Beer Bust." Needless to say it was highly appreciated by all. A surprise "jam session" by the same orchestra that performed at the officers' party only added to the revelries. On the same night as the enlisted men's party a dance was held at the Officers' Club with Army nurses from the 26<sup>th</sup> General Hospital at Bari and the 4<sup>th</sup> Field Hospital nearby being the first women to grace the club room.

Disease prevention and sanitation were important at Pantanella. Particular attention was given to minimizing the dangers of dysentery during the summer through the construction of screens for all mess building doors and windows. Latrine facilities were improved. Group, Wing and higher headquarters conducted inspections with the objective of improving the living and health conditions in the entire area.

The Red Cross Clubmobile Girls came through with their coffee, lemonade and doughnuts. The entire squadron appreciated their visit and hoped for their quick return.

On 16 June 1944 the Squadron received its first new crew and one airman got to go home. Lt. Edgar J.

Trott was selected to return to the United States for a six-week course in gunnery, followed by a 21-day leave. In addition, a few days after his departure, Lt. Trott was promoted from 2<sup>nd</sup> Lt. to 1<sup>st</sup> Lt. He was regarded as the luckiest man in the 780<sup>th</sup>.

*The series continues in the next issue of Flightline, as we get more details about the combat missions the 780<sup>th</sup> Bombardment Squadron participated in during the summer of 1944.*

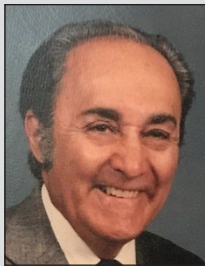


*The Officers' Club, June 1944, replete with decor*

# TAPS



Albert D. "Junie" Riffle, 97, passed away September 7, 2022, in Frederick, Maryland. Albert was born August 3, 1925, in Thurmont, Maryland, to Albert J. and Nellie G. (Moser) Riffle. He served in the U.S. Army Air Corps during World War II as a B-24 ball turret gunner, flying 33 missions. After the war he was employed by C & P Telephone Company for over 35 years and was a member of the Telephone Pioneers of America. Albert and his wife, the late Audrey Lewis Riffle, liked visiting friends and family but he especially enjoyed road trips with son, Scott. In 2021 they traveled more than 15,000 miles across the country together. Albert is survived by his son, Scott, with whom he lived for four years; brother, Franklin (Shirley) Riffle; and many nieces and nephews. He was preceded by son, Larry; daughter-in-law, Debbie; and three brothers.



Virginia M. Suarez and Albert Suarez, of Dearborn, Michigan, passed away less than three weeks apart; Virginia on February 4, 2021, and Albert on February 24, 2021. They both were 96. Their survivors are four children, Larry, Robert (Janice), Richard (Carol) and Linda Rauner; seven grandchildren, and five great-grandchildren.

## *Spring cleaning tips from World War II (but actually timeless)*

### **Keep up don't catch up**

It's easier to keep up after messes every day than waiting til it's out of hand. Get into a daily routine and your house will always be ready for unexpected visitors. And you'll be happier.

### **Go old school with products, buy less**

Some of the products Grandma used are still around today, are inexpensive, safe and work! Vinegar, Borax, Bon Ami, and lemon juice and oil are just a few examples. And you don't need a million cleaning products. A chosen few can almost do it all.

### **Freshen the air naturally**

Use vanilla extract for deodorizing. Douse cotton balls with vanilla and hide them in plants, or rub one over a cold light bulb; when it heats, the room will smell great. For stinky microwaves, put two tablespoons of vanilla in a glass bowl, heat for 30 seconds, then let sit

for a few hours. For cooking smells, simmer a few tablespoons of lemon juice in a pan.

### **Stock a rag bin**

Clothes or bed sheets that are too worn are excellent cleaning cloths. Tear old flannel sheets and cotton T-shirts into square cleaning rags. Never buy cleaning towels again!

### **Deep clean with the seasons**

Clean with the calendar. At least once a year, wash windows, change the furnace filter, deep-clean carpets, flip and vacuum mattresses, and purge closets and cabinets. If you're really ambitious, tackle the garage and basement.

### **Use tea towels instead of paper towels**

Use tea towels to dry glasses lint-free, wipe down the stove, or let dishes drip-dry on them. Made of 100 percent cotton tea towels launder well, dry fast and come in many colors and patterns.

Kathy Le Comte  
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## *Flightline*

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### **Spring Cleaning Time!**

**You think you have it rough keeping a house clean? Imagine not having the tools and products we have today. And cleaning during wartime. *Good Housekeeping* was the World War II housewife's Bible. Inside this issue are some sensible cleaning tips that still apply today.**

**Happy Spring Cleaning!**