



# Flightline



Newsletter of the 780th Bomb Squadron of WWII

March 2014

***Use Train, Plane, Horse Cart, Ship to Get Back to Base***

## **Last Squadron Mission Takes Shreve Crew Month to Complete**

by Frank Diederichs

**O**n April 25, 1945, the 780<sup>th</sup> Bombardment Squadron flew its last effective mission of World War II. The target was Linz, Austria, midway between Munich, now being held by Patton's Third Army, and Vienna, just captured by the Russians. My brother, Bob, two years younger than me, was a sergeant half-track driver in Patton's Army, and they captured Linz the day after we bombed it.

Bill Shreve's crew, with co-pilot Bob Carter, navigator Jerry Harriman, engineer Sgt. Cal Page, and the gunner sergeants, was scheduled to fly deputy lead. Since they had no regular bombardier I was assigned to be their bombardier.

The mission was a rough one with more than usual flak activity. We were badly damaged on the bomb run but I was able to get the bombs out and on target. By "bombs away" we had two engines feathered and couldn't gain enough altitude to get back over the Alps, so Shreve decided to head east and try to land behind

the Russian lines. Shreve started us east as we quickly lost altitude. Harriman located a dirt landing strip just south of Lake Balaton in Hungary. Bill and Bob, who had been hit in the leg by a piece of flak but was still able to handle the controls, managed to get us on the ground in one piece.

The Russian Army, which now was in control of this area, greeted us very decently. They escorted us to the nearby small city of Pecs. Here they put us in a very decent hotel, and fed us reasonably well with Borsh, pork, potatoes and vodka.

The following morning, under the charge of a middle-aged Russian officer, we left by train to be turned over to the Russian Air Force. Our Russian officer-in-charge we nick-named "Joe." He very much resembled Josef Stalin - same height, size, full mustache, and long coat - so, we called him "Joe." He never caught on!

The train chugged along at about 20 miles per hour until the track ran out due to a large-scale tank battle a few days earlier. We stayed over-



*1<sup>st</sup> Lt. Frank Diederichs, then, and a self-portrait in 2012. He flew 34 combat missions as a bombardier.*

*continued on page 3...*

# Your News & Letters

Editor's note: I had the pleasure to talk to several squadron members over the past few months, and receive emails from others. Pat Logan sent an email in December to say, "Bob Bleier was a great guy and a joy to be around," in response to Bob's passing. Ed Gluklick called in December looking for the phone number for one of our members. I don't remember who it was, but I had a number, so I hope Ed got in touch with him! And I had a great conversation with "Sweet Bill" Edwards in February about, of all things, Robert E. Lee, Eisenhower, and a North Carolina stained glass artist who has a name similar to mine (no, we aren't related). Bill is doing great despite having regular blood transfusions due to low red blood cells. Bill was looking for George Kuchenbecker's new contact information. That information, an email update, and another address update, are below:



*Hi right back to all the Luptons,*

*We have moved out of our home of 44-plus years and into a retirement community where we have all our meals prepared. That was the biggest reason for the change as I am a LOUSY cook. We have two bedrooms and baths with a small kitchen and fairly nice living room. But the space we have*

*is a real challenge. We have less than half the "living" space we have enjoyed for the 40++ years in the house in Shoreline. Plus, no basement. We had a professional handle the move. Part of that service was the packing of most of our stuff. End result is that I can't find a d\*\*\*\*\* thing. But I guess we'll survive, hopefully. Here's how to reach us:*

*12503 Apt E104  
Greenwood Ave N.  
Seattle WA 98133  
206-362-1172  
2olddad@comcast.net*

*George Kuchenbecker*

Editor's note: Despite the comparatively cramped new living arrangements George reports he can still duck out to the garage for a smoke on his ever-present pipe. And Gloria is doing well managing her aphasia.



*Kathy,*

*Had a phone conversation with Ashby Nelson; they were both good and families, too. Always great to hear from them. Had a phone conversation with Jim and Aileen Long in South Carolina, and they were good, too. Aileen asked me about Sue Thiel, thought she had heard she passed away? Had you heard that?*

*Also had phone conversation*

*plus email back and forth from Jim Rogers in Baton Rouge, son of the late Matthew and Eve Rogers. He was good and family, too. Still working as he is younger than we are. He keeps saying he is coming to Illinois to visit. Hope he does. Mia Smith, Philena's granddaughter, got an excellent medical report on her cancer. It is in remission.*

*Do you have a mailing addresses for Bill or John Edwards? We get Christmas cards from Bill, but no return address. I sent mail to both John and Bill from the roster, but mail was returned. Got a new Christmas card/picture of Bill this year, but no return address. Would like to keep in touch with either of them.*

*Tanya Beitz  
daughter of Ardnel and  
Philena Steele*

Editor's note: Yes, I'm sorry to report Sue passed away in early December. Her obit is on page 5. I told Tanya she is quite a switchboard operator for keeping up with all these contacts. Tanya was scheduled to get left hip surgery on February 24, so all our prayers go to her for a quick recovery. Bill and John, if you are reading this, maybe drop a note/call/email to Tanya: 208 E. Third St., Stewardson, IL 62463, 217-682-3259, tlbeitz14@gmail.com.



Dear Kathy,

I would like to continue receiving the Flightline.  
My new address is:

756 Auburn Ravine Rd. #110  
Auburn, CA 95603

Thanks,  
Frank Freeman  
rffreeman@att.net

Editor's note: Frank's last two *Flightlines* were returned. In the process of trying to track down his new address I came across an article about him biking, then found his son who builds custom bikes, and learned even more! Frank's story appears on page 4.

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...continued from front page

night in the small abandoned depot. The next morning, "Joe" loaded us on to a horse cart and we traveled around Lake Balaton north-eastward through war debris, then by truck (Studerbakerski) to a small landing field south of Vienna and a nearby village of Trausdorf, Austria. Here "Joe" delivered us to the Russian Air Force, which consisted of a major and two common soldiers. After a week of living in the homes of the villagers, the major obtained a DC-3 American cargo plane and had us flown, via Bucharest, Romania, to Odessa, Russia, on the Black Sea. Here we were turned over to the British Army military commission, deloused, issued new clothes, and celebrated Stalin's announcement of the war's end.

After several days we boarded the *SS Auckland*, an Australian passenger ship, along with other "evadees," escaped POWs, Jews, etc. After a Black Sea "cruise," a visit to Istanbul and Piraeus, Greece, we were reunited with our squadron in Italy on May 25, 1945. We had been gone a month.

As "evadees" we were given special privileges. The best one was being assigned to fly a B-24 home to the USA rather than returning by ship with the squadron.

We left the squadron going south to a field



Frank Diederichs says this is one of the wall decorations inside the officers' club at Pantanella. There are so many details to take in, but the one I like the most is the spider web that developed between his arm and the bomb sight. Too much time on his hands? - editor

at Manduria, Italy. Here we pre-flighted a B-24 and departed for the USA on June 30, 1945. Along with our crew of ten we also had two Tuskegee fighter pilots. Nice guys.

We flew southwest for our first overnight stop at Marrakech, Morocco, then on to another overnight at Dakar, present day Senegal. Then we headed southwest across the Atlantic, crossing the equator and landing in Fortaleza, Brazil, for a two-day stop-over. We then flew north to spend the night in Georgetown, Guyana, and on to an overnight stop at San Juan, Puerto Rico. On July 5 we flew into the USA, landing in Savannah, Georgia!

After de-briefing, medical exams and paperwork we split up. Bill Shreve and Harriman went north, Bob Carter went to Indiana, and Cal Page and the rest of the crew went to their homes. Along with the two Tuskegee pilots I boarded a train for California. After a short stop at Marysville Army Air Base near Sacramento for more medical checking and paperwork, I left by train for a 30-day leave in Los Angeles.

# Freeman Shows What 90 Can Do

Frank Freeman was an instructor B-24 pilot with the 780<sup>th</sup>, but when the war ended his flying did not. Nor his taste for adventure.

According to his son, Bob, after the war Frank moved to Yakima, Washington, where he got a job with a flying service. "He would do whatever they needed. He did crop dusting, deliveries, and taught others to fly."

In Yakima Frank met another young pilot who had a colorful career in flying and wrote a book about it. He was a skier, too - like Frank - and introduced Frank to his sister, which is how Bob and his brothers, Dick and Charlie, came along.

Frank's wife encouraged him to go back to school, so he enrolled at Oregon State in Corvallis and got a degree in chemical engineering. Frank's wife had a daughter, Perrie, from a previous marriage. Her first husband was an Army Air Corps pilot, too, and was tragically killed in a mid-air crash over Texas just after the war ended.

After Frank finished college the family moved to Concord, California, where Frank lived in the same house for 62 years until his recent



Frank, center, surrounded by family during his 90-mile bike ride in California in 2010.

move to assisted living. His wife passed away 20 years ago this past January.

But life keeps moving for Frank. In 2010, to mark his 90<sup>th</sup> birthday, he biked 90 miles in one day. Riding a custom-made cycle built by Bob to fit Frank's frame, he and his family biked just over 13 hours, with breaks for lunch and a "siesta."

"I kind of feel responsible for getting him into this, so I want to watch over him," Bob told *Inside Bay Area*.

"The thing is, he doesn't think he's old," Bob added, even when his father injured his elbow during training for the ride, which didn't affect Frank's 75-year run of downhill skiing either.

"Every three or four years, he'd fall and break something and then he'd pick himself up and do it again.

"He's a guy who knows how to carry on."

That attitude clearly stuck with him from the war.

"It's going to be a maximum effort," Frank told *Inside Bay Area*, perhaps not even realizing that 'maximum effort' is a familiar phrase from the war years.

Frank is now 93. Bob says he's still healthy, if a bit frail. Maybe to compensate, he will ride 93 miles on a stationary bike this year.



Frank celebrating his victory.

# TAPS



Sue Thiel, daughter of Bob and Gerri Dorrigan, passed away from a heart attack December 12, 2013, in Oklahoma City, OK. She and her husband, Ray, attended many 780<sup>th</sup> reunions and hosted the 2009 reunion in Oklahoma. She had one sister, Bobbette Cockrell.

## Reminisces Flying Home Over Atlantic

Editor's note: in the September 2012 issue of *Flightline*, Gene Koscinski asked for information about the crews that flew the Newfoundland route home after the war. Some of the crews apparently were lost over the ocean. George Kuchenbecker responded that same month, but I just found his reply in my email (time for spring cleaning, I think). Regrettably, Gene passed away in February 2013. Here's what George remembers:

*We flew out of Pantanella for the short trip to Gioia, Italy, where we stayed for three or four days. We understood it was to allow installation of auxillary fuel tanks in the forward bomb bays but I'm not too sure about that as we were off to town to celebrate our upcoming journey home. After the short rest we took off for North Africa, Marrakech, for another couple days. Got to do some serious shopping in a real live PX, among other things. Got a really nice watch, Hialeah I think, only to lose it later in the belly of an AT-6 trainer some time later in Minneapolis.*

*Then it was off to the Azores for the long overwaterflight that was our first leg of the journey home. More shopping in a real PX and more celebrating. All this time I was carefully dismantling my Colt .45, wrapping the pieces in oil-soaked rags and stashing it carefully under the seat cushion of my tail turret. Spent a few more days in the Azores celebrating to the max. Then time to head for Newfoundland.*

*Joe Theena, my pilot, kept on my case to get rid of the Colt .45, and somewhere over the North Atlantic he finally prevailed and I tossed out my carefully-wrapped Colt .45 from*

*the space between the tail turret and the fuselage. But he was right; that was not something I should be taking into civilian life. We landed in Gander, Newfoundland, after a long, successful overwater flight. After a few days of R&R we boarded the train headed for Minneapolis and home. I don't know of any other crews/flights involved in the journey.*

*One of the memorable things, for me, happened in Gander. Typical GI long line waiting to go through customs. Just ahead of me was top turret gunner Bill Edwards. We all had our musette bags slung over one shoulder and dragging them along the countertop as we proceeded to the next place where we would be questioned about what we had in our bags. At one point someone shouted out for Bill. As he turned to see who it was he dragged his bag off the edge of the counter to go smashing to the concrete floor. Smashing is the correct term here as Bill had two bottles of good Dago red wine in his bag. As the bag turned the deep red color of the wine and the wine started spreading across the floor Bill calmly stepped over the growing mess and went on to the next station in the customs line.*

*The other thing I want to comment on is the picture "The Board Room" on the back page. I am quite certain that is, in fact, the room where we had our pre- and post-flight briefings. The "stage" up front would be where the chart of the day was posted with all it' red lines. The briefing officer would point out the route and where we might expect significant German anti-aircraft activity.*

Kathy Le Comte  
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## *Flightline*

At right is another article from the 28 January 1945 issue of *Sortie*, printed in Italy, submitted by Eleanor Ball from Jack's collection. The pilot, William Harrigill, flew with the 454<sup>th</sup> Bombardment Group.

### **THANK YOU!**

The *Flightline*  
is grateful for a donation by

**Bill Edwards**

to keep *Flightline* flyin'

If you would like to contribute  
please send your donation to:

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### **Freak Explosion Saves Liberator**

Explosive power of its own bombs saved a ten-man crew and Liberator plane as it was about to crash in rough terrain enroute to an Austrian target.

The heavy bomber was nearing its rendezvous for the formation flight when a vapor lock cut off the supply of gas to the engines. The plane lost power and fell from 6,000 to 800 feet in a few seconds.

Unable to control the ship, the pilot gave the order, "prepare to crash." The bombs were immediately dropped.

Upon striking the ground, the bombs exploded with a tremendous roar. The concussion lifted the bomber in the air and at the same time the vapor lock was jarred free. In the period of grace given by the added altitude, the pilot was able to regain engine power and safely complete the mission.

Pilot William Harrigill had only a one-word comment on the freak accident, "Whew."